



PACES

Progression of Accessibility Centres in higher Education for Students with disabilities in North Africa

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PACES

Introduction



PACES Partners at Coventry University | July 2019

The Erasmus+ PACES project (Progression of Accessibility Centres in higher Education for Students with disabilities in North Africa) has just drawn to a close. In this report we reflect on the achievements of this collaboration with our partners in Europe and North Africa who have worked with us over four years. In this project we aimed to improve the academic and employment prospects of students with disabilities in North Africa.

The background to PACES is that it followed a previous Tempus project, SWING (Sustainable Ways to Increase higher education students' equal access to learning environments), in which we started building Accessibility Centres in Egypt and Morocco. Some of the partners from the SWING project have been instrumental in the success of PACES, and new partners helped to increase the number of Accessibility Centres and the number of people benefiting from the project. In fact, we overachieved on many of our targets including creating extra centres and providing more training and peer support than we had intended.

With the support of the EU Erasmus+ Programme we worked with four universities from Europe, four from Morocco and four from Egypt to build Accessibility Centres that host accessible technology and provide advice and support. The project was led by Coventry University in the UK who also conducted research into the needs of students with disabilities in higher education (HE) in Egypt and Morocco and documented best practice in this field. Our partners from Europe led on different parts of the project: the University of Maribor in Slovenia led on the establishment of Accessibility Centres, the University of Macedonia in Greece led on progression of training, and the University of Alicante in Spain led on the peer-to-peer student support schemes.

Three of the North African partners had previously worked with the coordinators in SWING, and they also led particular strands of the project; the Arab Academy for Science, Technology and Maritime Transport led on dissemination and was also the lead and mentor for all the Egyptian partners. Université Abdelmalek Essaâdi led on quality and sustainability and Université Ibn Tofaïl was responsible for the employer networks; both of these universities mentored and supported new partners from Morocco.

Ain Shams University, Mansoura University and Fayoum University from Egypt were new to the consortium, as were Université Mohammed V de Rabat and Université Moulay Ismaïl from Morocco. Our new partners brought fresh approaches and helped to widen the reach of the PACES Erasmus+ project throughout the region. We all worked together to support students with disabilities through university and, importantly, to create a culture of equal opportunities for study and employment.

Perhaps the most important impact from this project was the support of policy makers in both countries and their willingness to carry on this work and create a more equal society.

The five key elements of the PACES project are:

- The transfer of good practice in equality and diversity across the EU and North Africa, researching the needs of students with disabilities in the partner countries, and transferring the knowledge gained from the SWING project.
- Expanding already-established Accessibility Centres and building new Centres in a further five universities, while also launching virtual and pop-up Accessibility Centres.
- The development of a new training handbook, to be used as a framework for partners to design institutionally-appropriate training for teaching and administrative staff, students (with and without disabilities), and employers.
- Establishing an action network of employers and Higher Education Institutes in Egypt and Morocco with the aim of helping employers to understand the needs and skills of persons with disabilities, and at the same time training students with disabilities in employability skills.
- Developing volunteer student schemes to encourage peer-to-peer support for students with disabilities. These schemes enable the volunteers to work with their peers who have disabilities so that they not only provide support, but also understand the implications of what it means to have a disability, thus influencing their future career choices and encouraging universal design.

Aim

The overall aim of the PACES project was to set up and progress a programme of initiatives in universities in Egypt and Morocco to support the modernisation of higher education by developing Accessibility Centres (static, mobile and virtual) that enable students with disabilities to access assistive technology and support services such as counselling and peer support. Through these centres and the Employer/HE networks students with disabilities will be able to gain employability and transition skills in order to move forward into employment.

The specific objectives were carefully constructed to build upon the outputs of the Tempus SWING project and to incorporate lessons learned and good practice knowledge transferred from several other Erasmus+ projects (MUSE, SINCHE and Trans2Work). They were also designed to add innovation in the form of virtual and pop-up/mobile Accessibility Centres to increase the reach and impact to more areas in North Africa. PACES will improve the study and employability chances of students with disabilities by accomplishing the objectives through concrete tangible outputs.

There are many difficulties for students and graduates with disabilities in North Africa, where students from poor socioeconomic backgrounds face significant barriers to accessing higher education. Disability can be stigmatised and cultural norms often result in families caring for their disabled members entirely at home, or struggling on under difficult circumstances. All project partners have learned lessons and aim to increase the scale of access to higher education and employment opportunities for students with disabilities throughout Egypt and Morocco.

