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„... I try to focus on the gender discrimination aspect, but among disabled people that's not the main problem” — Barriers and supporting factors in the participation of students with disabilities in higher education

Abstract

The article examines visible and invisible structural barriers and biases impeding access to higher education, offering examples from Hungary and beyond. The article showcases practice-oriented, reflective approaches and a case study examining the underlying patterns and discourses that maintain inequalities in higher education. Considerations and findings inform various stakeholders and individuals of systemic barriers and issues, and the findings act as catalysts for promoting and ensuring equitable access and participation in higher education.

Keywords: access, participation, higher education, individuals with disabilities, inclusion.

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Barriers and supporting factors in the participation of students with disabilities in higher education

Introduction

The 20th and 21st centuries have witnessed many changes in society and higher education. New groups, particularly those previously underrepresented in higher education, have gained entry into it. Various societal changes, such as the civil rights movement, have impacted greater access and participation in higher education. On a global and European level, acknowledging and strengthening the universal right to education was a crucial milestone. Especially over the past few decades, higher education has become more diverse and accessible globally, including in Hungary. However, many studies (for example Claeys-Kulik & Jørgensen, 2018) have shown that there are still structural barriers that prevent certain social groups and individuals from accessing and participating in higher education. These barriers can have short, medium, and long-term effects on employability and social fragmentation, and they contribute to increasing inequality gaps. Therefore, it is crucial to work towards increasing access to quality education to build resilient societies and economies, particularly in the face of global challenges.

The community of students and staff in higher education has become much more diverse than in the 19th century (Kottman et al., 2019). The UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education Report recognized this trend and recommended that higher education institutions adapt to these societal changes. Paradigm shifts and strategies are needed to create a more innovative, diverse, and inclusive education system (UNESCO, 1998). Equal access to quality education and enhancing the social dimension of higher education are on a global agenda (i.e., SDG’s Goal 4) and among the European Union’s central goals. Despite multiple actions promoting access, participation and non-discrimination, many people still face barriers to access and inclusion in higher education. Mapping structural barriers that hinder individuals’ full and effective participation and outlining strategic directions and practical implementations in this area cannot be interpreted in isolation (Fazekas, 2018).

According to a survey carried out in connection with a recently concluded Erasmus+ project, EESI-Digi (Educational Empowerment and Social Inclusion of



Students with Disabilities through Digital Solutions and Assistive Technologies), reveals that the students with disabilities in the partner countries (Greece, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania and Spain) still face many visible and invisible barriers when entering higher education (EESI-DIGI, 2024). The presence of structural barriers can be seen in all countries. Without claiming to be complete, the most important structural challenges are:

- the lack of adequate career counselling,
- inaccessible information on websites and learning management platforms,
- inaccessible learning materials,
- physical and info-communicational inaccessibility,
- missing on-site services for students with disabilities at campuses,
- negative or stereotypical attitudes of teachers and staff,
- teachers have little knowledge and no guidance on special needs, reasonable accommodations and universal design,
- low income of students with disabilities,
- insufficient financial support,
- missing presence of teachers and students with disabilities in governing bodies.

From the students' perspective, skill gaps exist among students with disabilities when entering higher education. A survey from 2017 by Kovács and Kollárszky shows the following essential skills to study successfully in a university, in which there might be a gap in students with disabilities:

- being familiar with the university's own systems (electronic learning system; study affair department; sports; library; application to social grants, etc.),
- knowledge on the rights to reasonable accommodations,
- understanding when and how to disclose disability to different persons at university,
- self-determination and a strong self-concept and identity,
- high level of IT skills, electronic communications, and Internet resources,
- accessing campus and community resources for academic support (e.g., disability center),
- self-advocacy and empowerment,
- sufficient social skills to be able to ask for help when needed, and having a network of peer students with and without disabilities (Kovács & Kollárszky, 2017).

Despite the challenges students with disabilities face in higher education, statistics show their growing number in many countries. According to the United States – National Center for Education Statistics, in the 2019–2020 academic year, 21% of all enrolled undergraduates and 11% of all enrolled graduate students reported disability (United States – National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Regarding the participation of students with disabilities in higher education, the ADCET survey in Australia showed a 7,44% rate in 2020 and a 9,4% rate in 2021 (Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training, 2021).

