START - Social Inclusion, Tolerance, Acceptance and. Realization for all Students

Ensuring the Social Dimension of Romanian higher education for students with disabilities and foreign/immigrant students: an exploratory study

Co-funded by the European Union

The European Commission support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Contents

Introduction 3
Method 5
Results 6
Recommendations 26
References 31

Introduction

The phenomenon of immigration is gaining more and more scope in Europe in recent years. It can be observed that the phenomenon is accentuated during major international crises, such as the war in Syria or Ukraine. European statistics show that only in 2017, there were approximately 21.6 million people in the European Union with other citizenship than that of an EU member state (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019), and of the total number of immigrants, a large proportion is between the ages of 18 and 34, i.e. a theoretically eligible category for the European higher education system. Their integration is a challenge in general and their integration in the European higher education system is an even bigger challenge.

There are multiple problems, from learning the language of the host country to adapting to the specific demands of the European higher education system. The needs are also various, such as adequate guidance, provision of training programs, vocational, and psychological counseling, social assistance, and so on. In this context, most European countries do not have yet a comprehensive and coherent policy for their inclusion in higher education (Vasiloupoulos & Ioannidi, 2020).

On the other hand, in recent years, an increasing number of students with disabilities are accessing the European higher education system (Ring & McKernan, 2008). Inclusion of people with disabilities in higher education refers to the extent to which higher education institutions support students and staff with disabilities to have equal access to university and equal opportunities to perform well compared to their non-disabled peers (Evans & Zhu, 2022). The same authors show that students with disabilities generally have less access to university, higher chances of dropping out of school, and lower graduation and employment outcomes than their peers without disabilities.

At the European level, over the last few years, several political commitments have been made to strengthen diversity and inclusion in higher education, starting with the Paris Declaration of the EU member states of March 2015 on the promotion of citizenship and the common values of freedom, tolerance, and non-discrimination through education. This is also reflected in documents such as the 2015 Yerevan Communiqué and the 2018 Paris Communiqué on the Bologna Process. All this series of documents reinforces the importance of the social dimension of European higher education. More recently, regarding social inclusion in higher education, one of the most important documents outlining principles and implementation recommendations at the level of European higher education is the 2020

Rome Communiqué (annex II). This document, based on the report of Advisory Group No. 1 on Social Dimension (Advisory Group 1 on Social Dimension, 2020) includes a set of 10 general principles (Social Dimension Strategies, Flexibility, Lifelong Learning, Data Collection, Guidance and Counselling, Funding, Staff Training and Institutional Mission, Mobility, Community Engagement and Policy Dialogue), which, according to the authors, should be understood as general-level statements that serve as a basis for conceptualizing different policies to improve the social dimension.

Starting from the documents mentioned above, a series of studies were carried out at the European level to monitor the implementation of the social dimension of higher education.

Thus, in a relatively recent report, entitled Equity and Inclusion in European Higher Education Institutions. Results from the INVITED project, Claeys-Kulik et al. (2019) published the results of the INVITED project of the Association of European Universities, which aimed to support universities in developing strategies to ensure equity, diversity, and inclusion. The report presents a broad picture through quantitative data collected from 159 higher education institutions in 36 European systems, collected through a survey and follow-up interviews between autumn 2018 and summer 2019. Unlike other similar studies (e.g. Towards Equity and Inclusion in Higher Education in Europe, 2022) which rather targeted macro-level indicators (national policies and strategies), this report focused on institutional approaches (challenges and success factors). Beyond the conclusion that ensuring the social dimension of higher education is still in its infancy, the project's design and data provide a wide range of possible institutional strategies, dimensions of diversity, ways of measuring success, levels of analysis, barriers, and ways to overcome of them in ensuring the social dimension/equity/inclusion.

Another study carried out in 2022 by the European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice starting from the general principles and recommendations of Annex II of the Rome Communiqué (2020), developed a report entitled Towards Equity and Inclusion in Higher Education in Europe in which an analysis is made at the level of European countries on how the 10 principles are absorbed at the level of national higher education systems. The report briefly explains how the principles and guidelines of the Rome Communiqué (2020) relate to equity, presents the methodological challenges related to their implementation, explains how to choose the indicators based on which the analysis was made, and, finally, presents the data collected, including in the form of maps and rankings, according to the scores obtained by each national higher education system on those indicators. The conclusion was that few countries have taken the necessary follow-up measures since the adoption of the general principles and recommendations of Annex II of the Rome Communiqué in November 2020.

Based on the same set of general principles and recommendations, U-Multirank conducted and published a study entitled Guidelines for Developing Social Inclusion Indicators at Higher Education Institutions: how to Develop Relevant and Internationally Comparable Indicators? (Kaiser et al., 2022) carried out in the period 2020-2022, and aimed at identifying some indicators of social inclusion in higher education and developing a guide for building these indicators at the level of higher education institutions. The study included both a qualitative component (interviews) and a quantitative one (survey) on a sample of European higher education stakeholders (policymakers, practitioners, and student representatives).

Starting from the need to build a set of indicators to evaluate the social dimension of Romanian higher education, we asked ourselves whether, beyond the general principles, the recommendations, or even the explicit indicators highlighted by the various European documents or studies to evaluate the degree of their implementation, it would somehow be necessary to investigate the elements specific to the Romanian academic environment. In other words, the objective of the present study is to highlight the provision of the social component of Romanian higher education, especially for students with disabilities and foreign/immigrant students, and the appropriate indicators for a specific evaluation of the Romanian environment, from the perspective of the main relevant actors: students and experts responsible for managing this problem in Romanian universities.

Therefore, the specific objectives of this study are: 1. Identifying the perceived level of ensuring the social dimension for students with disabilities and foreign/immigrant students in Romanian higher education, 2. Identifying how the relevant actors (experts and students) define the success in ensuring the social dimension, 3. Exploring the possible ways of measuring the success of a higher education institution in ensuring the social dimension for students with disabilities or foreigners/immigrants, respectively 4. Exploring the perceived barriers to ensuring the social dimension and solutions to overcome them.

