



Equal Opportunities or Hidden Inequalities – Disabled Students' Ethical and Legal Challenges in Higher Education in the EU and Hungary

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ABSTRACT: The integration of persons with disabilities into higher education is a key social and policy issue all over the world. The presence or absence of an accessible environment, legal regulations, and institutional support fundamentally influences the educational equity and social inclusion of students with disabilities. Legislation treats this area as of utmost importance at both international, European Union and national levels. Although the majority of society claims to be verbally accepting of people with disabilities, in practice, there is often insensitivity towards their limitations and needs. This prejudice, stemming from ignorance, has a harmful impact on the affected individuals and contributes to the persistence of exclusionary behavior. The aim of this study is to present, using the method of legal source and literature analysis, how this area is regulated at the EU level and how these norms are enforced in Hungarian higher education at the member state level.

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1. Introduction

The participation of students with disabilities in higher education reveals a distinctive pattern. While access is formally expanding and institutions are placing increasing emphasis on ensuring equal opportunities (Kálmán – Hübner, 2020), the creation of a truly accessible and inclusive educational environment remains fraught with challenges. Universities often declare as their objective the protection of fundamental rights for students with disabilities and the implementation of procedures that serve the "best interests of the student" (EC, 2020). However, the practical realization of these regulations frequently falls short of the intended goals. Accessibility, beyond the provision of appropriate physical infrastructure, also encompasses attitude formation, the establishment of effective support systems, and the presence of qualified professionals (Burgstahler, 2015). Inclusive education and learning environments raise fundamental ethical questions. According to Rawls's (1971) theory of justice, social and educational institutions should operate in a way that ensures genuine equality of opportunity for those in the most disadvantaged positions. This principle is particularly relevant for students with disabilities, as accessibility in higher education implies not only technical solutions but also a moral responsibility (Nussbaum, 2006). Professional support, the sensitization of educators, and attention to individual needs are indispensable for the principle of inclusive higher education to be truly implemented. The current limitations of social inclusion continue to pose significant obstacles for both students and institutions alike.

2. Equal Participation and Non-Discrimination in the Social Integration of Persons with Disabilities

According to the European Commission, we are currently living in the era of the Union of Equality, which aims to promote equal participation and non-discrimination (EC, 2020). One of the key instruments in achieving this goal is the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030, which primarily

supports the realization of the idea of equality for persons with disabilities in a declarative manner. However, the practical implementation of equal treatment depends on a range of social, economic, and cultural factors (Degener, 2017; Quinn & Arstein-Kerslake, 2019). The definition of disability has been the subject of significant academic debates for decades. The traditional medical model interprets disability primarily as an individual deficiency requiring medical or therapeutic intervention (Shakespeare, 2018). In contrast, the social model — developed by Oliver (1990) and other researchers — emphasizes that disability primarily arises from social barriers rather than an individual's biological condition. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and its Optional Protocol (A/RES/61/106) adopts a hybrid approach, suggesting that disability is a dynamic and interactive process shaped by both biological and social factors (UN, 2006). The WHO's International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) represents a bio psycho-social model (WHO, 2001). The European Union applies various political and legislative frameworks to promote an inclusive society and the possibility of equal participation for persons with disabilities (EC, 2021).

The WHO distinguishes between two fundamental concepts: the *impairment* as the loss, deficiency, or abnormality in the psychological, physiological, or anatomical systems or activities of the body, such as paralysis or blindness; and the *disability* as any limitation or deficiency — resulting from impairment — that hinders the performance of an activity considered normal for a human being (WHO, 2001). From the perspective of those affected, however, disability is not a personal trait, but rather a set of conditions, many of which are brought about by social and external or internal environmental elements. According to the formulation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, disability is a broad term. It denotes a variable concept, as disability results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers. These consequences hinder the affected individuals from fully and effectively participating in society on an equal basis with others (Gurbai & Kovács, 2007).

