

Status of Education for Disabled in Higher Education – A Comparative Study in various European countries

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Abstract: The paper considers how inclusive college or university education is in the Netherlands, Romania and Germany. Since there is no policy for their specific support demand and the educational institution can therefore do nothing for such students in Netherlands. This has a major impact on the study opportunities of students with support needs. Similarly in Romania, the number of students with disabilities enrolled in higher education is very low compared to European union average. While Germany has made considerable progress in promoting inclusive higher education for students with disabilities, in line with its commitment to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Acknowledging the diverse needs of individuals with physical, psychological, and chronic impairments, the country has put in place comprehensive policies, infrastructure enhancements, and support systems to ensure equal access to academic opportunities. The paper attempts to give some key recommendations and suggestions for Netherlands and Romania and to adopt best practices from Germany.

Keywords: Students with disabilities, students with special education needs (SEN), inclusive education, accessibility, HEIs.

INTRODUCTION

The European Union (EU) comprises 27 countries, known as member states. The EU supports individuals with disabilities by setting objectives and providing funding. Approximately one-quarter of people in the EU report having a disability, with older adults, particularly those over 65, being more likely to experience disabilities. As life expectancy increases, the number of people with disabilities is expected to rise. Individuals with disabilities often face challenges such as accessing suitable education or employment, traveling internationally, and receiving necessary healthcare. They are also more likely to experience poverty and may struggle to participate fully and equally in society. These issues were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Support for people with disabilities varies significantly across EU member states. Each country has its own criteria for determining disability status and the type of support provided. This lack of standardization means there can be disagreements among member states about who qualifies as having a disability. A study by the European Court of Auditors 3 revealed that not only do individuals receive different levels of support in various countries, but disparities can also exist within different regions of the same country.

Additionally, member states use different methods to collect information about disabilities and the support available. This inconsistency poses challenges for the European Commission, which relies on data from surveys to compare disability-related information across countries. The lack of uniform data collection methods makes it

difficult to accurately assess the number of people with disabilities in the EU and understand their needs.

The European Commission has emphasized that public bodies within the EU should lead by employing individuals with disabilities. However, a study by the European Court of Auditors found that many public bodies lack precise data on the number of employees with disabilities in their workforce.

Status of disabled in higher education in Netherlands

In Dutch higher education, there is no separate provision for 'special education' for students with disabilities or support needs, unlike in primary, secondary, and vocational education, which are governed by laws such as the 'Passive Education Act.' Furthermore, there is no dedicated policy framework like a 'special roadmap' or a 'working agenda on inclusive education.' Consequently, colleges and universities operate as inherently inclusive environments where students with and without disabilities pursue their education together.

Since ratifying the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2016, the Netherlands has been obligated to advance inclusive education. Among students, 38% have a disability, and 14% face study-related barriers that necessitate specific support. Over recent years, colleges and universities have shown growing commitment to inclusive education, with increased engagement from top management and greater awareness and motivation among teaching staff.

Despite these advancements, significant challenges also

persist. Rising stress and performance pressures among students are notable concerns, particularly for those with less visible disabilities, such as mental health conditions. These students often express dissatisfaction with available support or uncertainty about where to access it. Institutions that have endorsed the UN Convention's declaration of intent often struggle to implement it effectively. For instance, not all departments are wheelchair-accessible, and some lecturers feel ill-equipped to support inclusive education. While the education sector is actively working to provide additional adaptations and tailored support for students, foundational issues remain unaddressed. Statistics reveal that 57% of students face disabilities or special personal circumstances, with 38% specifically reporting disabilities. Of these, 14% encounter study-related obstacles that necessitate specific accommodations. Furthermore, the academic progress of students with disabilities lags behind their peers, with a study success rate of 74% compared to 86% for students without disabilities.⁵

Educational institutions at Netherlands rate the progress of implementing the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities at their institutions an average of 6.3 out of 10. (Scheeren & Van Veen, 2023)⁶. Educational institutions acknowledge that they are making positive, albeit small, strides in the right direction. They note that since the signing of the UNCRPD, there has been increased awareness and support, with inclusion becoming more integrated into policy plans. However, they also emphasize that meaningful change takes time and highlight that there is still significant room for improvement.