Method

Participants. Two categories of respondents participated in the study, experts and students selected voluntarily. In the expert category, 8 experts in special psychopedagogy, inclusive education, multiple disabilities, counseling, and psychotherapy for people with disabilities were interviewed, respectively 3 experts in mobility and international students. In the student category, 16

foreign/immigrant students organized in two groups were interviewed, representing the Republic of Moldova, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Guinea, Brazil, Bangladesh, and Ukraine, respectively 8 students with visual, hearing, or motor disabilities.

Instruments. The focus groups were conducted based on an interview guide that pursued 4 main themes: 1. The perceived level of ensuring the social dimension for students with disabilities, respectively foreign/immigrant students in Romanian higher education, 2. Defining success in ensuring the social dimension for disabled students and foreign/immigrant students respectively, 3. Measuring the success of a higher education institution in ensuring the social dimension, 4. Barriers in ensuring the social dimension for students with disabilities and foreign/immigrant students and ways to overcome them.

Procedure. Five focus groups were held, of which those with expert participants were held face-to-face, while meetings with students were held online. At the beginning of each meeting, the participants were informed of the objective of the study and the fact that the confidentiality and anonymity of the answers will be respected in all forms of presentation of the study results. The modal duration of the meetings was an hour and a half.

Results

Analysis of the social dimension for students with disabilities

The perceived level of ensuring the social dimension for students with disabilities in Romanian higher education

Students perspective. Evaluating globally, the respondents appreciated that students with disabilities benefit from a series of facilities that contribute to ensuring the social dimension, such as assistance during exams, mime-gestural interpretation, etc. Beyond that, students with motor disabilities raised several issues specific to this type of disability. The first was that of wheelchair ramps, showing that not all university buildings have ramps or their slope sometimes makes them unusable. Another problem reported was that sometimes successive classes are held in different buildings or different areas of the city, with not enough time between them for a student with motor disabilities to arrive on time. The third

problem mentioned was that sometimes when repair works, and renovations are done around the university buildings, the access ways are blocked or partially blocked and students with motor disabilities have difficulty accessing the buildings.

Experts perspective. From the perspective of experts, the social dimension in the relationship with students with disabilities must be ensured mainly through a unitary strategy/policy at the university level which will then be found also at lower levels: faculties, specializations, and ultimately individual staff behaviors didactic and non-didactic. Thus, teachers must adapt the elements of the general strategy to the particular teaching, learning, and assessment activities. Under this aspect, the respondents signal a gap/incongruence between the university's policies regarding ensuring diversity regarding students with disabilities, and the actual practices in this regard.

Defining success in providing the social dimension for students with disabilities

Students perspective. A first highlighted feature is the provision of all resources so that a student with disabilities can manage independently in the university environment (eg maps of buildings for the blind, bibliographic materials adapted to each type of impairment, etc.).

The second characteristic mentioned is communication. This includes not only communication with teaching staff or non-teaching staff of the university but also communication with other colleagues.

The third characteristic is the congruence between the institution's formal procedures and policies and their implementation in the field. In other words, from the perspective of the respondents, policies, strategies, protocols, and formal procedures regarding students with disabilities should not be just forms without substance.

The fourth characteristic mentioned is inclusion from all points of view, formally and informally, both in the educational process and in student organizations and extracurricular activities.

Experts perspective. From the perspective of experts, a successful university in ensuring the social dimension regarding students with disabilities is a university that closely follows the respects of the values of equality, equity, diversity, and inclusion. A university that has a vision and a strategy in this regard,

which is in turn taken over by the university staff and implemented in the daily activities with the students belonging to this category.

Measuring the success of a higher education institution in providing the social dimension for students with disabilities

Regarding the concrete ways of quantifying the success of ensuring the social dimension, the suggestions of the respondents, both students and experts, were structured according to the stage of the educational process.

Students perspective

Accessing. At this stage, the main indicators resulting from the interview were: 1. Meetings to present the educational offer for potential students with disabilities 2. Online promotion, in which the services it can offer for students with disabilities are explicitly exposed 3. Services of career guidance, and vocational counseling.

Admission. Regarding admission, the most important aspects highlighted were: 1. Preparation for the admission exam 2. Assistance with the admission exam (extra time, separate space if necessary, assistance with writing, etc.)

Retention. During the course of the studies, regardless of whether it is about the bachelor's or master's degree, the main indicators mentioned were: 1. Psychological counseling services for students with disabilities, medical services 2. The allocation of mentors or tutors for groups of 2-3 students with disabilities, to guide them throughout the study program 3. Adaptation of examination methods (oral exams, extra time, writing support) 4. Adaptation of bibliographic materials, course presentations (Braille, audio), adjusting the volume of information, etc. . 5. The existence of scholarships for financial support 6. Mandatory training for teachers to raise awareness of the problems of students with disabilities, models of interaction with this category 6. Monitoring the results of this training

Graduation/post-graduation. For this sequence, the indicators identified by the students were the following: 1. Facilities for participating in the graduation ceremony with other students 2. Monitoring the evolution of graduates 3. Centralized information related to employment opportunities 4. Providing

support for integration into the labor market 5. Offering internship opportunities, and collaboration with private companies 6. Post-graduation counseling related to insertion on the labor market 7. Facilitating the connection of graduates with private companies 8. Mediating the relationship between disabled graduates and employers

Experts perspective

Accessing. From the experts' perspective, the main indicators for this stage could be: 1. Activities to promote university specializations among potential students with disabilities, especially specializations compatible with certain disabilities. These can be identified through an analysis of the specializations most sought after by students with disabilities (the existence of promotional materials adapted for this category of potential students. 2. The existence of a strategy to open the university to special high schools (summer schools, workshop 3. The existence of a structure, and teams designated to carry out the promotion activity 4. Vocational guidance services for potential students.

Admission. For this stage, the experts listed the following indicators: 1. Accessibility in the university buildings where the entrance exams are held or the processing of competition files 2. The provision of complete and transparent information related to the accessibility services (assistance/support) that the university offers for specific activities (eg registration assistance). 3. Special places for students with disabilities, accompanied by very clear information related to the eligibility criteria for those places.