Project Activities



- 1.1 Conducted a needs analysis, including focus groups held with students with disabilities in the Egyptian and Moroccan universities.
- 1.2 Shared knowledge between all partners about good practice in supporting students with disabilities.
- 1.3 The report *PACES - Needs Analysis Report and Examples of Good Practice* was written using data from the needs analysis and the knowledge sharing events.
- 1.4 Mapped relationships between universities and employers at the start of the project.
- 2.1 Designed new Accessibility Centres and progressed/improved existing Centres for students with disabilities.
- 2.2 Developed Accessibility Centres equipped with assistive technology, trained staff, and support services.
- 2.3 A Virtual Accessibility Centre was created and integrated into the main project website.
- 2.4 Developed mobile/pop-up Accessibility Centres in Egypt and Morocco, which visited other campuses, community spaces, and schools to publicise the work of PACES.
- 3.1 Designed a training handbook, used as the framework for the development of training sessions in partner universities in Egypt and Morocco.
- 3.2 Train-the-trainer workshops were held at EU partner universities. These trainers cascaded the training to teaching and administrative staff, students and employers.
- 3.3 Students, both with and without disabilities, were trained using the handbook. Some of these students also signed up as peer support volunteers.
- 3.4 Training was provided to employers to help them to improve the working environment for people with disabilities.
- 3.5 An evaluation of all training was completed and is available in English and Arabic.
- 4.1 Employment Accessibility Mentors were recruited in Egypt and Morocco, to support the development of relationships between universities and employers.
- 4.2 Round Tables and Employability Workshops were held in partner universities with employers from industry, charities, and government.
- 4.3 National networks of universities and employers were created in Egypt and Morocco. As part of this, a guidance document (charter) for the employment of people with disabilities was developed and shared with regional and national employer organisations.
- 4.4 Partner universities worked with employers to build lists of work placements for students with disabilities.
- 5.1 New policies for peer-to-peer student support schemes were developed, tailored to each university's context, and ratified by university management.
- 5.2 Volunteer student supporters, both with and without disabilities, were recruited in each university and provided with information and training on how to support their peers.
- 5.3 Each university developed individual student peer support pages, accessible by students with disabilities and by the student support volunteers.
- 6.1 An internal quality group was set up to monitor the ongoing quality of the project and its management.
- 6.2 Internal quality reports have been produced, based on feedback from all partners.
- 6.3 An external quality expert was engaged and has completed two detailed evaluation reports on the quality, sustainability, and management of the project.
- 6.4 All partners have contributed to planning for the sustainability of the project, working to ensure that the positive impact which has been delivered can be continued beyond the life of the project.
- 7.1 A project website was created (www.pacesproject.eu) and will continue to be maintained as part of the project's sustainability, showcasing events and resources relevant to people with disabilities in education and employment, university staff, and employers.
- 7.2 A web library of resources has been included as part of the website; combined with the virtual accessibility centre, this page provides a range of resources including information about software, support organisations, and training materials.
- 7.3 Several national and international events took place as part of the project, focusing on the technology and legislative support available for people with disabilities in education and employment. Two final conferences took place in Morocco and Egypt, which were very well attended by employers, charity organisations, and government representatives.
- 7.4 A variety of dissemination materials were created, including banners, leaflets, and social media accounts.

Achievement Highlights Needs Analysis

A needs analysis was performed at the start of the project to provide a picture of the situation with regard to partner universities' support systems for students with disabilities, before the project's activities began. Data was gathered both at an institutional level and directly from students; a significant crossover was found between the gaps in support identified by the universities and the needs identified by the students.

Although a lot of work had been done to integrate students with disabilities into university life and to enable them to have a successful university career, it was clear that sustaining a high level of support could be difficult, particularly where there are no established policies or procedures in place to sustain those practices.

The final recommendations were based on the results of the needs analysis and took into account the good practices which had already been established in the partner universities.



These recommendations laid the foundations of the project's activities:

1. Employability Skills

The needs analysis illustrated the importance of employability skills to the students who took part in the focus groups. This need was also reflected in the survey results, which showed that most of the North African universities did not have employability training set up specifically for students with disabilities, and that building relationships with employers can be difficult. Employability has become increasingly important for European universities over the past few years, which is reflected in their good practices, and that knowledge was shared among partners throughout the project.

