

INCLUSIVE UNIVERSITIES. EXPLORING THE WELLBEING OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN ALBANIA

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ABSTRACT

Aim. The purpose of this study is to explore the issue of the inclusion of university students with special needs (USSN) in universities and their social well-being, based on the case of the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Tirana in the Republic of Albania.

Methods. The methodology used is based on the combination of secondary sources, with primary ones, provided through the interview of the academic and administrative staff, parents and students.

Results. The study highlighted that in the Republic of Albania important positive steps have been taken in improving the legislation of Higher Education regarding

the inclusion of USSN in universities. This has been successfully adapted to the University Statute of the University of Tirana. Also, the study highlighted that even from the infrastructural aspect, some opportunities have been created for USSN in this faculty, but they are still insufficient. The lack of protocols and individual programmes for the treatment of USSN is a necessity. Regardless of these shortcomings and some people's skepticism about the participation of USSN in university education, a friendly climate is created in this faculty, in function of the social well-being of USSN.

Conclusions. As a conclusion, the adaptation of the philosophy of inclusion in concrete practices is met with numerous challenges. Regarding the creation of a friendly climate in function of the social welfare of USSN, the case of the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Tirana constitutes a positive model, which should be promoted.

Keywords: university, students with special needs, inclusion, social wellbeing, Albania

INTRODUCTION

Inclusion in the education is a philosophy that brings children, families, educators, and community people together to construct schools and other social institutions based on acceptance, belonging, and community (Salend, 2006).

Many factors such as globalization, technology improvements, and more mobility put pressure on education to fulfill high standards and enhance quality, making teaching more complicated and challenging (Leka, 2022). On the other hand, nowadays it is important to adopt an individualised perspective in the education, as well as to involve embracing diversity (Kondrla et al., 2023). Moreover, Edward Zygmunt Jarmoch et al., (2022) claim that the spiritual side of pedagogy will have a crucial function in the educational process, especially in the context of multiculturalism and inclusiveness. Given the diverse student population encompassing various genders, races, religions, disadvantages, and individual needs, cultivating a heightened sense of spiritual awareness will be essential.

In the context of inclusive education, an approach which has found support since 1994 with Salamanka's statement, more and more students with special needs are enrolling in mainstreams. According to Salamanca's statement regular schools with this inclusive perspective are the most effective way to battle discriminatory attitudes, create friendly communities, construct an inclusive society, and achieve education for all (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization & Ministry of Education and Science Spain, 1994,). The philosophy of inclusive education has long been turned into a concrete practice in pre-university education in the Republic of Albania, but in university education level the practices of inclusiveness are still unstructured.

The aim of this research is to investigate the challenge of including students with special needs in universities and their social well-being, based on the example of the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Tirana in the Republic of Albania.

This paper can give a contribution at least in two directions: Firstly, it can help to fill the gap on the exploration of inclusive education dealing with students with special needs in higher education institutions and their social wellbeing, especially for Albanian context; Secondly, this paper can contribute towards generating new ideas, new projects and suggestions to make universities more inclusive regarding students with special needs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The inclusion of university students with special needs (USSN) in Albanian universities is an innovation of these last 10 years. Albanian higher education institutions function under Law no. 80/2015, "For higher education and scientific research in higher education institutions in the Republic of Albania."

According to Agran et al., (2020) laws enacted by policymakers have been pushed by disabled activists with the goal of ensuring that students with disabilities (a) receive a free appropriate public education, (b) are educated alongside nondisabled peers to the greatest extent possible, (c) participate and progress in the general education curriculum, and (d) are educated in the least restricted atmosphere possible.

Although legally instead of the term special needs, the term children or persons with disabilities, or with limited abilities is used, due to the negative stereotyping this term has, in this article the term student with special needs will be used. In this category, students with both intellectual and physical special needs will be included.