3. Social Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities – The Philosophy of Human Rights

A fundamental ethical and philosophical question for society is whether it can truly accept persons with disabilities in an inclusive manner, particularly at the level of everyday interactions. Persons with disabilities constitute the largest minority in the world (Barnes - Mercer, 2010). Consequently, the perception of disability is not only a sociological or economic issue but also a deeply political one, as it touches upon structural inequalities and the accumulation of disadvantages within society (Fraser, 2009). Certain groups of persons with disabilities – such as the Deaf Community (WFD) – possess unique socio-cultural traditions, a shared language, and a distinct identity that can be interpreted through the dynamics of oppression and self-determination (Young, 2011). The paradigm shift in the perception of disability stems from a rights-based approach, which aims to address disability not merely as a matter of social policy, but as a fundamental human rights issue (Degener, 2017). This change in perspective aligns with Martha Nussbaum's capabilities theory, which argues that a just society must ensure the necessary conditions for individuals to live a fulfilling life and participate fully in society (Nussbaum, 2006). A central element of awareness-raising is recognizing that the social integration of persons with disabilities is not solely a matter of individual adaptation, but also a structural and policy-oriented task requiring the active involvement of those affected (EC, 2008). Accordingly, persons with disabilities should not be viewed merely as patients or individuals in need of rehabilitation, but as citizens whose rights and opportunities must be guaranteed equally alongside those of non-disabled individuals (Quinn & Arstein-Kerslake, 2019). The social inclusion and integration of persons with disabilities are of paramount importance for social justice and equality. The concept of a Union of Equality articulated by the European Commission (2020) emphasizes that the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2021–2030) aims to realize the ideal of equality. However, the definition and perception of disability can vary across cultural and political contexts. Persons with disabilities comprise the world's largest minority, as anyone can join this group due to accident, illness, or aging (WHO, 2011). Nevertheless, disability frequently appears as a political issue, increasing the risk of compounded disadvantage (Petri, 2019). Some groups

of persons with disabilities have a specific socio-cultural background, including the development of a common language, sign language, modes of expression, and customs. Within the disability movement, the human rights narrative has gained increasing strength, supported by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The EU has launched various initiatives and programs to promote the education and implementation of human rights. The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) regularly publishes reports on the status of fundamental rights, analyzing current conditions (FRA, 2024). The practical impact of human rights education and implementation can be observed across several areas within the European Union. At the same time, significant challenges arise from the differing interpretations and practices of law among member states, which complicate uniform application and the effective enforcement of rights (EP, 2024). Moreover, empirical data indicates that among those engaged in advocacy work, knowledge and application of human rights remain limited, and their practical impact is negligible (Petri, 2019).

Awareness-raising plays a pivotal role in the development of an inclusive society. In their quantitative research, Dukic and Perlusz (2023) introduced a participatory awareness-raising program targeting the market sector with the aim of promoting diversity. According to their findings, the program may contribute to positive changes in attitudes towards persons with disabilities, although the limited sample size precludes drawing broad conclusions. To ensure social inclusion and equal access, it is essential to actively involve persons with disabilities in decision-making processes. In this way, not only can formal rights be ensured, but the principles of equality and inclusion may also be realized in practice (Vissi & Papp, 2021).

4. The Rights and Social Integration of Persons with Disabilities in the European Union – Legal Aspects

The legislative bodies of the European Union have developed a multidimensional strategy aimed at safeguarding the rights of persons with disabilities and promoting their social integration. The strategic direction defined by the European Commission (EC, 2018) is built upon three core pillars: the enforcement of EU rights, the promotion of independent living and autonomy, and the assurance of non-discrimination and equal opportunities (EC, 2021). Within the legislative framework, persons with disabilities are entitled — just like any other citizen — to meaningful participation in all areas of life. In recent decades, progress has been made in key sectors such as healthcare, education, and employment. Changes are also observable in areas such as leisure and political engagement. In 2023, 9.5% of individuals aged 18–24 across the EU left the education and training system prematurely. This represents a steady decline over the past decade, from 11.8% in 2013. The dropout rate was higher among men (11.3%) than among women (7.7%) (Eurostat, 2024). There are approximately 101 million persons with disabilities living in the European Union, accounting for 27% of the population aged 16 and over. Despite significant efforts, 52% of persons with disabilities report having experienced discrimination in at least one member state. In 2022, among those aged 18–24, 22.2% of young persons with disabilities left the education system early, compared to only 8.4% of their non-disabled peers. For men, this rate was 25.3% (with disabilities) and 10.0% (without disabilities), whereas for women, the figures were 19.5% and 6.6%, respectively (EC, 2024). Only 29% of young persons with disabilities in the EU attain higher education degrees, compared to 44% among their non-disabled counterparts. The legislator has identified three main thematic areas in its strategic framework, each encompassing key initiatives. These initiatives are primarily aimed at establishing a regulatory environment conducive to the practical implementation of the principle of equal treatment and serve as a protective mechanism for affected individuals living in member states (EC, 2016).

Persons with disabilities in the EU are entitled to the same rights as their non-disabled peers. A key initiative supporting this principle is the European Disability Card, introduced in 2016 by the European Commission on a pilot basis. The trial version of the card was implemented in Belgium, Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, Italy, Malta, Romania, and Slovenia (EC, 2016). Building on these experiences, the EU proposed

