

# THE DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES IN EUROPEAN INSTITUTIONS FOR THE DEAF



HIPEN

edited by Philippe Belseur,  
Enrico Dolza and Claudia Germano



ISTITUTO DEI SORDI  
DI TORINO





Philippe Belseur  
**HIPEN PRESIDENT**

“HIPEN network is very proud to introduce this booklet concerning the demographic change in professional institutions for deaf and hard of hearing in Europe.

It gives a state of art from 16 organisations from 10 European countries and demonstrates the real evolution of our clients. Presentations indicate the real challenges all around Europe with this demographic change, in term of the necessary adaptation of mainstream for inclusion as well as the support in our institutions to be able to provide the expertise required for the new beneficiaries.

This booklet does not pretend providing guidance or advices, but is a first step to develop exchange of practices all around Europe”

Philippe Belseur  
Hipen President



Enrico Dolza  
**HIPEN SECRETARY**

The Hipen network brings together various European entities and organizations that share a common goal: providing professional services for and with deaf individuals.

Many of the institutions participating in the network have a long-standing history, having witnessed the different phases of deaf education. In particular, they have navigated the challenges and opportunities arising from the paradigm shift introduced by inclusion policies in the late 20th century and, more recently, by the profound cultural reforms prompted by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

This study presents qualitative and quantitative data regarding the demographic change of students in 16 of the most prominent educational institutions for the deaf across 10 different European countries. The well-balanced geographical distribution of these institutions makes this data a potentially representative sample of the entire continent

The data analysis reveals clear signs of convergence in the evolution of these institutions, despite the diverse cultural and regulatory contexts of the countries in which they operate. The main trends can be summarized as follows:

- A general decline in the number of deaf students attending special schools, due to various factors such as school integration policies, the widespread implementation of early intervention programs, overall demographic decline, and improvements in public health conditions.
- The opening of special schools to non-deaf students, occurring in different ways:

- a. In some cases, through a reverse inclusion model, where schools for the deaf begin admitting hearing students without disabilities, evolving into inclusive schools while maintaining a strong focus on support services for deaf children. These students are not integrated individually but rather attend bilingual settings where 2 to 5 deaf students share a classroom with 10 to 15 hearing students, supported by a significantly increased teaching staff.
  - b. In other cases, by expanding their services to include deaf students with additional—sometimes severe—disabilities, who now represent a significant, if not predominant, portion of the student body.
  - c. In yet other cases, by admitting students with related disabilities affecting communication, cognition, and language, often within the autism spectrum or with aphasia. These schools maintain their status as special institutions but broaden their scope to accommodate a wider range of disabilities.
- The expansion of institutional services to deaf adults and individuals with related disabilities, including previously unavailable services such as employment support, housing assistance, and life skills programs.
  - The progressive closure of, or significant reduction in demand for, boarding facilities, particularly for younger children.
  - The transformation of traditional special schools into resource centers to support inclusion, taking advantage of their highly specialized professionals. Many of these experts are now engaged in mainstream services, allowing institutions to share their expertise and design customized services externally.

These transformations open up new and unprecedented scenarios for the future of our institutions, as well as for the roles and training of the teachers and professionals working within them.





# **The demographic changes in European institutions for the Deaf**

Krakow conference, May 2024

Edited by Philippe Belseur, Enrico Dolza  
and Claudia Germano



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# **The demographic changes in European institutions for the Deaf**

## **The HIPEN organization**

The HIPEN organization is a network uniting different institutions within the European union, who are active in providing services for people that manifest a hearing impairment. Founded on January 8<sup>th</sup>, 2007 at a Meeting at the Zakladna Skola Internatna Pre Sluchovo Postihnutych Viliama Ganu in Kremnica, Slovakia, the organization now accounts for twenty members all around the European Union.

The associated organizations are involved with all age groups, providing care through every aspect of a Deaf or hearing impaired person's life, from education to employment and rehabilitation. HIPEN's main goal is to exchange best practices in Deaf Education and training by creating a strong network of professionals in the field of Deaf Education, guaranteeing an improvement of teaching and support practices amongst schools for Deaf.

With the steady growth of the organization, the goal has been set of fostering collaboration between members and securing funding for projects, focusing on developing a sense of community between Deaf people of different countries and giving opportunity of cultural exchange to both young people and adults. All projects are member-driven, including student exchanges, professional exchanges and sharing of expertise. All ongoing or past projects are available on the HIPEN website<sup>1</sup>.

HIPEN is also actively advocating for the needs of Deaf people and promoting awareness about the community's rights on both a national and international scale, by actively supporting the principles set in the United Nation's *Declaration of the Rights of Disabled Persons* (United Nations, 1975).

Hosting two general meetings each year, every member has the opportunity to welcome representatives from the various organizations in their reality and to organize clinical visits, lectures and workshops on various relevant topics for Deaf and Hearing Impaired.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://hipen.eu/index.php/projects>

## **1. A changing demographic**

Institutes members of HIPEN are focused on Deaf and hearing impaired; most of them were founded last century and were a point of reference for Deaf people of the country. With the advancement on technologies for early intervention on deafness and progressing laws about inclusion, the enrolment numbers to the schools are slowly declining.

The members met in Krakow Institute in May 2024 in order to address the future perspectives that each organization is envisioning and the role the institutions are going to play in the Deaf community moving forward.

The next sections will analyse the data each institute has collected and shared during the conference, highlighting the key similarities and differences to offer deeper insights of the findings.

### **1.1 IRSA, Institut Royal pour Sourds et Aveugles, Brussels – Belgium**

IRSA services centre for Deafness and developmental language disorder offers a daycare centre for school children, a daycare centre for children who are unable to attend school and a residential centre for children.

The Institution creates specialised programs in partnership with the family. It also offers audiology, speech-language pathology, medical and psychology services. Along with these services, IRSA provides support in homework, cultural and sport activities. For older students, a life skills program and a student job assistance search has been put in place.

The Royal institute has six educational programs:

- French language program, in which students with cochlear implants or hearing aids are exposed to French oral language as their first language.
- Bilingual program, in which both sign language and written French are taught to students with hearing impairments and/or with additional disabilities.
- French language and bilingual program, combining the two previous programs, in order to give independence to which the students are entitled.

- ESoLAM program, a self-actualization and autonomy program for the deaf through multimodal language.
- CoAALAM, Alternative augmentative communication via multimodal language for hearing children and adolescents with developmental language disorders or autism spectrum disorders.
- CJENS, a program based on the ESoLAM program for hearing impaired children who are in a situation of high dependence and do not have the prospect of schooling.

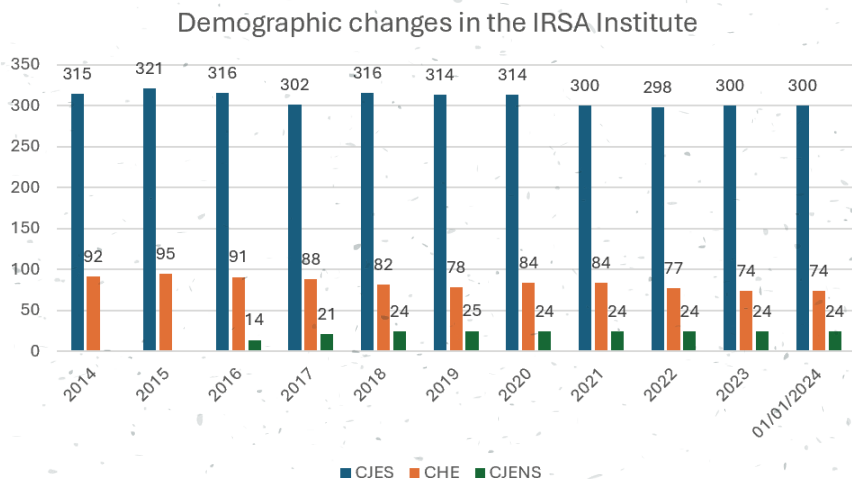


Table 1: Demographic changes in the IRSA institute

The reasons for the changes shown in the data provided is based on the inclusion laws approved.

For the CJES program, the students are included in mainstream classroom but often enrol in specialized education later in the years. Additionally, territorial hubs have emerged in order to coach teachers who welcome disabled children in their classes on the practices.

