



DEVELOPING GOOD PRACTICES TO FOSTER INCLUSIVITY FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION SETTINGS. AN INSTITUTIONAL APPROACH

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Abstract

Adopting a multi-level governance-based approach, this article aims to provide a framework to foster inclusivity in higher education for students with disabilities. For this purpose, the analysis examines the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development with a focus on the policy recommendations for persons with disabilities, identifying areas centered on facilitating access to education. At the regional level, the research focuses on the European Union standards on accessibility as formulated in the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030. At the national level, the analysis provides an assessment of the existent legal framework adopted in Romania, to determine how national standards can be developed relative to the global and EU policy frameworks. Finally, at the university level, the research outlines a set of guidelines for higher education that can be institutionalized to identify the systemic issues affecting students with disabilities and provide the necessary tools in order to develop an inclusive educational environment based in the principles of equity and representation.

Keywords: accessibility, global governance of disability, higher education, inclusivity, students with disability, EU Strategy for the rights of persons with disabilities 2021-2030, United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

1. Introduction

The issue of disability in education can be depicted as the road from exclusion and segregation to integration and, beyond that, to inclusion. Where exclusion seeks to bar people with disabilities from accessing regular educational avenues inhabited by the abled-bodied and neurotypicals, segregation enables systems of separation, removing those with disabilities from their peers on account of their condition – a practice that for too long has been the golden standard in the education system. Integration allows for people with disabilities to be brought into the general educational setting, but still maintains a degree of separation, reflected, for example, in separate classrooms or ingrained prejudices towards people with disabilities. Inclusion goes a step further and refers to the creation of access and opportunities in an equitable way for all beneficiaries of the educational act. Inclusive education is therefore more than a pedagogical approach, it is a human right. In the three decades that have passed since UNESCO adopted the Salamanca Statement in 1994, which codified the principle of inclusion in education, students with disabilities at every level of the educational system still encounter systemic barriers in their development that hinder them from accessing inclusive educational support.

The present research provides an overview of the existing governance frameworks to address the need for strategies aimed at fostering inclusion for students with disabilities in higher education settings in light of existing institutional challenges. In adopting a multi-level approach, the article seeks to present how a regulatory framework can be developed from a global to a local setting to address an implementation gap that exists at the institutional level. The emphasis is put on the aspects concerning the implementation frameworks because, in the tripartite logic of respecting, protecting, and fulfilling rights (Quirico, 2022), this is the prevalent issue faced by the

universities and students in their capacity as providers and beneficiaries of education services, respectively. More specifically, the problem identified concerns the transposition of a governance-based prescription into a regulatory mechanism that creates effective tools to remove barriers that would otherwise prevent the students' inclusion and development. To address this issue, institutions should make available avenues that individuals can access depending on their educational needs and goals.

The study is structured around four levels of analysis. At the global level, the research examines the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, focusing on policy recommendations that directly address the ways to increase access to education for persons with disabilities. At the European Union (EU) level, emphasis is put on EU standards on accessibility advanced in policy documents such as the European Disability Strategy 2010-2020 and the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030. The national level assesses Romania's capacity-building potential on this issue, seeking to identify national standards derived from the existing legal framework. Lastly, the study aims to formulate a set of guidelines to be implemented at the university level to determine the structural issues impacting students with disabilities and provide tools conducive to the establishment of an inclusive educational environment.

2. Literature Review

Though democratic polities are based on the respect of human rights and contain provisions on non-discrimination, for people with disabilities, the application can often be subpar because disabilities, by their very nature, can only be treated at a subsidiary level. Thirty years ago, Tony Booth and Mel Ainscow published *From Them to Us* (1995), a comparative study on inclusion and exclusion dynamics in educational practices, showcasing the differences compounding inclusivity practices "between and within schools, between parents and professionals, between disabled people and the creators of legislation about disability, amongst disabled people themselves, within and between a variety of cultural groups and amongst academics and researchers) (Booth & Ainscow, 2005, p. 4).

The access of persons with disabilities to higher education has been the focus of multiple studies (Dolmage, 2017; Fernández-Batanero, Montenegro-Rueda, & Fernández-Cerero, 2022; Sachs & Schreuer, 2021) though, arguably, there is a lag compared to the literature on early childhood, primary education, and secondary education. A systematic review conducted by Jyotesna Maurya et al. published in *Higher Education Quarterly* in 2025 analyzed 227 research articles on disability in higher education. According to the authors, the review was based on two research determinants: promotion of "inclusive and equitable quality education and reduced inequalities in sustainable development goals" and a focus on the role of universities "in promoting social change, justice and mobility for marginalised groups" (Maurya et al., 2025).