2. Staff and Student Training

Training for teaching and administrative staff, and for students, on disability awareness and how to support and communicate with people who have disabilities was a vital need. Several of the North African universities had been involved in earlier projects to improve the experience of higher education for students with disabilities: however, it is important to keep training updated and to ensure that new staff are included in the training programme.

3. Development of Accessibility Centres

The Accessibility Centres which were already in place in Egyptian and Moroccan universities illustrated the positive impact which these centres have on the university experience of students with disabilities. There is always more that can be done within these centres, whether that is increased access to support, more assistive technology, or additional services. In those universities without an existing Accessibility Centre, there was an acknowledged need for them, both on an institutional and a student level.

4. Accessible Learning Resources and Assistive Technology

Increased provision of accessible learning resources, as well as hardware such as Braille printers, was something which all of the partners were working to achieve as PACES began; as more students with disabilities enter higher education, more of these resources are required. Students were particularly eager to mention the importance of having adequate resources available at the busiest times of the academic year, such as the end of term and examination time.

5. Needs Assessments

Conducting needs assessments with all students who disclose disabilities would contribute to improved levels of support and academic achievement. Every student with a disability is an individual, and their requirements for assistive technology, learning and social support, and physical assistance are different. Setting up a system of needs assessment after disclosure, with follow-up meetings, would ensure that no student with a disability is disadvantaged. This would facilitate the establishment of individual learning plans which ensure that, for example, the recording of lectures is permitted for all students for whom this would be useful.

Achievement Highlights Accessibility Centres



An important element of the PACES project is the establishment of new Accessibility Centres and the progression/improvement of already-established Centres in Egypt and Morocco.

These Accessibility Centres were appropriately equipped and staffed in order to provide assistive technology, personal support, and academic advice for students with disabilities. The three partners which had been involved in the SWING project had created Accessibility Centres as part of that project's activities, and the focus of those partners was to improve and progress their Centres with new technology, furniture, or other resources. The goal was to improve the three existing Accessibility Centres, and create five new ones in the other universities; in fact, eight new centres were developed.

In addition to the physical Accessibility Centres, mobile or 'pop-up' Accessibility Centres were created in each country. These pop-ups are staffed by PACES trainers or student support workers, and visit campuses, schools, and public spaces to demonstrate the technology and other support which is available within the university. These mobile centres are used to increase the reach of the project, and to inform young people with disabilities, their teachers, and their parents that university is an option for them, and that support and assistive technology will be available to facilitate their studies.

Following a school visit by the PACES team, a teacher brought her autistic nephew to Mansoura University's Accessibility Centre to ask for advice. "His parents felt so helpless and desperate beforehand because they did not know what to do. Help and advice was given by three volunteers who are specialists in Special Education. It was totally free and the parents were more than thrilled." (Dr Inas El-Zayyat, Mansoura University).

"I am happy with the fact that the university thinks about us - this centre helps us for our exam and the equipment helps us for our documentaries."

Student, Université Moulay Ismaïl, Morocco

"At first I did not believe that we can have something like this and thought that it is something not reliable but after I went through it I found a work that is really appreciated - the accessibility centre is now a part of my life in the faculty."

Faculty of Medicine student, Ain Shams University, Egypt



Erasmus+



Centre d'accessibilité

Achievement Highlights

Training



Training of students and staff at
Université Mohammed V de Rabat,
Morocco



Training at Fayoum University, Egypt

“It was an intensive training session with valuable and great information. I hope that all of our colleagues will benefit from such training.”

Attendee of staff and employer training,
Arab Academy for Science, Technology
and Maritime Transport, Egypt

Each partner in Egypt and Morocco nominated a training lead and team who attended train-the-trainer events in the four European partner universities.

Staff were selected for their ability to cascade the training within their own university. The training teams developed their sessions and learning outcomes using the PACES training handbook, which was designed for partners to adapt to their specific institutional and regional contexts.

The PACES training handbook contains four modules: Self Determination, Self-Advocacy, Social Support Services, and Universal Design and Accessibility. It includes guidance on supporting students towards employment, and on adapting the workplace.

The training was very successful and exceeded the project’s goals. **433 university staff** (teaching, administrative, and support), **1,468 students** (with and without disabilities), and **138 employers** attended sessions run by the Egyptian and Moroccan partners. Many of the students also volunteered to be part of the peer support schemes (see page 9).

