

# CHAMPIONING EDUCATION ABROAD

## FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES



Alex Stone, Executive Director of The Amandla Project, with Fraser on Table Mountain in Cape Town, South Africa.

**W**hen Alex Stone was an undergraduate student, he participated in an internship for a disability advocacy agency in Cape Town, South Africa. The experience had such a powerful impact on Stone that he vowed to help make education abroad available to people with disabilities.

“Education abroad is an opportunity for such profound personal and professional growth, and to make those opportunities accessible for as many populations as possible is a social justice issue,” says Stone, Executive Director of The Amandla Project. The program began as Stone’s master’s thesis and is a fully-funded, 8-week internship and leadership development fellowship program. It was aimed at increasing the participation of disabled students in educational experiences abroad.

According to the Institute for International Education’s most recent Open Doors® report, 8.5 percent of study abroad students had disabilities in 2016-2017, up from 2.6 percent just a decade earlier. But there’s still more work to be done to ensure accessibility for everyone.

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“International education is a big part of citizen diplomacy,” says Ashley Holben, Program Specialist for Mobility International USA, an organization that administers the U.S. Department of State-sponsored National

**HOW TO EXPAND  
STUDY ABROAD  
OPPORTUNITIES FOR  
STUDENTS WITH  
APPARENT AND  
NON-APPARENT  
DISABILITIES.**



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Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange. “It’s really important that all kinds of people are represented so that as we extend relationships with people in other countries and cultures they aren’t getting a limited picture of who Americans are.”

Among those Americans are people with physical, mental, learning and sensory disabilities. “Whether people have an apparent or non-apparent disability, it’s very important for them to have equitable opportunities to contribute to the global community,” says Holben.



## TIPS

### FOR OPENING UP OPPORTUNITIES TO EVERYONE

The idea of sending students with disabilities on study abroad programs may seem daunting at first. How can a blind student be part of a program on adventure tourism? Will a student with sensory disabilities be able to wade in a murky river on an environmental program? In most cases, there are ways to make education abroad accessible to nearly everyone. It just takes some forward thinking and advance planning.

“Focus on the smaller things you can do little by little to make study abroad accessible,” says Shun Yanagishita, University Relations Manager for the Western Region for SIT Study Abroad. Yanagishita, Holben and Stone offer the following 10 tips for creating an inclusive education abroad environment:



**1. Include disability in your diversity and inclusion plan.** “Don’t wait for students with disabilities to make the first move,” says Holben. “Be proactive, and start thinking of disability as yet another aspect of diversity and identity.”

Just as you try to increase the number of first-generation, LGBTQ and students of color traveling abroad, so too should you reach out to students with disabilities.

**2. Create inviting marketing materials.** That can be as simple as adding the statement “alternative formats made available upon request” to all documents and incorporating photos showing a variety of students. “Make sure you show students with disabilities in your materials,” says Stone. “Showing someone in a wheelchair or with a guide dog can help other students with disabilities conceptualize that opportunity. It goes a long way toward planting the seed that education abroad is possible.”

**3. Learn about the principles of universal design.** Universal design strives to make the design of buildings, products and environments accessible to the greatest number of people possible. “It’s not just related to disability,” says Holben. “It’s about how humans engage and interact with environments.” For instance, you might offer housing options on the first floor of buildings to accommodate a broad array of students.





#### 4. Design programs with flexible assignments.

“Every student has a different way of learning and absorbing material,” says Yanagishita. “Give different types of assignments to students so they can choose how to show their understanding.” For example, you might allow students to write an essay, choreograph a song or create a sculpture as a final project to best show what they learned from the program.

#### 5. Coordinate efforts with the Office of Disability Services.

“The study abroad office should take advantage of the resources available to it to enhance accessibility,” says Holben. “In most cases, it’s going to take partnerships.” The “[Champions for Inclusion](#)” issue of Mobility International USA’s “A World Awaits You” journal cites several examples of successful partnerships: The University of Texas at Austin designates a study abroad advisor to formally liaise with the disability services office on campus. The Illinois Abroad and Global Exchange office at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign teamed with Disability Resources and Educational Services to create an Enable Abroad Scholarship specifically for undergraduates with physical or sensory disabilities.

#### 6. Educate your faculty who lead international programs.

“Make sure you train faculty on concepts of inclusion and universal design so they think about different modes of presenting content and potential types of disabilities in their groups,” says Yanagishita. For example, encourage them to build in extra time between activities for students to rejuvenate or get from place to place, and select meeting places that are accessible to everyone.

**7. Attend conferences to learn more.** “Going to conferences that are planned and organized by disability-focused organizations can be really informative and innovative in terms of modeling accessibility,” says Holben. “So many people who have different ways of learning, moving and interacting are brought together in one space.” You can integrate ideas from those conferences into your education abroad programming. Holben recommends conferences led by the Association on Higher Education and Disability and the National Council on Independent Living.

**8. Rethink your office space.** Is it friendly to people with all kinds of disabilities? Create wide, level entrances. Make sure recycling bins, plants and other objects don’t block or narrow pathways. Avoid bright lighting and patterned carpets that might affect people with sensory disabilities.

**9. Budget for inclusion.** “Having a student with disabilities on an education abroad program isn’t always going to entail extra costs, but if you can put a plan in place to fund potential accommodations



that may have costs attached to them, that will make all the difference in the world to someone who thought study abroad wasn’t possible,” says Holben. Students may need a sign language interpreter, transportable ramps, assistive equipment and other accommodations. The University of Arizona established a central institutional account more than a decade ago that is stewarded by its Disability Resource Center to pay for unpredictable accommodations.



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**10. Set realistic expectations for students.** Not every program is ideal for every student. SIT offers a genocide restoration and peacebuilding program in Rwanda that may trigger strong emotional responses from some students. One of its programs in Nepal requires students to hike six to nine miles a day. “Our job as educators is to tell students what programs are really like and empower them to make their own decisions on whether they can physically or mentally handle it,” says Yanagishita.

The overall goal is to make all students—whether non-disabled or with apparent or non-apparent disabilities—feel

welcome and included. “Big changes take time, money and signatures, but we can all take a little piece and do something. Set a goal for every quarter or semester,” says Yanagishita. “It’s our job as educators to be welcoming. Showing the population of students with disabilities that we care and are open to them is the key.”

International educators who have questions about enhancing access to international exchange for students with disabilities are encouraged to contact the National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange for free technical assistance at [clearinghouse@miusa.org](mailto:clearinghouse@miusa.org). Visit [www.miusa.org/ncde](http://www.miusa.org/ncde) to learn more.



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