From an institutional perspective, research focuses on the role of higher education in developing inclusive practices to address the needs of persons with disability (Zhou, 2023; Hoffman, Blessinger, & Makhanya, ed., 2019), providing universities and campuses with toolkits to advance integration (Burgstahler, 2020; Kim & Aquino, ed., 2017), emphasizing teacher education for inclusion (Robinson, 2025), or fostering innovation and technological solutions (Lyner-Cleophas, 2019). Where students are concerned, a major focus is put on examining inclusive learning opportunities (Meeks & Jain, eds., 2016, see also: Ajani & Rathilal, 2025), while at a fundamental level, studies underline the need to acknowledge the very existence of disability (Evans et al., 2017; Kerschbaum, Eisenman, & Jones, 2017) and the issue of access to higher education by persons with disabilities (Lid et al., 2024).

Students with disabilities represent a distinct and critical subset given that the denial of rights or their suboptimal implementation will have a long-term negative impact on their development and autonomy (Carmel, Chapman & Wright, 2025; Bailie et al, 2023; Saran et al., 2023). In this regard, studies found that institutional actors can develop an inclusive framework rooted in universal design, which as Sheryl Burgstahler explains, could be operationalized in actions such as "a statement on a syllabus that invites students to meet with the instructor to discuss learning needs; multiple delivery methods that motivate and engage all learners; flexible curriculum that is accessible to all learners; examples that appeal to students with a variety of characteristics [...]; regular, accessible, and effective interactions between students and the instructor; allowing students to turn in parts of a large project for feedback before the final project is due; class outlines and notes that are on an accessible Web site; assessing student learning using multiple methods; faculty awareness of process and resources for disability-related accommodations" (Burgstahler, 2010, p. 16). In order to ensure the resilience and sustainability of the identified policy approach, the decision-makers can center the individual so that the policies developed are implemented relative to their needs. In this case, the students are directly involved in the decision-making process in their capacity of stakeholders, not only as beneficiaries (Griffen & Tevis, 2017).

3. Research Approach

The analysis of global, regional, and national prescriptions aids the institutional decision-maker to develop a set of guidelines to foster inclusivity since these governance frameworks provide a synthesis of expert knowledge, multi-level policymaking, and disability groups participation. Disabilities exist on a spectrum and at the intersection of multiple systemic deficiencies. By acknowledging this state of affairs, professionals need to incorporate a logic of inclusion. This logic accounts for the diverse conditions in which disabled people exist since, as Colin Goble argues, they are “routinely disadvantaged by inadequate and inaccessible education, information and communication systems” (Goble, 2004, p. 51).

Adopting a multi-level governance approach highlights the complexity of the issue under review and the need for a comprehensive approach to account for a diverse range of disabilities. Ensuring that students with disabilities can access educational facilities and services is imperative when considering three areas of action: class attendance, completion of studies, and employment opportunities. Awareness of the existent challenges coupled with an institutional disposition to mitigate them should support the establishment of an inclusivity-based approach.

In the development of a comprehensive framework, a series of potential issues need to be identified that would otherwise lead to a suboptimal implementation. Tone Ristad et al. point out that the most prevalent issues stem from the fact that the providers of higher education do not have the *skills* and *resources* required to meet these requirements (Ristad et al., 2024, p. 8). In this sense, at the individual level of the stakeholders – personnel and students with disabilities – the shortcomings stem from lacunae in the foundational knowledge, with Tone Ristad et al. observing that the stakeholders are not aware of the provisions in the legislation and related regulations (Ristad et al., 2024, p. 4). Additionally, in the case of the providers, another significant issue is that they have gaps in the application of pedagogical skills involving “diverse teaching techniques”, “early intervention”, or “the use of assistive equipment” (Ristad et al., 2024, p. 4).

Another aspect concerns the lack of involvement of people with disabilities in the creation and improvement of measures designed to address the needs of these students. A qualitative study of higher education institutions, conducted at the national level in Australia found that “universities are often not inclusive or safe places” due to the existence of “entrenched attitudinal and cultural prejudice”, noting that both students and personnel were reticent to reveal their disabilities for fear that they would be ostracized or ridiculed (Harpur, Stafford, and Ellis, 2025, p. 373). The study noted that the participants were supportive of a “paradigm shift” with the measure of co-creation / co-participation playing a center role in their view when developing strategies, plans, actions that targeted persons with disabilities ridiculed (Harpur, Stafford, and Ellis, 2025, p. 376).