Research on the implementation of the UNCRPD indicates that 75% of higher education institutions face challenges due to insufficient time and personnel, while 63% report 7 difficulties stemming from a lack of clear ownership (Scheeren & Van Veen, 2023). Educational institutions grapple with questions about who is responsible, which tasks fall to whom, and who has the time and capacity to address these responsibilities.

Inclusive Education Policy faces a variety of challenges. A monitoring study on the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities shows that 31% of higher education institutions updated their policies on inclusive education or studying with a disability during the past academic year. Some institutions integrated inclusion into existing policies, such as those related to admission or recruitment (Scheeren & Van Veen, 2023). Institutions that did not update their policies cited reasons such as under staffing, being in the initial stages of implementation, or having already revised their policies in recent years.

Higher education institutions report involving students participation with lived experience in policymaking, implementation, and evaluation through mechanisms such as sounding board groups, platforms, or advisory committees comprising students with support needs (Scheeren & Van Veen, 2023). However, institutions acknowledge challenges in effectively engaging these students. Small-scale research on the participation of students with support needs highlights obstacles such as

inadequate recognition of their contributions, unclear agreements, and a lack of feedback. (Van Veen & Schreurs, 2022)⁸

Students with support needs often perceive a lack of awareness from educational institutions regarding physical accessibility. They are frequently left to determine on their own whether buildings and classrooms are accessible, which can be time-consuming and exhausting. Challenges include having multiple entrances, with only one being accessible, elevators equipped solely with Braille but lacking auditory floor announcements, limited signage or markings within buildings, and school surroundings that are not accessible. (De Koning & Scheeren, 2023; Schreurs et al., 2023).⁹

A wide range of digital tools, including websites, platforms, and apps, are used in education. Ensuring these tools are digitally accessible and usable for all students is essential. However, research indicates that information is often provided in formats which are not accessible (Schreurs et al., 2023).¹⁰ As a result, students who rely on screen readers or pre-reading software are unable to properly navigate websites. They believe the issue can be easily addressed by ensuring proper website structure, but this has not yet been implemented across all educational institutions.

Currently, many educational institutions do not offer the option of taking online education (Schreurs, et al., 2023). Research indicates that incorporating online education as a standard mode of learning, available to both students with and without disabilities, is a crucial component of inclusive education (Bakker, 2022; Schreurs et al., 2023)¹¹. It provides greater flexibility. By offering lessons both online and in-person, students can select the option that best suits their needs at the time. Those who prefer attending classes in person can be present at the educational institution, while other students have the option to take the class online. This choice can help them better manage their energy throughout the day or experience fewer external distractions during a lecture.

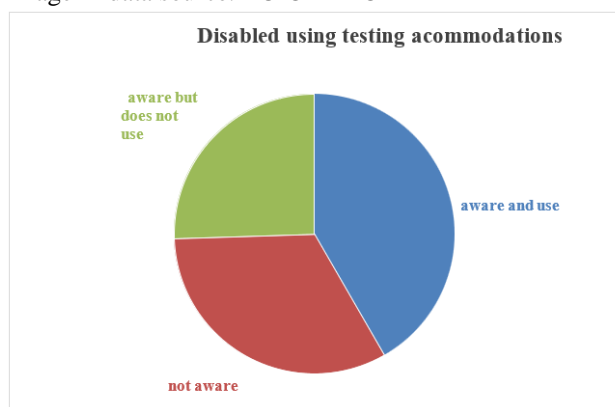
Students with support needs are more prone to experience performance pressure and stress. (Dopmeijer et al., 2023)¹². The perceived workload is often greater for students with such needs compared to those without support needs. On an average, they have less energy available to complete all their tasks and obligations. This is often due to additional responsibilities, such as care appointments or time-consuming tasks, or the need to invest significant effort into organizing the appropriate support. As a result, it becomes more challenging for this group to balance all their various commitments.

A key element of inclusion is the sense of belonging, or feeling at home, whether within an educational institution or a particular subject area. Research shows that a positive relationship with teachers has a beneficial impact on students' sense of belonging (Adrichem et al., 2022). However, it is not always the case that students feel at home at their educational institution. Students with support needs

often report a lack of connection with both the program and the institution, partly because they feel hindered or even antagonized by the institution (Schreurs et al., 2023). Additionally, the Monitor policies indicate that students with disabilities report lower levels of engagement with their programs compared to students without disabilities (Van den Broek et al., 2022). This is concerning, as a strong sense of connection and engagement is crucial for students' academic success and influences dropout rates (Elffers, 2016; Kappe, 2017).