PACES training will continue as ongoing activities in the partner universities. Staff will be trained as part of their university inductions, continuing professional development courses, and as part of other engagement activities. Students will continue to be trained for their own development, and as part of their involvement in the volunteer peer support networks, and employer training will be integrated into job fairs, conferences, and other university events.

“It’s very important that the community should understand the needs and the required skills needed for the persons with disabilities in order to train the community on these abilities and develop them. Also to train the persons with disabilities on the requested skills in order to raise their effectiveness and accuracy to find more jobs easily in the society without facing any difficulties. The more we raise awareness in the society the more we will assist the disabled persons to develop and improve.”

Member of the Egyptian Parliament

Achievement Highlights Peer-to-Peer Student Supporters Schemes



PACES built on the strong cultural traditions of volunteerism in Egypt and Morocco in order to create new support schemes for students with disabilities. These schemes increased awareness among all students, and improved the academic and social lives of students with disabilities.

Each partner university established their own peer-to-peer student support scheme, through which students volunteer to support their peers with disabilities, whether academically or socially. These schemes have been extremely successful with almost 150% of planned volunteers recruited. These volunteers (both with and without disabilities) not only support other students throughout their university career, but also receive valuable experience which will benefit them in the future, and which should ensure that they, as future employers and co-workers, retain their awareness of the abilities of people with disabilities and the advantages they can bring to the workplace.

The schemes are organised within the remit of the newly created or newly improved Accessibility Centres, but are designed to be managed predominantly by the student volunteers themselves, using Facebook groups. The volunteer schemes will be self-perpetuating, as each generation of peer supporters will help to recruit and train the next cohort.

“I find it has been nothing but a large awareness course. The amount of students this project has reached, who were absolutely ignorant about the struggle and the life of those with disabilities, positively influences the awareness culture.”

Staff member, Arab Academy for Science, Technology and Maritime Transport, Egypt



Student volunteer training at Université Mohammed V de Rabat

Achievement Highlights

Universities and Employers Network

Both Egypt and Morocco have laws requiring employers to meet quotas for hiring people with disabilities; despite this, they are much more likely to live in poverty. The longstanding problem of underemployment for those with disabilities was addressed by PACES, not only by supporting students to successfully complete and graduate from higher education, but also by engaging with employers.

The main reason to create this link with employers was to increase employment opportunities for students with disabilities and to make a societal impact on attitudes and practices. COVID-19 meant that unemployment rose during the pandemic in the partner countries, as in the rest of the world. This created problems in formally recruiting employers to the Universities and Employers Network. There was a lot of good will, and many employers joined the network but did not want to formally commit and sign up: this was understandable in an uncertain employment market, combined with the concern that people with disabilities are a vulnerable group likely to be affected by COVID-19.

Throughout the project the partners have made many links with employers through the Employment Accessibility Mentors, the Round Tables and the conferences. Ten employer events were carried out during the project. Many employers were sympathetic to employing and engaging with people with disabilities, and attended training and dissemination events.

The Employers' Charter was written by the partners and included as part of the invitation to participate in the Universities and Employers Network. The Charter, which is available in English, French and Arabic, serves as a basis and protocol for the PACES network. The leader of this strand of the project stated that:

“employers consider involvement in the network to be a moral engagement”.

Partners have made concrete links with employers to strengthen the chances of employment for students with disabilities. Agreements have been reached with various organisations that work for and with people with disabilities such as the RUMI association (TEMPUS program); trainers such as AFEM and EFE; and recruiters such as ANAPEC and ALSA. Université Abdelmalek Essaâdi has signed a cooperation agreement involving four major entities: the university, Al Chourouk Association, Hanan Association and the Regional Academy for Education and Training. A road map to continue the Universities and Employers Network after the project ends details the implementation, milestones and deliverables.

Creating a national Universities and Employers Network can be a difficult task in any country, at any time, but we endeavoured to create this Network during the time of COVID-19. By offering training to employers, involving students with disabilities in job fairs, and hosting national employment events, PACES has developed new relationships between universities and external organisations, facilitating entry into employment for students with disabilities.



Attendees at the Employability Event in Rabat, October 2019

Achievement Highlights



Policy makers' involvement

Impact from collaboration with policy makers was one of the highest achievements for the PACES project in which we aimed to spread knowledge and change attitudes about people with disabilities.