Although the declaration of Salamanca places the emphasis mostly on children, an attention to university students with special needs (hereinafter USSN) would also be important, in order to complete the mission started earlier for the creation of an inclusive society. As many studies highlight the implementation of inclusion principles for students with special needs remains a big challenge for all levels of education, including the universities themselves (See: Zabeli et al., 2021), even the group of students with special needs has less support in the university compared to students attending pre-university education (Riddell & Weedon, 2011).

Over the past 25 years, the population of college students who are disabled has tripled and, according to some estimates, quadrupled (Olney et al., 2004). Since USSN are mostly being enrolled in universities over this time, the studies related to this category also extend mostly in this 20-year period (See: Bahçalı & Kasap, 2023; Barnard-Brak et al., 2010; Quick et al., 2003; Zabeli et al., 2021).

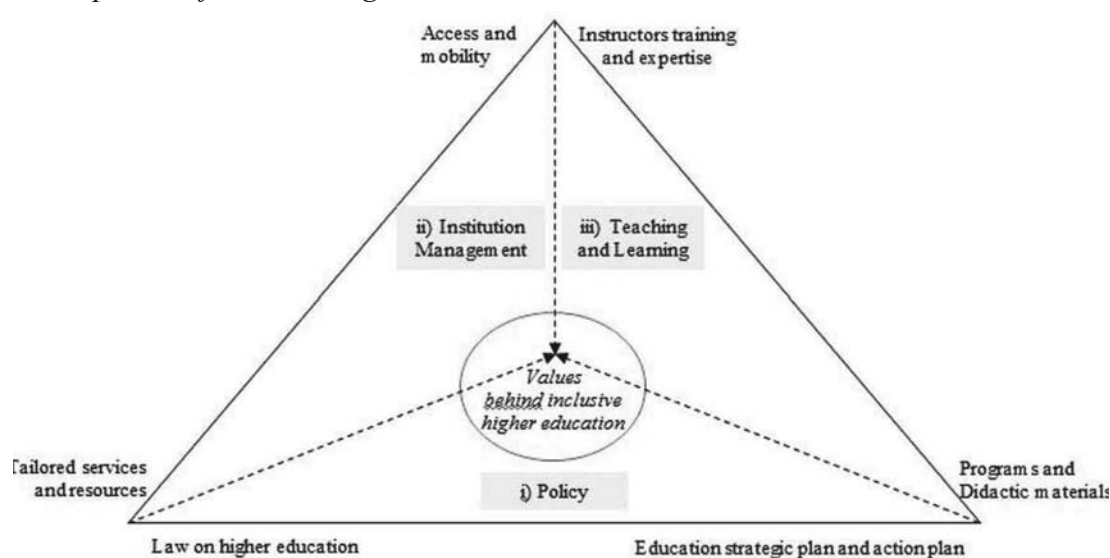
As Naser Zabeli et al., (2021), claimed, although there is a wide range of studies regarding students with special needs in pre university level of education that analyse

the challenges of implementing the philosophy of inclusion, regarding the category of USSN the studies are limited. The participation of these students has begun to be seen in university auditoriums as well, institutions which seem to be less prepared to include this category of students, compared to the primary and secondary agencies of education.

Exploring the literature regarding the situation of students with special needs, Zabeli et al. (2021), identify three main pillars of the literature regarding the inclusion of USSN in higher education: 1. The policy issues; 2. The institutional management issues; 3. The teaching and learning issues.

Figure 1

Three pillars of USSN in higher education



Source. Zabeli et al., (2021, p. 16), CC-BY license.

According to these authors, which refer to the Kosovo context, (a) regarding the policy level, although important steps have been taken in relation to the drafting of legislation where inclusiveness is in focus, there are still weak values and a social skepticism towards the inclusiveness that makes the implementation of this legislation difficult and sometimes impossible; (b) regarding the institutional and management, although the creation of a welcoming infrastructure, comparing to the past, there is a passive attitude from the institutional management; (c) regarding the teaching and learning, although the positive attitude of professors and lecturers toward the students with special needs, there is a lack of their training and preparedness to concretely deal with this category of students (see: Zabeli et al., 2021).