In European countries, the picture is quite heterogeneous and it is difficult to find current data analysis. Searching for the national webpages of some European



countries shows results from relatively low participation, for example 2% in France (Campus France, 2022), to medium high representation, like in Ireland with 6,6% (AHEAD Ireland, 2020/21), Germany with 11% (Kauffmann et al., 2023), and high participation, like in the UK where the number of students with disability in higher education represents 17,3% (UK Parliament, House of Commons, 2021).

Where is Hungary in the ranking examining the participation of university students with disabilities? According to the data given by the Ministry of Innovation and Technology, the number of students with disability registered in higher education institutes for the 2023/2024 academic year is 3.070 among the total number of 310.414 students, which stands for 0,99% (Ministry of Culture and Innovation, 2023/2024). Although statistics show great increase – in 2013/2014 the ratio was only 0,52% – participation does not even come close to the data of other EU countries.

1. Theoretical context

1.1. First steps towards inclusive higher education: pioneers with disabilities and the Americans with Disabilities Act

One of the first individuals with disabilities who participated in higher education was the most famous congenitally blind physician, Jacob Bolotin (1888–1924), who was enrolled at the Medical Faculty of Valparaiso University in 1908 and later worked as a pulmonology and cardiology specialist (Perlman, 2007). Students with disabilities showed up in the universities more after the II. World War, thanks to the enactment of the Serviceman's Readjustment Act in 1944. Besides other objectives, this act aimed to improve the education opportunities of soldiers who left the army. As a result, more than 2 million veterans were enrolled in different universities in the US by the beginning of the 50s, which added up to 50% of all American college students. Excessive growth in the volume of disabled veterans in postsecondary education followed. According to a report by the American Council on Education (ACE), this was the first time in the US higher education history that veterans with disability emerged en masse. These students needed special treatment and services, which was not common then. These services should include hiring sighted guides, note-takers, and building ramps. This early period was characterized by frequent negative discrimination and refusal, mainly against students with profound impairments. The colleges and universities with a veteran hospital or rehabilitation centre nearby were more open and preferred by applicants (Madaus, 2011).

The case of Edward Verne Roberts (known as Ed Roberts) is an impressive testimony of this phenomenon. Ed Roberts had to fight to get into University of California, Berkeley in 1962 and to receive appropriate service (Leon, 2006). He pioneered the disability rights movement in universities and became the father of the independent living movement. A new federal legislation, the Rehabilitation Act (1973), especially Section 504, had a great impact on the extended civil rights of people with disabilities. It was the first national civil rights legislation that provided equal access for students with disabilities to higher education institutions receiving federal

financial assistance. The application procedure for Section 504 in higher education institutes took over a decade. Stilwell et al. (1983) describe the controversial situation in their study. By the beginning of the 80s, most universities in Kentucky State did not exclude students based on disability. However, half of them did not provide alternative ways of entrance examinations. The Americans with Disabilities Act on Higher Education of 1990 impacts the whole structure of higher education, including activities, programs, and employment (United States Code 42).

Regarding academics, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) 1990 required higher education institutions to provide reasonable student accommodations, including extracurricular activities (Gordon & Keiser, 2000; Gordon et al., 2002). These accommodations can be in the form of academic adjustments or modifications, such as extended time for test taking or completing course work, substitution of specific courses to meet degree requirements, modification of test taking or performance evaluations so as not to discriminate against a person's sensory, speaking or motor impairments, unless that is what is being tested. Accommodations can also take the shape of auxiliary aids and services, such as qualified sign language interpreters, note-takers, readers, braille, large print, and electronic formats of print materials, as well as adaptive equipment. Today, ADA and Section 504 together provide equal access to students with disability in higher education.

After a brief introduction to the pioneers and the relevance of the ADA, the following chapters examine the challenges that higher education institutions currently face, and demonstrate their responses to them.

1.2. Governance in higher education

To remain relevant and competitive in the global education landscape, higher education institutions must proactively demonstrate their commitment to global issues and tackling societal challenges, such as those related to the Sustainable Development Goals. However, there are reputational, financial, and legal demands, too. Universities must update their governance models, strategies and management structures to attract and keep top students and staff and to continue attracting funding that contributes to their rankings and other reputational factors.

Having inclusion profoundly and systematically interwoven into universities' core strategic and governance structures supports their reputation as innovative and pioneering role models for social inclusion in diverse and complex societies. Universities that demonstrate their commitment to meeting the needs of students and staff with diverse backgrounds, lived experiences, and access requirements will be able to raise their profiles and take their places among the leading innovative universities of the 21st century.

Despite these still sounding far-fetched visions, in many higher education institutions around the world, it is often observed that the scope of the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) area is placed around the service provision – meaning service provision units or governance bodies – of higher education institutions, rather than placed into strategic bodies of university governance.