Retention. The indicators offered for this stage were: 1. Opportunities to express requirements related to flexibility of teaching, learning, and examination methods 2. Partnerships of the university with organizations/foundations/companies to ensure certain services for students with disabilities in interaction with the university (e.g. translation into mime-gestural language for deaf students, adaptation of tactile resources for the blind, assistance for people who cannot move, etc.) 3. Ensuring an infrastructure that allows accessibility in university buildings, lecture halls, seminars, and laboratories 4. The degree of participation of students with disabilities in the didactic activities but also in the more general social activities organized by the university 5. The collaboration of the university with the students' families 6. The training of teachers to adapt the methods of teaching, learning, and assessment to the specifics of students with disabilities

Table 1. Main indicators of the success of ensuring the social dimension for students with disabilities (students vs. experts)

	Etapa

Participants	Accessing	Admission	Retention	Graduation/post-graduation
Students	-Meetings to present the educational offer for potential students with disabilities - Online promotion, in which the services it can offer for students with disabilities are explicitly exposed -Career guidance services, vocational counseling.	-Preparation for the entrance exam - Assistance with the entrance exam (extra time, separate space if necessary, assistance with writing, etc.)	-Psychological counseling services for students with disabilities, medical services -Allocation of mentors or tutors for groups of 2-3 students with disabilities, to guide them throughout the study program -Adaptation of examination methods (oral exams, extra time, writing support) -Adapting bibliographic materials, course presentations (Braille, audio), adjusting the volume of information, etc. -The existence of scholarships for financial support -Mandatory training for teachers to raise awareness of the problems of students with disabilities, models of interaction with this category Monitoring the results of this training	-Facilities for participating in the graduation ceremony with other students Monitoring the evolution of graduates Centralized information related to employment opportunities -Providing support for integration into the labor market -Offering internship opportunities, collaboration with private companies -Post-graduation counseling related to insertion on the labor market -Facilitating the connection of graduates with private companies -Mediating the relationship of disabled graduates with employers
Experts	- Activities to promote the university's specializatio ns among potential students with disabilities	-Accessibility in university buildings where entrance exams are held or competition files are processed -Providing complete and transparent	- Opportunities to express requirements related to the flexibilization of teaching, learning, and examination methods -Partnerships of the university with organizations/foundations /companies to ensure certain services for	- Pass rate. -Graduation results -The percentage of those who want to continue their studies after graduation -The percentage of students with disabilities who were employed in the field

	- The existence of a strategy for opening the university to special high schools (summer schools, workshops, collaboration protocols). - The existence of a structure, and teams designated to do the promotion activity. - Vocational guidance services for potential students.	information related to accessibility services (assistance/support) that the university offers for specific activities (e.g. enrollment assistance) -Special places for students with disabilities, accompanied by very clear information related to the eligibility criteria for those places.	students with disabilities in the interaction with the university (e.g. translation into mime-gestural language for deaf students, adaptation of tactile resources for the blind, assistance for people who cannot move, etc.) - Ensuring an infrastructure that allows accessibility in the university buildings, lecture halls, seminars, laboratories -The degree of participation of students with disabilities in the didactic activities but also in the more general social activities organized by the university - University collaboration with students' families -Training of teachers to adapt teaching, learning, and assessment methods to the specifics of students with disabilities -Training typical students to interact with people with disabilities. - Anti-discrimination training - The existence of adapted examination methods (more time, a special room, oral exams, a special place in the examination room, etc.).	in which they completed their studies.

Barriers to ensuring the social dimension/equity/inclusion and ways to overcome them

Students perspective. The main barriers identified by students were poor management and legislative barriers. As solutions to overcome them, the following were mentioned: 1. The existence of an online interface where students with disabilities can present their problems and needs, and the university can support them or assign them a support person 2. The number and regularity of meetings with students with disabilities to obtain feedback related to the measures implemented and the need for new measures 3. Representation of the category of students with disabilities in the management structures of the university (e.g. faculty council, board of administration) 4. Universities to benefit from support in the implementation of the measures aiming to ensure the social dimension (e.g. from the Ministry of Education) 5. The development of hybrid higher education (with an emphasis on the online component) would favor students with disabilities (it would compensate for the access difficulties of some students) 6. The flexibility of teaching staff.

Experts perspective. The first barrier pointed out by the experts, manifested in the way the flexibility of the assessment methods (longer time for the examination, oral examination, etc.) was the teachers' fear of not violating regulations at the institutional level (the fear of not disfavoring the other students). The proposed solution to overcome this barrier is the development at the university level of clear policies related to the management of students with disabilities, accompanied by implementation guidelines to be popularized among university, teaching, and non-teaching staff.

A second barrier pointed out was the fact that respect for diversity (an open attitude towards diversity) is not necessarily an intrinsic characteristic but must be educated, and trained at the level of university staff through explicit programs. The solution would be the introduction of inclusive education courses, skills for diversity, and awareness for both students and university staff.

The third barrier identified is represented by legislative gaps regarding the status of persons with disabilities or disabling conditions. The solution would be to provide feedback to decision-makers from university representatives to fill in those gaps.

The fourth barrier reported was represented by the fact that there are certain stereotypes of teachers according to which, if they adapt their methods to the specifics/needs of students with disabilities, this would decrease the quality of higher education (the quality of teaching the respective subject). The solution could be, on the one hand, the existence of a university-level strategy regarding ensuring the social dimension for students with disabilities, popularized among teaching staff, and on the

other hand, their participation in training aimed at ensuring equality, equity, diversity and inclusion of students with disabilities.

A last barrier highlighted by the experts was the fact that the social dimension is not included in the evaluation of universities and in establishing the rankings. From this point of view, universities do not have a strong motivation to introduce policies/strategies to ensure the social dimension. Also, at the institutional level, teachers are not evaluated in terms of ensuring the social dimension. The solution to this problem would be the lobby universities and other institutions for the introduction of ensuring the social dimension as an indicator of university performance. Also, at the institutional level, the solution would consist of the introduction of some indicators related to the involvement in adaptation activities of teaching methods for students with disabilities in the teacher evaluation grid by the institution.