The present analysis shows that by addressing the likely institutional issues that can arise in the implementation stage, the policymaker can better ensure that the framework developed meets the normative requirements stated in the programmatic documents adopted at various levels of the governance regimes. This is significant because as is the case of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the document contains obligations that state actors, more broadly, and institutions as is the case of universities, in particular, should abide by where people with disabilities are concerned (Harpur, Stafford, and Ellis, 2025, p. 370, Lansdown and Vaghri, 2022, Waddington and Lawson, 2018).

4. Global Governance-Based Frameworks Centered on Disability and Inclusivity

4.1. *The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)*

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) was adopted by the General Assembly in December 2006 and signed on March 30th, 2007. As of 2025, the Convention has been signed by 164 states and ratified by 20 states, including Romania. The EU has also ratified the CRPD. Central to our analysis is Article 24 focusing on education. The article establishes that: “States Parties recognize the right of persons with disabilities to education. Endeavoring to realize this right without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity, States Parties shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and life long learning” (UN, 2007, p. 14).

The article further describes how states should act in order to respect the right, such as provide “reasonable accommodation”; provide “the support required [...] to facilitate [...] effective education”; provide “effective individualized support measures [...] in environments that maximize academic and social development, consistent with the goal of full inclusion” (UN, 2007, p. 15). In terms of inclusivity, Article 24 further affirms that “States Parties shall enable persons with disabilities to learn life and social development skills to facilitate their full and

equal participation in education and as members of the community” (UN, 2007, p. 15). Another significant point relates to the fact that persons with disabilities should be “able to access general tertiary education, vocational training, adult education and lifelong learning without discrimination and on an equal basis with others”, and that, accordingly, states should provide “reasonable accommodation” (UN, 2007, p. 15).

For our research objective, of the measures identified to address this issue, the CRPD refers the states to provide qualified support such as creating opportunities for “teachers, including teachers with disabilities, who are qualified in sign language and/or Braille”, and provide training for “professionals and staff who work at all levels of education” (UN, 2007, p. 15). The CRPD specifies that “training shall incorporate disability awareness and the use of appropriate augmentative and alternative modes, means and formats of communication, educational techniques and materials to support persons with disabilities” (UN, 2007, p. 15).

At the UN level, access to education is framed in terms of access to opportunities. In this global framework, states have to facilitate the education of persons with disabilities in an integrated way, reflected in the development of education programs (Della Fina, 2017, p. 447). As we have seen, the CRPD codifies the states’ duty to ensure persons with disability have access to tertiary education and to other educational environments (vocational, adult education, lifelong learning). According to Valentina Della Fina, UN regulations – such as the UN Standard Rules – highlight the importance of tertiary education with regard to persons with disabilities, “as a means to ensure their inclusion in society and in the workplace” (Della Fina, 2017, p. 458).

On the CRPD and education, Gauthier de Beco remarks that while the right to inclusive education has been codified in a UN document, in practice, Article 24 is “far from being implemented” (de Beco, 2019, p. 58). Institutional actors should implement the provisions of Article 24 as they relate to higher education and work towards ending exclusion and discrimination since tertiary education is the setting that equips persons with disabilities with the necessary skills to access employment opportunities and create a pathway for lifelong development.

4.2. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Provisions on Education and Disability

In the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted in 2015, “persons with disabilities” or “disability” are directly mentioned eleven times. If the CRPD outlines a comprehensive framework of rights to be implemented by the states, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a multilevel roadmap towards building a more inclusive and sustainable world. According to Janet E. Lord, “the SDGs contain seven targets that address with specificity persons with disabilities in terms of education, accessible schools, employment, accessible public spaces and transport, empowerment and inclusion, and data disaggregation” (Lord, 2019, p. 318). It is important to note that the implementation of the SDGs is universal in nature and, consequently, they apply in the case of persons with disabilities as well. At the same time, we also have to consider that the SDGs are built around the principles of non-discrimination and of combating all forms of discrimination which hinder the well-being of persons with disabilities (Lord, 2019, p. 318).

For the present research, of the SDGs that reference disability, the analysis identifies three that focus on education or whose implementation depends on inclusive education: SDG 4 – Quality in Education: “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”; SDG 8 – Decent work and economic growth: “Promoting inclusive economic growth, full and productive employment allowing persons with disabilities to fully access the job market”; and SDG 10 – Reduced inequalities: “Emphasizing the social, economic and political inclusion of persons with disabilities” (UN, 2015). For the present analysis, we will focus on SDG 4. Gauthier de Beco notes that SDG 4 “refers explicitly to disabled people among its targets” (de Beco, 2019, pp. 58-59). Specifically, Target 4.5 envisions to “eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations” (de Beco, 2019, p. 59).