by the end of 2023 to introduce an European Disability Card valid in all member states, facilitating the free movement of persons with disabilities. However, affected individuals have raised concerns regarding the proposal, particularly in relation to the varying definitions of disability across member states, which ultimately determine eligibility for the card. In 2024, the European Union adopted two directives concerning the European Disability Card, and the European Parking Card for persons with disabilities as EU citizens (2841/2024), and also for third-country nationals legally residing in a Member State (2842/2024). The disability card serves as a uniform proof of disability across all member states, simplifying access to rights and various benefits for persons with disabilities. Member states are required to transpose these rules into national law by 2027 and ensure their practical implementation by 2028. In principle, persons with disabilities — just like any other EU citizen — have the right to live independently and to freely choose where and with whom they live. Promoting independent living and community inclusion requires targeted awareness-raising among both the general public and policymakers. It is particularly important to raise awareness that instead of building institutions or residential facilities, member states have a range of alternative options available. In this context, support measures (such as those under ERPA) aimed at fostering inclusion may include the provision of social housing, the purchase or rental of apartments, and the improvement of accessibility. These actions directly contribute to the realization of the legislative intent behind the EU's strategic objectives. The European principle of *Non-discrimination and Equal Opportunities* protects individuals with disabilities from all forms of discrimination and violence. Ensuring equal opportunities and accessibility remains a challenge in various areas, including all levels of education, public administration, and cultural participation. Overall, it has become clear that the foundation of accessibility lies in ensuring that both physical and digital environments are fully accessible to persons with disabilities.

5. The Enforcement of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in the European Union – Socio-pedagogical Aspects

The European Union has developed a comprehensive strategy at the legislative level to promote the social inclusion and equal opportunities of persons with disabilities. This strategy defines key initiatives in three main areas: ensuring EU rights, promoting independent living and autonomy, and guaranteeing non-discrimination and equal opportunities. The aim of these initiatives is to implement the principle of equal treatment and to create an appropriate regulatory environment for the affected individuals within the member states (EC, 2016). According to the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, persons with disabilities enjoy the same rights as their non-disabled counterparts (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2020). To ensure the practical implementation of these rights, the European Commission introduced the European Disability Card on a pilot basis in 2016. The card was tested in Belgium, Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, Italy, Malta, Romania, and Slovenia (EC, 2016). Building on the lessons learned from this pilot program, the EU set the goal of introducing the disability card across all member states by the end of 2023, which would enable persons with disabilities to freely move within the single market (EC, 2023). However, the implementation of the program has raised several questions. Member states have different legal definitions of disability, leading to varying criteria for determining eligibility for the European Disability Card. As a result, the legislator must address the challenges posed by national disparities before the uniform application of the card can be fully realized (Waddington & Lawson, 2018). From a sociopedagogical perspective, the current situation is crucial, as the social integration and mobility of persons with disabilities are closely linked to the harmonization of legal frameworks and the assurance of equal access (Nagy, 2009).

Raising awareness among political and societal actors is essential to ensuring that solutions are found which genuinely guarantee independence for persons with disabilities. Support mechanisms, such as the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), provide opportunities for member states to promote community-based housing and the construction of accessible homes in addition to institutional care (EC, 2021). Research in the field of sociopedagogy indicates that the involvement of affected individuals and community-based approaches significantly contribute to the

success of rehabilitation and the increase in autonomy (Nagy, 2011). In the EU legal system, the principle of non-discrimination holds particular significance (EP, 2018). However, ensuring equal access continues to challenge member states, particularly in the areas of education, the labor market, and public services (European Disability Forum, 2022). According to the Eurobarometer 2019 survey, 44% of persons with disabilities experienced discrimination or obstacles in their daily lives (AGE Platform Europe, 2019). Disabled youth, according to their accounts, primarily regard participation in social life as essential. The attitudes of both society and persons with disabilities fundamentally influence the outcomes of integration and success.

6. Social Justice and Inclusion in European Higher Education

The six pillars of the European Education Area — quality, inclusion, gender equality, the green and digital transitions, the role of teachers, and higher education — form the basis for achieving tangible outcomes for the member states. Each of these ultimately aims to ensure education is accessible to all. Career guidance counselors and public employment services play a catalytic role in linking education to labor market participation. As part of the Skills Agenda, the European Commission committed to working in partnership with the European network of public employment services to enhance personal skill development. A fundamental question of this collaboration is the improvement of peer learning to identify which competencies are essential for enhancing success in the labor market. It is becoming increasingly necessary to extend the availability of counseling-type services to both the employed population and vulnerable groups. According to legislative intent, every child, pupil, or student has the right to education that corresponds to their condition and personal abilities. Learners with disabilities and the schools they attend are identified by the term *inclusive*, signifying their efforts to re-evaluate the implementation of the curriculum and address organizational issues accordingly. These institutions aim to optimize operational conditions in the best interest of the students. Within such educational frameworks, every student receives education tailored to their individual needs and developmental requirements.