Referring to the data reviewed from the literature, the present article is based on five main pillars: (a) the formal inclusion, legal framework and the institutional policies; (b) the inclusion through special quotas; c) the inclusion through infrastructure and

supporting logistics; (d) The inclusion through study programme curricula; (e) The inclusion through social environment support.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology used is based on the combination of secondary sources, with primary ones.

First, the desk review included: (a) the analyse of the secondary data and documents, such as Ligji për Arsimin e Lartë në Republikën e Shqipërisë (Laws of Higher Education, in Republic of Albania), *Statuti i Universitetit të Tiranës* (Statute of University of Tirana, hereinafter UT), *Strategjia e zhvillimit të Universitetit të Tiranës 2018-2023* (Strategy of Development of University of Tirana 2018-2023), as well as the university curricula and study programmes of the Faculty of Social Sciences.

Second, the empirical research was focused on a qualitative methodology based on in depth semi structured interviews with 13 people. With the objective of gathering the perceptions from different points of view, different categories of people have been interviewed, as shown in table below. Other studies regarding university USSN have used quantitative methodology based on in-depth semi-structured interviews (See: Bahçalı & Kasap, 2023). The content analysis has been used in the data examination.

Table 1

The interviewees typology

Nr	The categories of interviewees	Number
1	Students with special needs	3
2	Other students	3
3	Parents	2
4	Academic staff	3
5	Administrative staff	2
	Total	13

Source. Own research.

The questions that drove the research are:

- How the inclusion philosophy is adapted in Higher Education legislation in the Republic of Albania and especially in University of Tirana Statute, logistics, university curricula?
- How the inclusion practices have influenced the wellbeing of students with special needs?
- What suggestions can be made to improve the inclusion of students with special needs at Albanian universities?

The Adapting of Inclusion Philosophy in Legislation and University Documents. The Case of Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Tirana

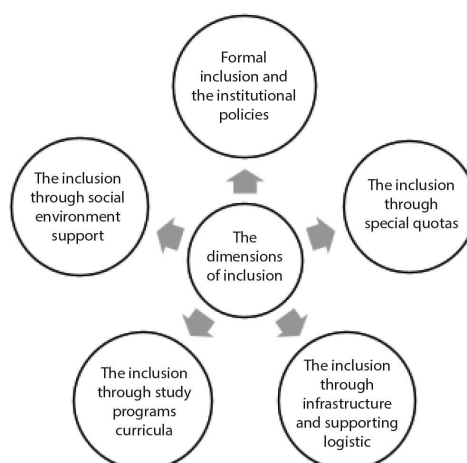
By its nature, the Faculty of Social Sciences, at University of Tirana has a special attention to students with special needs.

As mentioned previously, this attention is related with 5 main pillars:

- The formal inclusion, legal framework and the institutional policies;
- The inclusion through special quotas;
- The inclusion through infrastructure and supporting logistic;
- The inclusion through study programmes curricula;
- The inclusion through social environment support.

Figure 2

The dimensions of inclusion



Source. Own research.

The Formal Inclusion, Legal Framework and the Institutional Policies

The Albanian legislation has been continuously harmonized with the European Union requirements relating especially in the education legislation the inclusive philosophy. In regards to higher education legislation, the philosophy of inclusiveness is firstly stipulated in *Ligji për Arsimin e lartë në Republikën e Shqipërisë* [Law for Higher Education in the Republic of Albania] and is also restated in the related regulatory documents of University of Tirana.

In the Albanian context, the higher education is regulated according to law no. 80, 2015 “On higher education and scientific research in the institutions of higher education in the Republic of Albania” (*Kuvendi i Shqipërisë*, 2015, p.1).