The 2024 SDG Report stated for SDG 4 that “prioritizing increased education funding, teacher training, and inclusive and accessible schools are essential steps, along with leveraging technology and bridging the digital divide to achieve equitable access to quality education” (UN, 2024). The following year, the 2025 SDG Report noted that in the case of Target 4.5, the disparities “tend to widen at higher education levels” (UN, 2025). While the emphasis was on socioeconomic disparities, without referring directly to “disability”, we can infer that the issue is further compounded for persons with disabilities. After all, the impact of poverty is directly specified in the CRPD, which, in the preamble, acknowledges “the critical need to address the negative impact of poverty on persons with disabilities” (UN, 2007, p. 3)

In specifying that quality education has to be inclusive and equitable, SDG 4 provides an outline for how the educational process should be designed to meet the needs of students with disabilities at all levels of education. Though the focus predominantly falls on primary and secondary education, where the state is more bound by

public responsibilities compared to tertiary education, SDG 4 cannot be accomplished without higher education. A UNESCO report issued in 2024, “Transforming Education Towards SDG 4”, detailing country commitments by sub-themes, indicates that of 143 countries, 50% made commitments in the area of inclusion, equity and gender equality that focuses on disability and special needs, while 20% have pledged to insure higher education access and inclusion (UNESCO, 2024, p. 10). In terms of country actions, the percentages improve because “countries’ actions often extend beyond their stated commitments” (UNESCO, 2024, p. 11). Consequently, of 91 countries that submitted reports, 87% undertook actions in the area of disability and special needs, while 74% undertook actions in higher education and inclusion (UNESCO, 2024, p. 11).

In the hope of meeting the 2030 deadline, the root causes of present gaps should be identified, and remedial actions should be taken to ensure that quality education is provided for all members of the community in compliance with international provisions. For this purpose, states should require institutional actors to disaggregate data by disability to reflect better the type of actions implemented in order to improve inclusion in higher education. Where available, good practices should be shared between the actors across various levels of policymaking, both interstate and intrastate, to scale up the results recorded so far.

5. The European Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030

The EU ratified the CRPD in December 2010, committing the Union and the Member States to respect and implement the provisions of the convention. In this sense, among various other frameworks, the EU developed the European Disability Strategy 2010-2020, which was followed by the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030, adopted in March 2021. The goal of the European Disability Strategy was centered on the removal of barriers around eight areas of action: 1) accessibility, 2) participation, 3) equality, 4) employment, 5) education and training, 6) social protection, 7) health, and 8) external action. On education, the strategy noted that it was the area that impacted the wellbeing of people with disabilities the most since “lower participation in general education and in the labour market lead to income inequalities and poverty for people with disabilities, as well as to social exclusion and isolation” (European Commission, 2010, p. 8). Depending on the severity of the disability, the degree of non-participation, the difficulties encountered, and the existence of segregation in certain cases, the document advocated for appropriate integration and individual support for persons with disability in the general education system (European Commission, 2010, p. 7).

The Commission states that it “will support the goal of inclusive, quality education and training” by providing certain avenues of action such as: “increase knowledge on levels of education and opportunities for people with disabilities, and increase their mobility by facilitating participation in the Lifelong Learning Programme” (European Commission, 2010, p. 8). Through the various institutional frameworks available, the Commission also identified a set of actions that Member States could pursue in their efforts to lift barriers preventing persons with disabilities from accessing general education and lifelong learning systems. Assistance would be lent in order for states to: “provide timely support for inclusive education and personalised learning, and early identification of special needs; provide adequate training and support for professionals working at all levels of education and report on participation rates and outcomes” (European Commission, 2010, p. 8).