Inclusion is based on recognizing and embracing diversity and on ensuring that teaching and learning are inclusive in nature. In the conceptual and substantive framework of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), it is a state responsibility to implement universal design as a methodological approach of preventive thinking and action (Fazekas, 2019). Universal Design is a specific design strategy and mindset that takes into account the diversity of abilities among students and learners — all users of the education system. A key principle of Universal Design is that it must not exclude the use of assistive tools and technologies needed by persons with disabilities when justified (Fazekas, 2019). As a result, the exercise of the fundamental human rights of persons with disabilities and the principle of equality becomes achievable. In such an environment, both able-bodied and disabled users become more innovative, thereby enhancing the appeal of the educational institution to society. The foundation of an inclusive environment lies in intentionality and a systems-thinking approach, alongside the acceptance of the thesis that inclusion is vital both in the workplace and in society. Most educational institutions strive for a positive public image. Across the European Union, issues of social justice are becoming increasingly prominent, and member states are under growing pressure to strengthen diversity and inclusion.

7. The Impact of European Union Higher Education Policy on Equal Opportunities for Students with Disabilities

In accordance with the principle of subsidiarity, the European Union delegates the formulation of higher education policy to the competence of individual member states, while maintaining a supportive and coordinating role. Within this framework, the main focus of the EU's policy is to promote student, teacher, and researcher mobility, the mutual recognition of diplomas and study periods, and the enhancement of cooperation between higher education institutions (EC, 2020). The EU's role also extends to launching initiatives such as the "European Universities" program, which, under the Erasmus+ scheme, supports cooperation between higher education institutions across member states. This enables students to pursue

studies in several EU countries and obtain a European degree (EC, 2018). The implementation of higher education policy varies across member states, resulting in diverse strategies. A key priority is ensuring equal opportunities for students with disabilities, which extends beyond the physical accessibility of educational environments to include accessibility in terms of information and communication technologies (Nagy, 2021).

The dialogue between higher education institutions and advocacy organizations representing students with disabilities centers around the differing perspectives of the medical and social models of disability (Halmos, 2017). While the medical model views disability as an individual biological deficit, the social model emphasizes the removal of societal barriers and the promotion of equal opportunities (Barnes, 2019). According to civil organizations representing persons with disabilities, social inclusion can only be achieved if the social model is consistently applied in higher education policy, ensuring the full and active participation of the individuals concerned (MEOSZ, 2023). To promote equal access to higher education for students with disabilities, the European Commission provides various programs and funding schemes aimed at improving educational accessibility and student mobility (EC, 2021). In practice, however, significant differences exist among Member States in terms of implementation, which hinders the effective realization of EU objectives. In Hungary, higher education is accessible to students with disabilities, but several structural and procedural changes would be necessary for successful completion of studies. Current systems and institutions do not always provide an adequate environment for students with disabilities, and often, there is a need for further development in physical accessibility. This includes ensuring accessible mobility within and between university campuses, as well as improving access to educational and supplementary facilities. Additionally, the true operational effectiveness of the system is closely linked to appropriate financial support, as well as the provision of suitable technological tools and assistive programs. Building accessibility and addressing the special needs of individuals with disabilities — most frequently in terms of transportation and independent living assistance — requires significant family and financial support. During practical implementation, students and their supporters, especially family members, must be prepared to handle various conflict situations. The effective management of such conflicts requires professional and comprehensive support, which enables the successful integration of young people with disabilities into higher education. For higher education institutions, the primary task is to create an inclusive educational environment, taking into account the diversity and equity that are fundamental values of the EU. From a practical perspective, the most important thing is that institutions implement comprehensive inclusion measures that not only ensure barrier-free participation for students but also make learning and development accessible to everyone. In the admission process and during the course of studies, the application of needs assessments is essential to consider the individual needs of students. These assessments should be based on the theoretical foundations of Universal Design, which focuses on the integrated application of necessary support tools and technological assistance for people with disabilities. The essence of Universal Design is to make necessary support available to all users through the design process and to create a learning environment that is optimal for everyone, taking into account various abilities and needs (Fazekas, 2018).

From an ethical standpoint, it is important that educational institutions view the inclusion of students with disabilities not only as a legal obligation but also as a matter of social responsibility. Inclusion is not solely about compliance with legislation but about realizing social justice. Institutions must adapt not only the physical environment but also the teaching methods and learning materials to ensure they are accessible and usable for all students, thereby ensuring equal opportunities and fair treatment (Shakespeare, 2020; EC, 2020).

A key ethical aspect of inclusive education is the promotion of social integration. The goal of inclusive education is not only to provide opportunities for learning but also to enable the social participation of individuals with disabilities, thereby contributing to the development of a more just society. It is the responsibility of political and societal actors—including families and educational institution leaders—not merely to express support for inclusion but to ensure it through concrete actions. Adherence to ethical

guidelines benefits not only people with disabilities but also contributes to the overall social development of society (Goggin & Newell, 2003; European Disability Forum, 2019).