The philosophy of inclusion has become an integral part of the legislation, starting from the law on higher education to the specific strategies of Universities and regulations of the faculties and/or departments. The article 1 of the *Ligji për Arsimin e lartë në Republikën e Shqipërisë* states that Higher education is a good and a civic responsibility, with the aim, among other things, to give equal opportunities to benefit from higher education and lifelong learning (*Kuvendi i Shqipërisë*, 2015). The inclusive philosophy is also part of the university documents. Especially University of Tirana in the Republic of Albania has made good steps to make inclusion philosophy integral part of its work. The article 8, point 8, of the Tirana University Statute o University of Tirana (UT), claims:

UT creates conditions for students and lecturers with disabilities to follow all teaching activities, the knowledge exam in accordance with the study program they are following, as well as access to libraries, computer rooms, laboratories, sports facilities, and other services, which are provided to students by the institution, in accordance with a reasonable accommodation, which should not constitute an excessive financial burden (Universitetit i Tiranës, 2018a, p. 5).

Also the same focus is given to the philosophy of inclusion in the objectives of the *Strategjia e zhvillimit të Universitetit të Tiranës 2018-2023*. So the objective nr. 4 claims “In order to increase the opportunities for equal opportunities, the University of Tirana attracts students from the needy strata and persons with disabilities through the policies of creating fiscal and infrastructural facilities” (Universiteti i Tiranës, 2018b, p. 6).

However, there is a lack of strategies and personalized approaches toward students with special needs in university. Unlike pre-university education, where students with special needs, after specific evaluations, are involved in a personalized way through Individual Educational Plans, these plans do not exist at the university level, and therefore the philosophy of inclusion remains unintegrated with the concrete practice of inclusion.

Inclusion through Special Quotas

The inclusion of students with special needs in universities of the Republic of Albania is fulfilled by special quotas. Every year there are special quotas for students with special needs provided by each single department. So, through this quota during the academic year 2023-2024, 8 students enrolled in bachelor and master programmes at the Faculty of Social Sciences at University of Tirana.

The table below shows a rise in the number of students with special needs at the Faculty of Social Sciences from the academic year 2021-2022 to the academic year 2023-2024.

Table 2

Number of USSN enrolled at the Faculty of Social Sciences during the academic years 2021-2022 to 2023-2024

Academic year	Bachelor programmes	Master programmes	Total
2021-2022	1 student	None	1 student
2022-2023	2 students	2 students	4 students
2023-2024	1 student	7 students	8 students

Source. Database of Faculty of Social Sciences.

Professors and administration staff claim that there are other students who may have particular disorders, but they have not been evaluated and have preferred not to be included in the category of special quotas for students with special needs. According to them, students with autistic spectrum disorders of a mild or moderate level are mostly encountered.

Infrastructure and the Supporting Logistic

From the observation several things were found regarding the infrastructure regarding students with special needs at the Faculty of Social Sciences, at University of Tirana taken as a case study.

So, the existence of steps slopes elevator, the accessible hallways are evidenced, but there is also evidenced the lack of libraries for blind students with Braille alphabet, there is no sign language interpreters for deaf students, and also there is a lack of computers that read texts for the students that can not see etc. As Brunilda Zenelaga et al. (2024) discovered, there is a dearth of appropriate technology for university students in Albania in general, and this is particularly true for students with special needs.

Study Programmes-Curricula-Teaching and Learning Methodology

For the purposes of this paper university programmes and curriculum have been explored, with the aim to evidence how they reflect the inclusiveness policies in higher education. It was evident that the Faculty of Social Sciences, UT offers a professional master's degree named "Specialised Social Pedagogy", that has as its general objective to train competent professionals in the field of specialised teaching, enabling them to acquire knowledge, skills to act and be indispensable in their work with students with special needs. Also, there are some different subjects offered in different study

programmes related to individuals with special needs such as: “Sociology of inclusion”, etc. Also, there are different modules related to the education for students with special needs integrated in different subjects offered in this faculty. The same faculty also offers training for teachers dealing with inclusive education.

The Inclusion through Environment Support. The Social Wellbeing of University Students with Special Needs

There are different concepts and indicators of human wellbeing, but according to Daniel Teghe and Kathryn Rendell (2005), it is more beneficial to think of wellbeing as a social “thing” that transcends the psychological aspects of belonging to a group or an individual. Social well-being is related to creating, developing and maintaining meaningful relationships with others. This allows one to feel unique and valued, and helps fulfil the need for connection and belonging. We are social creatures who need each other. A part of our brain (the limbic system) is responsible for our desire to be with, around, and connected to others. It creates within us feelings of security and happiness when we are with our “familars”.