The residential centre for children (CHE) still sees a population of high dependencies or increasingly complex needs that require significant resources.

Inclusion has brought a positive change of perspective for long-standing professionals in the field of deaf education. These organizational shifts have also forced teams to re-train and learn new skills.

There is, though, an increased risk of higher turnover in personnel. Additionally, mainstream schools need specially trained professionals to deal with sensory disabilities and behavioural disorders in the classroom.

Looking at the organization's future, the institute is going to develop a real pilot project at the service centre level and schools.

To develop a real pilot project at the level of CDS (service centre) and schools, in 2024-25, professionals will be trained, and considerations will be made for infrastructure planning. A coordinator will be nominated to oversee this project. This person would have various responsibilities: acting as a reference for expertise in autism and type 2 and preparing for the implementation of the project within various institutions of the IRSA.

## **1.2 Institutes Ocens, Añvol, IRSAM, VyV3 PDL, INJS de Chambéry – France**

There are multiple institutes for deaf people in France, providing care for people during each aspect of their life. Specifically, the centres are focused on deafness, deaf-blindness, deafness along with additional disabilities, language disorders, allophones and intellectual disabilities along with autism spectrum. The five institutes analysed in this paragraph represent a staple for the support and education of deaf people and people with other disabilities in the whole French territory.

Institut Public Ocens is a medical-social establishment of the Loire Atlantique region. It offers special services to children and adults with sensory disabilities, language and learning disorders, autism spectrum disorders and developmental delays.

This institution has noticed a change from the year 2017-2018 to the last school year. The students enrolled between ages 0-14 have decreased from five to just one, while the students with other disabilities but hearing have seen an increase. The number of deaf students in external support services has more than halved from the year 2017.

The next age group has also seen similar changes, although the deaf students in external support services have increased greatly, going from seven to thirty. The institutes noted a change in deaf population without associated disabilities, with an increase in the deaf with associated disabilities.

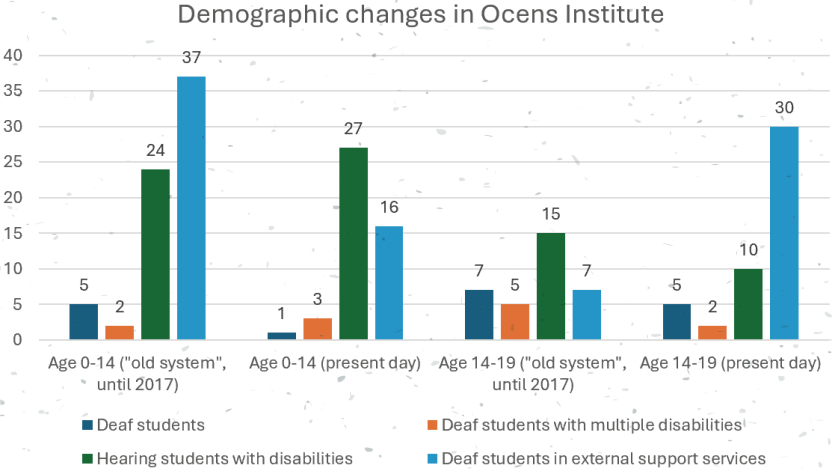


Table 2: Demographic changes in Ocens institute

Añivol bretagne association supports deaf and hard of hearing children and adults in their social, educational, professional and cultural inclusion. The centre offers early medical and social action, sensory education, training and employment, family education and schooling support services.

The data from Añivol bretagne association shows, from the year 2005, an increase in the student-population in both age groups presented. The 0-14 age group has welcomed, in the last school year, around seventy hearing students with no disabilities in the centre and supported just over seventy deaf students with its external services.

The age group 14-19 has opened its door to hearing students, signing an increase in enrolments and in external support services.

Añivol bretagne association’s biggest population is made of adult deaf people enrolled in the daily services provided. The institute accounts for 439 deaf adults.

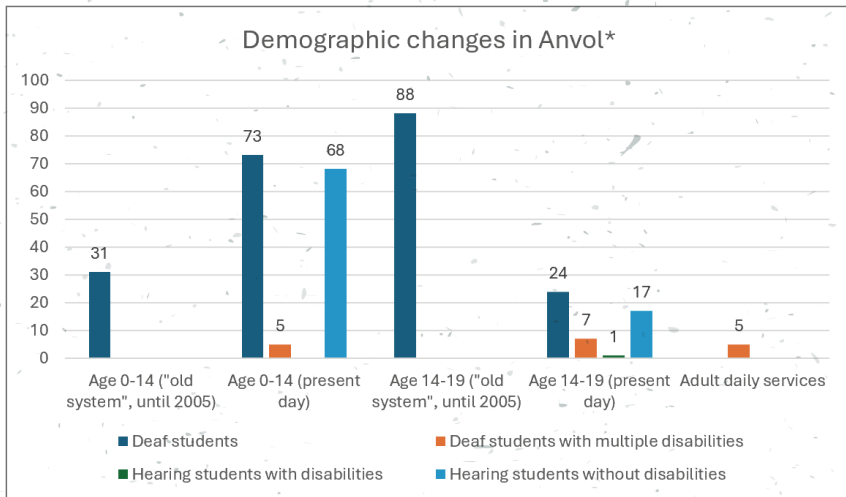


Table 3: Demographic changes in Anvol institute (\*data is to be considered as the detail of students enrolled in external services)

IRSAM was founded in Marseille in 1858. Here the first centre for the young blind people was founded and starting in the year 1866 also deaf students were allowed to enrol. Since 1980s the association has continued to expand its services towards people affected by sensorial disabilities.

The centre has seen a large decrease in enrolments, specifically with deaf students, which have dropped by 93% in the age group 0-14, and a decrease of 95% in the group 14-19 years old. The number of deaf students involved in external support services has bridged the gap between enrolment numbers of the old and new system. A large part of the institute's population is made up by the adult daily and adult residential services, accounting for two hundred deaf people with multiple disabilities.

### Demographic changes in IRSAM

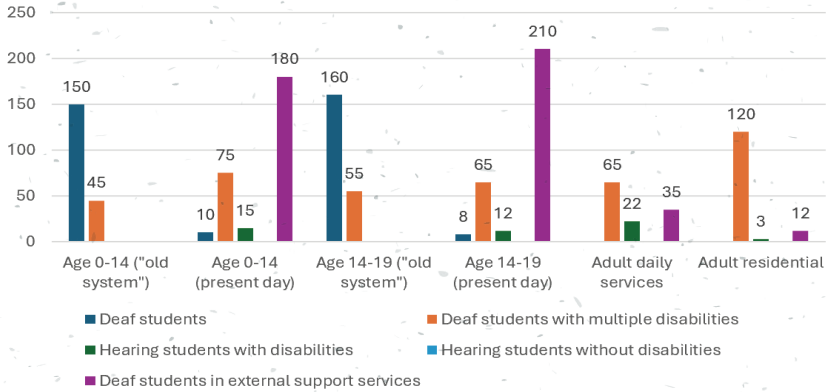


Table 4: Demographic changes in IRSAM

VyV 3 Pays De la Loire works towards health accessible to all. It is offering support and solutions to the members. They provide insurance, care and support as well as housing to create a network of care for millions of French people.

The data provided by VyV 3 has also noticed some decrease of enrolment in the two age groups analysed. The number of hearing students with additional disabilities has been increasing steadily.

### Demographic changes in VyV 3

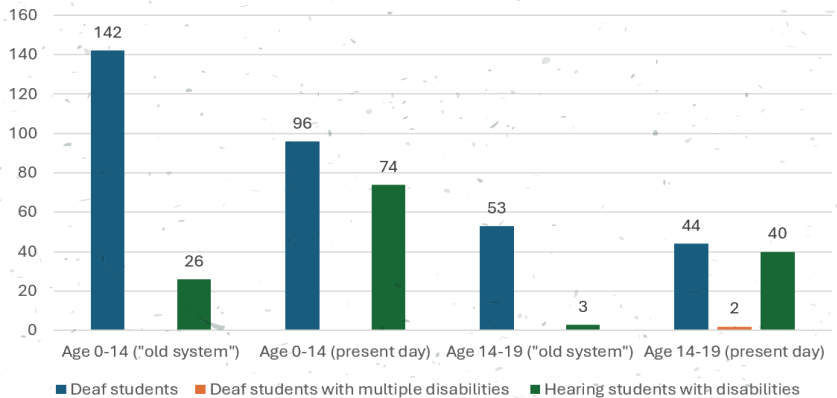


Table 5: Demographic changes in VyV 3

INJS de Chambéry was founded in 1840 for the education of deaf girls; two years later an institute for deaf boys was created. Since 1974 the institute opened an audiology centre. The INJS centre has seen a steady growth during the years, allowing them to open primary and secondary SSEFIS (Service de Soutien à l'Education Familiale et à l'Intégration Scolaire) services.