Table 3. Barriers to ensuring the social dimension for students with disabilities and solutions (students vs. experts)

	Bariers	Solutions
Students	-disfunctional management - legislative barriers	-The existence of an online interface where students with disabilities can present their problems and needs, and the university can give them support or assign them a support person -The number and regularity of meetings with students with disabilities to obtain feedback related to the implemented measures and the need for new measures -Representation of the category of students with disabilities in the management structures of the university (e.g. faculty council, board of administration) -Universities should benefit from support in the implementation of measures aimed at ensuring the social dimension (e.g. from the Ministry of Education) - The development of hybrid higher education (with an emphasis on the online component) would favor students with disabilities (it would compensate for the access difficulties of some students) - The flexibility of teaching staff.
Experts	- teachers' fear of violating regulations at the institutional level - respect for diversity is not necessarily an intrinsic characteristic, it must be educated	-the existence of a university regulation on ensuring the social dimension for students with disabilities - inclusive education courses, skills for diversity, awareness - providing feedback to decision-makers from university representatives to fill legislative gaps -teacher evaluation grids that include ensuring the social dimension for students with disabilities

	- legislative gaps regarding the status of people with disabilities or with a disabling condition - stereotypes of teachers according to which, if they adapt their methods to the specifics/needs of students with disabilities, this would decrease the quality of higher education	

3.2. Analysis of the social dimension issue for foreign/immigrant students

The perceived level of ensuring the social dimension for foreign/immigrant students in Romanian higher education

Students perspective. Even if, on the whole, foreign/immigrant students appreciate the fact that universities make efforts to ensure the social dimension for this category of students, they also highlight several problems. Some of them relate to the wider social, political, and legislative environment, others directly target universities.

The first category includes the issue of files, more specifically, the issue of residence permits. The integration of foreign/immigrant students is directly related to solving the problem of residence permits. Respondents indicate a gap between the time of entering the university and the time of obtaining the residence permit (obtaining it takes months). This adversely interferes with free access to the facilities normally provided by the university. Also in this context, the respondents indicate that the immigration center is poorly organized. The pace of processing cases is slow, resulting in huge queues and wasted time.

Here, too, the problem of articulation between the institutions with which foreign/immigrant students interfere is highlighted. For example, the lack of collaboration between immigration centers and universities is mentioned. Sometimes students have to make more trips than necessary to solve certain documents (eg student certificates) for the simple fact that sometimes the university staff does not know

the exact model of the document that is needed. The lack of a common database between the two categories of institutions is also reported.

In the second category, of problems specific to universities, the communication barriers are primarily reported. These are sometimes more general, related to the clear and transparent communication of information such as the percentage of courses/seminars to be held in a foreign language, the location of buildings/rooms, accommodation facilities, libraries, and other study resources, in this context, with foreign/immigrant students noting that they often have to get their information from social media groups. Sometimes it's about language barriers. Students mention that sometimes the teachers who teach in foreign language study programs do not master the foreign language well enough, preferring to teach in Romanian.

Also related to the university, the respondents mention the problem of discrimination, either at the institutional level or at the level of local students. At the institutional level, respondents mention the fact that foreign students, even if they have very good grades, cannot receive the merit scholarship the performance scholarship, or the prohibition to participate in certain university projects. At the level of Romanian colleagues, the respondents indicate sometimes hostile attitudes, invoking the argument that foreign students take the place of local students.

Expert perspective. For their part, the interviewed experts signal two categories of problems: general ones, aiming at cultural differences (especially regarding non-EU students) and those specific to the university (logistics problems).

In the first category, of more general problems, cultural differences are mentioned mainly. The cultural differences are perceived to be so great that in the absence of a support, person to help them understand the specific Romanian culture and to guide them through the bureaucratic system and all the formal requirements of the university, many of the foreign/immigrant students do not disentangle.

In the second category, of the problems specific to the university, logistical problems are primarily reported. The structures that are in charge of managing these students lack staff, clear protocols for interaction with international students, and effective means of communication regarding the rights and obligations of this category of students. In the absence of this infrastructure, the pressure is felt by the employed staff who have to solve particular problems of these students, from their resources sometimes and under their pressure (social cases). Also. Here, too, experts mention the need for foreign/immigrant student representation in faculty or university management structures (e.g. professorial councils) so that

communication regarding their needs and the university's policies in this regard is facilitated. Last but not least, the need for social assistance is indicated.

Table 4. Main categories of problems reported by foreign/immigrant students and experts

	General problems	Specific problems
Students	- the issue of residence permits - the slow pace of the immigration center's operation - the faulty articulation of university/other institutions that process immigrant students - the absence of a common database	- institutional communication barriers - language barriers - institutional discrimination - informal discrimination
Experts	- cultural differences - logistical problems	- logistical problems - lack of staff - lack of interaction protocols with international students - defective institutional communication

3.2.2. Defining success in providing the social dimension for international/immigrant students

Students perspective. From the perspective of the respondents, the main characteristics that would define a successful university in ensuring the social dimension for foreign/immigrant students are accessibility (to feel that they are integrated into the policy of the higher education institution), equity (offering specific opportunities), inclusion/non-discrimination (students from the African area signal that they are discriminated against European students, whom they consider privileged), transparent communication (the feeling that the university thinks about them, that it cares, that it takes them into account; communication of the specific requirements of the university for this category of students but also the communication of the opportunities offered to them), respect for cultural diversity, social and psychological assistance, financial support (reducing discrepancies regarding financial resources between domestic and foreign/immigrant students).

Experts perspective. From the perspective of experts, a successful university in ensuring the social dimension for foreign/immigrant students is conceptually prepared (the existence of a vision and a strategy that covers all stages of the educational process, from the promotion of the university's educational services to graduation and post-graduation) and logistical (personnel, interaction protocols, efficient and transparent communication infrastructure, collaborations with other institutions involved,

social, psychological, medical assistance services) to manage the number of foreign students and the diversity of problems they face (generated by cultural diversity but also by specific social cases).

Measuring the success of a higher education institution in providing the social dimension for foreign/immigrant students

The concrete ways of measuring success in ensuring the social dimension of higher education for foreign/immigrant students were structured in the four stages of the educational process, access, admission, retention, and graduation/post-graduation, both in the case of student responses and in the of experts.