While universities are working towards further increasing their reputation and uplifting their ranking positions by developing various innovative structures, policies and practices from governance to teaching and learning environments –

without mentioning an exhaustive list –, meaningfully interweaving DEI matters in the governance, or working towards an inclusive university governance structure should also be meaningfully taken further and should be considered fundamentally a strategic priority, rather than just empty phrases when promoting the institution (Fazekas & Johnson, 2022).

1.3. Embracing change and taking innovative approaches in higher education

On a global scale, higher education institutions compete to be the best. They want to be acknowledged as examples of good practices for fostering mobility, inclusiveness, quality, competitiveness and implementation of best practices. These include various innovative approaches, policies, and practices in alignment with global values and the SDGs. There is also a definitive need and demand to explore and re-think new paradigms and strategies for governance structures, management, curriculum design, and teaching and learning environments in 21st-century higher education.

In this multidimensional race, the diversity and inclusion ethos and equity, equal opportunity, and non-discrimination policies are gradually gaining the spotlight within the universities' organisational culture, governance, and overall operation.

Many higher education institutions include in their vision, mission, values, and statement principles to promote and work towards equality, non-discrimination, equity of access, inclusion, and diversity. More and more universities believe in the power of diversity, and it is more recognised that diversity can take many forms and is often intersectional (Miller et al., 2017; Wolbring & Lillywhite, 2021). Learning in a diverse environment leads to personal development and cultural enrichment for all involved. Universities start to see it as their social responsibility to foster an open, welcoming, safe environment by removing barriers and supporting the access and participation of all students and staff.

There is increasing policy and practice work visible through implemented policies and practices on how to foster a more open, welcoming, and safe atmosphere where forms of diversity are recognised, respected, and seen as a source of strength and benefit to the wide university community. Access participation and a true sense of belonging are achieved by continuously co-creating and collaborating with students and staff with various lived experiences. The collaboration keeps everyone on track to conduct our activities inclusively, with available support, knowledge, and practical tools (Fazekas-Vinkovits, 2023).

1.4. Diversity, Equity and Inclusion: use of buzzwords versus meaningful implementations

Mainstreaming inclusion and diversity mean, in practice, putting diversity and inclusion at the heart of the higher education institution's culture and overall operation (Claeys-Kulik & Jørgensen, 2018). Still, many times significant application and accountability need to be improved. Actors who wish to incorporate diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) aspects significantly face a double situation. On the one hand, they are in



an internal competitive situation with those actors who work in the same field but approach the subject matter superficially, reducing trust in the inclusion ethos. On the other hand, in areas where this ethos has not had a tradition and was introduced just now, a certain degree of concern, resistance and questioning of the area may be experienced by the organisation and individuals (Abrams, 2019).

Actors working in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) are in a multidimensional space, compared with those areas (e.g., marketing, communication) that are already an integral part of the institutional culture and operation, including the unquestionability of organisational embeddedness and the provision of appropriate resource allocations. More energy investment and a high degree of mission and passion are required for persons responsible for DEI to bring about significant change. The organisation needs genuinely passionate DEI people and equally interested colleagues who see value in the field and are not immediately resistant but open to the discourse. Their role is outstanding since they will be the actors who will be ambassadors of the change process and will support DEI enthusiasts. The path from a value-based approach to inclusion and diversity to its practical implementation is a journey. Applying mainstreaming inclusion and diversity means becoming a consistent, passionate real-time 'door opener', creating dialogues and cooperation with colleagues within and between the institutions' various organisational units, where inclusion and diversity work has not been introduced or has not been considered before (Fazekas-Vinkovits, 2023).

1.5. Promoting equitable access and participation in higher education

Approaches to access, participation and support provision have been evolving, which means that it is necessary to review structures and value the diversity of individuals. Still, a major concern for the education system at various levels is embracing diversity and creating an inclusive teaching and learning environment conducive to individuals to participate fully and meaningfully. As highlighted by Fazekas-Vinkovits in her work (Fazekas, 2018), the Universal Design framework applied in education is still a new, innovative and proactive approach (Rose et al., 2014). It can be viewed as a set of principles that recognizes and values the diverse composition of individuals, considers diversity as an asset, and aims to create a flexible teaching and learning environment that best caters to the needs of individuals from diverse backgrounds, lived experiences and circumstances. It seeks to eliminate barriers in the educational environment from the outset and to ensure that the widest range of users can participate effectively, and maximizes their potential (Fazekas, 2019).