During the final conferences in Morocco and Egypt members of parliament in both countries joined the debates, pledging significant support for benefits to people with disabilities. In Egypt and Morocco the PACES team connected with the highest level of Government.

On the morning of the IC-PACES conference in Egypt in March 2021, the Minister for Social Solidarity, Her Excellency, Doctor Nivine El Qabbage flew in from Cairo to be the keynote speaker. Her commitment to the project and to people with disabilities in Egypt was very clear. In a passionate speech, she spoke about a turning point in Egypt, encouraging partnerships with universities, employers and people with disabilities. Speaking of the PACES project and its aim to help people with disabilities into higher education and ultimately into employment she said:

"I pledge to support you, I stand with you and you stand with me, partners together."

She pledged to work with the PACES team, to uphold the 5% quota and ensure that people with disabilities are paid equally for their work.

Six other Egyptian MPs from three ministries – the Ministry of Social Solidarity, the Ministry of Education and Technical Education, and the Ministry of Youth and Sports – have adopted the patronage of the IC-PACES Conference. Some of them joined the Round Table discussions, and promised to deliver the recommendations of the conference to the Egyptian Parliament to update the laws (if needed) towards the inclusion of students with disabilities. The IC-PACES Conference will continue every two years, where national achievements will be disseminated to the leaders of all countries in the Arab League.

In Morocco, the PACES conference in February 2021 was attended by members of Government in three ministries: Mr Elyazidi Abdessalam, Ministry of Higher Education; Mr. Brahim Zerrouki, Ministry of Solidarity, Social Development, Equality and Family; and Mr. Abdelhamid El Haddad, Social Development Agency. The Morocco conference resulted in a ministerial pledge to assign no less than 10% of civil society organisations' activities and services to people with disabilities.

Mr. Brahim Zerrouki of the Ministry of Solidarity, Social Development, Equality and Family discussed the political will of the King of Morocco to help integrate people with disabilities into the job market, and Mr. Abdelhamid El Haddad of the Social Development Agency presented "The Importance of Empowerment and of Strengthening of Income-generating Activities in the Socio-economic Integration of People with Disability". He said that in 2019, 200 people with disabilities were recruited, in 2020 it was 400, and in 2022 600 people with disabilities will be recruited.

HE Dr Nivine El Qabbage, at the Second International Conference, Arab Academy for Science, Technology and Maritime Transport



Professor Sanaa Haroon, the leader of the PACES team at Fayoum University, was invited to take part in a Government Committee on the rights of people with disabilities. Prof. Dr. Sahar Al-Bazar, Member of Parliament and the Undersecretary of the Foreign Relations Committee, interviewed the Fayoum University team, as well as some students with disabilities. Her Excellency said:

"the House of Representatives has an important legislative role, and therefore I will personally adopt this issue and follow it up."

Fayoum University in Egypt became affiliated to the Ministry of Higher Education with 76 institutes; they updated the programmes for students with disabilities, using PACES resources, to help them in all areas of education and all their activities. The Ministry of Higher Education follows up on these students through official letters sent to the university president.

AASTMT, in partnership with the Egyptian Ministry of Social Solidarity and the Central Department for Community Development in the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, are currently building a platform for people with disabilities which can be used by all Egyptian universities and organisations. This will have an impact on all Egyptian people with disabilities. They are also creating a database which will record all mental health disorders and skills requirements.

Engagement and Publicity



Visit to Université Ibn Tofail
by Ihssane Benalluch

The project's activities have been publicised in a variety of ways, including press coverage, engagement with employers and local organisations via newsletters, and the visits of the pop-up Accessibility Centres.

PACES has accounts on Facebook and Twitter, which are used to disseminate the project outcomes and to share information on events and relevant news stories.

Visits by the pop-up Accessibility Centres have taken place in libraries, schools, charity organisations, and at national youth events.

To increase awareness of PACES and its activities among younger people, the Erasmus+ office in Morocco invited social media influencer Ihssane Benalluch (<https://www.instagram.com/ihssanebenalluch>) to visit Université Ibn Tofail in October 2020. Ms Benalluch visited the Accessibility Centre, met PACES staff, and spoke to some of the students with disabilities. Her social media post and video has had more than 458,500 likes on Instagram and 155,000 views on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1mA8GYKGLow>).



Press coverage

There has been significant media coverage of the project's activities, particularly the employability workshops and the final conferences, which were reported in local and national newspapers and television in both countries.

