

It is the Romanian higher education ready for the inclusion of students with disabilities?

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Abstract

This study aims to answer the question: *It is the Romanian higher education ready for the inclusion of students with disabilities?* In this context, we intend to approach different issues, educational and social, by radiography issues such as: *the rate of inclusion of people with disabilities in higher education in Romania, if universities develop strategies for including students with disabilities, national strategy that Romania has developed to include young people with disabilities in higher education.*

This subject is topical, considering that the Europe 2020 strategy, the European Council established five major EU objectives for education aiming at increasing to over 40% for the higher education graduates in the population aged between 30 and 34 years. The situation in the year 2013 shows that the number of people with disabilities in Romania was 709.216, of which 14% is people aged between 8 and 35 years.

A comparative study of *Eurostudent* highlights the percentages of students with physical disabilities and chronic illnesses of all students in different countries, in 2008, and ranks Romania 17th place of 22, the young people with disabilities in higher education. Also, in recent academic years, the percentage of students with disabilities did not exceed 0.07% of the total number of students, according to data collected in the university ranking.¹

Keywords: *people with disabilities, higher education, accessibility, adaptation, inclusion*

The current situation in Europe

Education is one of five pillars which are central to the Europe 2020 growth strategy. Two indicators presented within this article at a regional level are benchmarks used to monitor the EU's progress towards becoming a smart, sustainable and inclusive economy. These benchmarks have been set at an EU level and they foresee that:

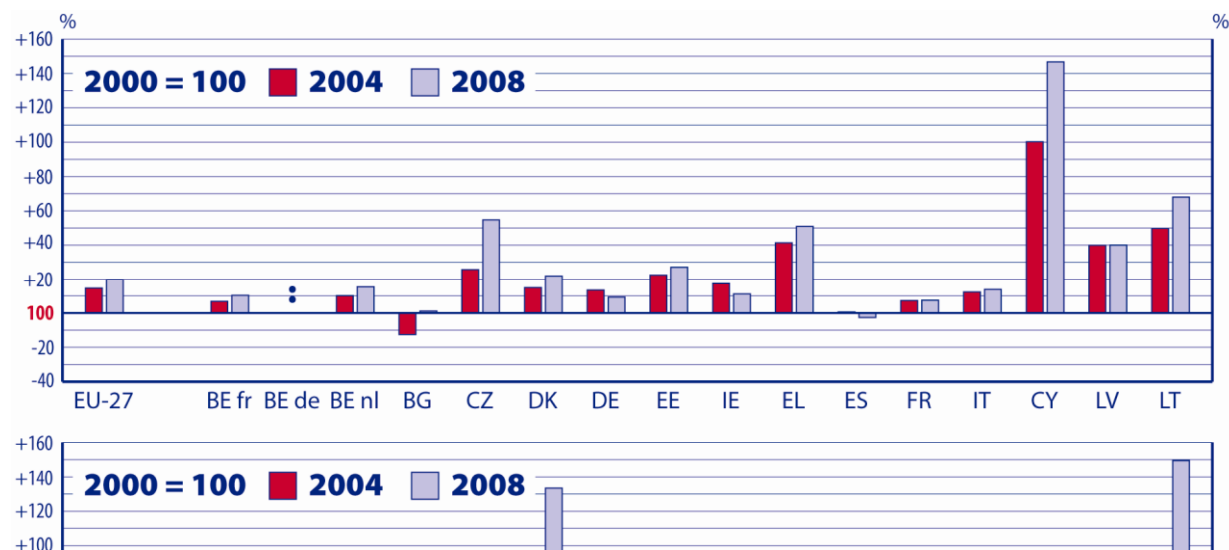
- The share of early leavers from education and training should be under 10 % by 2020; and
- That at least 40 % of 30–34 year-olds should have completed a tertiary or equivalent education by 2020.

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¹ *Politici publice in invatamantul superior, (2014).The social dimension of higher education in Romania. Accesat la adresa <http://www.invatamant-superior.ro/?p=2122>, in May 2014*

Note that while both of these objectives have been set across the whole of the EU, they do not specifically apply at a national or a regional level. Indeed, each Europe 2020 benchmark has been translated into national (and sometimes regional) targets, which reflect the different situations and circumstances of each Member State.⁴⁷