In terms of outcomes, Charles O’Mahony and Shivaun Quinlivan point to several initiatives that resulted from the European Disability Strategy, namely the European Accessibility Act (2019), a Directive on Web Accessibility, and, as concerns our analysis, the Erasmus+ Programme (O’Mahony & Quinlivan, 2020, p. 26). However, the absence of a quantifiable progress report highlighted the strategy’s shortcomings relative to the EU’s commitment towards the implementation of the CRPD. O’Mahony and Quinlivan cite the recommendations issued by the European Disability Forum, which stated that the EU lacked a comprehensive strategy to implement the CRPD, that the European Disability Strategy was limited in scope, and that the funding was insufficient to adequately meet the provisions stated in the strategy (O’Mahony & Quinlivan, 2020, p. 26). A review document issued by the Commission found that the Education and Training area recorded lower levels of implementation, observing that the Strategy’s “impact in this area is not clearly measurable” (European Commission, 2020, p. 29). Actions that achieved results included: “programmes for the inclusion of children with disabilities into education, trainings for teachers, educators and staff who work with children with disabilities, as well as in raising awareness and promoting good practices” (European Commission, 2020, p. 29). As regards higher education, the document noted that educational gaps persisted and that the rates of early leavers among persons with disabilities averaged 20%. In contrast, the rates for persons without disabilities fell below 10% in the period analyzed (European Commission, 2020, p. 30).

Subsequently, the European Commission adopted the next ten-year strategy – the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030 – in March 2021. Acknowledging the challenges that people with disabilities face in the EU, the Commission envisions the creation of a Union of Equality that the Strategy will help manifest

in practice: “This Strategy aims to improve the lives of persons with disabilities in the coming decade, in the EU and beyond” (European Commission, 2021, p. 5). Across eight sections, emphasis is put on two main directions of actions: rights promotion (accessibility, respecting EU rights, fostering conditions to promote decent quality of life and living independently, supporting equal access and non-discrimination) and institutional capacity-building (promoting the rights of persons with disability globally, developing tools to deliver the strategy, becoming an institutional role-model; and strengthening awareness, building governance and measuring progress).

On education, the Commission notes that “the main competence remains with the Member States”, and that European institution act in a supporting capacity (European Commission, 2021, p. 5). A subsection dedicated to inclusive and accessible education is included in the “Equal access and non-discrimination” section. Arguably, education is the common thread connecting the various directions of action, without which the goals of inclusion and accessibility could not be implemented. This is because “education creates the foundations for combating poverty and for creating fully inclusive societies” (European Commission, 2021, p. 17). For higher education, the Strategy notes that “only 29.4% of persons with disabilities attain a tertiary degree compared to 43.8% of those persons without” (European Commission, 2021, p. 16). This outcome can be attributed to the persistence of segregated learning environments that are not conducive to integration into “the mainstream education system, continued training, or [...] the labour market” (European Commission, 2021, p. 18).

The Strategy identifies measures taken to prioritize inclusive education in the EU, such as establishing the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education; dedicating one of the six axes of the European Education Area to inclusive education; developing initiatives such as the Pathways to School Success or spearheading micro-credentials, which can provide access for persons with disabilities to lifelong learning processes and improve employability prospects (European Commission, 2021, p. 18). Additionally, Member States can access EU funding to promote inclusive education under Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps programmes. At the same time, for accessibility designs, they can apply for the Renovation Wave to refurbish educational facilities (European Commission, 2021, p. 18).

The document also outlines efforts to enhance multi-level cooperation, to examine policies, to promote good practices, and to support reform efforts in Member States that promote inclusive education. It cites additional instruments such as the Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the European Child Guarantee or the Action Plan on Educational Support and Inclusive Education. For the EU to facilitate the implementation of an inclusive education framework and create opportunities for synergy, the Strategy calls for actors to participate in the various programmes available at the European level: “the European Education Area, the European Skills Agenda, the Digital Education Action Plan and the European Research Area” (European Commission, 2021, p. 18).

Concerning the discussion on higher education, we can refer to the provisions aiming to develop the competences of “all education professionals to manage diversity” as well as to implement the Action Plan Educational Support and Inclusive Education. The Action Plan includes measures ranging from fostering “accessibility and reasonable accommodation” to adapting the curricula to the needs of learners with disabilities and awarding, for example, “alternative leaving certificates allowing for continuation of education at national level” (European Commission, 2021, p. 19). A final set of provisions asks Member States to comply with the CRPD and implement Article 24 across their educational systems (European Commission, 2021, p. 19).

The Strategy lays out an ambitious, comprehensive framework; however, as we noted, the Commission lacks the mandate to make these stipulations binding. In the European Higher Education Area, P. Solís-García et al. argue that “implementation is currently framed as desirable goals or indicators rather than enforced requirements, lacking a binding mandate” (Solís-García et al., 2024, p. 2). On the upside, since the EU adopted the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Member States have, in turn, adopted national strategies (Swedish Agency for Participation, 2023), which reflects a willingness to conform to European guidelines. On the issue of implementation, a granular review of the actions adopted could help us assess the progress made so far, or lack thereof, given that we have reached the midpoint of the 2021-2030 period.