8. The Admission to Higher Education and the Integration of Students with Disabilities in Hungary: Strategic Issues and Institutional Challenges

The issue of admission to higher education has been of strategic significance for successive governments. In Hungary, according to the current government's stance, higher education is regarded as a successful sector, and through the reforms implemented in recent years, the system is continuously adapting to changing societal and economic demands (KIM, 2023). By studying the data, the changes related to its transformation can be traced. The characteristic of the current system is its customer orientation, in the sense that high schools consider the state and the family as the most important customers after this point. Based on the evaluation of the customers, the state is not considered an ideological customer in the field of developing skills and competencies. In fields where there is competition, the complexity of the situation is defined by the fact that, after the educational institution sets its own admission requirements, students applying for the same program from different educational institutions must prepare in different ways and with different study materials.

9. The Situation of Students with Disabilities in Hungarian Higher Education: An Ethical and Statistical Overview

Regardless of this starting point, the creation of an inclusive educational and learning environment benefits all students. The situation of students with disabilities in higher education institutions has positively changed in the last five years. Educational institutions declare in regulatory documents that they bridge the gap between able-bodied and disabled students, assisting their integration into the higher education system and, consequently, into the sub-systems of society. Students with disabilities express, in individual reflections, their opinion that a trend can be observed, according to which their fellow students are more accepting, and they encounter physical prejudice less frequently. According to the relevant data from Eurostudent (Table 1), about 3% of students suffer from sensory or motor impairments, 7% have mental health issues, 3% experience learning disabilities, 4% suffer from serious illnesses, and 10% live with other long-term conditions lasting at least 6 months.

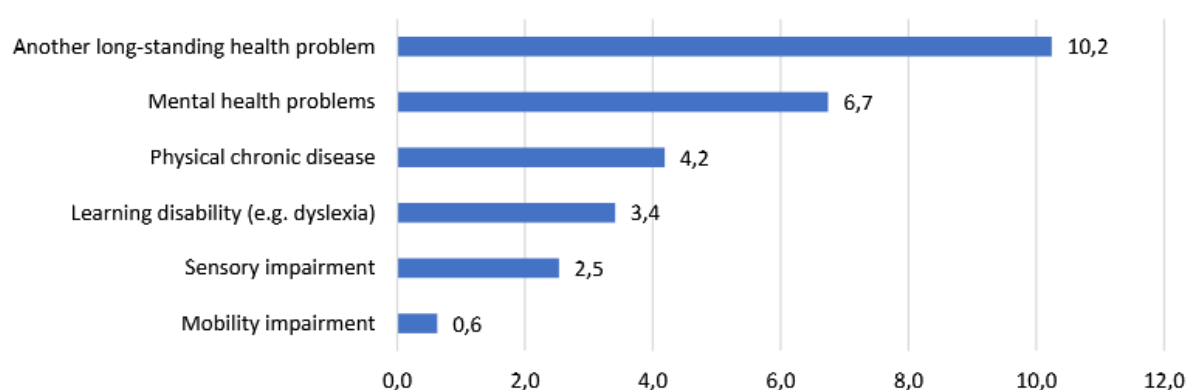


Table 1: Types of Health Problems /% (2022)

Source: Eurostudent 8th Hungarian Data Collection, 2022

Including non-respondents, it can be estimated that 24% of students struggle with some form of long-term health issue or disability, sometimes multiple issues (Eurostudent 8th Hungarian Data Collection, 2022).

There is little difference in the proportion of students with disabilities or long-term health problems when classified by level of education or work schedule. However, larger differences are observed when looking at educational fields.