Many students with support needs are familiar with and make use of testing facilities, and are generally satisfied with the services provided. However, educational institutions still place limited emphasis on inclusion within the curriculum. Students frequently encounter inaccessible learning materials, and inclusion is seldom included as a topic within the curriculum.

Image 1- data source: ECIO REPORT



An inclusive support system ensures that educational institutions offer appropriate support for students facing barriers and actively inform them about available resources. Despite efforts to improve information about studying with support needs, research shows that many students still experience difficulties related to accessibility, discover-ability, and clarity of information. Additionally, students are often dissatisfied with the provision of information. Furthermore, the students with support needs are more likely to face financial difficulties but are often unaware of the financial compensation that may be available to them through the institution.

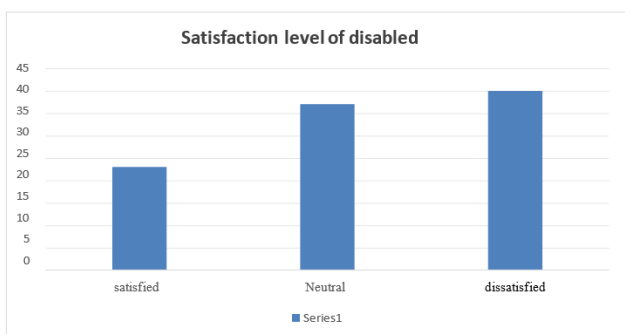


Image 2- ECIO Report “the state of inclusive education”

Equipping professionals for inclusive education involves

supporting, facilitating, and training education staff to foster inclusivity at their institutions. Students report that many educators still lack awareness, knowledge, and skills to provide inclusive education. Teachers themselves note that their institutions do not provide adequate tools to make their teaching accessible, and they often lack sufficient knowledge and skills in this area. High workloads and decreased well-being among instructors further limit their capacity to address students' support requests in addition to their teaching responsibilities.

Inclusive transitions between educational stages refer to a smooth flow into and out of education for students with support needs. While higher education in the Netherlands is generally accessible to students with support needs, these students still face barriers when transitioning into higher education. As a result, students with support needs are more likely to drop out of higher education compared to their peers without support needs.

The inclusion element focuses on the importance of national and regional cooperation to promote broad knowledge exchange on inclusive education. Such cooperation is viewed as both a prerequisite and a method for continuing progress on inclusive education. Several networks and collaborations have already been established where national and regional partners come together to share knowledge and experiences related to various aspects of inclusive education.

Status of disabled in higher education in Romania

Currently, the number of students with disabilities in Romania's national higher education system is very low. According to the EUROSTUDENT VII National Report 13(2022), only 5% of young people enrolled in full-time programs report having a disability, compared to the European average of 15%. Furthermore, a significant portion of these students (37%) indicate that they do not feel the need for additional support from authorities to complete their academic journey. This is reflective of the limited attention given to the issue by most stakeholders in the Romanian higher education sector (Lazăr, 2022). The data collected by ANOSR from 2012 to 2021, alongside findings from the report "Diagnosis of People with Disabilities in Romania," highlights a persistent need within the Romanian higher education system to adapt the physical environment, as well as educational and informational resources, to better support students with disabilities or special educational needs (SEN). Additionally, there is a need to raise awareness among academic staff, students, and administrative personnel about this critical social issue (ANOSR, 2022; Grigori et al., 2021) 14.

In the Romanian academic environment, examples of best practices are currently limited to a few universities. These institutions have either allocated resources to create organizational structures dedicated to supporting students with disabilities (e.g., “Babeş-Bolyiai” University of Cluj-Napoca), developed and implemented specific intervention procedures for students with disabilities (e.g., West University of Timisoara), or carried out projects funded by institutional development funds or other sources. These projects have introduced targeted intervention mechanisms

aimed at enhancing the inclusion of students with disabilities (e.g., University of Bucharest, Polytechnic University of Timisoara).¹⁵

Romania has implemented several legal measures to promote the rights of individuals with disabilities, in line with international agreements like the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). National legislation, including Law No. 448/2006 on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Disabled Persons, emphasizes the right to education for all. However, despite these frameworks, the practical implementation of inclusive policies in higher education institutions (HEIs) is inconsistent. While many universities have developed disability policies. But their effectiveness varies greatly depending on available resources, the level of leadership commitment, and regional differences