The Institute has seen, from the year 2019, a slight increase in the number of deaf students in the age group 0-14 but a slight decrease in the next group. Deaf students with additional disabilities have been rising in both age groups. The data collected about deaf students in external support services have also shown an increase.

Additionally, 92 adult deaf people have been enrolled in daily services.

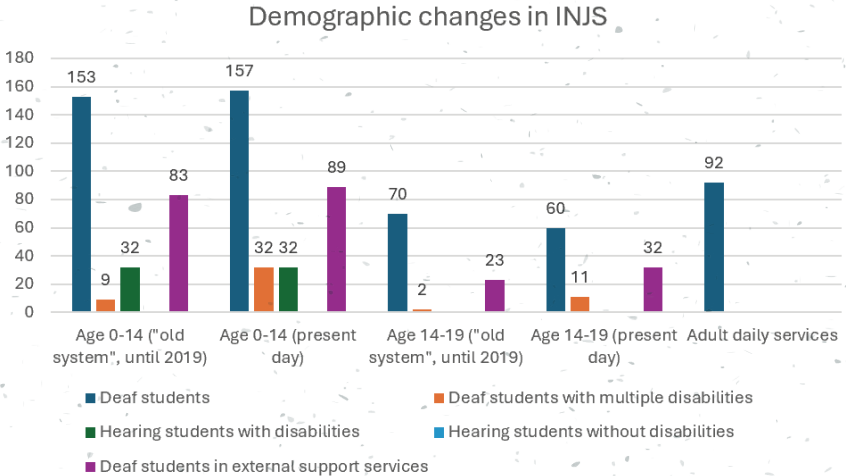


Table 6: Demographic changes in INJS

The reason for the changes shown by the five institutes presented can be traced back to the 2005 law that guaranteed a higher grade of inclusion for deaf people both in school and in society as a whole. The country has also implemented a higher funding towards supporting students with language disorders.

Another strong point in favour of these changes has been the technological advancements, making the cochlear implant surgery safer and available to a larger plethora of people and

higher quality of hearing aids. Additionally, early screening of hearing loss since the year 2012 has given the chance for early intervention of deafness.

The changes also show the increase in multiple disabilities associated with deafness, such as memory, focus and planification disorders. Support provided by the French institutions has been more focused on the child's overall environment and designed to best support each person.

Positive points for the institutes are a regular updating of the professional practices, giving the personnel lifelong training for the innovation of educational practices based on the new tools technology has provided for the youth specifically those with language disorders.

The extensive partnership both nationally and internationally has created a better network between institutes for deaf people and it has supported the spread of awareness in schools and society.

Professionals in deafness and special needs for language disorders have been a support in the child's overall development and environment.

Some negative points are identified in the mobilization of professionals and a lack of specialized training. Some schools have not yet adapted to the need of personalized curriculum to support students with disabilities.

The training of teaching staff and families in French sign language or Cued Speech<sup>2</sup> is in need of expansion. The centres are implementing trainings for families and professionals to give each person a specific toolbox.

The French organizations presented feel that their futures are going to be dependent on the legislation, which will be broadening the scope of intervention with the child's overall environment.

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<sup>2</sup> *Cued Speech* is a visual communication system developed by Dr. Orin Cornett in 1966. It is a tool to help Deaf and hard of hearing to understand spoken language using hand shapes and gestures close to the mouth in order to clarify lipreading.

### **1.3 Istituto dei Sordi di Torino – Italy**

Istituto dei Sordi di Torino was founded in 1814 from the Royal family Savoia, in order to give assistance to deaf students and to train teachers on special education. The Institute was first located in via Assarotti, in the heart of the city, constructed thanks to the donation made by the Countess Ottavia Borghese Masino di Mombello.

In 1965 the building was sold to the city of Turin and the profits were allocated to the construction of a new and improved center for Deaf and Hearing impaired in a smaller town called Pianezza, where it is located to this day.

With the advancement of Italian laws and policies about inclusion in the late 1970s, a profound crisis of the institutions for special educations arise. It is at this point in time, that the Institute decides to close the boarding school and open its doors to the hearing students of neighbouring towns and villages, while also opening a support system for Deaf students who decided upon venturing into mainstream schools.

The institute is nowadays organized in six departments: Educational services, Training, Day and residential services, Research and communication, Speech therapy and Academy.

Until 1980 the boarding school accounted for 250 students between the ages of zero and fourteen and 50 students between the ages of fourteen and nineteen. All 300 students were Deaf or hearing impaired, though some had other disabilities as well. There is no record of hearing

students with or without disabilities being accepted into the boarding school. External support services were also not provided.

The current situation of the Institute shows a decrease of 91.6% in the enrolment of Deaf students between ages 0 to 14, counting just above 20 students in the age group.

Although the numbers of Deaf students have seen a drastic reduction, there has been an increase of the Deaf students involved in external support services, of hearing students both with and without disabilities, bringing the total number of students in the 0-14 age group from 250 to 503 in the last academic year, marking an increase of 101,2%.

It is notable about the students ages 14 to 19, that since the 1980s, enrolment numbers have been stable, but has shifted from services internal to the institute to services externally provided.

The following table highlights the specific changes in the demographic at Istituto dei Sordi di Torino, comparing the period from foundation to 1980 and the last academic period.

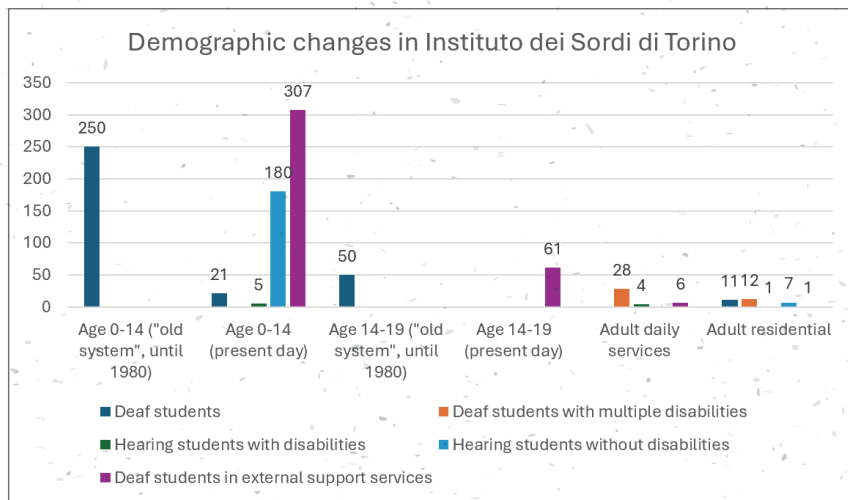


Table 7: Demographic changes in Istituto dei Sordi di Torino

The Italian legislation system had major steps towards inclusion of students with disability in mainstream schools, starting in 1971 with a law number 118, establishing the right of students with disabilities to be enrolled in normal schools. This principle was then reiterated with law 577 in the year 1977, that abolished differential classrooms and established the right of students with disabilities to participate in normal education with the help of support teachers.

A strong factor in the decrease of Deaf and hearing impaired pupils is also an effect of the advancement in the newborn hearing screening and consequential cochlear implant surgery to “correct” the deficit.

The development of a more family-centred pedagogy brought many boarding schools to close or reduce their population. Boarding schools such as Istituto dei Sordi were mainly located in cities. Families who sent their children off to get an education in the institutes were often

located in the countryside or in smaller cities, meaning that the opportunity of visitation between the family and the pupil was limited to the school holidays. The family-centred pedagogy aims to foster a closer bond between family members, guaranteeing that the students can live in its home while also receiving a quality education.