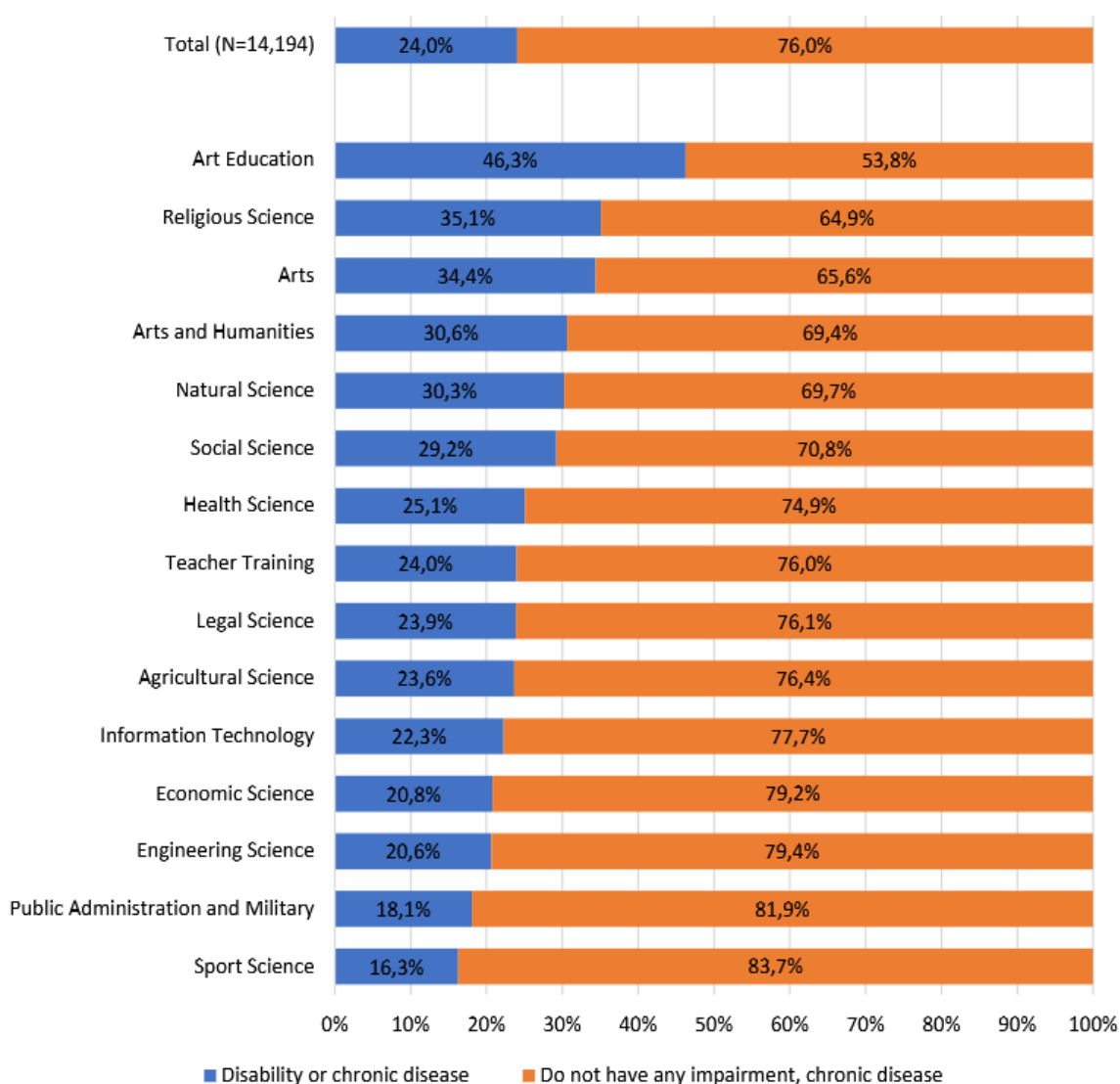


Table 2: Proportion of Students with Disabilities, Chronic Illnesses, or Other Long-term Health Impairments by Educational Field

Source: Eurostudent 8th Hungarian Data Collection, 2022

The lowest percentages of students reporting disabilities or long-term health problems were found in the fields of sports science (16%) and political science (18%). On the other hand, significantly higher proportions, exceeding 30%, of students in theology, arts, and art communication programs reported chronic illnesses or long-term health issues. Additionally, around 30% of students in the fields of humanities, natural sciences, and social sciences reported similar issues (Table 2).

Students with disabilities, based on their own decisions, prefer to attend universities of science. According to the data, the most popular institutions among affected students during the examined period were the Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest Corvinus University, University of Debrecen, University of Szeged, and University of Pécs (KIM, 2023). Affected students believe that universities of science offer the greatest opportunities for their personal development in their chosen fields. According to their

assessment, the number of helpers, the quality of assistance, and access to opportunities are most reliable in these institutions.

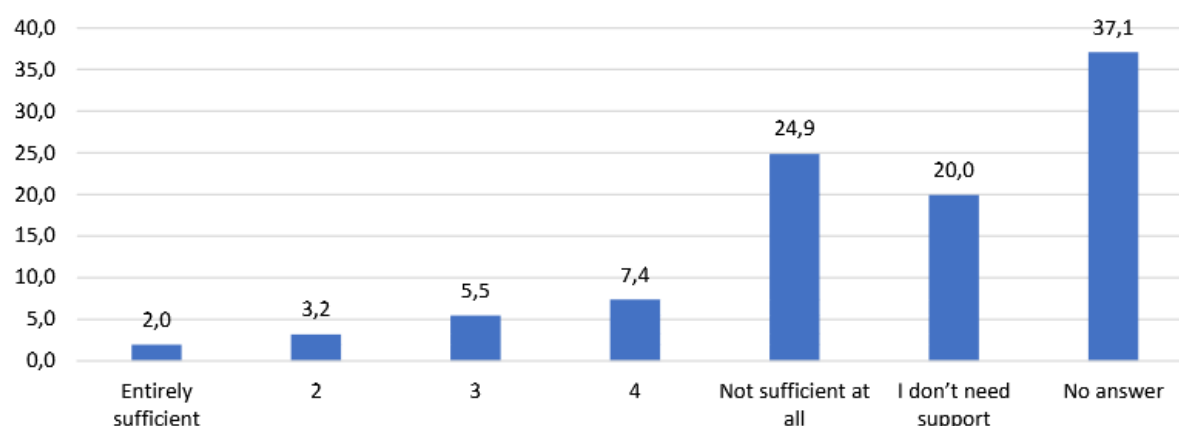


Table 3: Assessment of the support received in relation to disability or illness (among students with a disability, chronic illness or other long-term health condition, N = 3,412)