The second employability event, hosted by Université Mohammed V de Rabat in Morocco, was attended and covered by the mainstream media, which led to discussions in the press about employment opportunities for people with disabilities.



Screenshot from news report on Employability Event in Rabat, Morocco (October 2019)

“This is an effort that must be borne and deployed by the educational community in general and the university in particular. Maybe we have already started [...] The university is on this path and I think the future will be better”

Professor Hmimid Zahra, Rapporteur at the employability event (quoted in Hespress, the most popular news website in Morocco)

Professor Mohamed Abo Elazm, a member of the PACES team at Arab Academy for Science, Technology and Maritime Transport in Egypt, was interviewed about the project during the Champions Challenge Programme on the Egyptian Nile TV channel, on 27 February 2021.

Screenshots of Champions Challenge Programme, 27 February 2021



Screenshot of Dr Nivine el-Qabbage, Minister in the Egyptian Parliament, interviewed by MBC Channel 2 in Egypt after the first day of the IC-PACES conference in Alexandria



الأكاديمية العربية تحتفي بأبناءها من ذوي الإعاقة

International conferences

Both final conferences received extensive news coverage online, in newspapers, and on television.

Innovation

In PACES there were many innovations. Here we highlight two:

Pop-Up Accessibility Centres

Pop-up shops, pop-up restaurants and even pop-up science venues have become a feature of culture and society in many countries. The benefits of 'pop-ups' are that they are temporary and low-cost. Utilising spaces where people meet, work, shop or learn with flexible mobile stands/enclosures/tents or other temporary structures is a good way of getting a message to people that would not otherwise visit a static physical space, for example within a university.

Mobile/pop-up Accessibility Centres (PUACs) were designed and hosted by the country leads (AASTMT in Egypt, and UAE in Morocco). They consist of a mobile kit with assistive technology, literature, training handbooks, banners and a range of information.

The PACES PUACs have created great impact throughout the region. AASTMT for example took their PUAC across Egypt to seven Governorates (Alexandria, Aswan, Luxor, Mansoura, Fayoum, Port Said and Sharm El-Sheikh). Demonstrating assistive technology and increasing awareness of the possibility of students with disabilities gaining a university education has been a twofold success: firstly, the students and their families have realised that they could go to university as there is support available; and secondly, teachers are aware that technology can support students with disabilities and increase their confidence and academic success.

PUACs can also be used to inform employers and institutions as to how they can adapt the workplace to facilitate the employment of people with disabilities.

Peer-To-Peer Student Support Services

Volunteer peer support services created in each North African partner university were extremely successful, with most partners recruiting significantly more than the planned number of student volunteers. Partners utilised a variety of methods to publicise the schemes and to reward or recognise the volunteers, including badges, involvement in events, and visits to relevant organisations.

The innovation created a generation of students with insight and empathy for the needs of people with disabilities. The intention is that they will take the training and understanding forward into their future careers (for example as teachers, doctors, or architects), making the environment more inclusive and creating more equal employment opportunities.

“[The volunteer scheme] at Mansoura University ... is a bright light ... that clearly reveals to us that the next tomorrow is undoubtedly more beautiful.”

Amal Jamal in Albawabh News



Pop-up Accessibility Centre visit by Arab Academy for Science, Technology and Maritime Transport

Obstacles and Limitations



COVID-19

The PACES project was not without its challenges, the most obvious one being the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in the last and the most active year of the project. As the virus spread across the world in 2020, universities and businesses closed, full lockdowns happened in many countries, travel was banned and economies constrained. Although the essential project relevance was not affected the lockdown had a significant impact on project meetings, conferences, training, and employment opportunities.

The most important impact of COVID-19 was the effect of the illness, and in some cases the sad loss of family members and colleagues from the virus. Apart from significant personal health and wellbeing issues, some of the effects included delays in carrying out activities, unavailability of signatories for authorising expenditure, and internal administrative delays. During the project, partners reported on a regular basis, through updates, emails and meetings; when the pandemic began all scheduled coordination meetings were moved online. In order to provide the necessary motivation and wellbeing support to the team, the coordinators held Zoom or Skype meetings with all of the partners as necessary. After March 2020 an additional 17 meetings were held with individual partners.

