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Report on the Implementation of the Project “No Autism! The Education and Personal Development of the Doctoral Student with Autism – The *Status Quo* and Interdisciplinary Optimization of Social and Professional Perspectives”²

Abstract: Implemented in 2016-2018, the project “NO AUTism! The education and personal development of the doctoral student with autism – the *status quo* and interdisciplinary optimization of social and professional perspectives.” aimed at developing and implementing methods that would facilitate the doctoral student with autism to complete his studies and obtain employment. The project allowed to verify previous experiences in education of adults with autism and developed the discussion on the participation of people with disabilities in social and professional life.

Keywords: autism spectrum disorder (ASD), right of persons with disabilities, education, right, legal education, PhD studies, adults with disabilities

The right to education is one of the fundamental rights guaranteed by international treaties (see Universal Declaration of Human Rights 2018, art. 26; International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights 1966, Convention on the Rights of the Child art. 14; 1989, art. 28). Its implementation in Poland regarding children and adults is ensured without major disruptions, except for changes in the structure of education, usually occurring after parliamentary elections. However, the guarantee of the right to education for people with disabilities has always been

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a problem, especially regarding adults. In the case of physical disability, this issue was noticed sooner – along with Poland’s accession to the European Union in 2004, architectural barriers in public facilities, including schools and universities gradually began to be removed; equipment of educational facilities was adjusted providing adequate benches, chairs and teaching aids. It allowed physical access to education for people with mobility disabilities. However, with regard to disabilities associated with developmental disorders, such as autism, it remained a challenge. The practice showed that, whereas in the case of children attempts to take care of their education were made, in the case of adults neither the state nor private entities had anything to offer. It applied not only to education, but also to work and a dignified life. Poland admittedly ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006)³ including Art. 24 concerning the right to education for people with disabilities and Art. 27 on work and their employment, however, the fulfillment of these obligations was not prioritized. Although this situation has improved, imperfections are easily visible, especially in smaller cities. That is why graduating from legal master’s studies and starting doctoral studies by Maciej Oksztulski, the first non-speaking autistic person in Poland, became an inspiration to develop the scientific project entitled “NO AUTism! The education and personal development of the doctoral student with autism – the *status quo* and interdisciplinary optimization of social and professional perspectives.”

The preparatory works for the project were ongoing since Maciej Oksztulski started his doctoral studies in October 2015. The project received funding from 17 May 2016 under the agreement between the University of Białystok and the Stefan Bryła Bank Zachodni WBK SA Foundation located in Warsaw. The project implementation was completed on 31 July 2018. The project was managed by Prof. Maciej Perkowski, the Head of the Department of Public International Law at the Faculty of Law of the University of Białystok (see Faculty of Law of the University of Białystok, n.d.-a), and at the same time the promoter of Maciej Oksztulski.

The English version of the project’s title (“NO-AUTism! ...”) may bring controversy, but in Polish it expresses the idea of the project – eliminating the outing / alienation of people with autism.

Within the project, the interdisciplinary team of researchers (composed of representatives of legal, pedagogical and IT sciences from various backgrounds – universities, non-governmental organizations, family members, doctoral students and students) worked on developing and implementing methods to help Maciej Oksztulski complete his doctoral studies and obtain employment. Although the project was focused on the person of Maciej Oksztulski, it was also indirectly aimed at improving the life situation of other people with autism.

3 The Polish government signed the Convention on 20 March 2007, but its ratification did not take place until 2012.

The project promoters planned a study visit to the United States of America to verify the opportunities offered by US universities to people with disabilities, including autism. After numerous consultations, the Syracuse University in New York State as a university conducive to people with disabilities, was selected. From 12 to 19 November 2017, a four-member delegation of the Faculty of Law of the University of Białystok (including Maciej Oksztulski) paid a study visit, which was received by Prof. Michael Schwartz, the Director of the Disability Rights Clinic at the College of Law (see College of Law of the Syracuse University, n.d.). During the visit the researchers verified the experience in the field of teaching people with disabilities, focusing in particular on the issues of people with autism. It also referred to solutions in the field of alternative communication methods offered by American universities (see University of Białystok, n.d.). The trip resulted in a proposal for further cooperation which now became possible due to the agreement of 2018 on cooperation between the University of Białystok and the Syracuse University (see Uchwała nr 2255 Senatu Uniwersytetu w Białymstoku, 2018).

Within the project computer hardware with the necessary software was also purchased, with which Maciej Oksztulski can work comfortably on the one hand, while on the other, can communicate more freely with others thanks to a voice synthesizer. It allows him to take an active part in meetings and scientific conferences.

During the project, the experiences of the team members and information about the project itself were described in several scientific publications (see Oksztulski 2016a; Oksztulski, 2016b; Perkowska & Sosnowski, 2016; Perkowska, Oksztulski, Perkowski & Wnorowski, 2017; Perkowski, Oksztulski & Kaczyńska, 2017), as well as referenced at several scientific and popularizing conferences and in the media (see Faculty of Law of the University of Białystok, n.d.-b).

To sum up, the project improved the conditions for learning and development of Maciej Oksztulski, as well as deepened the knowledge of the project participants and their environment on the topic of autism. The cooperation established with the Syracuse University allows to hope for further development of research in the field of the rights of people with disabilities and improvement of their living conditions. The scientific publications developed as part of the project allowed to progress in the discussion on the presence of people with autism in social life (including in the context of education) and professional life. Through these popularizing activities, many people could learn more about autism and find out that having been diagnosed with the disorder does not mean the end of social life for people affected by it. The project team hopes that in the future it will be possible to implement further research projects for people with disabilities.

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