Students perspective

Access. For this sequence, the respondents emphasized two ways of promoting educational services to potential students: the formal and the informal way. Regarding formal promotion, students mentioned on the one hand the need to present the information on a university platform, in a centralized form, in several languages, and with access from anywhere in the world, so that potential students do not have to look for additional (or more accessible) information on other sources (eg social networks). Also mentioned here is the need for the university to participate in university fairs or other international promotion events. Regarding informal promotion, the respondents believe that the best advertisement the university can make among potential foreign students is the way it has provided quality services and supported the post-graduation integration of foreigners/immigrants who already have graduated

Admission. In this regard, respondents mentioned three dimensions of success evaluation/measurement. 1. The legal/bureaucratic dimension. This is about optimizing the relationship between the university and other responsible institutions such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Education, so that bureaucratic/legal procedures are simplified to facilitate admission. For example, bureaucratic issues related to the legalization of diplomas that allow participation in admission (both by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Education). The indicator would be a simplification of the bureaucratic procedures related to the documentation required to participate in the admission process for foreign/immigrant students. Also included in this category is the complete digitization of the legal procedures associated with admission. For example, documents that must be

submitted to the university after students have been admitted are also accepted in electronic format and sent by email to facilitate the process. Currently, only their physical deposit is accepted, which involves extra travel and additional costs. Also in this context, gaps are mentioned between the calendar of the university's activities and the terms at which the Ministry of Education or other institutions process the residence documents of foreign/immigrant students. 2. Linguistic support. This is about offering training courses both for the language of the host country and for languages of international circulation such as French and English. This would also facilitate didactic activities, in which many subjects are taught in foreign languages, respectively it would facilitate the consultation of bibliographic resources which are often in languages of international circulation. 3. Optimization of internal procedures. Measures such as: extending the duration of the admission process for immigrant/foreign students to give them the necessary time to prepare specific documents related to admission, the existence of special places for foreign/immigrant students in all faculties and specializations (their absence in some specializations are considered by the right respondents to be a form of discrimination), shifting the admission and place confirmation calendars between faculties and specializations to offer more options.

Retention. For this stage, the respondents mentioned the following measures: 1. the existence of procedures/protocols by which the university permanently monitors the evolution of immigrant students, the problems they face 2. Integration procedures 3. Involvement of students in teaching and research activities 4. Services of permanent guidance through the bureaucratic system 5. Providing scholarships.

Graduation/post-graduation. For this stage, the respondents mentioned the following measures: 1. The existence of university strategies/procedures to monitor the integration of graduates into work. 2. Providing equal internship opportunities to foreign and local students (e.g. internships in state institutions are prohibited to foreign students; there are also private institutions that do not accept foreign students for internships. 3. Assistance to graduates in finding their first job work after graduation (I think immigrant students need 2-3 years of work experience to find a job on their own, and the university should, in their perspective, provide them with post-graduation opportunities to do this experience).

Experts perspective

Access. At this stage, the main indicators highlighted by the experts were: 1. Fairs, workshops, and webinars promoting the educational offer of the university (in recent years and the context of the pandemic, these were held more online) 2. Presence on several international university promotion platforms 3. Promotion on social media (social networks), recruitment agencies from countries where

foreign students come from (recruitment agencies also assist potential foreign students in the preparation of documentation). 4. Referrals of existing students/graduates attracting other international students (informal promotion, through the alumni social network).

Admission. Experts believe that the success of this stage depends on two factors: the positive result at the actual admission, i.e. obtaining the visa. Ideally, from their point of view, all the links/structures involved in the admission process would work in an articulated manner, but in reality, they signal that these structures are not always synchronized and sometimes send contradictory messages to students. An example of communication deficiency provided is that regarding information relevant to students, such as the minimum number of credits required to move from one year of studies to another, participation in courses, seminars, laboratories, etc. So from this perspective, relevant indicators would be 1. Coherent articulation between the various structures responsible for the admission process of international students and 2. Clear and transparent communication of all the rights and obligations of this category of students in the educational process.

Retention. Although experts admit that the cultural diversity of the foreign/immigrant student body is a problem, they believe that, in general, the teaching body is quite internationalized and would not need specific training on cultural diversity. They also appreciate that there are no problems with the delivery of courses in international languages. Instead, experts believe that professors should monitor the progress of foreign/immigrant students enrolled in their courses and if they see unsatisfactory progress offer them counseling. Another proposed solution would be for foreign/immigrant students to receive a tutor from among Romanian students, who would offer them support.

Graduation/post-graduation. Regarding the graduation stage, experts believe that the pass rate among foreign/immigrant students can be a measurable indicator. For the post-graduation stage, useful indicators would be: 1. Monitoring the evolution of foreign graduates (the existence of a database in this regard) 2. The employment rate in the field in which they completed their studies, or 3. The percentage of those who succeed in opening a business after graduation.

Table 5. The main indicators of the success of ensuring the social dimension (foreign students/immigrants vs. experts)

	Stage			
Participants	Accessing	Admission	Retention	Graduation/

				Post-graduation
Students	-formal promotion (online platform, clear, centralized, multilingual information, participation in university fairs, international promotion events) -informal promotion (through graduates, the quality of their training)	- the bureaucratic legal dimension (simplification of procedures, digitization of admission) - language support - optimization of internal procedures (e.g. flexibility of the admission calendar)	- procedures/protocols for monitoring student progress - integration procedures -involvement of students in teaching and research activities -guiding services through the bureaucratic system - specific scholarships	-strategies/ procedures for monitoring the integration of graduates into the labor market - internship opportunities - assistance in finding the first job after graduation
Experts	-fairs, workshops, and webinars to promote the educational offer of the university - presence on several international platforms for the promotion of universities - promotion on social media (social networks), recruitment agencies -recommendations for existing students/graduates	-coherent articulation between the various structures responsible for the admission process of international students - the clear and transparent communication of all the rights and obligations of this category of students in the educational process.	- monitoring the progress of foreign/immigrant students - assigning a tutor/group of foreign/immigrant students	-monitoring the evolution of foreign graduates (the existence of a database) - the employment rate in the field in which they completed their studies -the percentage of those who manage to open a business after graduation

3.2.4. Barriers to ensuring the social dimension/equity/inclusion and ways to overcome them

Students perspective. The first mentioned barrier is the difference between the university's formal (on paper) strategies and procedures regarding foreign/immigrant students and the extent of their implementation. Respondents perceive this relationship as a paradox: although it formally exists, rules

and procedures are little implemented. The proposed solution is to monitor the extent to which formal protocols and procedures are implemented.

