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Inclusive Education – a Key Factor for Equity and Academic Succes

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Abstract: *This article addresses the essential role of inclusive education in promoting equity and academic success in higher education. In the context of an increasingly diverse student population, inclusion becomes a fundamental principle for ensuring equitable access to resources, adequate support, and participation in academic life. The present study is based on a questionnaire survey aimed at exploring students' experiences regarding accessibility, adaptability of educational content, institutional support, and their sense of belonging within the university community. The results highlight the existence of considerable challenges as well as valuable resources that support inclusion. Based on the analysis of results, the article proposes action directions and recommendations for the development of more inclusive practices capable of responding to the diversity of students' needs. The conclusion emphasizes that an inclusive university is not only more equitable but also more effective, contributing to the formation of competent, confident, and socially connected graduates.*

Keywords*: inclusive education; diversity; equity; academic success;*

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Introduction

In a constantly evolving society, schools remain the primary space where the fundamental values of equity, respect, and equal opportunities are shaped. In this context, inclusive education emerges as an essential element for building an equitable educational system, capable of addressing the needs of all students and providing them with real foundations for academic success and social integration.

Today, inclusive education is a pillar of social equity and academic achievement, resulting from a conceptual evolution that began in the 1990s. While integration focused on the participation of children with disabilities in regular classrooms, inclusion broadens the perspective, targeting all students facing difficulties – from emotional or behavioral challenges and learning difficulties to socio-economic disadvantages or belonging to the social protection system (Gherguț, 2023).

The transition from a restrictive approach to an inclusive one highlights the value of diversity as an educational resource, holding schools accountable for meeting the needs of all students. In line with UNESCO's "Education for All" initiative, launched in 1990, inclusive education affirms every student's right to a quality education, with particular attention to vulnerable and marginalized groups, to ensure the full development of individual potential (Gherguț, 2023).

According to the Pre-university Education Law No. 198/2023, inclusive education addresses all students, with special focus on those at risk of marginalization, discrimination, school dropout, or low academic achievement, including children from disadvantaged

backgrounds, minorities, refugees, children with disabilities, special educational needs, or victims of violence and abuse (Art. 67).

International documents such as the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Manual of European Law on the Rights of the Child, 2015) and the Salamanca Statement (1994) support this approach, emphasizing that the success of inclusion depends on adapting programs to students' diverse needs and learning paces, as well as on continuous collaboration among schools, families, communities, and authorities, ensuring appropriate support and services for all children.

Thus, inclusive education transforms schools into safe and equitable environments, supporting academic achievement and social-emotional development through curriculum flexibility, diversified teaching methods, promotion of positive relationships, parental and community involvement, and provision of tailored support services (Gherguț, 2023). In this context, Acedo, Ferrer & Pàmies (2009) highlight the essential role of teachers, who go beyond merely transmitting knowledge to become facilitators of positive interactions and promoters of diversity, cultivating a climate based on respect and empathy. By implementing differentiated strategies and supporting practical programs—such as mentoring, conflict resolution workshops, or diversity-focused activities—teachers contribute to students' psychosocial safety, motivation, and academic performance.

Furthermore, Acedo et al. (2009) mention that inclusion represents one of the major global challenges of the 21st century, with relevance for all educational systems. The central issue is not only the integration of those who are excluded, but also ensuring the quality and relevance of the learning process in a diverse environment. Therefore, implementing inclusion faces numerous obstacles, such as discriminatory practices, lack of resources, policy inconsistencies, or the difficulty of identifying subtle forms of exclusion in informal spaces.

UNESCO (2008) emphasizes that inclusion should be understood as a continuous process, based on removing barriers, adapting content, and valuing diversity. International assessments such as PISA, TIMSS, and PIRLS confirm that when implemented correctly, inclusion does not diminish the quality of education, but rather promotes equitable and sustainable outcomes, although many governments still struggle to effectively link equity and quality.