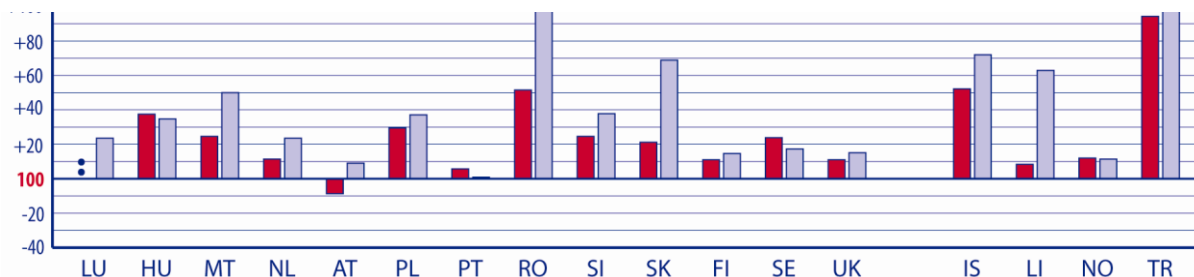
One of the most significant trends in European higher education in the past decade has been the noticeable expansion of the sector. Figure 1 presents Eurostat data on student numbers for the period 2000-2008. It shows that, compared to 2000, EU-27 student numbers have increased by 20 percent. However, variations between countries are extremely significant. The Czech Republic (55 %), Greece (51 %), Cyprus (147 %), Lithuania (68 %), Hungary (35 %), Malta (50 %), Poland (37 %), Romania (133 %), Slovenia (38 %) and Slovakia (69 %) within the EU, as well as Iceland (72 %) and Turkey (149 %) outside it, have all experienced extremely rapid expansion in student numbers. In comparison, the growth in student numbers in Belgium, Germany, Ireland, France, Italy and Austria is relatively low at around 10 per cent. Portugal showed static development and Spain is the only country where student numbers have decreased by 2.6 per cent.⁴⁸

Figure 1: Trends in the number of students in tertiary education compared to 2000, 2000-2008



⁴⁷ Eurostat, (2014). *Education Statistics at region level*. Accesat la adresa: http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php/Education_statistics_at_regional_level#Students_in_tertiary_education, in May 2014

⁴⁸ EACEA P9 Eurydice (2011). *Modernisation of Higher Education in Europe: Funding and Social Dimension*. Accesat la adresa: <http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice>, in May 2014



Source: Eurostat, 2014⁴⁹

In 19 regions in the EU less than one in five of the population aged 30–34 possessed a tertiary level of education. Many of the regions where tertiary educational attainment among those aged 30–34 was relatively low were characterized as being areas where primary activities or heavy industries (for example, agriculture, mining, or iron and steel) have traditionally played an important role in the economic fabric of a region. There were 19 NUTS 2 regions across the EU where less than one in five persons aged 30–34 had attained a tertiary level of education in 2012. Six of these were located in Romania, five in (southern) Italy, two each in Bulgaria and Greece and a single region each from the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Austria. They were mainly categorized as being economically underdeveloped, insofar as 15 of them had an average level of GDP per inhabitant that was less than 75 % of the EU-28 average in 2011; each of the remaining four regions had a ratio of GDP per inhabitant that was also below the EU-28 average.

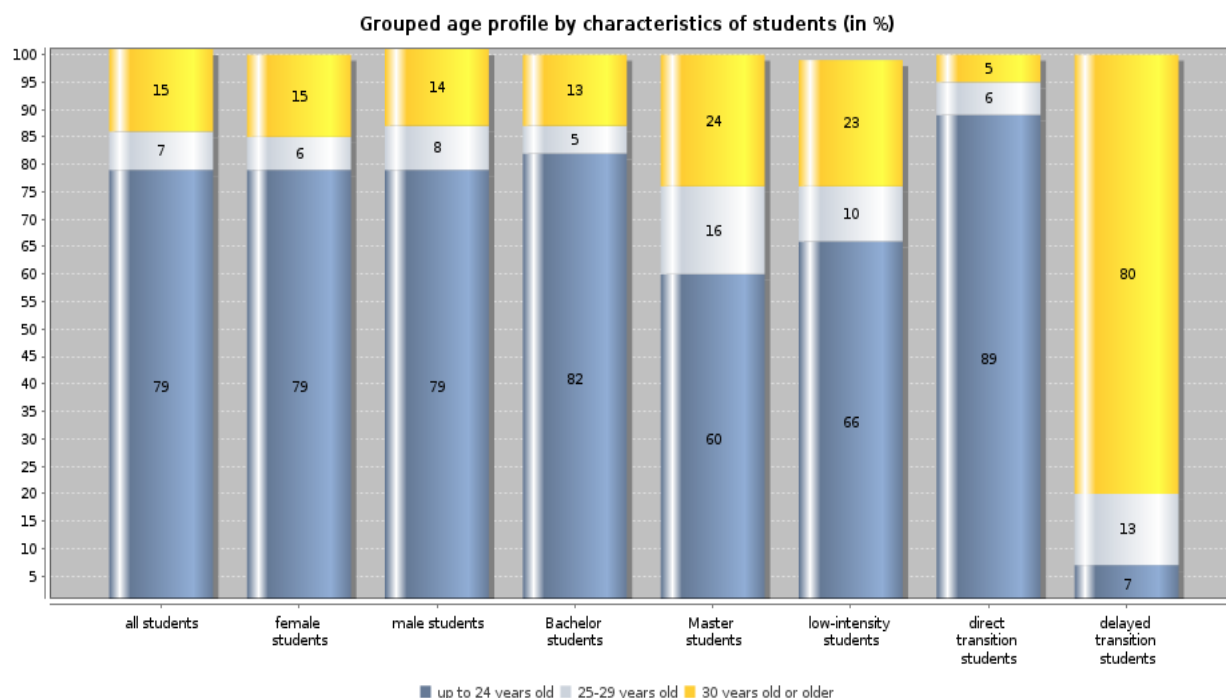
In 2012, just over one third (35.7 %) of 30–34 year-olds in the EU-28 had completed a tertiary level of education. These latest figures support the premise that a rising proportion of the EU's population is studying to a higher level — in keeping with the Europe 2020 target — as a decade before (in 2002) the corresponding share was 12.2 percentage points lower, at 23.5 %.