A second mentioned barrier is cultural and religious, but also racial differences. In this context, the respondents indicate cases of discrimination in the relationship with local students. They feel that they are not informally integrated into the student body. The respondents believe that the solution could be the university's organization of events, activities, and projects that bring together foreign and domestic students, stimulating their collaboration.

The third barrier mentioned is the linguistic one. It is mainly about communication in the languages of international circulation with both teaching and non-teaching staff. The suggested solution would be additional training in the use of international languages for both foreign/immigrant students and university staff.

Other solutions proposed by the students to improve the provision of the social dimension were: 1. the construction of comparative indicators at the European level separately for university majors, such as the percentage of immigrant students integrated into the higher education system 2. the construction of representativeness indicators to cover diversity cultural 3. Explicit social integration programs for immigrant students 4. Adaptability of study programs for foreign students. Indicators for evaluating the flexibility of study programs by referring to the specific needs of immigrant students 5. Financial support of immigrant students and open and transparent communication of all financial opportunities available for this category of students. 6. Involvement of students in research activities. 7. The use of indicators to quantify the number of immigrant students participating in international conferences, members of the collective of authors of scientific articles, etc. 8. The existence of procedures to evaluate the feedback of immigrant students related to the services offered by the university and mechanisms to integrate this feedback to improve the services offered. 9. Creation of student organizations (including foreign/immigrant students) to mediate communication between foreign/immigrant students and the university 10. Training programs for teaching and non-teaching staff of the university to raise awareness of the issue of cultural and religious diversity. 12. Anti-discrimination training for university staff and students.

Experts perspective. The main barrier mentioned by experts is cultural diversity. Especially in the case of non-EU students, this generates difficulties in understanding the local specifics, the demands of the university, and the rights and obligations of both parties: students and the academic body. The

suggested solution is to assign native student tutors to small groups of foreign/immigrant students to guide them through their studies and formal/bureaucratic interaction with the higher education institution.

The second important barrier is the logistical one, the lack of personnel, and protocols/procedures necessary for good management of the foreign student population. The indicated solution would be to strengthen the institutional interface in the relationship with foreign/immigrant students.

Table 6. Barriers to ensuring the social dimension for foreign/immigrant students and solutions (students vs. experts)

	Bariers	Solutions
Students	-formal/implementation inconsistency at the level of protocols and procedures -cultural and religious differences - language barriers	-monitoring the level of implementation of formal procedures/protocols - organization of integration events/projects -language training for university staff and students - comparative indicators at the European level (e.g. immigrant students integrated into the higher education system - indicators of representativeness to cover cultural diversity - indicators for evaluating the flexibility of study programs by referring to the specific needs of immigrant students -financial support for immigrant students - communication of available financial opportunities -involvement of students in research activities. - indicators regarding the number of immigrant students participating in international conferences, members of the collective of authors of scientific articles, etc. - procedures to evaluate the feedback of immigrant students related to the services offered by the university and mechanisms to integrate this feedback to improve the services offered - the integration of foreign students into student organizations - anti-discrimination training
Experts	-cultural differences -logistic deficiencies	- tutors/mentors assigned from among local students - strengthening the institutional interface

4. Conclusions and discussions

The present study aimed to highlight a series of indicators to ensure the social dimension of Romanian higher education for disabled students and foreign/immigrant students. Beyond this specific objective, we were also interested in pursuing a broader perspective on this issue, as it results from the consultation of experts in these fields (special psychopedagogy, inclusive education, education for diversity but also mobility and international students) respectively from the consultation the main beneficiaries, i.e. students with disabilities and foreign/immigrant students.

As can be seen from the results section, experts and students sometimes highlighted problems, characteristics, indicators, barriers, common solutions, and sometimes specific aspects, depending on the position from which each one interacts with this issue, or depending on the degree of cultural differentiation (the case of foreign/immigrant students) respectively the type of disability (the case of students with disabilities).

First of all, regarding the level at which the social dimension is ensured today for the two categories of students, it can be noted that both students with disabilities and foreign/immigrant students appreciate the efforts made by the university in this regard. Beyond that, both categories of students highlight several aspects that can be optimized and improved.

Regarding students with disabilities, most of the problems are related to the facilities that the university should provide so that they can manage independently or quasi-independently both in the physical university environment (buildings, lecture halls, seminars, laboratories) as well as in the non-physical one (regulations, bureaucratic/legislative elements, etc.), but also problems related to the flexibility of teaching staff in teaching and evaluation activities. As far as foreign students are concerned, they cite specific legal problems, especially those related to the articulation of the institutions that manage their status as foreign students (universities, immigration centers, etc.) as well as interaction problems such as communication with the university, barriers to language or even discrimination.

The experts' perspective on the same issue is largely congruent. The experts confirm the need to optimize the aspects pointed out by the students, who nuance the need for a broader institutional vision of the issue, which then guides and legitimizes individual behaviors in concrete situations. In other words, the need for a top-down approach at the institutional level is indicated, in such a way that teaching staff or even non-teaching staff act guided by protocols, and explicit procedures for interacting with students

with disabilities or foreigners/immigrants, but also the need an additional investment in responsible infrastructure.

Starting from definitions or characteristics of success in ensuring the social dimension, relatively similar between students and experts, with an emphasis on communication, flexibility, advice, or financial/logistical support, the study participants generated a series of concrete ways of quantifying this success. Although a single analysis criterion was explicitly targeted, the stage of the educational process (access, admission, retention, and graduation/post-graduation), the indicators highlighted in the focus groups can also be grouped according to other criteria, congruent with those highlighted in various studies previous ones at European level.