The inclusion laws have brought positive changes to this institution. Being open to all students, whether hearing or Deaf, has given the institution the chance to expand its audience, advocating for needs of Deaf people to an increasingly large population. Also, it has been able to expand its services from being only a school to being able to follow the development of the Deaf person in all aspects of their life.

On the other hand, Deaf people are harder to reach for the institute, being scattered across the county. The inclusion of Deaf people in mainstream schools has raised an organizational challenge: if in the past the Deaf person came to the institute to receive the support needed, now the staff needs to be sent to the setting where the Deaf person is choosing to get his education or at their home. The delicate balance between the need of specialization to work with Deaf and hearing impaired and the need of trained personnel in mainstream schools is and has been a topic of discussion. Istituto dei Sordi aims, in the next years, to increase its role in training mainstream school teachers about sign language, in order to give them proper tools to be able to welcome Deaf and hard of hearing students in their classrooms.

Since technologies are constantly developing and updating, the training professionals need to be flexible and adapt to changes, also by shifting their point of view from the person to the environment they are an active participant in. The future of Istituto dei Sordi di Torino, with a rising collaboration between institutions for Deaf in Europe, has the expectation that the Deaf community will grow at an international level, going well beyond the walls of the institute's building.

The institute will increase its involvement in advocating for the accessibility of every aspect the Deaf person's life, starting from the workplace to tourism and sports. Its focus will be primarily the education of adults, by creating accessible paths in museums, cultural events and television shows.

All these advancements need to take into consideration the need of the deaf community to have safe places, where the culture can continue to grow stronger.

## **1.4 Fondazione Gualandi a favore dei Sordi, Bologna – Italy**

Fondazione Gualandi was founded in Bologna in 2003; the history of the foundation dates back to 1849, when the two Gualandi brothers, Giuseppe and Cesare created an institution to educate Deaf children and adolescents. The main goal of the institute was, in the beginning, to create a house, not a boarding school, in which everyone could live together, communicate, learn and also learn about God. Regal recognition of the brother's work came almost twenty years after the first opening.

Fondazione Gualandi has expanded, opening three new institutes: Rome (1884), Florence (1885) and Giulianova (1903). In 1907, at the death of the institute's first founder, it was estimated that around seven hundred Deaf and hearing impaired students had been welcomed between the schools.

Fondazione Gualandi is nowadays organized in four departments: Administration, Educational services, Training and Communication.

The Educational services departments include a nursery - founded in 2008 - and a kindergarden - funded in 2013 - which welcome around a hundred students. The aim is to offer an inclusive educational service, capable of welcoming every child in a stimulating environment under the guidance of professionally trained educators.

Extracurricular activities are also offered specifically to Deaf children in order to develop their knowledge and skills in written Italian language.

Fondazione Gualandi in the timespan between its foundation in 1950 until the first laws for inclusion were passed from the Italian parliament, accounted for 150 to 200 pupils, all of which with a hearing impairment or Deaf. The number of students between ages of six and nineteen has dropped to nine, following the inclusion laws and integration of Deaf students in mainstream school. This marks a 97% decrease in the school population.

Since 2008 the foundation started welcoming kids aged 0-6 in their nursery and kindergarden setting and are now accounting for 139 students, two of which are deaf and four of which are hearing but with disabilities.

In the age group of 6-14 all eleven students are Deaf, four of which with multiple disabilities.

The foundation also works with deaf adults, supporting their development of autonomy and involving them in socialization projects. The project also supports them in job placement.

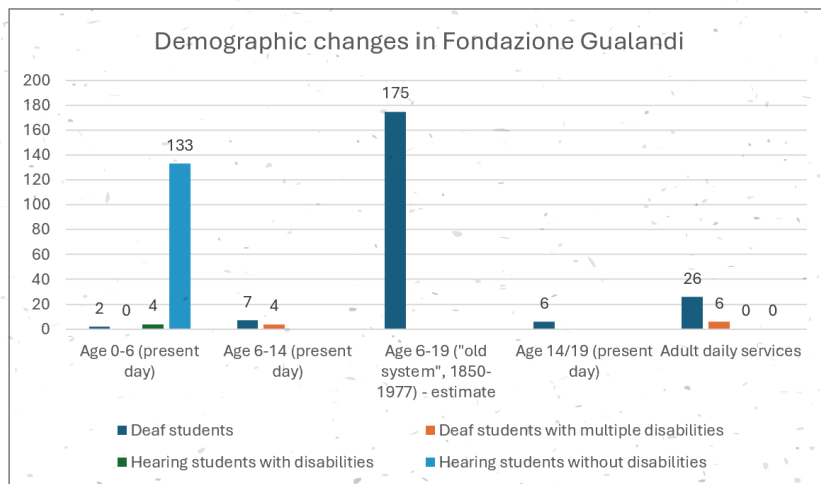


Table 8: Demographic changes in Fondazione Gualandi

Changes, as explained in the data analysis provided for Istituto dei Sordi di Torino, are mostly due to the inclusion law of 1977. Fondazione Gualandi a favore dei sordi brought to the end the classes that were active in 1977 but no longer welcomed new Deaf children. By the 1990s all Gualandi institutes did not have pupils attending.

The changes that were highlighted have had a positive effect on pupil's lives, who have, since 1977, been able to enrol in mainstream schools. This has given Foundation Gualandi the chance of spreading awareness on the opportunities and challenges of deafness and to research new strategies for a proper inclusion of Deaf and hearing impaired people, creating an inclusive context along the principles presented by the Universal Design for Learning<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a theoretical and methodological framework for designing flexible, inclusive, and accessible learning environments that consider student diversity from the outset. The goal of UDL is to remove learning barriers and ensure that all students, regardless of their abilities, learning styles, or backgrounds, have the opportunity to develop their full potential.

Although inclusion of deaf pupils in the school is a great step towards an inclusive society, support teachers who are assigned to guide deaf children in school are not properly trained and can therefore not communicate effectively.

In the future, the Foundation aims to be a reference point for Deaf people and to offer support to those dealing with deafness. It strikes to become an institute of excellence in the field of inclusive education, forwarding research and experimentation of inclusive teaching methods.

A way Fondazione Gualandi aims to increase communication with parents of Deaf and Hearing impaired is to foster a relationship with the healthcare system, ensuring that parents of deaf kids and with other disabilities in Bologna are given the support that they might need.

Focusing on Deaf youth, the Foundation would like to make their space a meeting spot for young people offering activities that respond to their needs and interests, such as sports, training courses for technological tools, support for the driving license exam and such. In order to increase the quality of the support offered to deaf kids in mainstream schools, the foundation is going to increase relationships with each student and supervise each individual case. Specifically for the early education, it is fundamental to spread awareness on sign language by creating new opportunities for educators to learn and be able to respond to all needs manifested by students. There are many projects Fondazione Gualandi wants to develop. An example is art therapy: combined with a psychological help desk or activities that promote mental health, this kind of an activity would be beneficial for deaf people of all ages and backgrounds.

### **1.5 Rīgas Ēbelmuižas pamatskola, Rīga - Latvija**

Rīgas Ēbelmuižas pamatskola was founded in 1840 in the capital city of Latvia.

The school offers ample spaces both inside and outside that are suitable for learning activities. Students are welcome to attend classes from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 9<sup>th</sup> grade; it is also an option to attend a vocational programme of the duration of three years. Vocational courses can be held from the end of basic education until the age of 45.

In the academic year 2023/2024 the school accounted for 94 students between all grades. The centre is a reference point not only for deaf students residing in Riga, but of the whole country. In order to accommodate the student's needs, the school offers boarding services.

The school provides educational programs for deaf students and students who have additional developmental disabilities, both severe and mild. The vocational education, named "Food services" offers a basic education to students aged 18 and over.

The school aims to create an educational environment and a process ensuring the achievements of goals set in the national basic education, basing their classes' programs on the mainstream education programmes. It also sets a goal to obtain an appropriate education for each student's abilities, development level and health state. Riga's Institute works towards pedagogical, psychological and therapeutic interventions to prepare its students for work and life in a developing - but not completely accessible - society.