To overcome current challenges and make inclusion a sustainable process, UNESCO (2021) provides concrete recommendations addressing both the structural and cultural dimensions of educational systems. The emphasis is placed on removing barriers and fostering a school culture founded on equity and diversity. Accordingly, the main proposed directions are:

- Expanding the concept of inclusion to encompass all students, not only those with special educational needs, thereby preventing stigmatization and restrictive labeling;
- Focusing the educational process on the student, through the direct involvement of children in program design and recognizing their experiences as an integral part of learning;
- Strengthening partnerships with parents and the local community to counter discriminatory attitudes and lack of trust in inclusive schools;
- Leveraging the role of NGOs and civil society in monitoring the right to education and complementing services through tailored projects;
- Interministerial and multisectoral coordination, since educational inclusion is inseparable from social inclusion and requires integrated policies;
- Applying universal design in education through flexible curricula, adapted teaching methods, differentiated assessments, and the use of assistive technology;
- Continuous professional development for teachers to build real competencies for working with diverse students and to combat discriminatory practices;

- Responsible data collection that reflects students' experiences without stigmatizing labels, supporting evidence-based policy-making;
- Exchange of good practices at local and international levels, to adapt successful models to diverse contexts;
- Developing a global partnership for inclusion, based on political will, adequate resources, and collaboration between governments and civil society.

UNESCO's recommendations emphasize that inclusive education cannot be reduced to declarative policies or isolated actions; it requires a profound transformation of schools, based on equity, diversity, and collaboration among all social actors. More than a mere pedagogical option, inclusive education represents an essential condition for academic success and for building a democratic school.

This necessity extends to higher education as well, where the access and success of students from diverse backgrounds depend on favorable conditions and tailored support. Inclusion in universities involves not only scholarships or financial aid, but also the adaptation of admission, teaching, and assessment processes, the implementation of tutoring programs, provision of academic and non-academic support, flexible study options, and recognition of prior experiences. Just as schools must be safe and equitable environments for all students, universities must value diversity as a resource, promote collaboration among faculty, students, families, and communities, and develop social and academic competencies that reduce inequalities. Through an integrated approach addressing structural, cultural, and methodological barriers, higher education can transform diversity into opportunity, strengthening inclusive education as a strategic tool for equity, social cohesion, and democratic development (European Commission, 2022).

In other words, by transforming schools and universities into safe, equitable, and diversity-friendly environments, inclusive education represents both a major challenge and a strategic opportunity, constituting a fundamental investment in human capital and social cohesion in the 21st century.

Metodology

Aim and objectives

The aim of this study is to highlight the role of inclusive education in building an equitable and supportive academic environment for all students, regardless of their diversity. In this regard, the challenges and opportunities faced by students are analyzed, particularly concerning the accessibility and flexibility of educational resources, while solutions are also proposed to improve academic success and strengthen the sense of belonging to the university community.

To achieve this aim, the following objectives were considered:

O1: Analyze students' experiences regarding the accessibility and adaptability of educational content, available resources, and institutional support;

O2: Assess the sense of belonging to the university community and the degree of integration of students from diverse groups;

O3: Identify the main challenges faced by students in the educational process and propose actionable directions;

O4: Evaluate the impact of inclusive education on students' academic success, considering both academic performance and social integration within the university.

Hypotheses

I1: The more students receive academic support tailored to their specific needs, the greater their academic success and sense of belonging within the university will be.

I2: The more the university provides an inclusive environment with continuous support from faculty and peers, the higher students' motivation and engagement in academic and extracurricular activities will be.

Participants

The sample consisted of 50 students from various programs within the Faculties of Mechanical and Electrical Engineering, Petroleum and Gas Engineering, and Economic Sciences, enrolled in the first, second, and third years of study at the Petroleum-Gas University of Ploiești.

Research methods and instruments

For this study, a questionnaire-based survey was used as the research method. As Chelcea (2001, p. 177) notes, a questionnaire is "a technique and, accordingly, an investigative instrument consisting of a set of written questions and, possibly, logically arranged graphic images, which, when administered by survey operators or self-administered, elicit responses from the respondents to be recorded in writing." In practice, the questionnaire is a structured means of obtaining information from a group of people, allowing for the standardization of questions and the collection of comparable data. Two questionnaires were used in this research: "Access and Inclusion in Academic Life" and "My Inclusion Strategy in Academic Life"**.** These included closed-ended questions with predetermined answers, as well as open-ended questions, which allowed students to freely express their opinions regarding both their perceptions of accessibility and inclusion in the university environment and their personal strategies for adapting to it.

Data analysis

The research results overall reveal a favorable student perception regarding equity in access and treatment within higher education. Thus, nearly nine out of ten respondents (89.80%) believe they have had equal opportunities for access, reflecting a high level of confidence in the university's current admission mechanisms. However, 10.20% of students state that they only partially experienced equal opportunities, indicating the presence of potential obstacles or perceived inequalities that could affect full and actual access to education.