Referring to Corey Lee M. Keyes (1998), Teghe and Rendell (2005) and Keyes (2009), there are five social dimensions that comprise wellbeing: social acceptance (accepting others as they are); social actualization (positive comfort level with society); social contribution (a sense of having a contribution to make to society); social coherence (perceiving the social world as predictable and understandable); and social integration (feeling as a part of the community).

If our social well-being were not developed, we would risk being socially isolated. Being isolated from society is not the same as choosing to be alone for a while and enjoy solitude. Social isolation is not a choice. Withdrawing from human relationships turns into a downward spiral (imagine a sinkhole, or a vortex), because isolation fosters negative feelings of fear and threat that encourage even more isolating behaviour. Social isolation fosters loneliness, which can be devastating.

During the semi structured interviews we identified that the actors (academic and administrative staff, as well as parents and students) related the notion of wellbeing of university students with special needs more with the component of *social acceptance*, *social coherence* and *social integration*.

Through direct interviews, two main attitudes of the academic and administrative staff were identified. The first position was in support of the inclusion of students with special needs in the university. According to the opinions of some of the academic staff, this inclusion, on the one hand, helps students with disabilities to give a beautiful meaning to their lives, to socialise with their peers, but also to become professionals in the future. According to them, another advantage of this inclusion is the creation of an inclusive spirit for all students. As Ambera Duka et al. (2024) note, collaborative atmosphere aspects influence and inspire students with special needs.

This is how the laboratory worker of one of the departments of the Faculty of Social Sciences (FSS) puts it:

I always see a girl with a carriage that comes in our faculty every day. When she comes here, she is always accompanied by her mother and then by a school friend and I think to myself 'It is a great thing that these young people are committed to each other, are helpful and work together to improve the well-being of the one who is in need'. (p. 304)

A lecturer gave her opinion about this issue, claiming:

There is a sensitive discussion regarding the participation of students with special needs in universities: the first position sees participation as an opportunity, a strategy to increase social cohesion, acceptance and solidarity between different individuals. The second position is more pragmatic and highlights the value of following a university program by a student with special needs, posing the question "Can a student with special needs be a good professional and have a public engagement?" I think that the Faculty of Social Sciences is a friendly institution that promotes participation and social cohesion. In one of my courses, I even invited a public figure with special needs to an open lecture, to promote her as a success story, and it was one of the most inspiring lectures for the students. 'Strength of character makes the impossible possible' and this is a message for all of us.

As identified in these pieces of the interviews, the component of social acceptance as well as social integration are strongly mentioned.

However, there are also those who view the participation of students with special needs in universities with skepticism. Here there is a focus on the social contribution of the students with special needs. According to some professors, even when these students finish their education, it will be difficult and in some cases impossible for them to get a job and to give a social contribution as professionals. According to their opinion, the job market is very selective and this is where the big challenge begins. On the other hand, these lecturers claim that they have difficulties in evaluating these students. Especially when it comes to disabilities of a high degree that neither speak nor write, the evaluation for them becomes impossible. According to the professors, although the legislation has been improved and the presence of students with special needs has now become a reality, there are no special protocols to enable the teaching and assessment of these students. A professor even expressed the idea that, in such conditions where there is a lack of the evaluating protocols, such students should be provided with a specific university certificate that verifies their participation in university and postgraduate programmes and not a classic university diploma.