The school until 2008 used to host roughly 80 deaf students and three students with additional disabilities between the ages of 0 and 14. Due to the passing of inclusion laws in Latvia since 2008, the number of students in this age category has dropped to about 50 deaf students; the number of pupils with multiple disabilities has since quadrupled and a small number of hearing students with disabilities has also been welcomed into the institute's school. In 2008, Latvia reinforced its existing commitment towards inclusive education for special needs students. It was highlighted in later studies that teachers are not properly trained to sustain special needs in a mainstream classroom environment, thus creating a need for further training of teaching personnel.

The most significant difference in enrolment numbers can be seen in the data presented for the age group from 14 to 19 years old. Up until inclusion laws were approved, about 76 students were hosted by the institute's higher education, while the current system hosts seventeen pupils between deaf, deaf with other disabilities and hearing students with disabilities. It is also notable that in the current system, the adult vocational programme has opened a new possibility for the Centre, hosting now seven adult students as well.

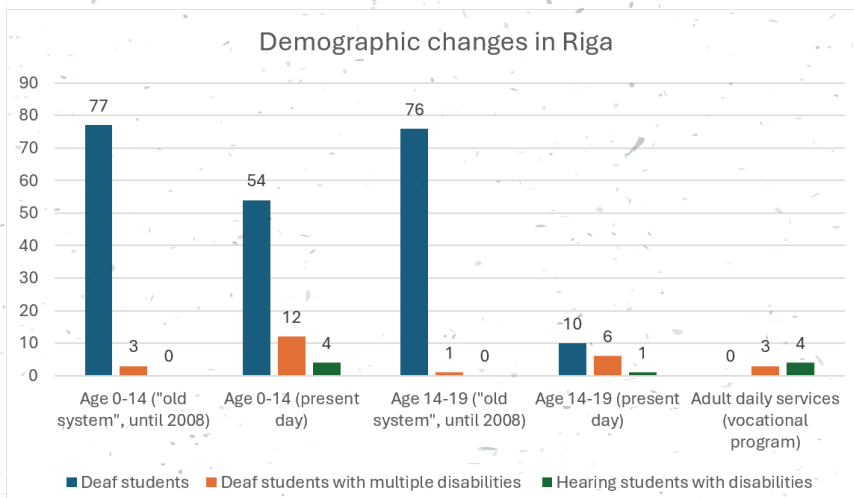


Table 9: Demographic changes in Riga

Due to economic, social and educational reasons Latvian deaf families have been moving to other countries. The country is also experiencing a high demand for special education teachers and specialists; it is of the utmost importance to provide adequate training courses to properly train new professionals on the opportunities and challenges of special education. In order to offer a modern, high quality and labour-market-driven educational process, Rīgas Ēbelmuižas pamatskola sees a need to develop research on the topic of education and develop programs to teach sign language to hearing parents and kids, with the aim to improve communication and cooperation between deaf and hearing communities.

The training of professionals needs to be supported by universities across the country, with establishment of sign language and sign language interpreter programmes. Supporting the training of speech therapists would be very beneficial for the centre. Another point of improvement in the development of new professionals would be the offering the opportunity to get internships in a special education setting.

It is the centre's belief, that knowledge on sign language should be added as a requirement to work alongside children with hearing impairments, from the teachers to the helping staff. A major challenge has been brought on by the recent reduction in state funding towards special education schools.

In the future, the school hopes to become an educational centre for the hearing impaired people of Latvia, promoting sign language development and collaboration with families, professionals and organizations. Specifically, the school aims to help families focus on the child's strengths and abilities, helping to create an environment focused on each child's needs utilizing an interdisciplinary approach.

## **1.6 Lietuvos kurčiųjų ir neprigirdinčiųjų ugdymo centras, Vilnius – Lithuania**

The history of Deaf education in Lithuania starts in 1833, when a school for deaf and mutes was established in the capital city, Vilnius. The first school for deaf and hard of hearing operated until 1843. During the early 1900s the school continued to provide education for Deaf and Deaf-Blind population and in 1960 the boarding school for Deaf was opened.

In 2001 the first secondary school for deaf and hard of hearing was established in this institute, providing secondary education to Deaf students of Vilnius and the neighbouring cities. In 2005 the school was appointed the title of Lithuanian Deaf and Hard of hearing Education Centre, with the abbreviated name LKNUC.

The main activities the institute provides are general education, pre-school education, informal education and socialization, educational support and assessment, dissemination of sign language and training.

Besides education, the Centre oversees the assessment of hearing impaired children all over the country, offering trainings, conferences and counselling to parents and teachers on a larger scale. The cooperation with universities and institutions is extensive, both within the country and internationally. At an international level, the institution organizes internships and exchange opportunities for their students.

Between the years of 1945 to 2000 the school was hosting forty to two hundred deaf students aged 7 to 19. It is not known whether the school hosted students with concurring disabilities. During the mentioned period, no external support services were provided to Deaf and Hard of Hearing.

It is interesting to note how the numbers of enrolment to the Centre for deaf expanded in the last 20 years with the age group 0-11. The Pre-school education centre for hearing impaired children has recently merged with LKNUC, who is now hosting around 75 students between the kindergarten classes and the first years of elementary grades.

A noticeable change is also seen with the number of Deaf students to whom the Centre provides external support services: eighty pupils from ages 0-11 and 12 students aged 12 to 19 have been involved in external support services offered by the institution.

The Centre does not offer residential or daily services towards Deaf adults but is involved in creating spaces for the growth of the Lithuanian Deaf community, organizing classes to spread awareness about Lithuanian Sign Language (LGK) and deaf culture.

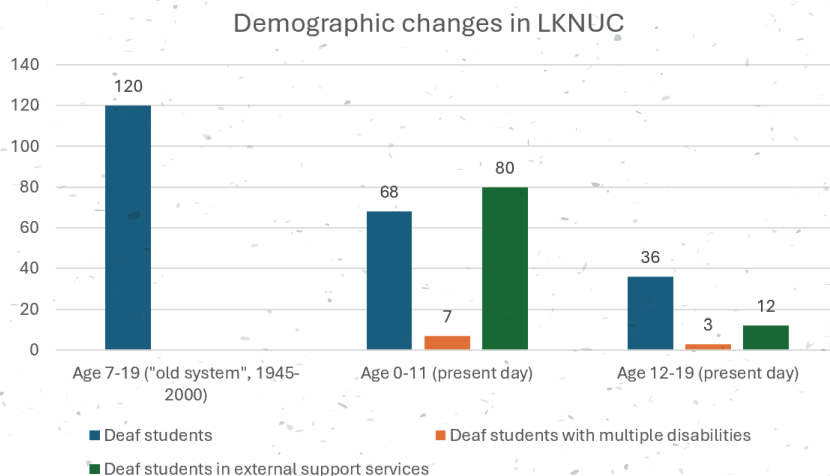


Table 10: Demographic changes in LKNUC

The data presented shows a change in demographic, brought on by the advancements in early intervention on hearing impairments; therefore, the country has seen, in the past decades, a decreasing number of institutes dedicated to Deaf Education.

A new law, effective since September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2024, established that all mainstream educational institutes must accept students with special education needs, without exceptions. ([www.european-agency.org](http://www.european-agency.org)). This law signs an important advancement towards inclusion for

all students both in education and in everyday life. The constantly evolving educational system is not only an opportunity for students, but it represents a new challenge to the Centre, which always works towards the wellbeing of their pupils.

Training of professional figures is handled by the Centre, which guarantees a high quality education and a better response to each pupil's needs. LKNUC also offers counselling activities and assessments throughout the country, establishing itself as a reference point for the deaf population.

A growing collaboration with universities and in-service trainings for professionals is being brought forward, with the intent of spreading awareness about the Deaf community and to spark a higher interest in the pursuit of careers such as sign language interpreter or special education teacher. The number of certified sign language interpreters is not sufficient to provide the services needed for the community.

In the past few years, professionals have been trained in Vytautas Magnus University Education Academy.

*The generation of tomorrow's educators is being grown here by combining solid interdisciplinary and objective knowledge, most efficient educational experiences and deeply rooted traditions as well as by fostering humanistic Artes liberales spirit.<sup>4</sup>*

In the year 2023 twenty students graduated in retraining module Education of children with hearing impairment. The following year 9 graduates were expected from the same course, while three Bachelor graduates were expected with a major in Special Education Needs.