Fixing the environment afterwards (retrospectively) is still relevant (dominant) on a global scale. The proactive approach is Universal Design in complementary with Reasonable Accommodations. The curricula design model is planned from the very beginning by the universal design approach which is inclusive towards users to the greatest extent, therefore only necessary additional reasonable accommodations will be needed. This approach is linked with universal design. As mentioned in UNCRPD, Art. 2, it means the design of products, environments, programs and services to be

usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design (United Nations, 2006).

A United Nations online article on the access and participation of individuals with disabilities in higher education on a global scale state that *“according to the United Nations Development Program, the global literacy rate for adults with disabilities is only 3%, and just 1% for women with disabilities. The 1 billion people with disabilities are the world’s largest minority, representing around 15% of the world’s population. Therefore, it is urgent that they be fully integrated into society, which implies having equal access to quality education. However, students, academics, and researchers with disabilities in higher education remain underrepresented and are among the most marginalized, vulnerable, and excluded groups on campus. They have difficulties accessing learning facilities and face various forms of stigma and discrimination, as well as barriers to exercising their rights. Inclusive education is important not only for students, academics, and university students with disabilities but also for the societies in which they live, as it helps to combat discrimination and promote both diversity and participation”* (United Nations, n.d., p. 1).

There are many studies, including Albinowski and their co-authors’ work (2023), that highlight that universal accessibility is the condition that must be met by environments, processes, goods, products, and services, as well as objects, tools, and devices, to be understandable, usable, and practicable by all people in conditions of safety and comfort, most autonomously and naturally possible. Although all schools and universities should be designed to meet the needs of all students, the reality is that they often are not. Accessibility is a fundamental aspect of inclusive education, which can make a big difference in the lives of people with disabilities. It is not just about making buildings accessible to wheelchairs and other assistive devices. It is about making educational content accessible to all students, regardless of their abilities. Therefore, it is important to make reading materials easy to read and understand, provide captions and transcripts for videos and images, and make graphics accessible to people with visual disabilities. Lack of accessibility in education can create significant barriers in the path of students with disabilities, making them feel isolated and demotivated, and can prevent them from reaching their full potential. Education affects the global performance of people with disabilities in all areas of their lives, especially those related to access to employment, so encouraging people with disabilities up to the furthest end of their desired formative path will lead to the improvement of employability and to a better quality of life. Completing tertiary education further increases the probability of employment by 8.6 percentage points and 20.6 percentage points for persons with disabilities. The employment effect of having tertiary education is much larger for persons with disabilities than it is for non-disabled people (Albinowski et al., 2023).

Recognising the importance of accessibility, the authors are committed to making Hungarian higher education more inclusive. Below we present a case study, which provides an insight into the positive and negative experiences of students with disabilities at ELTE Eötvös Loránd University.



2. A Hungarian case study

In Hungary, the first publication on including students with disability in higher education was written by Yvonne Csányi (Csányi, 1999). The author gave a state-of-the-art report on the Hungarian situation, comparing it with the Western European practice. She finds the Hungarian situation quite immature in many aspects: the ratio of students with disability, the lack of legislation, and the services.

The first state regulation dealing with equal opportunities in higher education was the 29/2002. (V. 17.) statutory rule by the Hungarian Ministry of Education. One major improvement was the establishment of the disability coordinator system. The effect of the regulation on universities and colleges was taken slowly. Three years after the regulation, Héra, Kun and Ligeti (2005) found big gaps between the rights of students with and without disabilities. The number of students with disabilities in the Hungarian higher education institutes was underrepresented (between 0,2 and 0,4%); students did not know their rights; universities were not barrier-free; there was no equal access; disability coordinators had no competencies in disability studies or special education. The biggest disadvantage was the lack of information from both partners (students and teachers).

In the academic year 2021/2022, the authors were members of an interdisciplinary research team at ELTE Eötvös Loránd University responsible for establishing a gender equality plan. The team consisted of working groups that examined different aspects of gender equality at the university. The aim of the working group was to examine the intersectionality between gender and disability; therefore, our study involved male and female students and staff members with disabilities. In this chapter, we only focus on the information we gathered during the qualitative interview with students.