Travel bans and fears of COVID-19 infection meant that the conferences were held as 'blended' events: anyone who was able to travel to the location did so, while overseas attendees or those who could not be there in person took part on Zoom. Despite the COVID-19 restrictions, the PACES International Conferences were a great success, achieving audiences in excess of the targets.

Morocco suffered from significant COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions which hampered the visits of the Pop-up Accessibility Centres for safety reasons.

Employers

The strand of the project which involved employers gave us two challenges: the first was COVID-19, and the second involved concerns over employment laws in Morocco and Egypt. The Universities and Employers Network and the Employers' Charter were created, although we were made aware that employers were reluctant to officially sign up to the charter as they felt that it was a formal obligation (similar to the employment legislation in both countries which has legal penalties): this became a barrier. As a result, we removed the requirement for them to 'sign up' to the charter, and instead restructured it as a guidance document.

Many employers joined the Universities and Employers Network but there was understandable anxiety about placements and employment in an uncertain job market, combined with the awareness that people with disabilities are in the most vulnerable group likely to be affected by COVID-19. To ensure that these activities carry on, a Road Map to continue the Universities and Employers Network has been created and agreed by leaders in both partner countries.

Financial Challenges

Other challenges included the procurement of equipment, particularly for our Moroccan partners. The purchasing process took longer than anticipated, due to procurement regulations, as well as a lack of suppliers. However, all equipment was installed and available for use by students at least twelve months before the project completed.

Impact - Institutional

Each of the Egyptian and Moroccan universities created significant institutional impact as a result of being part of the PACES project. The Accessibility Centres which were created or improved within the universities not only provide support and information to students with disabilities and to staff members, they also help to increase awareness of the activities and the principles of the project.

Training programmes which were set up for university staff, students, and employers have been extremely successful, and will continue after the project has ended, so that awareness of the capabilities of people with disabilities will continue and expand. The training has had a broader impact: a new university degree 'Assistants et Accompagnateurs Sociaux' (Social Assistants and Supporters) has been co-created with the team from Université Abdelmalek Essaâdi in Morocco; modules from the PACES training handbook are being added to teacher training courses in Université Mohammed V de Rabat in Morocco; and our Egyptian partners are providing training to external universities and other organisations.

The Public Service Center in Mansoura University, Egypt, now offers two courses which were suggested by PACES trainees: 1) How to deal with people with disabilities; and 2) Terms and concepts in the field of Special Education (a course in specialised English). The PSC is part of the Faculty of Education for Childhood, and the courses are available both to student teachers and to the general public.

The impact of the project on students is also clear from the high level of interest in volunteering for the peer-to-peer support schemes which were established in each partner university. These schemes will continue to improve the academic and social lives of students with disabilities.

The successes of the various activities of the project have led to new or increased engagement with students with disabilities by high level management.

The impact of the final conferences, in terms of the number of attendees, the attention from government ministers, and the media coverage, underlined the public interest in improving the lives of people with disabilities, and the role that universities can play in that improvement.

Impact – National and International

In both Egypt and Morocco high-level national impact has been achieved through new and improved relationships with government ministers as a result of individual meetings, involvement in government committees, and ministerial attendance at conferences. Ministers and other government officials who attended the PACES conferences pledged to uphold the goals of the PACES project, to improve access to employment for people with disabilities, and to support employers in creating accessible workplaces for all.

Professor Sanaa Haroon, the PACES lead at Fayoum University in Egypt, has been invited to take part in a government committee on the rights of people with disabilities, with Professor Dr Sahan Al-Bazar, MP and Undersecretary of Foreign Relations, who has made an assurance to personally adopt the issue and follow it up.

During September 2021 the President of Fayoum University made a visit to the new Accessibility Centre. The visit was covered by Egyptian television news, and highlighted the training programme for deaf students, and the important role which the Centre plays in the Faiyum governorate by providing training to employees.

The Arab Academy for Science, Technology and Maritime Transport in Egypt, is working with the Egyptian Ministry of Social Solidarity and the Central Department for Community Development in the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology to build a platform for people with disabilities which can be used by all Egyptian universities and organisations.

The mobile/pop-up Accessibility Centres continue to visit a variety of venues around each country – schools, other universities, community centres, libraries, and charities, as well as local and national events such as the Africa and Arab Collegiate Programming Championship (ACPC) (www.acpc.global/).