Source: Eurostudent 8th Hungarian Data Collection, 2022

37% of students with disabilities or chronic health impairments did not provide an evaluation of how much their condition hinders their daily life or studies, nor did they comment on whether they receive appropriate support from the state or their higher education institution. Regarding state and institutional support, one-fifth of the remaining students stated that they do not require targeted assistance, while another quarter felt that they do not receive adequate support related to their health condition (Table 3).

Among those with chronic illnesses or disabilities, about one in ten feels that their health impairment significantly hinders their daily life or studies, but the relative majority of affected students experience only minor obstacles (Table 4). A high proportion of affected students also chose not to respond to this question.

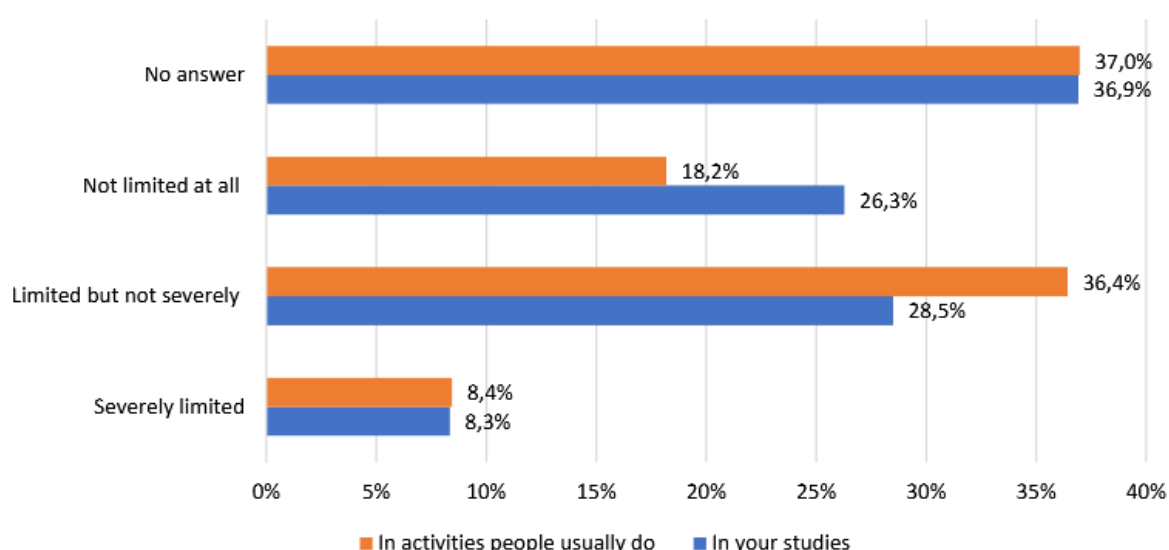


Table 4: To what extent are you limited because of your health problem(s)?" (Among students with a disability, chronic illness or other long-term health condition, N = 3,412)

Source: Eurostudent 8th Hungarian Data Collection, 2022

Higher education institutions can provide support to affected students in varying degrees and ways. To a lesser extent, support comes from fellow students, financial assistance, and, to a larger extent, from staff in equal opportunities offices, instructors, and volunteer helpers, and family. The greatest challenges are territorial and temporal constraints, as support is almost exclusively provided during the location and time of the educational process. The professional materials related to institutional development within educational institutions include actual proposals for developmental or improvement measures concerning the target group. However, these are often not realized in practice. The development and positive movement can be supported by indisputable factual evidence in line with the European Union regulatory framework. In the work of equal opportunities coordinators, it is noticeable that many students do not disclose their disability due to the fear of discrimination. Students who receive extra points in the admission process because of their disability often do not appear later in the statistics as students with disabilities. They also typically do not apply for preferences regarding the timing, location, or implementation methods of assessments. Moreover, they tend not to request special tools or the personal involvement of helpers.

Among those students who start their studies, many drop out of the system, deactivate their semester, and then do not return as active students (KIM, 2023).