2.1. Research design

The research was question-driven and did not formulate any preliminary hypotheses. Its main question was: *What supportive factors and barriers to equal access and equality do students with disabilities experience at ELTE Eötvös Loránd University?*

We conducted a 120-minute online focus group interview with disabled male and female students from different faculties. The interview was on Zoom, because based on our previous experience, it is currently the most accessible meeting platform. We were aware of the different support needs; therefore, we informed the interviewees in detail about mandatory research ethics and equal access considerations before the interviews.

None of the interviewees took up the opportunity to arrange for an assistant, but one person arranged for a sign language interpreter. The technical arrangements for interpretation were tested beforehand. The interviews were conducted by one researcher in the team (Anikó), while the other researcher (Ágnes) participated as an observer. We created written notes on our observations and reflections during the interview, and analysed them after the interview. The reflective evaluation served as a quality assurance element of the research.

The interviews were conducted without distractions, however, three of the students did not show up at the scheduled time. We also noticed that among the students who



were present there was significantly less interaction than during the staff interview. The students were visibly discouraged and did not mention many examples and experiences from their university life. We cannot confirm, but only assume that the inevitable power relation among students and us as their lecturers prevented them from speaking freely, despite several attempts to balance these dynamics (e.g., one of their peers was present as an observer, we offered communication on a first name basis, we guaranteed anonymity, etc.).

The completed interview was transcribed, the information identifying the participants was anonymised and the texts were analysed using qualitative content analysis. All members of the research team signed a confidentiality agreement and all research subjects consented to the recording and use of the information they provided.

2.2. Limitations

In most cases we do not have sufficient access to data on students with disabilities. The sampling of our qualitative procedures was supported by statistical data and by the body that assisted the group, the University Disability Centre. Research has shown that several students may have an invisible disability, possibly a psychosocial disability or a chronic illness, of which their environment is unaware (Brown & Leigh, 2018; Lindsay & Fuentes, 2022; Orr et al., 2020; Gillberg, 2020; Yuknis & Bernstein, 2017). Although their experiences are of particular relevance to our study, their inclusion in the sample was not possible, as they would not reveal their identity for the sake of a research study.

The limitation of the focus group interview method is that we can only learn about the views of a specific group and the dynamics between the interviewees create specific results that may have led to different results if other participants would have been invited. A further limitation of the group interview is that it is more difficult for people who are quieter, perhaps anxious, in a multi-actor situation to have their opinions and experiences heard.

In the case of a student focus group, there is a power relation between the interviewer (who is a lecturer) and the students, which can distort the results, as important experiences can stay hidden. We have tried to mitigate this risk by using the above-mentioned power balancing techniques.

In general, the availability of a key person who is trusted by potential subjects and who is willing to take part in the research at their request is a significant support factor in activating the group. We have endeavoured to ensure that the appropriate key person (in this case one of the authors, Krisztina) takes the role of sending out the invitation letters. Other researchers would only engage with the students after they confirmed to Krisztina that they consent.

2.3. Findings

The student interview was dominated by positive experiences. Everyone reported that their inclusion was successfully facilitated by the University Disability Centre, the faculty disability coordinators and the Student Union representatives. They perceive



that in case of invisible disabilities their integration is even easier because they only have to indicate their needs in special situations, e.g., when extra time is requested during exams. Other than this, they can participate „normally” in student life. One of our main general impressions is that disabled students do not experience gender-based discrimination and oppression, because their disability-related difficulties override this aspect. This is in line with previous research findings in the field of Hungarian Feminist Disability Studies (Hernádi, 2014).

The main contacts for students, apart from their fellow students, are the lecturers. Most of them reported well prepared, cooperative and flexible instructors, but there were also experiences that suggest a lack of methodological preparation or even negative attitudes towards disability (e.g., if there is no openness to share accessible resources, students do not receive a reply email). The interviewees stressed that making their environment accessible takes far more resources than listening to their needs in advance and using the universal design approach. This phenomenon puts them at a disadvantage in tenders and projects.

Not only the departments mentioned above, but also the library staff and the heads of the dormitories played a positive role, and with their help students were able to solve many issues (e.g., scanning books that were not yet accessible; allowing the use of a ground floor room, etc.). In terms of career support, the students consider career management training and the possibility to participate in all competitions and contests as important. However, they mentioned the recently terminated Higher Education Students with Disabilities Public Administration Scholarship, which they saw as an extremely useful opportunity. Although they can also benefit from other scholarships and talent development frameworks, their disability makes it difficult to meet the requirements.