6. National Policies Supporting Students with Disabilities’ Right to Education

The Romanian legal framework on the rights of persons with disabilities is established by Law no. 448/2006 on the protection and promotion of the rights of persons with disabilities, updated in 2025 by Emergency Ordinance no. 156 from 30 December 2024. Article 6 (par. b) states that people with disabilities have the right to education and professional development. Chapter II outlining the rights of persons with disabilities contains a section on education (Articles 15, 16, 17, 18, 19). Article 15 states that “(1) Persons with disabilities have free and equal access to any form of education, regardless of age, in accordance with the type, degree of disability and their educational needs. (2) Persons with disabilities are provided lifelong education and vocational training” (Legea nr. 448, 2006). On higher education, the law contains several provisions, addressing aspects concerning

accommodation and inclusion. Article 16 (8) affirms that “Students with disabilities benefit, upon request, from a 50% reduction in fees for accommodation and meals at student canteens and dormitories” (Legea nr. 448, 2006).

Additionally, Article 18 details what are the accessible accommodations that persons with disabilities have a right to “within the educational process, regardless of its level”: a) educational support services; b) technical equipment adapted to the educational needs of the person with disabilities, including computer applications or devices for transforming written/spoken text into alternative forms of visual, auditory, augmentative communication”; [...] d) school textbooks and courses in an accessible format for visually impaired pupils and students; e) use of assistive equipment and software in taking exams of any type and level; f) accessibility of buildings in which educational units and institutions operate by ensuring adaptations specific to each type of disability [...]” (Legea nr. 448, 2006).

Article 19 presents the obligations of public authorities to ensure the access of persons with disabilities to educational units and institutions: “a) to promote and guarantee access to education and professional development for persons with disabilities; [...] c) to ensure access to forms of permanent education, adapting them to the educational needs of persons with disabilities; [...] e) to ensure the training of teachers in order to adapt educational practices for students with disabilities in regular education groups or classes; [...] h) to ensure access to educational units and institutions in compliance with the provisions of art. 18 paragraph (1) letter f)” (Legea nr. 448, 2006). Article 76 in Chapter V on Guidance, Professional Development, Employment and Job Placement, states that “The Ministry of National Education establishes measures regarding equal opportunities for persons with disabilities, ensuring, where necessary, additional assistance adapted to the needs of adults with disabilities, supporting their access to higher education units and institutions” (Legea nr. 448, 2006).

Another document to consider is the National Strategy on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities “A Fair Romania” 2022-2027 adopted by the Government Decision no. 490/2022 from 6 April 2022. The Strategy notes that Romania signed and ratified the CRPD in Law no. 221/2010, citing the steps taken to implement the provisions of the Convention. The EU Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030 is also cited as part of the international and European strategic framework in which the national strategy can be placed. The Strategy mentions that “the specific legislative framework for inclusive education is extensive, however a coherent, unitary approach is missing, due to the absence of financial resources and human resources with training in the field of special education” (Ministerul Muncii, Familiei, Tineretului și Solidarității Sociale (MMFTSS, 2022, p. 12).

The document identifies eight priority areas: 1. accessibility and mobility; 2. effective protection of the rights of persons with disabilities; 3. employment; 4. social protection, including habilitation / rehabilitation; 5. independent living and community integration, including access to public services; 6. education; 7. health; 8. political and public participation (MMFTSS, 2022, p. 7). The section on education advances as general objective: “Access of children and young people with disabilities and/or special educational needs (SEN) to quality inclusive education in the community, on an equal basis with other children and young people, so that they can reach their maximum development potential” (MMFTSS, 2022, p. 40). The general objective is underpinned by two secondary objectives: 1) Improving access to quality education for all levels of pre-university education; and 2) Improving access to tertiary education for people with disabilities. For the purpose of this analysis, we will review the objective detailing the issues impacting tertiary education.

The Strategy states that persons with disabilities have a limited access to tertiary education. A comparative study from 2017 found that, in Romania, only 7% of the students declared that they had a disability or some other form of impairment – the lowest scores of all the European states analyzed. The document further notes a peculiar situation: while participation rates are low, of the persons that have stated to have a disability, “43% are not impeded in their learning activities” while “over half of students with limitations in their studies (56%) do not need or want support from the authorities to be able to complete their university studies” (MMFTSS, 2022, p. 43). Several factors contribute to the exclusion of persons with disability from higher education: “poor quality, insufficient preparation during basic education”; funding regulations for tertiary education lacks criteria regarding the number / share of students with disabilities in determining the core funding; “absence of a national system for monitoring the conditions that universities provide to a student with disabilities” (MMFTSS, 2022, p. 43). Moreover, the document also notes that supporting students with disabilities in tertiary education is treated at the level of a recommendation, rather than as a mandatory national-wide policy (MMFTSS, 2022, p. 43).