Accessibility in higher education¹⁶ is an area where a lot more needs to be done. Although some universities have made strides in offering accessible infrastructure, such as ramps, elevators, and specialized restrooms, many campuses still lack comprehensive accessibility solutions. The presence of historical buildings in Romania's universities presents further challenges in retrofitting them to include accessibility features. As digital education becomes more prevalent, ensuring accessible online platforms and resources has gained greater significance. Some institutions have implemented assistive technologies, such as screen readers and captioned lectures, but these efforts are not yet widespread

Support services for students with disabilities in Romanian universities are often limited. While some institutions offer specialized counseling, mentorship programs, and adaptive learning resources, these services are not consistently available across the country. Although financial aid and scholarships for disabled students do exist, they may not fully address the unique challenges these students face.

Social attitudes toward disability play a significant role in shaping the experiences of disabled students in higher education. Despite some improvements in awareness and advocacy, stigma and discrimination continue to be issues. These attitudinal barriers can deter students from pursuing higher education or fully participating in academic and social activities.

There is limited statistical data on the enrollment and success rates of disabled students in Romanian higher education. Available reports indicate that their representation remains low compared to the general population. Contributing factors include inadequate preparation during primary and secondary education, financial limitations, and the absence of tailored admission processes, all of which exacerbate these disparities

Status of disabled in higher education in Germany

Germany has made considerable progress in promoting inclusive higher education for students with disabilities, in line with its commitment to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Acknowledging the diverse needs of individuals with physical, psychological, and chronic impairments, the country has put in place

comprehensive policies, infrastructure enhancements, and support systems to ensure equal access to academic opportunities. Universities across Germany, with the support of initiatives such as the Information and Advice Centre for Students with Disabilities (IBS), offer tailored services, including accessible facilities and personalized study plans. Despite these efforts, challenges remain, including structural obstacles and a lack of awareness within academic communities. As Germany continues to champion inclusivity, the focus is on creating environments where students with disabilities can fully engage, succeed, and contribute to higher education.¹⁷

Germany has developed comprehensive support systems and policies to foster the inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education. However, ongoing efforts are required to address the challenges these students encounter and to create truly inclusive learning environments. While there are no universities in Germany dedicated exclusively to disabled students, all universities are committed to ensure equal access for all students, including those with disabilities

Germany has a strong legal framework to support disabled students in higher education, including the Federal Equal Opportunities for Disabled People Act (BGG) and state-specific regulations. The General Equal Treatment Act (AGG) prohibits discrimination, ensuring that individuals with disabilities have equal access to education and employment opportunities. Furthermore, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), ratified by Germany in 2009, has prompted reforms aimed at improving accessibility and inclusivity in higher education. Universities are required to accommodate students with disabilities by implementing accessible infrastructure, digital learning tools, and personalized support services.

German universities are generally ahead in providing accessible infrastructure. New buildings are designed with universal access in mind, and many older campuses have been retrofitted to meet accessibility standards.

Germany has embraced digital inclusion, focusing on assistive technologies. Universities often provide accessible course materials, captioned video lectures, and platforms compatible with screen readers. However, the effectiveness of these measures can vary between institutions.

In Germany, support services are well-structured and widely available. Many universities have dedicated offices for students with disabilities, offering services such as academic accommodations, psychological support, and career counseling. Financial assistance, including scholarships like the "Deutschlandstipendium," is also available to students with disabilities.¹⁸

Germany has made significant progress in promoting inclusive attitudes, supported by advocacy organizations and government initiatives. However, challenges remain, particularly in addressing subtle biases and ensuring that

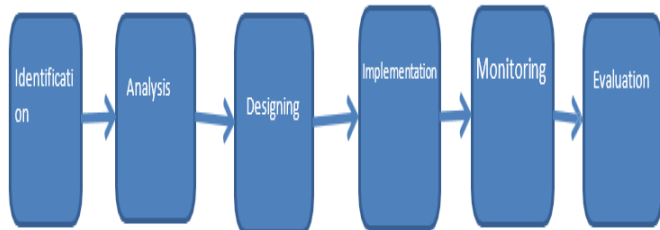
staff and faculty are adequately trained to support students with disabilities.

In Germany, data collection on students with disabilities is more systematic. Recent studies show that around 11% of higher education students identify as having a disability or chronic illness. While this figure indicates positive progress toward inclusion, barriers related to accessibility and support still impede their full participation.