Regarding career support, there are also experiences of a lack of information from lecturers: some students feel that they have received misleading or contradictory advice from them. This is presumably influenced by the faculty they are enrolled at and their area of studies. Some say that it should be accepted that a particular field is not accessible to a person with a disability, but other students believe that everyone has the right to gain experience and should not be denied the opportunity in advance. As they do not always receive competent advice on this issue, interviewees underlined the importance of specific awareness-raising trainings for their lecturers.

Results of the focus group interview indicate that interpersonal support often happens at an informal level, without any conscious structural or institutional effort. According to the students, they had no difficulty in finding friends and if they sometimes needed help, it was solved with their informal support. It is important to stress, however, that this is also possible because the support system for students is based on the Personal Assistance service, and therefore there is no need to “burden” friends with everyday tasks (note-taking, helping with administrative tasks). In fact, it is more of an intrapersonal issue that a self-critical element emerged in the interview: not only the training of non-disabled people is important for cooperation, but also the development of self-awareness and learning methodologies for students with special needs, because they need to learn not only how to ask for help, but also how to identify what support need they exactly have.



2.4. Recommendations

Based on the results mentioned above, we formulated recommendations at both organisational and interpersonal levels.

At the *organisational level*, we should strengthen the work of the Office for Special Student Affairs, the Student Self-Governments and the faculty disability coordinators, as well as the Equal Opportunities Committee, as the role of these departments is key according to students' experiences. It is also relevant to encourage and support cooperation between the above departments. Universities should give priority to supporting the talent management and development of students with special needs, and to compensate fairly for disadvantages arising from their condition.

Consideration should be given to accessibility when awarding grants and scholarships, and decision makers should use a selection matrix to support diversity in the evaluation of applications. We highly recommend the recognition of the multiple disadvantages faced by female students with disabilities, parallel to the monitoring and elimination of discriminatory practices that they experience. Information and awareness-raising for female students with disabilities is needed to enable them to stand up for their rights more effectively.

Information transfer and awareness-raising, along with supervision and training for teachers, staff and fellow students is also key in promoting participation and equal access. In our opinion, it is essential to provide trainers with the opportunity to develop their attitudes and methodological training in order to learn about equal access and the universal design of educational processes, as well as the possibilities of adaptation. In the meantime, teachers should be encouraged to create new teaching materials in line with the principles of universal design, to adapt existing materials and to be made aware of the need to give priority to universal design aspects over retrofitting (including in the design of physical environments, information and projects). Our research was only a first step, but it is essential to provide additional resources to support future studies.

At the *interpersonal level*, universities should encourage networking between students with disabilities. This can be achieved primarily through coordination between the departments that support them. The organisation and maintenance of platforms, forums, support and self-help groups for the exchange of experiences should be promoted. The provision of informal support, which is already working well, can be strengthened by raising the awareness of non-disabled students.

3. Conclusions

Education is not a privilege but a fundamental human right, as stated by various resources, including UNESCO. The right to higher education encompasses both access and success. Access to higher education means that individuals from diverse backgrounds, experiences, and access needs can participate meaningfully where structural barriers are removed (UNESCO International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2022). Higher education institutions must move forward from individual, retrospective resolutions to an "*inclusion in mind as a default*" approach and eliminate barriers – such as financial constraints and lack

of inclusiveness in curriculum design, teaching, and learning, among many others – proactively.

The Hungarian case study demonstrated that the higher education experience of students with disabilities is overall positive. They receive effective support by the University Disability Centre, the faculty disability coordinators and the Student Union representatives, as well as significant informal help by their peers and lecturers. Unfortunately, students also have to face challenges due to their needs. Some of them feel that they have received misleading or contradictory advice from lecturers, especially regarding their career opportunities. However, the Personal Assistance service provided by the University Disability Centre can be assessed as a promising practice, because it allows them to avoid burdening their friendships with constant requests for voluntary help.

Success in higher education involves ensuring inclusion and diversity mainstreaming across the institution, including establishment and accountability for an inclusive governance model, organisational culture, and adequate support via various service provisions. Ensuring that the greatest extent of students have access to higher education, thrive, and succeed in their academic pursuits requires collective energy, investment, and accountability from all stakeholders. Leadership, organisational units and individuals should create a more open, democratic, diverse, inclusive organisational culture and operation.

The study not only enabled a moment to examine the state of the art, but it also acted as a catalyst for a call to action, and inspired relevant stakeholders to become change-makers who meaningfully work in collaboration with individuals with lived experiences to strive for a more inclusive and diverse higher education, not only on a national but also on an international level. We are confident that our recommendations will be able to support higher education institutions in taking the first steps towards a more inclusive and accessible approach.

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