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Visually impaired people in Luxembourg – education and services

Health care for the visually impaired people in Luxembourg

Luxembourg currently is probably the only European country where it is implemented a systematic program of early detection of visually impaired people in the first months of life. This program has been in place since thirty years. Visits for early detection are optional (the participation rate is about 70%) and take place upon invitation in babies' consultation centres or in City council rooms properly managed. Starting from 5 years of age early detection visits take place yearly in schools and the participation rate is obviously much higher (about 95%). Until the age of 13 visits take place annually while later controls become more spaced in time.

The "Institut pour deficients visuels, IDV" (Institute for Visually Impaired People)

In case the correction of visual defects of patients in school age cannot be implemented through orthotic treatments or surgery, it is the IDV to take charge of patients.

The "*Institut pour deficients visuels*" is under the Ministry of Education, and in particular under the "Service for the *éducation différenciée*" (Service for the special education).

The IDV is in charge of education, learning autonomy and family, school and society integration of young visually impaired people.

Within the institution the different sections deal with various aspects of life of the visually impaired. In particular the service for artistic activities takes charge of organizing activities such as courses in sculpture, ceramics, dance and gymnastics. Currently there is not being given special training in theatre and we hope to make our research on theatre for visually impaired people available to this institution as well as other organizations that deal with children with impaired vision.

Info-Handicap

One of the associations with the more dynamic and original ideas who is active in Luxembourg is Info handicap, an organization that operates in the field of disability in general. The activities of this organization consist in informing and guiding people



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with disabilities and their entourage, to provide a legal information service, with the possibility of consulting a lawyer for discriminations based on disability, and in raising awareness about the life of disabled people. The association takes an active role in organizing awareness days in Luxembourgish schools.

Info-Handicap is also involved in the promotion of Tourism for all, certified by the label EureWelcome.

Among the many initiatives of this association we report the contest "Eng Gemeng fir Jiddereen" (a town for all), to raise awareness of the public for taking the necessary measures for the elimination of barriers to disabled people, filmmaking about disability made by the disabled themselves, and the organization of training courses for volunteers who deal with disabilities.

Other associations active in Luxembourg

In addition to the above-mentioned associations on the national territory of Luxembourg operate different organizations for visually impaired people.

The "Fondation *Lëtzeburger* Blannevereenegung" (Luxembourgish Union for blind people foundation) offers rooms and apartments for visually impaired people, who can live within these structures as independent as possible.

This foundation also helps the visually impaired to fit in professional activities.

The *Association pour Déficients Visuels asbl* (Visually Impaired People Association) whose board of directors includes parents, visually impaired people and professionals, acts as a liaison between families and public institutions and raise the awareness of the public about the problems of the visually impaired.

The association *Canne Blanche* (white cane) aims at the improvement of moral, economic and social rights of visually impaired people in Luxembourg and counts among its activities the organization of travels for its members.

The "*Association pour Mal Voyants et Aveugles au Luxembourg*" (Association for Visually Impaired People and Blinds) aims to improve the mobility of the visually impaired people and together with the Ministry of Transport of Luxembourg has set up the service *Novabus*. *Novabus* is a bus that offers services to the visually impaired people upon payment of very cheap rates.

The awareness campaign on disability

Since 2012 in Luxembourg in the month of May takes place the awareness campaign on disability that lasts 2 weeks. With this initiative, the city of Luxembourg aims to encourage exchanges between disabled people and the rest of the population, exchanges that too often are insufficient because of the fear of the Other and the Different. During these two weeks are held debates, lectures, films, workshops and demonstrations, as well as the long-awaited dinners in the dark, in some restaurants participating to the project.



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Sports and cultural activities for the visually impaired

Sport

Visually impaired people who want to play sports in Luxembourg should contact the Luxembourg Paralympic Committee, which regulates and manages sports activities for disabled people throughout the country.

Among the recommended sports for the visually impaired are horse riding, athletics, swimming and even archery (the athlete does not need to see, since he receives sensory or sound feedbacks on the target) and the showdown, which can be defined as a cross between table tennis and table soccer. This sport is particularly suitable for visually impaired people but can also be practiced by normal sighted people, provided they wear opaque glasses, so to be equal with the visually impaired people.

Reading

In addition to having access to the usual audio books, visually impaired in Luxembourg have been the recipients of an interesting initiative started by four girls from a school in Ettelbruck. The students asked some Luxembourgish authors to make their works available for free (request which was in most cases accepted willingly) and then begun to record the reading of the texts (now available to the visually impaired).

City tours and museums visits

During the awareness weeks have been organized city tours for the visually impaired people and visits to the Museum of history of the city of Luxembourg and the Villa Vauban Art Museum.

Cinema

According to the results of a European study of 2003 entitled "*Handicap and cinema in Europe*" a lot remains to be done to overcome the barriers and make the cinema accessible to disabled people. Nowadays European national norms require the removal of architectural barriers for the construction or renovation of cinemas. From this point of view UK is at the forefront of European anti barriers legislation, while Luxembourg is the only country in which these norms don't apply. Of the 10 cinemas in the country at present only 4 are accessible from viewers with the wheelchair.

In addition to architectural barriers exist however other barriers that prevent people with disabilities, including visually impaired, a full enjoyment of the film. One solution is the audio description of films obtainable from visually impaired people via wireless headphones. Audio description is the auditory narration of visual representations such as television programs, films and live performances. During



gaps in dialogue, it describes visual elements such as scenes, settings, actions and costumes..¹

Unfortunately, audio description is still in its infancy stage and there are still very few audiodescribed films. It is probable that in the near future this problem will be easily solved by the entry into the market of a new app called CinemaConnect, which should help to break down decisively costs for audio description.

As regards accessibility of the cinemas by the visually impaired people in Luxembourg this is unfortunately still very poor. The largest cinema chain in Luxembourg, Utopolis, on its website does not even mention the visually impaired people (in contrast to what happens for many British cinemas for example). Currently you cannot watch audio described films and as it seems there are no steps in this direction in the near future.

Theatre

Although Luxembourg is well advanced in some aspects related to the integration of the visually impaired people into society, it must be said unfortunately that in this country the theatre, both in terms of the enjoyment of the shows and the attending of theatre classes, is still the "Cinderella" of the visually impaired people's cultural activities. At present it does not exist in Luxembourg the opportunity to attend to theatre plays with audio description. To our knowledge there are not currently theatre classes organized for visually impaired people, or have ever been staged theatre performances with blind or partially sighted actors. Yet the theatrical activity, as shown by numerous studies, is the most direct way to eliminate barriers to socialization encountered by the visually impaired, which often affect their lives even more than the physical and architectural barriers. We therefore believe that the Luxembourgish associations for visually impaired people will greatly benefit from the project Vision and the dissemination of best practices for visually impaired people's theatre.

¹ <http://www.mediaaccess.org.au/about/what-is-media-access/what-is-audio-description>



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