In 2012 (the 2011/12 academic year), the number of students enrolled in tertiary education in the EU-28 stood at 20.0 million.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Eurostat, (2014). *Education Statistics at region level*. Accesat la adresa: http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php/Education_statistics_at_regional_level#Students_in_tertiary_education, in May 2014

⁵⁰ Eurostat, (2014). *Education Statistics at region level*. Accesat la adresa: http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php/Education_statistics_at_regional_level#Students_in_tertiary_education, in May 2014

Figure 2: Trends in participation rates in tertiary education



Source: Eurostat, 2014⁵¹

In the United Kingdom, higher education institutions are under a statutory duty to make "reasonable adjustments" for the specific requirements of disabled students. There is also an anticipatory duty to provide reasonable adjustments for students, and thus plans must be made ahead to address potential barriers impeding disabled students.

However, Estonia expressed a concern that the needs of students with disabilities are often not well understood, reporting that teachers and students generally have a low awareness of needs of people with disabilities, and as a result appropriate measures may not be taken.

Denmark and the United Kingdom (England, Wales and Northern Ireland) apply an interesting concept whereby students with physical and psychological disabilities can access significant support through the student support system, but only if they take the initiative to identify their individual obstacles and outline their needs. In the case of Denmark, rather than taking general measures for a category of students with disabilities, the student support system aims to be responsive to specific requests for targeted, individual support. The aim is to ensure that all students have equal opportunities to progress and complete their studies on equal terms. In the United Kingdom, meanwhile, in addition to the duty upon institutions to make reasonable adjustments for disabled students, specific financial support is provided in the form of a disabled students allowance.

⁵¹ Eurostudent, (2014). *Demographic Characteristics – country Romania*. Accesat la adresa: https://eurostudent.his.de/eiv/report/data_overview.jsp?ssid=51BF3A96BDE771D2B7A19DBEED0EC599&sel_lang=&cnt_oid=16 in May 2014

Targeted guidance and counseling was also mentioned by a few countries. Many Austrian and German universities have a Disabled Students Officer who gives advice to students with disabilities, supports them in case of discrimination and informs them about additional financial measures. Similarly in Slovenia, the majority of higher education institutions employ a member of staff dedicated to working with students with special needs. In addition, tutoring by both students and teachers aims at strengthening the students' potential. Furthermore, targeted measures are also in place in Greece, where students with health problems are entitled to be transferred to the nearest university to their residence. In the United Kingdom (England, Wales and Northern Ireland), the institutional funding mechanism includes a widening access premium which assists universities in improving provision for students with learning difficulties and disabilities.⁵²

The current situation in Romania

The percentage of young people with disabilities, of all young people between the ages of 20 and 29 years old from Romania, was, in 2002, 2,06%.

In a comparative study of Eurostudent, the percentages of students with highlights physical disabilities and chronic illnesses in different States, at the level of 2008, Romania's ranks is 17th from 22, a disabled youth participation in higher education. At the same time, in recent years, the percentage of University students with disabilities did not exceed 0,07% of the total number of students, according to data collected in the process of classification of universities.⁵³

According to The Programme of National Reform in 2014, Ministry of Education (MEN) decided to continue the reforms in the field of education and training, in order to ensure the educational and labour market adapted centered on personal and social development, with positive impact on preventing and combating early school leaving. MEN will continue to ensure that the system of opening education and training to all young people and ensuring equal access to education, in particular for specific risk groups. MEN will continue the implementation of social programmes for students (scholarships, grants for accommodation and meals, partial reimbursement of transportation) to assist students from rural areas, disadvantaged groups and non-traditional students in order to increase the rate of participation in tertiary education. In addition, MEN will promote a supplements of 200 euros on the stock exchange of those students received ERASMUS who come from rural areas or disadvantaged groups and will continue the allocation of special places for Roma students in State universities.⁵⁴