Thus, it can be seen that beyond the stage of the educational process, which we will not return to here (it is treated explicitly in the results section), we can detect the direct or indirect criterion of the indicators, in other words, indicators aimed directly at students and indicators aimed at staff university. In the first category are most of the indicators (e.g. psychological counseling services, vocational guidance, social assistance, language support, financial support, practice opportunities, internship, employment, etc.), and in the second a smaller volume of indicators, such as anti-discrimination training, inclusive education courses, competences for diversity, intercultural communication, awareness, teacher evaluation grids that include ensuring the social dimension for disabled or foreign/immigrant students, etc.

Another criterion that can be separated is the direction of the institutional process in which the indicator is included. We can thus detect top-down vs. bottom-up indicators. In the first category, the respondents mentioned the existence of a vision, strategies, regulations, and procedural protocols at the institutional level that guides the individual behaviors of the university staff in the relationship with students with disabilities or foreign/immigrant students, the representation of the two categories of students in the management structures of university, etc. In the second category, we can identify indicators such as mechanisms/interfaces through which disabled or foreign/immigrant students can present their needs, and specific problems in such a way that they are made aware and addressed.

Another implicit criterion resulting from the participants' answers is the level of implementation of the indicators: measures vs. meta-measures. In the case of measures, we refer to various facilities, structures, and processes, through which disabled or foreign/immigrant students are supported. Here we include indicators such as financial support, the existence of a structure responsible for managing these

categories of students, and the existence of inclusive training programs for students or teaching staff. In the case of meta-measures, we refer to strategies or mechanisms by which, based on the analysis of the results of the measures or through the analysis of feedback, the process of ensuring the social dimension is optimized. Here we can include the number and regularity of meetings with students with disabilities/foreigners/immigrants to obtain feedback related to the measures implemented and proof of the adjustment of procedures according to the feedback, the existence of a mechanism for monitoring student performance and adjusting didactic activities for optimization, monitoring the evolution graduates on the labor market and adjusting their training and the type of support for female employees, etc.

Also, a categorization of the indicators can be separated according to the objective they aim at. We are talking here about structural indicators vs functional/process indicators. In the first category, we will include those indicators that evaluate the existence of institutional structures, teams, and interfaces aimed at dealing with the problems of students with disabilities/foreigners/immigrants, such as the existence of an office for students with disabilities, the existence of a structure responsible for monitoring the evolution of graduates, the degree of representation in the Teacher Councils/Senate/Administrative Council, etc. In the category of functional/process indicators, we can include mechanisms for monitoring, feedback, optimization, activities to promote educational services, collaborations with other institutions, recruitment centers, etc.

Without resuming here an inventory of all the indicators identified according to the criteria mentioned above, we only point out that any comprehensive assessment of the social dimension of higher education must take into account a set of multi-criteria indicators. The present study also provides a last criterion (but not last in importance), that of the specificity of Romanian higher education (European vs. national). In other words, even if an evaluation system for ensuring the social dimension must also include elements common to the European higher education system, it is important that the evaluation also incorporates indicators derived from the national context.

The last theme addressed was that of the barriers to ensuring the social dimension and the solutions to overcome them. The mentioned barriers were both individual, such as the mentality, and stereotypes of typical teachers or colleagues, and general, such as legislative gaps, university motivation, and cultural diversity. What stands out, however, is the fact that for each barrier, the participants in the study, whether they were experts or students, also proposed constructive solutions to overcome them,

solutions that in the last instance can become good indicators of a (desirable) assurance of the social dimension in higher education.

Of course, our study is not without limitations. Among them, we mention, on the one hand, the limited heterogeneity of the study participants, in terms of geographical areas of origin, in the case of foreign/immigrant students, terms of the type of disability, for students with disabilities, in terms of the specializations that both categories study. Also, the number of participants is relatively small, which may have limited the wealth of problems, solutions, and indicators highlighted in this study. Last but not least, it is possible that the interaction with the researcher or just the awareness that they are participating in a study may have generated some reserve in voicing any needs or problems.

Taking into account all the above, we still consider that the results of this study offer a wide base of options or at least starting points for building a way of evaluating the social dimension of Romanian higher education that has not only an evaluative value but also a constructive and formative.

Recommendations

By combining the information obtained from the analysis of literature dedicated to ensuring the social dimension of higher education with that identified in the aforementioned focus groups, and also by analyzing both the core common issues and the specific problems highlighted by experts and students, we propose a set of indicators from which a more accurate evaluation can be initiated.

Although these indicators can be structured according to a multitude of criteria, as seen in our previous analyses, we have chosen to retain only the criterion of the educational process stage (Outreach, Admission, Participation/Retention, and Graduation/Post-graduation), and the type of agents upon whom the measures are directly implemented: students or academic staff.

Thus, in tables 7 and 8, we present our recommendations regarding the indicators for ensuring the social dimension in higher education, separately for students with disabilities and foreign/immigrant students.

Table 7. Recommended Indicators for Ensuring the Social Dimension for Students with Disabilities (Integration of Literature Analysis Results with Focus Group Findings)

	Stage			
Indicators	**Outreach**	**Admission**	**Participation/Retenţion**	**Graduation/Post-graduation**
Targeting students	-The existence of a strategy to open the university to special high schools (summer schools, workshops, collaboration protocols). -Specific promotion activities for the admission of students with disabilities (e.g., online/social media campaigns, open house events, summer schools, workshops). -The presence of a designated structure or team responsible for promotional activities. -Collaborations with special schools, NGOs, youth organizations (e.g., collaboration protocols). -Career guidance and vocational counseling services.	Special accommodations for students with disabilities. Accessibility in university buildings where admission exams or competition file processing take place. The availability of assistance/support services during the admission exam (e.g., extra time, separate space if necessary, writing assistance, etc.).	-Availability of adapted learning materials (e.g., bibliographic materials, course materials in Braille, audio formats, etc.). -University partnerships with organizations/foundations/companies providing specific services for students with disabilities in their interaction with the university (e.g., sign language translation for deaf students, tactile resource adaptation for the visually impaired, assistance for those who cannot move, etc.). -Utilization of inclusive teaching/learning methods. -Availability of part-time study options/flexible courses. -Implementation of adapted examination methods (extra time, a special room, oral exams, special seating in the exam hall, etc.).	-Availability of additional educational services to facilitate the professional integration of graduates with disabilities (e.g., postgraduate courses, master's programs). -Collaboration protocols with potential employers or employment facilitators (e.g., companies, business organizations, chambers of commerce/similar institutions). -Monitoring the graduation rate of students with disabilities. -Collection and utilization of data regarding the post-graduation progression of graduates with disabilities. -Post-graduation counseling related to job market integration.