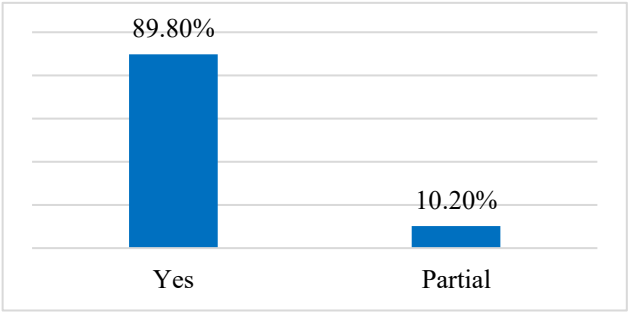


Fig. 1. Students' perception of equal access to higher education

Furthermore, the data show that 96% of students feel they are treated fairly in the admission and integration process, confirming that once they enter the system, the majority benefit from an educational climate based on respect and equity. However, the 4% who cannot express a clear opinion may be interpreted as a sign of insufficient information regarding institutional criteria and procedures.

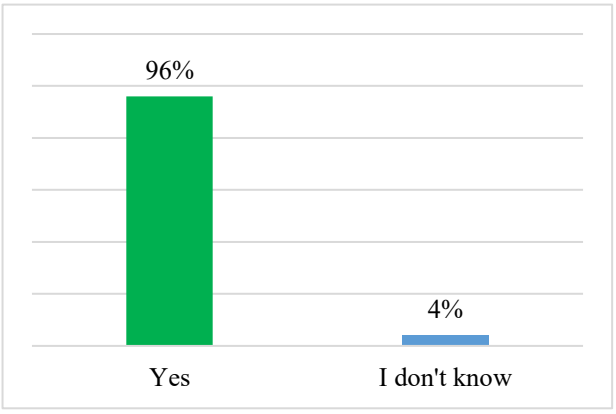


Fig. 2. Students' view on fair treatment in admission and integration

Thus, although the general trend indicates a positive reality and a commitment to equity, the data emphasize the importance of continuing and strengthening inclusive education policies to reduce perceptions of inequality and ensure that every student, regardless of their socio-economic or cultural background, has real and non-discriminatory access to education.

Regarding access to university-provided services and information (admissions, scholarships, schedules, courses, etc.), the majority of students (60%) report that they have never encountered difficulties, reflecting well-organized and functional institutional communication channels. However, 40% of respondents indicate that, although not consistently, they have occasionally faced problems in this process, suggesting the existence of isolated situations that hinder access, likely related to busy periods or delays in updating information.

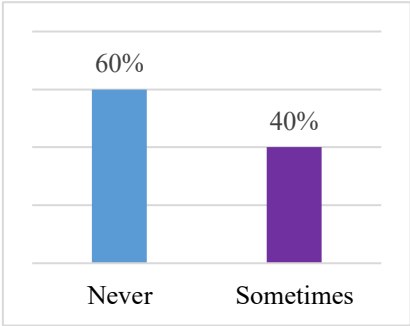


Fig. 3. Difficulties in accesing university

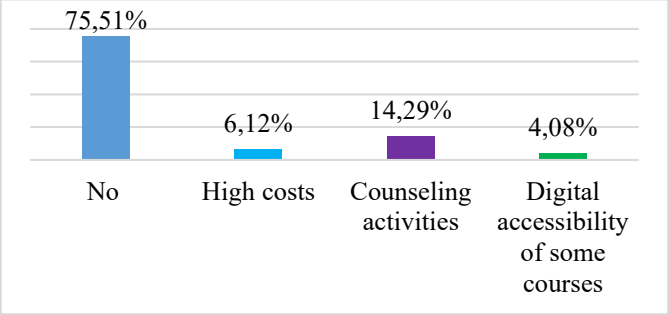


Fig. 4. Difficulties in accessing the study program services/information

Regarding access to their chosen study program, 75.51% of students report being satisfied and not encountering major obstacles in completing their program, indicating a good alignment between the educational offer and their expectations. On the other hand, a small portion of students highlights specific issues: 6.12% consider the costs too high, reflecting financial pressure on a subset of students; 14.29% perceive a lack of more substantial counseling activities, signaling the need for additional support for academic and career guidance; and 4.08% mention difficulties with the digital accessibility of certain courses, indicating potential technical limitations or inconsistencies in the digitalization of educational resources.

Analyzing the challenges faced by students in the university environment, their responses reveal not only practical obstacles, such as physical or digital access, but also issues related to human interactions, participation in extracurricular activities, and personal or financial resources.