The national strategy refers to two aspects that impact access and inclusion. One focuses on the students who should participate in formal education “to develop their professional skills and / or [...] transition to tertiary education” (MMFTSS, 2022, p. 43). On the long term, the strategy envisions that students with disabilities who graduate higher education could become “role-models” and that by obtaining the necessary qualifications, they could be “employed in the formal education system” (MMFTSS, 2022, p. 43). Secondly, the document emphasizes the need for universities to “ensure access to the physical, informational and communication environment, with

reasonable adaptation of teaching and assessment methods” in order for students with disabilities to “benefit from the same opportunities” as those without disabilities” (MMFTSS, 2022, p. 43).

In the absence of appropriate adaptations, students will not be able to complete their education, and, in turn, will not be able to access the labor market and lead an independent life. In this sense, the Strategy recalls the aims set by the global and European instruments to respect and promote the rights of persons with disabilities, putting an emphasis on the the key objective of formal education which is “to contribute to ensuring an independent and fulfilled adult life” (MMFTSS, 2022, p. 43). Though the issues identified in the Strategy are relevant for the topic analyzed, additional guidelines should have been included in the document in order to provide the institutional actors with a clear framework for implementation. Without it, there is the risk that the strategies or approaches adopted at the lower levels will be too disaggregated or unevenly implemented to obtain consistent results across the higher education system.

7. Discussion: Developing Good Practices in Higher Education – A Pilot Framework for Promoting Inclusivity

Inclusivity, accessibility, and educational equity are the key principles that decision-makers should apply in developing institutional guidelines that promote the participation of students with disabilities in higher education. At the institutional level, based on the regulatory frameworks analyzed, three main directions can be discerned: 1) ensuring that the educational rights of students with disabilities are safeguarded in compliance with current regulations; 2) providing adequate training of the teaching personnel and auxiliary staff; and 3) ensuring that the facilities meet accessibility standards. All these directions of action have to account for the specificity of different types of disability.

Actions that focus on students should address the academic progress, the completion of their studies, and employment opportunities. In this sense, it is important to provide support depending on the needs of each student. At a preliminary level, the institution should ensure access to digital accessibility tools. Angelica-Nicoleta Neculăesei provides relevant examples of such technologies: “adaptive / assistive technology (subtitling, CART transcription [...]); creation of text or audio materials that describe images (for students with visual disabilities, for example); enabling access to accessible documents (PDFs that allow people with disabilities to use Braille readers, screen magnifiers and printers); employing schemes, colors, mind maps; creating websites, using platforms, other digital resources accessible to students with disabilities; developing a design that ensures easy, intuitive navigation” (Neculăesei, 2023, p. 71).

A second set of actions should focus on providing psychopedagogical support to the students to assist them in achieving academic success. Measures should include: access to counseling, early prevention mechanisms to prevent abandonment of university studies; mentoring programs (see also: Neculăesei, 2023, p. 71). A third set of actions should address the development of adaptive methodologies: if a universal design-based approach cannot be implemented in full, then the institution should consider varied measures that enable the completion of tasks: pursuing differentiated / adapted teaching and assessment; when necessary, giving extensions for the completion of tasks and extending examination time (see also: Neculăesei, 2023, p. 71).

Additionally, the institution should foster a participatory environment since as Almudena Cotán et al. explain, “the active participation of students in the teaching-learning processes is essential for the attainment of an effective and meaningful learning” (Cotán et al., 2024, p. 24). In this way, they can have a positive academic experience that includes direct participation in the academic activities, as opposed to being mandated to complete minimal tasks. Additionally, the students will be better integrated in the community, able to collaborate and receive support from their colleagues, as well as take an active role in the university experience.

On the second direction of action, for the academic environment to be inclusive, the university has to implement training programs for teachers in order to familiarize the members of the academic community with the notion of disability, their types and specificities, and to assist them in developing methodologies and tools that can aid students with disabilities. This process should be conducted periodically through training courses and workshops provided by members of the Faculty of Psychology or outside specialists and counselors (see also: Neculăesei, 2023, p. 70).