According to the perspective of other students, the participation of students with special needs in the auditoriums of this faculty gives a more friendly spirit to the faculty, increases empathy towards people in need and awakens the spirit of hu-

manity. They also affirm that by providing help and support to USSN, they increase solidarity among them in function of this support. This is how a student expresses it:

We had a friend who came in a wheelchair who spoke very little, or almost not at all. We took care of him at times. We pushed the wheelchair, put on his sweater when it was cold, and even took him for walks. We also helped him with the lectures and, thanks to this human warmth, he started to communicate somehow with us, but yet he couldn't say a full sentence and the professors had a hard time understanding him. He followed the bachelor program for 2 years and after that he went to Sweden with his family. There, thanks to special programs, he has made a lot of progress there and we are very happy for him. Universities here in Albania should also have such specific programs to help students with special needs.

Another student who is at the end of the master programme in the Faculty of Social Sciences shows a very interesting experience as part of a project, supported by an international organisation, based on which the Club of Students with Different Abilities was created, in which attended not only students with special needs, but also other students, who supported the cause of including USSN in the university and made a real contribution to their support and life facilitation. According to her:

In this club we have managed to bring together different students who believe in a common cause "the social inclusion of different students". We have found the support of parents and lecturers and we are trying to make a small contribution to improving the well-being of the USSN.

Interviews with parents of USSN also highlight the importance of the participation of students with special needs in university education. According to them, the continuation of the socialisation process with the peer group is very important for the social well-being of these children and the support of friends and professors is very important for them. However, according to them, although the support of their friends is not missing, sometimes they feel that they do not have the specific attention of the professors. According to the parents, the assessment of these students should be based on special programmes, as it also works in pre-university education.

According to the students with special needs, themselves, in the FSS there is a special sensitivity towards students with special needs.

We feel accepted here, as in our home. The other students, the administrative staff and the lecturers have a special care for us. This is an extraordinary thing; however, some other steps must be taken, especially related to the improvement of infrastructure. For us who are blind, the lack of infrastructure is very big. Another important thing that university should do is lobbying and making advocacy to enable some legislation changes, where special quotas can be provided for us in the employment field as well. Our employment is the next challenge...

RESULTS

The study highlighted that in the Republic of Albania important positive steps have been taken in improving the legislation of Higher Education regarding the inclusion of students with special needs in universities. This has been successfully adapted to the University Statute of the University of Tirana in the Republic of Albania.

Also, the study highlighted that even from the infrastructural aspect, some opportunities have been created for students with special needs in this faculty, but they are insufficient. The lack of protocols and individual programmes for the treatment of these students is a necessity.

Regardless of these shortcomings, based also on the statistical data, an increase in the number of USSN in the auditoriums of the Faculty of Social Sciences at UT is observed. This increasing number dictates an increased attention to this category of students.

On the other hand, despite the skepticism from some about the participation of USSN in university education, a friendly climate is created in this faculty, in support of the social wellbeing of USSN.

CONCLUSIONS

As a conclusion, the adaptation of the philosophy of inclusion in concrete practices with the universities is met with numerous challenges. Some of the challenges are related to the creation of infrastructure and protocols for the application of individualised programmes, staff training, etc. Regarding the creation of a friendly climate in function of the social welfare of USSN, the case of the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Tirana constitutes a positive model, which should be promoted.

Some challenges with which the students with special needs, parents and professors deal with, can be overcome through the following measurement:

- The creation of a National University Protocol about the inclusion of USSN in universities of the Republic of Albania would be of an important necessity;
- The creation of ad hoc multidisciplinary assessment committees within the faculties and the drawing up of individual plans for students with special needs, would be of a great value;
- With the aim to overcome some prejudices, and the lack of information about the category of USSN and specific training is needed to be developed for both academic and administrative staff;
- The University programmes and curricula needs to be improved and more modules and topics dealing with the inclusion of USSN need to be involved in the existing university programmes;

- Collaborative efforts at the micro level (within universities themselves) and in macro level between universities, universities and other stakeholders and countries as well, can influence the improvement of the inclusion of students with special needs.
- With the aim to overcome the skepticism “if a student with special needs can be a good professional and have a public engagement”, the harmonisation of the studies with the job market for USSN needs to be built. Through raising the people’s awareness about the importance of inclusion of people with special needs in universities and job market, a friendly society can be created and developed.

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