Lietuvos kurčiųjų ir neprigirdinčiųjų ugdymo centras will be a national resource centre for deaf people.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://svietimas.vdu.lt/en/about-us/>

## **1.7 Kauno kurčiųjų ir neprigirdinčiųjų ugdymo centras, Kaunas - Lithuania**

Kauno kurčiųjų ir neprigirdinčiųjų ugdymo centras is a school and multifunctional centre for Deaf and hard of hearing children. It was established in 1939, admitting 25 students. In 1940 the centre for the deaf-mute merged with the Kaunas institute for the deaf and hard of hearing. In those years, the school hosted up to 100 students in its facilities.

In 1960 the school's educational paths changed from a focus on deafness to a focus on hard of hearing people. It was upon the school to create textbooks for the hard of hearing to learn correct pronunciation via visual lessons. Textbooks created are available, to this day, in the centre's museum.

The centre nowadays provides kindergarten, primary school and basic school education; it is a boarding school, accommodating students from all around the country.

From 2012 the centre also provides families with external support for students being educated at home or in mainstream school settings. Starting in 2016, the centre opened the kindergarten groups for deaf children.

The data provided by the centre shows a decrease in enrolment numbers of deaf students. The age group 0-14 has shown a 28% decrease in students from the year 2000 to the last school period. The age group from 14 to 19 years old has seen an even more significant decrease, with numbers fluctuating from 71 to merely 15 in the past academic year. This is a drop of 78%.

An increasing number can be seen in the students enrolled in external services, which the centre has been providing since 2012.

## Demographic changes in Kaunas

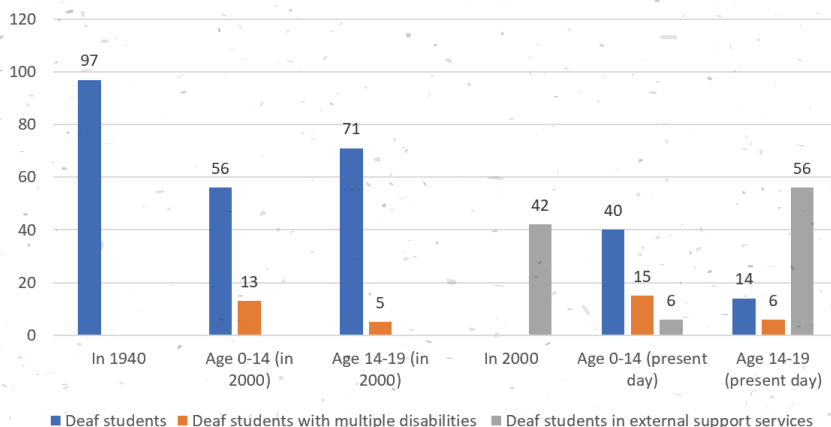


Table 11: Demographic changes in KKNUC

Some causes of these changes in demographics can be identified with the advancement of inclusive education in the neighbourhood schools. Deaf children are being welcomed in mainstream schools; therefore, the child has the chance to live with their family instead of living in a boarding school for weeks or months at a time.

Additionally, cochlear implantation surgery has become more accessible and reliable for families with deaf children, determining a declining number of deaf students in need of a special setting. It is also to note, that birth rate in Lithuania is also experiencing a decrease and an increasing number of young families are leaving the country.

Kauno kurčiųjų ir neprigirdinčiųjų ugdymo centras feels that these changes, although posing a challenge on the school, are creating a smaller, closer and safer community and giving teachers the opportunity to give more individualized attention to students. The changes shown are forcing schools and centres for deaf to merge with other institutions.

From September 2024 the centre has been reorganised to join Kaunas Pranas Daunys Educational Centre and will serve as the department for deaf and hard of hearing education. The new centre will include external support services for children on the autism spectrum, visual disabilities as well as hearing loss.

## **1.8 Specjalny Ośrodek Szkolno - Wychowawczy dla Niesłyszących, Krakow – Poland**

SOSWDN was established in the year 1950 and operated in two fields: weaving and tailoring. Since 1966 the school has been appointed the title of educational centre for the deaf.

According to Polish educational system, SOSWDN is a special school. In order to be able to attend the centre, students need to present a special education certificate, with an assessment of the disability diagnosis. Based on the provided certificate, the student will be directed to the special school best suited to fulfil their individual needs. The centre educates deaf and hard of hearing youths as well as young people with communication disorders and post-primary level aphasia.

The age group the centre attends to is from 15 to 24 years old. In the last academic year, 2023-2024, 93 pupils were enrolled in SOSWDN, while the teaching staff consists of 91 people.

The first stage vocational school hosts almost 30 students, mostly deaf with associated disabilities. The second stage vocational school hosts 6 deaf/hard of hearing students who have decided to continue the path after the first stage vocational course.

Vocational Technical school hosts 27 students, who are learning a profession and preparing for graduation exams. The secondary school hosts students preparing for graduation and the postsecondary school hosts students wanting to gain additional profession training. Current professional degrees are being held in the fields of mechatronics, nutrition and catering services and IT technician, as well as beauty services, florists and postal service.

The centre also organizes internships and exchanges for pupils in the institutions member of the HIPEN organization, giving the opportunity to the students to cooperate and gain social skills and develop competences.

The data presented is for students aged 15 to 24. Before 2013 the data about student's additional disabilities is not available, though the majority of students before that year were

deaf and hard of hearing. Data analysis shows that number of deaf and hard of hearing students in the Centre is decreasing, in favour of students with aphasia.

Changes in the institution may be caused by an increase in early screening for deafness, leading to a quicker response to the child’s needs; families are faced with support early on, leading many to cochlear implant surgery. Resulting of early intervention, most deaf born kids develop their hearing and speech, thus leaving the families with the option of letting their child attend mainstream schools. The development of technologies and screening tests has given families a better access to specialists such as speech therapists to work on speech development.

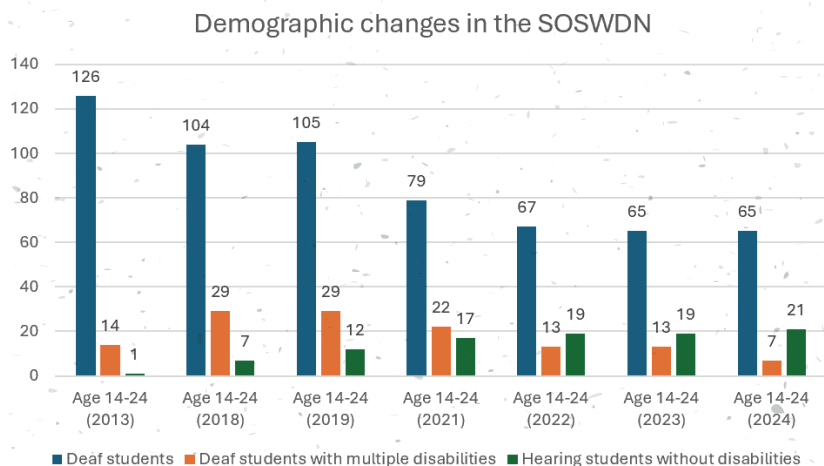


Table 12: Demographic changes in SOSWDN

Deaf students attending mainstream schools have a greater opportunity to integrate with hearing people: it is to note, however, that a lack of knowledge of sign language in the hearing society is one of the biggest difficulties when it comes to communication.

Education of young people with multiple different disabilities in the centre may be an opportunity to create an inclusive setting, in which communication is not a barrier, because sign language is a teaching subject.

The flexibility that this school is able to reach for its students' individual psychophysical needs is a strength of this setting. It is a challenging point, for SOSWDN institute to provide the highest level of education in each class, on the grounds of the different disabilities present in each class. Integration between different special needs pupils has also proved to be a challenging aspect of educational work.

The centre was originally meant as an educational setting for deaf and hearing impaired pupils only; it has been a challenge in the last few decades to shift the perspective and broaden the area of expertise in education also of students with aphasia or on the autism spectrum.

The training of professionals has seen a shift, from teachers specialized in sign language and deafness, to a larger interest in rehabilitation and care for autism and communication disorders.

The future of Specjalny Ośrodek Szkolno - Wychowawczy dla Niesłyszących is going to be ensured by adapting the educational offers of the centre to the current needs of the labour market and psychophysical capabilities of students, in order to keep being a reference point for students with disabilities in Krakow.