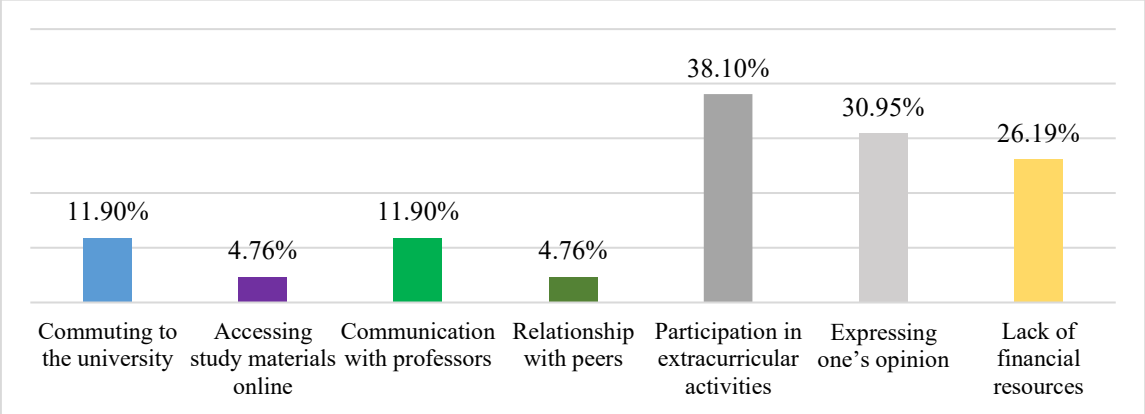


Fig. 5. Difficulties encountered in the university environment

Thus, the percentages obtained reflect the diversity of challenges faced by students: 11.9% report difficulties commuting to the university, either due to professional obligations or personal choice to remain commuters, despite the university offering sufficient accommodation in student dormitories; 4.76% indicate difficulties accessing online study materials, either due to uneven digitalization or technical issues; 11.9% experience challenges communicating with professors, a situation explained by the irregular presence of commuting and working students, who must rely on alternative channels (email, digital platforms) that are not always effective; 4.76% report difficulties in relating to peers, which may be caused by shyness, lack of integration into established groups, or reduced socialization opportunities, especially among commuters and part-time workers; 38.10% face difficulties participating in extracurricular activities, the most common reasons being lack of time, a busy schedule, or shyness and low self-confidence; 30.95% acknowledge difficulties in self-expression and self-confidence, signaling psychosocial issues that can affect participation in classes, extracurricular activities, and academic performance; 26.19% feel financial pressure, which hampers access to studies, materials, transportation, and university life in general.

Despite these challenges, the majority of students report a high level of inclusion and acceptance, suggesting that socially and within the community, they feel supported and integrated into university life. In this regard, faculty, peers, and administrative staff contribute to strengthening this sense of satisfaction and belonging within the university community.

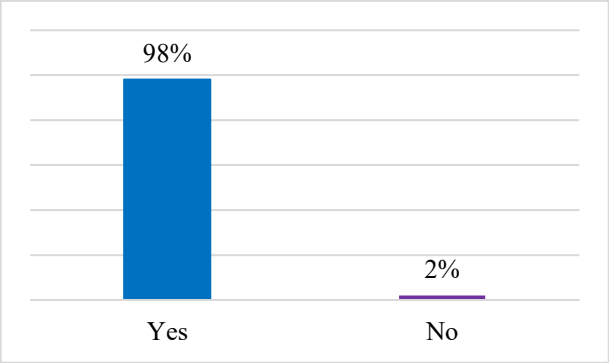


Fig. 6. Do you feel included and accepted in the university community?- Students' opinion

Thus, 98% of respondents feel included and accepted, indicating that the majority of students benefit from a safe and supportive environment where their opinions are heard.

This support provided by the university manifests in multiple ways, such as: adapting courses and teaching methods to meet the diverse needs of students; providing relevant, up-to-date educational resources tailored to different learning styles; mentoring activities where faculty offer guidance for exam preparation and academic skill development; academic counseling centers that help students organize their time, apply learning techniques, and manage study workloads; orientation programs for new students that facilitate getting to know peers, faculty, and university resources; student clubs and associations that encourage building social networks and participation in extracurricular activities; financial and logistical support through scholarships, housing and meal services, as well as access to libraries, laboratories, and study equipment; and international programs and academic exchanges, such as Erasmus+ or other mobility initiatives, which contribute to students' intercultural development.