The development of inclusive methodologies should be characterized by a degree of variability since the experience is shaped by diverse teachers in different environments, and, consequently, there can be no “one size fits all approach”. Cotán et al. identify five didactic strategies proven to succeed when applied to the educational experience of students with disability: 1) appropriate adjustments; 2) Universal Design for Instruction; 3) teaching planning and adaptation; 4) emotional dimension of learning; 5) practical contents (Cotán et al., 2024, p. 26). Of the didactic strategies and actions, Cotán et al. identify twelve: 1) problem-based learning; 2) project-based learning; 3) collaborative learning; 4) cooperative learning; 5) flipped classroom; 6) guided debates; 7) guided

discovery; 8) practical case studies; 9) gamification; 10) interactive lessons; 11) peer tutorials; and 12) individual tutorials (Cotán et al., 2024, pp. 27-28).

On the material dimension, Article 18 from the national law analyzed (Law no. 448 from 6 December 2006) provides ample direction in terms of the adaptations needed to foster accessibility. Depending on the type of disability, the institution should ensure that the following adaptations are made available or that substitutes are considered where because of logistical reasons, certain measures cannot be implemented: ramps and/or, as appropriate, electronic or automated access systems for people with locomotor disabilities and reduced mobility; acoustic guidance systems and tactile maps for people with visual disabilities or with vision difficulties, including deafblindness; visual warning systems and electronic sound amplifiers for hearing aids, for people with hearing disabilities; guidance system in easy-to-read language for people with mental and psychological disabilities (Legea nr. 448, 2006). Additional adjustments should be made on a case by case basis since the list of measures indicated is not exhaustive.

Consulting the students, collecting feedback, organizing discussion groups at both the faculty level and at the university level represent critical steps in the inclusion process, aiding students, teachers, and management to identify the optimal ways in which students with disabilities can pursue their goals and strive alongside their peers (see also: Neculăesei, 2023, p. 71). In furthering these aims, additional actions can include the organization of events that foster connections between the student body with the active participation of students with disabilities; community-building; or the establishment of intra-university networks to identify issues, exchange good practices, and ensure that global, European, and national targets meet the deadlines set in the programmatic documents analyzed (2027, 2030).

Once the inclusion-based framework is in place, it is important for the university to monitor the activity and evaluate the degree of implementation in conjunction with the goals of accessibility and competence development / skill building. The complex nature of disability with its diverse variations require that institutions perform periodic audits to identify current or potential hindrances and adapt the policy measures accordingly.

Conclusions

Disability issues are at the center of an inclusive society, standing at the intersection of human rights, good governance, and sustainability (Hayvom, 2025; Kosanic et al., 2022; Stein & Stein 2022). The extent to which the rights of people with disabilities are recognized, respected, and redressed in accordance with global, regional and national frameworks represents a microcosm of possibilities and challenges, indicative of a budding potential for affirmation, but also encapsulating prevalent systemic shortcomings. In implementing fundamental rights, such as the one to education, an inclusivity-based framework should be built around the responsibility and obligation “to respect, protect and fulfil” these rights, otherwise a logic of deprivation would prevail where people would have their rights denied and institutional actors would fail to acknowledge their responsibility to safeguard these rights (Quirico, 2022, p. 4). In this sense, it is critical that at every regulatory level analyzed, periodic monitoring and follow-up activities are pursued in order to determine what are the impediments impacting the implementation process and what remedial actions can address and overcome these situations.

The university through its various stakeholders has to ensure that the institutional frameworks adopted are not just surface-based, but that they go in-depth and establish norms, practices, and tools that provide students with disabilities access to inclusive spaces where they can have fulfilling and rewarding experiences, helping them obtain the skills needed to function beyond the university walls. By creating an institutional environment where students with disabilities are an integral part of the community, the university transforms from a space of hierarchies into one of equity. By investing resources and creating inclusion frameworks, the university should become the basis of development and resilience for students with disabilities, without which the goals of social inclusion could not be achieved.

Higher education can become the conduit that ends the cycles of exclusion and segregation since its practices trickle down to all other sectors of the social global sphere. In order for this systemic change to become a part of the institutional experience, the university by working along side other disability stakeholders, can help create the guiding frameworks to build an inclusive society where all people have their rights respected and are able to be a part of the community. In providing the students with disabilities access to higher education and supporting their right to education throughout their academic training, in accordance with the guidelines outlined, good practices enable students to become aware of their rights and, hopefully, even, to find those opportunities that will help them lead independent lives.

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