While Germany has made notable strides in accessibility and support services, countries like Romania and the Netherlands continue to face significant challenges in implementing inclusive policies. By prioritizing accessibility, expanding support services, and promoting inclusive attitudes, both countries can create higher education systems that serve all citizens effectively. This would not only uphold the rights of individuals with disabilities but also enrich the academic communities as a whole.19

Key Recommendations and Suggestions for improvement in higher education in all the European countries:

1. Elaboration of an operational procedure of intervention for the students with disabilities, through taking account of the model of good practice in various universities of Germany and some of Romania
 - a. Identifying the students with disabilities in the beginning at the time of their enrolment;
 - b. analyzing the individual needs for assistance and support of each young person who faces disabilities or has learning difficulties;
 - c. designing individualized action plans for each particular situation;
 - d. implementing of interventions for each particular case;
 - e. Monitoring the implementation of plans of students with disabilities.
 - f. evaluating the quality of the support-services provided.



2. Offering quality counselling and support services with a view to enabling the students with disabilities/SEN overcome adaptation obstacles and difficulties
 - a. Pedagogical and organizational support includes organizing remote learning activities during illness, providing training for partial or final exams and projects, setting minimum attendance requirements for academic activities, and offering consultations with teaching staff to adapt teaching methods and resources to address the unique

- challenges faced by individual students.
- b. Providing therapeutic support to enhance the well-being and development of students with disabilities includes psychological counseling for those experiencing mental, emotional, or psychological challenges, as well as therapeutic assistance for students facing difficulties with learning, communication, social integration, or adapting to the academic environment and curricular demands.
- c. Technical support involves ensuring physical accessibility to learning environments by implementing features such as ramps, mobile platforms, support bars, and elevators for students with motor disabilities. It also includes providing auxiliary technical resources to enhance the teaching-learning process, such as adjustable desks and chairs, and tools to create secure and adaptable learning environments for students with diverse needs.

3. Raising awareness among the teaching staff and equipping them to adopt necessary curricular adaptations, including the identification and implementation of the most suitable teaching, learning, and evaluation methods. This includes Personalized consultations for students with disabilities, designing course content and delivery to individual learning capacities and Utilizing technology to enhance accessibility, such as audio tools for visually impaired students and visual resources for hearing-impaired learners.

4. Enhancing the professional development of teaching staff to promote inclusive education and effective pedagogy for individuals with disabilities. Key aspects of this development include: offering personalized consultations for students with disabilities or special educational needs (SEN); devising solutions to customize course content and individual study activities in the syllabus to suit students' learning capabilities; and modifying teaching strategies and assessment methods to accommodate the needs of students with disabilities. This can be done through Participating in awareness campaigns and public policy discussions on inclusion, Organizing and engage in regional and national events to enhance inclusive education practices and Preparing grant proposals to secure resources for an inclusive educational system.

5. Providing the access of the students with disabilities to various components of the material resources of university campuses I.e.Dormitories, dining facilities, sports grounds, and cultural centers.Adapted lecture halls, laboratories, and library resources, Social and extracurricular spaces to foster interaction and mutual support.

6. Accessing projects that enable getting financial support for providing decent life and learning conditions for the students with disabilities which includes Additional funding for special accommodations, travel support, and assistive resources and Internships and training programs to enhance employability and professional skills

7. Securing Additional Financial Support by Advocating

for increased funding through diverse sources, including: State and non-state financing mechanisms, Partnerships with businesses and organizations committed to social responsibility., Participation in national and international projects to improve living and learning conditions for students with disabilities.

CONCLUSION

This paper has highlighted the significant disparities in the inclusivity of higher education for students with disabilities across the Netherlands, Romania, and Germany. While the Netherlands and Romania face challenges in providing adequate support and infrastructure for students with disabilities, Germany's progressive approach has yielded notable improvements in fostering inclusive academic environments. The implementation of comprehensive policies, enhanced infrastructure, and tailored support systems in Germany serves as a valuable model for both the Netherlands and Romania. It is crucial for these countries to acknowledge the diverse needs of students with disabilities and adopt best practices to ensure equal access to higher education. By drawing on Germany's experience, the Netherlands and Romania can develop more inclusive educational frameworks, thus empowering all students to achieve their academic potential and contribute to a more equitable society.

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