

Nothing ventured, nothing gained

Julien Benaouda about his studies 'Applied Computer Sciences' at KU Leuven

The visual impairment of Julien Benaouda (24) from Roeselare did not stop him from taking the master's degree 'Applied Computer Sciences' at KU Leuven. Julien is graduating soon and talked to SIHO about his approach and experiences during his studies.

Studies

Julien is currently a master's student in 'Applied Computer Sciences' at KU Leuven and has been blind from birth. Before starting with this master's program, Julien already obtained his bachelor's degree 'Applied Computer Sciences' at Vives Kortrijk. Julien's decision to continue his studies was made quickly. 'After my bachelor's degree, I wanted to try the transition program. I thought "Nothing ventured, nothing gained" and just wanted to see how it would go. I started the program as a 21-year-old which made me a lot more mature and therefore more assertive when something didn't work out'.

At the beginning of the transition year, Julien often thought about quitting. 'The bar is much higher than in college, with very tough mathematics. I still find it hard to believe that I will succeed in the end anyway.'

Living next to the class group

In high school, young people with visual impairments were brought together by the home counseling services several times a year to share experiences. Because of this, Julien also build many friendships with visually impaired people. 'This is very interesting, because you meet people that are some steps ahead of me and you are challenged by this. They are also the people who understand the problems you are experiencing, while in the sighted society that is a little more difficult'.

"I felt like I was living next to the class group.

Julien indicates that many people with visual impairments find it difficult to belong to the class group in high school.

'I felt like I was living next to the class group. I was never able to go out on Fridays and was left behind during group works. It's a shame, but I know I can trust the friends I still have today for more than 100%.'

"I often have the feeling that I have to prove myself extra.

Julien is also regularly confronted with prejudices. 'People often think in advance that I will be a burden for a group work, which makes it more difficult to get involved in a group. I often have the feeling that I have to prove myself extra, before people want to give me a chance. That's a shame.'

Support

Julien uses reading software on his computer, which converts the output into speech. He also has a braille display, which converts what is displayed on the screen to braille. Since not all study materials are accessible to Julien, he often consults the center in which conversions are done. 'Among other things, they make sure that images are explained, and that the mathematics is readable. For example, they can print graphs on swelling paper on which the drawn lines swell, so that they become tangible to me.'

At the university Julien also got to know the mathematical program 'Latex', which enables him to read mathematics perfectly. At college and university, Julien always made use of exam facilities, such as more time, use of his own computer and oral explanations of exams. 'I had also always received pedagogical help for mathematical subjects. This meant, among other things, that a tutor provided support if the exercises were very visual. This was a very big help for me.'

Challenges because of corona

The corona pandemic also entails additional challenges for visually impaired people. 'People are now more reluctant to offer an arm. When you go to the store, you don't see the

line. Taking the bus is also less obvious in these times, as the bus doesn't open at the front anymore and you can't ask for the bus number.'

Independent life in a dorm

Julien has always been living in a dorm, as it is more practical. At the moment Julien lives in a dorm with assisted living support in Leuven. This means that he can call on his fellow roommates. They have chosen to help a student with disabilities. 'They guided me to the campus and classrooms when I was new, since I didn't know my way around in Leuven at the time.'

"I don't want to depend on others.

Julien also attaches great importance to independence. For him, living in a dorm is a preparation for living independently in the future. 'It teaches you to integrate into a new society. I don't want to depend on others. It also gives you a much better feeling that you can do things independently and do not have to call on someone every time.'

ICC Belgium

In addition to his studies, Julien is also working for ICC Belgium as Event Director.

Inclusion Creates Chances Belgium organizes all kinds of workshops on teaching skills for people with visual disabilities. 'The combination is often busy, but it doesn't outweigh the satisfaction I get from it. You know that you give people a lot more opportunities that way. That is why I do it.'

Transition to work

Julien has already completed three internships. Since Julien is graduating soon, he is already working on his transition to the work field. A transition with mixed feelings. 'Somewhere I'm reluctant, because I'm afraid it won't be easy to find a job. I often have to deal with prejudices such as 'people who are blind are mentally behind'. On the other hand, I am really looking forward to a new challenge'.

Julien mentions in his CV that he is blind but expresses it in a positive way. 'As a result, I work in a more structured way and am less distracted by all kinds of visual stimuli. I also have more expertise in accessibility.'

According to Julien, his ideal workplace is where he is not treated inferiorly because of his visual impairment. He also strives for a workplace where there are many challenges, both technological and personal. 'That's the feeling I had at my last internship.'

I hope to be able to start there when I graduate.'

“I don't want to be treated inferiorly.

Dare to ask for help

To someone in a similar situation as Julien, Julien advises to do what you feel comfortable with. It's never a bad thing to try something. 'If you try something and don't succeed, you won't regret it afterwards. Try to gather as many experiences as possible within your network. Also indicate in time when something does not go well. Dare to ask for help. Ask for tips. Communicate openly. If I hadn't, I wouldn't be standing where I am now.'