			-Ensuring infrastructure that allows accessibility in university buildings, classrooms, seminars, and laboratories. -Provision of material/financial support. -Training of typical students to interact with people with disabilities/anti-discrimination training.	
Targeting academic staff	-Programs to raise awareness/sensitivity to the specific issues of candidates with disabilities. -Collection of data to allow identification of underrepresentation and potential cases of students with disabilities.	-Access to specific infrastructure (e.g., access to technology for admission methods adjusted to the needs of candidates with disabilities). -Non-discrimination assurance protocols.	-Training programs for teaching staff to develop and use inclusive teaching methods and materials. -Existence of codes of conduct/non-discriminatory policies. -Anti-bias training programs, positive discrimination. -Availability of initial and/or ongoing teacher training programs to develop competencies in equity, inclusion, and diversity. -Orientation/counseling/mentoring activities. -Material/financial support	

			(accommodation support, scholarships, etc.).	

Table 8. Recommended Indicators for Ensuring the Social Dimension for Foreign/Immigrant Students (Integration of Literature Analysis Results with Focus Group Findings)

	Stage			
Indicators	**Outreach**	**Admission**	**Participation/Retenţion**	**Graduation/Post-graduation**
Targeting students	-Multilingual promotion of admission among potential foreign/immigrant students (e.g., fairs, workshops, webinars). -Presence on international platforms for university promotion. -Promotion on social media (social networks), recruitment agencies.	-Simplified admission procedures/digitalization of admissions. -Existence of non-discrimination assurance procedures. -Linguistic support services. -Provision of financial support. -Procedures for recognition of prior learning/alternative pathways. -On-campus childcare services for immigrant students with family responsibilities. -Existence of a communication interface regarding the rights and obligations of applicants.	-Existence of orientation/counseling/mentoring programs. -Language courses. -Use of inclusive teaching-learning methods and materials. -Providing part-time study options/flexible courses. -Offering remedial courses/bridge courses. -Positive actions/positive discrimination. -Provision of financial/material support (e.g., scholarships, accommodation facilities). -On-campus childcare services for immigrant students with family responsibilities. -Procedures/protocols for	-Procedures through which non-formal and/or informal prior learning counts towards the completion of the higher education program. -Additional educational services to facilitate the professional integration of immigrant graduates (e.g., postgraduate courses, master's programs).

			monitoring the progress of students. -Guidance services through the bureaucratic system.	
Targeting academic staff	-Existence of awareness/sensitivity-raising programs regarding specific issues faced by candidates from immigrant backgrounds. -Collection and utilization of data regarding the dimensions of the immigrant community, socio-demographic and educational profiles, potential for absorption into the higher education system. -Collection of data to allow identification of underrepresentation and potential cases of immigrant students with family responsibilities.	-Access to specific infrastructure (e.g., access to technology for admission methods adjusted to the needs of candidates from immigrant backgrounds).	-Training programs for teaching staff to use inclusive teaching methods and materials. -Existence of codes of conduct/non-discriminatory policies. -Language courses. -Training programs focusing on intercultural communication. -Availability of initial and/or ongoing teacher training programs to develop competencies in equity, inclusion, and diversity.	-Procedures for monitoring the graduation rate of immigrant students. -Collection and utilization of data regarding the post-graduation progression of graduates from the immigrant community. -Procedures for monitoring career progress.

Taking into consideration all the aspects mentioned above, we believe that the results of this study provide a broad range of options or at least starting points for building a method of evaluating the social dimension of higher education that not only has an evaluative value but also a constructive-formative one.

References

- Advisory Group 1 on Social Dimension. Final report. EHEA, Rome, 2020
- Annex II to the Rome Ministerial Communiqué: Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA (2020)
- Claeys-Kulik, A. L., Jorgensen, T. E., Stober, H. (2019). Equity and Inclusion in European Higher Education Institutions. Results from the INVITED project. EUA
- Declaration on Promoting citizenship and the common values of freedom, tolerance, and non-discrimination through education (2015). Informal meeting of European Union education ministers. Paris, 17 March
- European Commision. Action plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027. COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS. Brussels, 24.11.2020
- European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019. *Integrating Asylum Seekers and Refugees into Higher Education in Europe: National Policies and Measures.* Eurydice Report. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.
- European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2022. Towards equity and inclusion in higher education in Europe. Eurydice report. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.
- Evans, C., & Zhu, X. (2022). The Disability Inclusion Institutional Framework. University of Lincoln, UK, University of Southampton, UK
- Kaiser, F., Veidemane, A., Crăciun, D., Ninoslav Šćukanec Schmidt, Mihut, G., Oniță, H., Calsamiglia, C., Stoychev, G. (2022). Guidelines for developing social inclusion indicators at higher education institutions: how to develop relevant and internationally comparable indicators? U-Multirank.
- Paris Communique (2018). EHEA Conference ministerielle europeene pour l'enseignement superieur, Paris, 24-25 May
- Ring, F., McKernan, C. (2008). Good Practice Guidelines, for the Providers of Social Supports and Services for Students with Disabilities in Higher Education. AHEAD, East Hall, UCD, Carysfort Avenue, Blackrock, Co. Dublin

- Vasilopoulos, A., Ioannidi, A. (2020). European Policies for the Inclusion of Refugees in Higher Education: The Case of Greece. *Open Journal for Anthropological Studies*, *4*(2), 61-74
- Yerevan Communique (2015). EHEA Ministerial Conference, Yerevan 14-15 May

START - Social Inclusion, Tolerance, Acceptance and Realization for all Students

PROJECT ID 101061768