⁵² EACEA P9 Eurydice (2011). *Modernisation of Higher Education in Europe: Funding and Social Dimension*. Accesat la adresa: <http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice>, in May 2014

⁵³ *Politici publice in invatamantul superior*, (2014). *The social dimension of higher education in Romania*. Accesat la adresa <http://www.invatamant-superior.ro/?p=2122>, in May 2014

⁵⁴ *Guvernul Romaniei*, (2014). *Programul National de Reforma in 2014*, accesat la adresa: <http://www.edu.ro/index.php/articles/21372>, in May 2014

The Central Electronic Register for persons with disabilities will provide a unified information system for the collection and reporting of data relating to persons with disabilities. Modernization of the evaluation system of persons with disabilities will lead to the development of new procedures, tools and harmonised criteria for medical evaluation after the model of approach to disabilities.

In addition, Romania has assumed within the framework of the Bologna process a series of goals that relate to increasing the participation of underrepresented groups in higher education and increase graduation rates and scroll in time of studies in higher education.⁵⁵

In Romania each university senate decides on the level of fees for all programmes. The senate also decides on exemptions based on need or merit. All students pay administrative, registration fees. The overall and maximum fee amounts per student are established by the National Council for Higher Education

Funding and are indicated in the institutional contract of every higher education institution. Fees range from RON 2 840.59 for 11.2 % of students to RON 5 007.54 for technical fields to a maximum of RON 21 304.34 for 0.10 % of students. The average amount is RON 7 481.⁵⁶

Students with disabilities, with the approval of the University Senate, benefits from the exemption of payment of tuition.

Analysis of the way in which students with disabilities are supported in the educational process in universities in Romania, is described in the final report of the project "Development and Integration of a Pilot Program for Increasing Access to Higher Education for Persons with Disabilities", which was co-financed by the European Social Fund through the sectoral operational programme for human resources development:

- Romania has not developed and implemented a national strategy concerning the social dimension of education, which include a comprehensive definition of underrepresented groups, clear objectives in connection with their inclusion indicators that relate to assessment of progress;
- Romania has not developed and implemented a national strategy concerning the social dimension of education, which include a comprehensive definition of underrepresented groups, clear objectives in connection with their inclusion indicators that relate to assessment of progress;
- There is no national system of data collection which will include relevant indicators on the characteristics of the student body, including from the perspective of the social dimension.
- Have not been implemented as incentives for universities to focus on the social dimension of education, including through the development of institutional strategies in this regard.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ *Politici publice in invatamantul superior, (2014). The social dimension of higher education in Romania. Accesat la adresa <http://www.invatamant-superior.ro/?p=2122>, in May 2014*

⁵⁶ *EACEA P9 Eurydice (2011). Modernisation of Higher Education in Europe: Funding and Social Dimension. Accesat la adresa: <http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice>, in May 2014*

Conclusion

People with disabilities do not have equal opportunities in education offered in universities in Romania and the Romanian educational system is not adapted to the needs of educating individuals with disabilities.

However, there are a number of individual initiatives at the level of the two universities in Romania: West University of Timisoara and the Babes-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca, the universities have set up structures to support students with disabilities. Thus, in The West University of Timisoara was founded the 2011 The Center of Psychopedagogical Assistance and Integration (CAIP), which aims to support students with disabilities lead: offering advice, rendering support, curricular accessibility, accessibility of physical environment, etc. Also, The West University of Timisoara, through Department of Education Sciences, was involved in the period 2011-2014 in international project ALLinHE (All in Higher Education) project, with the participation of 10 other countries in Europe and Asia. The project aimed to capture the status quo and existing policies at the macro - meso and micro levels, concerning the inclusion in higher education of disadvantaged groups, including people with disabilities and a description of the ways in which it can achieve validation of previous competences acquired by them.⁵⁸

At present, The West University of Timisoara (partner), through Department of Education Sciences and "Lucian Blaga" University of Sibiu (applicant), is involved in European funded project "*E-Inclusion: developing and implementing a programme of assistance based on TIC technologies for increasing access to higher education for persons with disabilities*"

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⁵⁷ Proiect EUPD, (2014). *The Final raport*. Accesat la adresa <http://eupd.ro/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/Raport-final.pdf>, in May 2014

⁵⁸ Proiect All in Higher Education, (2014). Accesat la adresa: <http://www.allinhe.eu/>, in May 2014