The centre also aims to offer support to deaf youth outside of the centre, striving for inclusion in society of both deaf people and people with multiple disabilities.

## **1.9 Škola sa domom za učenike oštećenog sluha i govora „11.maj” Jagodina – Serbia**

The institute is one of the oldest in special education of Serbian population. Official opening of the special education was on September 1<sup>st</sup>, 1928. In the first years after the opening, up to 100 students were able to be hosted. In the first five years after the inauguration, the demand for a residential space was high, therefore a boarding school was opened. This paved the path for younger pupils and female students to enter the educational programmes.

The school provides different educational activities for deaf students, starting from preschool until the secondary education. Specifically, the institute offers a preparatory school program and rehabilitation for students with developmental disabilities. For primary education, the

centre offers eight grades of education, split between two four-year cycles. The secondary vocational program offers four paths of education, for bookbinding, baking, hairdressing and graphic design.

The data provided by the centre shows a significant change in the demographics. The enrolment percentages of deaf students from 1945 to 2009 has been estimated to the 85% of total pupils. An additional 10% had concurring disabilities, while only 5% of pupils were hearing with disabilities.

In the current system the school is hosting, for the large majority, hearing students with disabilities while deaf students are now a minority of the school's population, accounting for 17% of the total pupils. It is of note, that almost half of deaf pupils are being reached by the centre's external support services. A similar demographic shift can be seen with the next age group considered in the statistic.

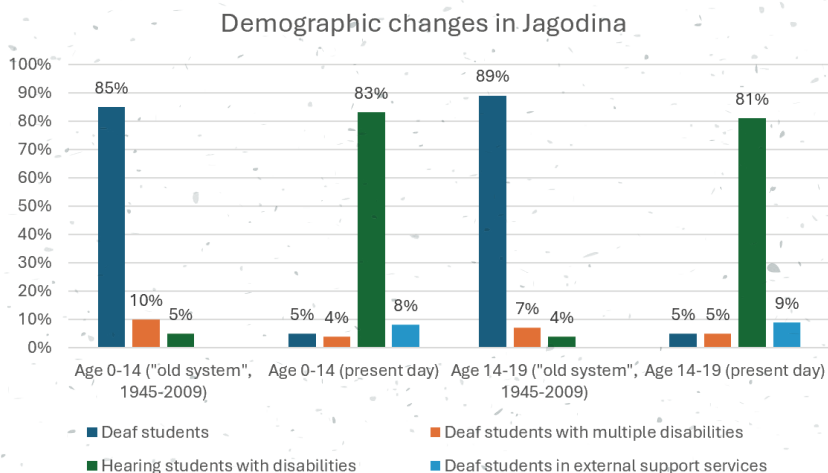


Table 13: Demographic changes in Škola sa domom za učenike oštećenog sluha i govora „11.maj”

Demographic changes such as these are an effect of a law approved in the year 2009, making the institute not only a school for deaf children, but a centre for all students affected by disabilities.

Another cause for the change seen by the institution can be found in the policy approved by the country on cochlear implants. Since 2007 Serbia has provided every deaf person with the option of free cochlear implant surgery. Most of the deaf population has exercised that right and, given adequate speech therapy in the early formative years, most students were, and to this day are, able to attend mainstream school programmes. Another practice put in place by Serbian government is a mandatory early screening for deafness, giving a chance to children to get early intervention when needed or wanted by the family.

A positive outlook on the changes described is the promotion of inclusion in regular education for each child. Schools are now creating quality education according to each person's needs and abilities. The diversity of students hosted in the school also offers an opportunity for diversification of staff and special educators, as well as an opportunity for the school's staff to improve skills and develop new competencies.

The inclusion of deaf students in mainstream school is both a positive and negative point in Serbia. The centre feels that the support system provided by the mainstream schools of the country is not adequate to the student's needs in most settings. Providing language support is especially difficult in mainstream schools due to the lack of professionals trained in sign language.

The future Škola sa domom za učenike oštećenog sluha i govora „11.maj” sees for its institute is a resource centre, providing support for teachers who support deaf students in the mainstream education system. They aim to be a leader in the development of teaching materials with a specific focus on deaf student's education.

The institute also hopes to open a training centre for young deaf people, providing them with a safe space to acquire necessary skills for an adequate inclusion in the labour market.

### **1.10 Spojená škola internátna Kremnica – Slovakia**

Spojená škola internátna Kremnica was founded in 1903 as a centre for the education of hearing impaired pupils. In 1914 the school's building that is being used to this day was completed.

In 2007 the school hosted the conference in which HIPEN organization was founded.

In 2019 the school was renamed a joint boarding school; nowadays, it has got nine different components, a boarding school and vocational high school trainings for pupils with hearing impairment, along with a special kindergarten, elementary boarding school for hearing impaired and for students with communication skills impairments. The centre also offers a practical school and a school club.

Starting from September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2024, the school merged forces with three other institutions: a boarding school for children on the autism spectrum, a special primary school for children with mental disabilities and a vocational high school for children with hearing impairments.

In the last few months, the centre has been providing education for students with different disabilities from the early childhood – 2.5 years – to the secondary school education pupils aged up to 20 years old.

In the near future, the centre is set to participate in some HIPEN projects, such as Comenius, a project to teach the English language to deaf students or the Erasmus+, methods used in the education of children with multiple disabilities.

### **1.11 Zavod za gluhe in naglušne, Ljubljana - Slovenia**

Zavod za gluhe in naglušne is one of the central Slovenian institutions for people with special needs.

The centre's main activities surround the educational areas of people with disabilities and special needs. Specifically, they focus on rehabilitation and education of deaf and hearing impaired pupils, people with speech and communicational problems, from the preschool level until the secondary level of education. In recent years, the centre has expanded its focus to the autism spectrum as well, providing appropriate education and support to people on the spectrum. The centre's focus is not only on early childhood but is follows the person throughout their lifespan. The centre provides adult education and rehabilitation, as well as physiotherapy and psychological support.

Looking at data provided by the centre, it can be noticed how the number of pupils has not been significantly affected by demographic changes. In the school year 2013/14 the centre welcomes, between the ages of 0 and 14, 50 deaf students -one of which with additional disabilities - and around 130 hearing students with other disabilities. In the latest school year (2023/24), the school's enrolment numbers have seen an increase in hearing students with disabilities, but the enrolment of deaf students has halved, going from 48 to 24. It is noticeable that the number of deaf students in external support services has also increased since the year 2013.

The age group from 14 to 19 years, has seen a significantly increased number of enrolments of hearing students with disabilities. The institute is now able to host 152 students in its facilities. Concerning this specific age group, the deaf teenagers hosted by the school have more than halved, going from 30 students to just six in only a decade.

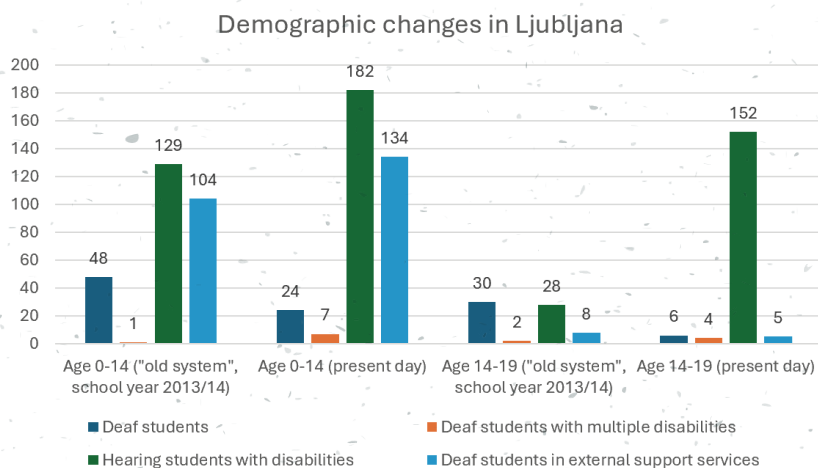


Table 14: Demographic changes in Ljubljana

The root causes of these changes can be found firstly among all are the inclusion laws in favour of students with disabilities. Another possible factor in these changes was the renovation of both basic and secondary school's programmes. The large increasing number of hearing students with disabilities are mostly due to the opening of programs for children on the autism spectrum.