Thus, by implementing policies and practices that ensure equal access, recognize diversity, and provide individualized support, the university creates an environment that encourages students to actively participate in courses, take on academic responsibilities, and engage in projects and extracurricular activities. The university promotes an open educational vision, where extracurricular activities become spaces where diversity, equity, and inclusion intersect. Student festivals, scientific projects, sports competitions, cultural events, and international programs are designed to offer all students equal opportunities for participation and achievement, regardless of their personal experiences or backgrounds. Through this approach, the university not only supports professional development but also fosters respect for differences, solidarity, and social responsibility, preparing young people to contribute actively to a fair and inclusive society.

Moreover, the data show that this approach has tangible effects on students' perceptions and development. Accordingly, 73.47% of respondents report feeling proud of themselves as students when achieving academic success; 10.20% feel proud when making personal progress, overcoming shyness, and managing to communicate and collaborate more effectively, which enhances their self-confidence, motivation, and academic engagement; and 16.33% feel proud of their involvement in projects and extracurricular activities, which provide opportunities for developing personal skills, expanding social networks, and strengthening civic and community engagement. These results highlight the close connection between university inclusion, student motivation, and their success both academically and socially.

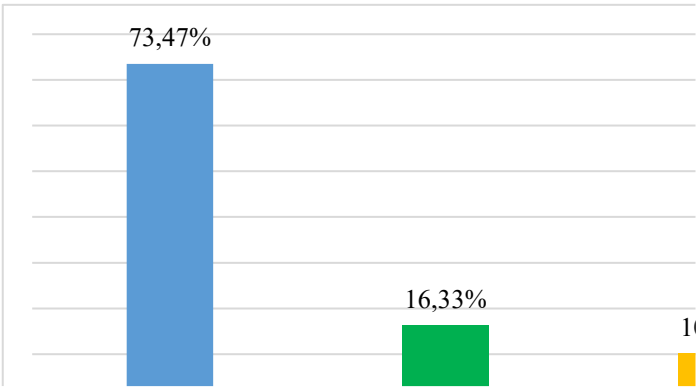


Fig. 7. Moments of personal pride durind studies

However, 2% of students report that they do not feel included and accepted within the academic community. This reality does not diminish the university's achievements in promoting an inclusive climate; rather, it serves as a warning signal, highlighting that building a fully inclusive university community is an ongoing process that requires continuous attention to students' individual needs, such as emotional difficulties, social anxiety, or challenges in integration.

Results

It can be concluded that the collected data clearly support both working hypotheses, providing solid evidence of the link between the support offered by the university and students' experiences. Academic support tailored to individual needs (such as personalized educational resources, mentoring, academic counseling, career orientation programs, etc.) contributes not only to academic success but also to strengthening the sense of belonging. Students who benefit from such forms of support feel more confident in their abilities and better equipped to face university challenges, which is reflected in positive academic results and an overall sense of inclusion within the university community.

Furthermore, an inclusive environment and the support of the academic community—provided through the involvement of faculty, students, and administrative staff—stimulate students' motivation and engagement in both academic and extracurricular activities. Activities that encourage collaboration, communication, and active participation enhance students' sense of belonging and pride in their achievements, contributing to the development of personal and social skills.

Therefore, the Petroleum-Gas University of Ploiești stands out for its ongoing commitment to inclusive education and creating an academic environment accessible to all students. Through projects such as LOGOS – Optimal Connections between Pre-university and Higher Education for Generating Learning Opportunities and Academic Success**,** First-generation Student – Equality and Inclusion**,** EDIS 4 – Quality Inclusive Education to Increase Access and Participation in Higher Education and FAST – Facilitating Access to Studies for Youth**,** the university provides concrete support to young people from vulnerable groups or those at risk of dropping out, facilitating the transition from high school to university and reducing obstacles to academic progress.

These initiatives not only improve students' academic and professional success but also strengthen their sense of belonging to the university community, fostering collaboration, solidarity, and respect for diversity. Thus, the university goes beyond merely transmitting knowledge, creating the conditions necessary for every student to be encouraged to complete their studies and realize their potential within a fair and inclusive framework.

Discussions

Thus, the research results highlight that academic support tailored to individual needs and an inclusive university environment have a significant positive impact on students' experiences. The majority of respondents feel integrated, included, and accepted within the academic community, and equitable access to resources and information contributes to their academic success as well as the development of personal and social skills. Participation in projects and extracurricular activities, along with overcoming challenges related to shyness or lack of self-confidence, enhances students' motivation and engagement. Therefore, the university's policies and practices - focused on equity, inclusion, and personalized support - prove effective in increasing academic performance, fostering personal development, and strengthening the sense of belonging within the university community.

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