Several partners signed partnership agreements or memoranda of understanding with relevant organisations in their countries: Université Abdelmalek Essaâdi in Morocco signed two separate agreements, pledging to provide employer and staff training, student placements, and work towards policy change; Université Ibn Tofail in Morocco signed a convention with a charity to improve accessibility in universities; and Université Mohammed V de Rabat in Morocco set up agreements with several organisations which provide training and employment support for people with disabilities.

A significant impact which has resulted from this project is the engagement and support of policy makers in both countries.

As Dr Mohamed Hussein El Hamamy, member of the Egyptian Parliament, declared at the PACES final conference in Egypt:

“We have created a contagious feeling of hope”

Future Developments

PACES is part of a suite of Erasmus+ projects that date back to 2012: SWING in North Africa, followed by MUSE in Latin America, then PACES in North Africa, and the latest (ongoing) project, ENTENDER in Latin America. This demonstrates that strong collaborations lead to future partnerships and highlights the need for joint projects that build capacity, especially involving people with fewer opportunities. During PACES the partners worked with university senior management to ensure sustainability. The Accessibility Centres are embedded within the universities, pop-up visits will continue in Egypt and Morocco, and PACES resources have become part of staff training, some of which is mandatory. There is also a roadmap for the ongoing activities of the Universities and Employers Network.

National and International Developments

The relationships developed with Ministers in Egypt and Morocco and the inclusion of PACES partners on Government Committees will facilitate further cooperation between universities and the Parliaments of Egypt and Morocco. Ministers at each of the conferences pledged to work together with the PACES team; this will result in future strategy and policy change for people with disabilities at the highest level in the region.

AASTMT are developing a platform in partnership with the Ministry of Social Solidarity and the Central Department for Community Development, for use by companies and universities, which will have an impact on all Egyptian people with disabilities. This activity will also record intellectual disabilities and skills requirements, having a future impact on people with a variety of conditions, including neurodiversity.

AASTMT are building a new Medical Simulation Centre in the Medical Campus of Alamein. The Accessibility Centre will work towards future developments in social and medical contexts that will improve life for people with disabilities.

There will be future collaborations internationally. Fifty alumni of Université Mohammed V de Rabat, now working across Africa, will be mentors for students with disabilities at their university. PACES students in Egypt will continue working with UN Egypt, fostering entrepreneurship for students with disabilities.

An academic paper with international PACES partners about collaboration in Erasmus+ projects will be published in a prestigious journal. Coventry University will expand on the PACES project in Latin America by working with colleagues in the ENTENDER Erasmus+ project. To continue the work of SWING and PACES, the partners aim to work together on future projects to help people with disabilities.

Events have been established by the partners who will take them forward as a regular feature. The PACES International Conference will continue every two years, disseminating the achievements of PACES to the Arab League of twenty-two countries; Université Moulay Ismaïl and Université Mohammed V de Rabat will organise a 'PACES National Day' with researchers and stakeholders across Morocco, and Université Ibn Tofaïl will organise Accessibility Open Days and sports/cultural events for students with disabilities.

Future PACES Training in the Wider Education System

Staff in the Faculty of Education of Université Mohammed V de Rabat will add PACES modules to their teacher training courses, and new PhD research will focus on people with disabilities. Université Abdelmalek Essaâdi co-created a university degree entitled 'Assistants et Accompagnateurs Sociaux' (Social Assistants and Supporters) in the Normal High School of Martil-Tétouan which will create awareness of opportunities and challenges for people with disabilities at high school level. Fayoum University's affiliation to the Ministry of Higher Education Institutes in Egypt will create future training programmes using PACES resources. NGOs and organisations outside the PACES consortium (for example AmidEast and Helm in Egypt, and ANAPEC in Morocco) will continue to use PACES training for their staff. In addition, the accessible PACES website containing the PACES resources will be maintained and freely available to everyone.

Thank You



The PACES project united all the partners towards a common goal, to improve the situation in higher education in Morocco and Egypt for students with disabilities. We would like to extend our thanks to Erasmus+ for funding this project and enabling us to achieve our aim.

We thank all of the PACES partners, in the EU and in North Africa, for their enthusiasm and hard work throughout the project, for their support, and their friendship.

Finally, we are grateful to all of the people who have contributed to the project, who have supported us and engaged with our training and events including, but not limited to, students, university staff, employers, and government ministers.



The PACES Partners, Rabat coordination meeting, October 2019



PACES

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www.pacesproject.eu.

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