The demographical changes affected not only this institute, but the two other institutions for deaf in Slovenia; the number of deaf children is decreasing so steadily, that one of the institutions has not been able to welcome even one deaf child in the past three years.

There are, though, some positive points to the registered changes. First of all, deaf children are able to be involved in mainstream education and be closer to home and their families; in return, scholastic inclusion has brought society's attention on raising awareness of disability and special needs. Assistance to deaf children has been established by the presence of interpreter and teaching of Slovenian sign language not only to the pupils of the school, but in other hearing settings as well.

Amongst the negative points of the research, it is noticeable how deaf kids in mainstream settings might encounter loneliness or difficulty in joining programs due to overcrowding. Another challenge faced by institutes such as *Zavod za gluhe in naglušne* is in training of professionals. All staff, to be working in the centre, needs to be retrained on surdopedagogical topics (deaf pedagogist), whereas mainstream schools do not have a need for this specialty.

According to the school's founding act, *Zavod za gluhe in naglušne* is a centre for deaf and hard of hearing, for children with speech disorders and children on the autism spectrum. According to the data presented, the school will need refinement of their policies in order to best implement the programmes offered.

Interpreters and new employees in training will be a precious resource for the centre, which in the future is mostly going to be providing external services for deaf students.

### **1.12 Centro educativo Ponce de León Fundación Montemadrid, Madrid – Spain**

The institute for education Ponce de León is based in Madrid. It was founded in 1973; there was previously another centre in an adjacent town that welcomed and trained students and young people with hearing impairments from the 1940s for three decades. In 1982 the school welcomed the first female students to the education path and a year later a three year vocational training course for deaf people was created.

In 1994 the secondary education was rendered mandatory and both deaf and hearing students were welcomed in the classrooms.

Since the year 2000 the centre expanded its areas of action and opened a special employment centre and occupational centre. In 2001 the Bilingual Oral Language and Spanish Sign Language Project was implemented, setting a national benchmark from which professionals from other countries in the fields of education, pedagogy and public administration can learn.

In 2016 the Montemadrid Gardens were founded as a labour integration project for people with disabilities and became a part of the centre.

The Spanish school system includes a preschool, 1<sup>st</sup> stage from 0 to 3 years old and a 2<sup>nd</sup> stage from 3 to 6 years old; it then offers a primary school from 6 to 12 years old and a secondary school until 16 years old. On a higher education level, there is the possibility of a Baccalaureate, vocational training and then university. The mandatory education is set from six to sixteen years old. The centre's school promotes a bilingual concept, teaching simultaneously Spanish oral language and Spanish sign language.

The school, in the times between the initial opening and the year 2000, hosted only deaf students, around 35 and from 2 to 5 students deaf and other compelling disabilities. The current numbers of enrolment, based on the data collected in the year 2023/2024 shows a slight decrease in deaf students, but an increase in both deaf and hearing students with additional disabilities and hearing students.

In the age group 14 to 19 the school was previously hosting 20 deaf students and 2 to 5 students with additional disabilities. In the last school year, the enrolments registered of deaf student was halved, but the deaf students with additional disabilities had an increase up to 23. It is also of note that around 70 hearing students were hosted.

The centre does not provide adult services; therefore, it has not seen changes in demographic.

## Demographic changes in Ponce de Leon centre

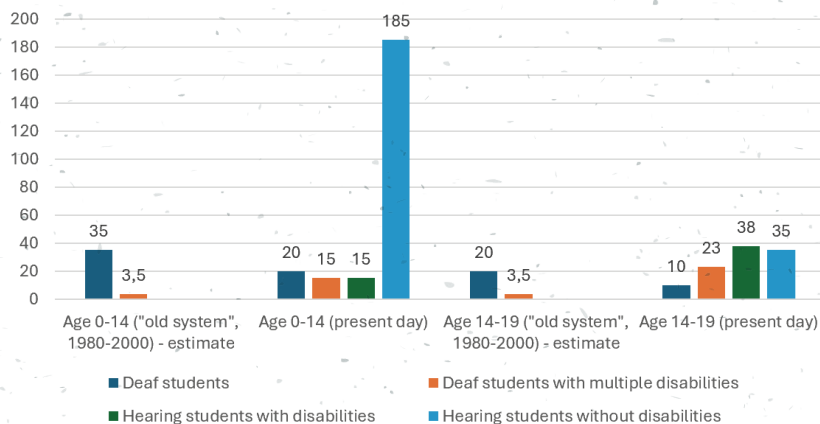


Table 15: Demographic changes in Ponce de Leon centre

Reasons for the changes can be found in the changes of methodology, with a perspective shift, bringing the child as a protagonist of their own educational path. A special ratio has also been established along with the inclusion of hearing people in the classroom. In special needs settings, the ratio of pupils and special needs children is 15/5. A strong point to the change seen in the demographic is the implementation of the inclusive education project.

Some positive points that this educational system has noticed are in the realm of care for the deaf person. The centre is able to follow the development of the pupils from the age of three until their high school graduation and guarantees a quality education during the 13 years, in a bilingual environment set to enrich their proficiency in both languages used.

Some challenges are also being faced by the Ponce de Leon centre; for example, there is a need of extra resources in order to be able to accommodate all student's needs, and this might not always be covered by the administration.

There is a need of continuous training for teachers to be up to date on all new research and methodologies in their field of work. It is a requirement, to be a teacher in this institute, to be able to communicate efficiently in Spanish Sign Language along with teaching degrees.

Centro educativo Ponce de León Fundación Montemadrid sees a strong future for the organization and hopes to continue onto the set path, being a reference centre for education of deaf students, The goal for the institute is also to implement an early classroom, a nursery, for deaf students between ages of 0 to3

## **Conclusions**

The data collected and presented shows some common ground amongst the institutes for the deaf and hard of hearing across HIPEN organization.

Most of the centres identify the approval of inclusion laws as a reason for the decrease in enrolments. The increasing emphasis put on inclusive education has contributed to this shift, as more school systems around Europe implement policies and resources that allow deaf students to thrive in mainstream school settings.

However, the transition has not been without challenges. One of the primary difficulties highlighted by the centres lies in training educators and school staff to accommodate these changes effectively. As more deaf students are integrated into mainstream schools, teachers and support personnel must be equipped with the necessary skills to provide adequate support, including knowledge of sign language, inclusive teaching strategies, and assistive technologies. Another trend emerging from the data is a rising of deaf students with additional disabilities. These students often require more specialized support, medical care, and therapeutic interventions, adding the need for institutions to train personnel adequately.

Another reason highlighted from the data in the decrease of enrolment numbers can be identified in the advancement of technology for early intervention to “correct” deafness. A vast majority of countries presented have implemented policies for early screening, giving the families an opportunity to choose cochlear implantation surgery or hearing aids and starting a hearing and speech rehabilitation process during early stages of the child’s development.

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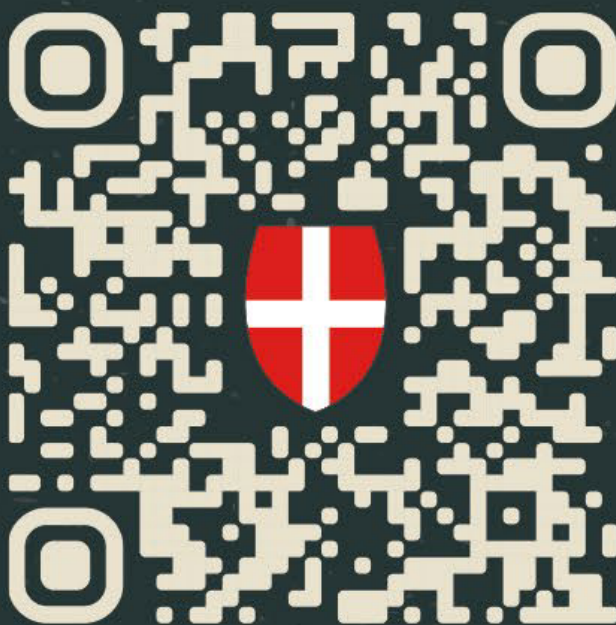
THE EUROPEAN NETWORK  
FOR PROFESSIONALS WORKING  
WITH PEOPLE WITH HEARING  
IMPAIRMENTS



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