10. Social Attitudes and Ethical Considerations – Practices in Higher Education Institutions

Although the majority of society claims to be verbally accepting of people with disabilities, in practice, there is often insensitivity towards their limitations and needs. This prejudice, stemming from ignorance, has a harmful impact on the affected individuals and contributes to the persistence of exclusionary behavior. The unconscious occurrence of this prejudice, caused by the general lack of knowledge and understanding, is harmful from the perspective of those affected and manifests in exclusionary attitudes. According to general opinion, there is no need to place greater emphasis on inclusive design because people with motor and sensory disabilities have their own buildings and institutions. The government's concept concerning higher education is that disability, accessibility, and rehabilitation knowledge should be integrated horizontally into the knowledge base of all representatives of a given field as part of relevant undergraduate programs (OFP 2015). However, this vision, after reviewing the current situation, will not be fully realized in the near future. In practice, equal opportunities coordinators and offices assist students with disabilities in their integration. Higher education institutions support the integration of students with disabilities through equal opportunities coordinators and offices. Especially at scientific universities, sensitization programs are organized, with the aim of involving and informing teaching and administrative staff. After reviewing the current situation, this vision will not be fully realized in the near future. In practice, equal opportunities coordinators and offices assist the integration of students with disabilities. Some institutions mainly involve staff in the operation of the system through sensitization programs, especially at relevant training fields and scientific universities. According to affected students, they face the following difficulties during their studies. These are the lack of personal assistants; unacceptable attitudes from instructors towards people with disabilities; disputes over subject-related accommodations; accessibility issues in higher education institutions and dormitories, mainly in internal spaces and between buildings; difficulty accessing libraries and mandatory practice locations; and the lack of capacity (human resources and financial support) in equal opportunities coordinators' offices.

According to our knowledge, the majority of students currently studying in the higher education system (60-70%) will work in jobs that require key competencies – including digital competencies – as a prerequisite for application, along with the development of transversal skills that function in synergy with them. The preparedness of professional teachers and the development of their competencies plays a significant role in preparing future employees, whether students with or without disabilities. All institutions have carried out or previously conducted significant infrastructure development and ICT equipment modernization. The development of digital technological services for disadvantaged groups has also become a critical priority according to the institutions. A key role is played by the creation of

conditions for a changing external learning environment, increasing provision with modern IT tools and networks, and ensuring access to online learning materials. The success of students with disabilities in their studies is supported by online and blended learning forms, quality digital content creation systems, and the provision of individualized learning opportunities. The system for the integration of disadvantaged and underrepresented student groups (remedial courses, academic mentors) is essential, and continuous systemic development in this area is necessary to comply with EU standards. Institutions aim to extend the successful elements of the current support system to enhance the success of disadvantaged students. The key component of inclusion is conducting sensitization lectures for university students to facilitate the inclusion of students with disabilities. It is essential to develop digital competencies and promote conscious media use to realize outcome-based higher education with an inclusive perspective. The strategy of successful institutions organizes tasks and related activities around five key areas: equality and non-discrimination; raising awareness; access; equality before the law; protection from violence and abuse.

Effective policymaking requires that decision-makers thoroughly understand disability-related issues, and that people with disabilities actively participate in the decision-making process. Therefore, it is essential for state institutions to establish closer partnerships with organizations representing people with disabilities. The Council of Organizations of Persons with Disabilities (FESZT) brings together civil organizations in Hungary.

11. Conclusion

The integration of persons with disabilities into higher education is a key social and policy issue both in the European Union and in Hungary as a member state. The presence or absence of an accessible environment, legal regulations, and institutional support fundamentally influences the educational equity and social inclusion of students with disabilities. The aim of this research is to analyze European and Hungarian strategies, legislation, and practical experiences. The core objective of the European Disability Strategy (2021–2030) is to ensure equal opportunities for persons with disabilities in the areas of education, employment, and social participation. The strategy highlights the importance of accessibility, inclusive education, and advocacy (EC, 2021). While member states are responsible for implementing the principle of equal treatment in practice, the role of civil society in advocacy remains limited.

According to the Hungarian government's position, higher education is considered a successful sector; however, data indicate that students with disabilities still face numerous barriers (KIM, 2023). The differing admission requirements and curricula between secondary and higher education institutions pose further difficulties. From the students' perspective, the best opportunities are offered by research universities, particularly Eötvös Loránd University, Corvinus University of Budapest, the University of Debrecen, the University of Szeged, and the University of Pécs (KIM 2023). Students report that these institutions provide the most comprehensive support services and accessible environments.

The examination of social attitudes and the role of inclusive environments reveals that, although the majority society claims to be accepting of persons with disabilities, in practice, affected individuals still face prejudice and structural disadvantages. Inclusive education and awareness-raising programs can contribute to the social integration of students; however, the effectiveness of current programs varies by institution (OFP, 2015). Higher education institutions have a responsibility to ensure equal access and a supportive environment for student inclusion. The role of equal opportunities coordinators and offices is crucial, yet accessibility and inclusive education still present significant challenges for institutions. The goal of the National Disability Programme (2015–2025) is to ensure that students with disabilities receive adequate support not only upon entry into higher education but throughout their academic journey.

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