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The social dimension of higher education: an exploratory study for the validation of quality assurance indicators

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Abstract

The present study aimed to identify, generate, and validate a set of indicators of the social dimension of higher education in the context of quality assurance systems, with a focus on immigrant students and those with disabilities. For this purpose, two research methods were implemented: the systematic analysis of specialized literature and focus groups. The literature review sought to update conceptualizations and good practices in the European and national context. The focus groups were conducted with stakeholders relevant for the social dimension of higher education: academic and non-academic staff, immigrant students, and students with disabilities. The corroborated results revealed a complex structure of potential indicators. The most important criteria were: the category of beneficiaries (students with disabilities and immigrant students), the reflected social value (equality, equity, diversity, and inclusion), the target of the specific measures (aimed at students or at academic and non-academic staff, the direction of the measures (top-down or bottom-up), the stage of the educational process to which the indicators refer (recruitment admission, participation, graduation and post-graduation, the level of implementation of the measures (primary measures and secondary measures /meta-measures. The indicators identified in this study allow multiple uses. In relation to the objective of the study, the most important is the possibility of use in the evaluation of the social dimension of higher education in the context of quality assurance systems.

Keywords: quality assurance in higher education, social dimension of higher education, immigrant students, students with disabilities

(*This study is part of an Erasmus + Project: START- Social Inclusion, Tolerance, Acceptance and Realization for all Students)*

1. Introduction

The last decade has been marked by a series of important and rapid changes in the dynamics of higher education institutions. We are, in fact, witnessing a series of transformations at the academic level in response to society's demands: the diversification of the student population, increased migration, the need for concentrated measures to assure inclusion, the need for flexible learning, including appearance of micro-certificates and e-leaning, , etc. Of course, these trends are also felt in terms should be reflected in quality assurance procedures, standards and indicators. In fact, universities and higher education systems are increasingly concerned with exploring new ways of approaching quality of education in order to provide diversified, highly useful and responsive services. `

In this context, one of the concerns of the quality assurance agencies and universities alike is the social dimension of higher education. The present paper focuses on two target groups of measures relevant aspects of the social dimension: immigrant students and students with disabilities, respectively. This research is part of a larger Erasmus + Project (*START- Social Inclusion, Tolerance, Acceptance and Realization for all Students)* where students with disabilities and immigrants are the main target groups. For the social dimension we used the same definition adopted in the final report by the Advisory Group 1 on Social Dimension: "social dimension encompasses the creation of an inclusive environment in higher education that fosters equity and diversity and is responsive to the needs of local communities" (EHEA, 2020).

The phenomenon of immigration has been gaining increasing magnitude in Europe in recent years. Statistics indicate that, as of 2017, there were approximately 21.6 million people in the European Union with citizenship other than that of a member state of the EU (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019). Among these immigrants, a significant proportion falls within the age range of 18 to 34, theoretically eligible for the European higher education system. Their integration into European higher education poses a real challenge.

The needs of immigrant students are diverse, including appropriate academic guidance, provision of training programs, vocational and psychological counseling, and social assistance. In this context, most European countries do not have yet a comprehensive and coherent policy for their inclusion in higher education (Vasiloupoulos & Ioannidi, 2020).

Another population group worth looking at are students with disabilities (Ring & McKernan, 2008). Evans & Zhu (2022) have shown that students with disabilities have reduced access to university, higher chances of dropping out, achieving lower graduation and employment outcomes compared to their non-disabled peers. For example, a number of studies on the German student population show significantly higher drop-out intentions for students with disabilities vs. students without disabilities (Koopmann et al., 2023; Rußmann et al., 2023) while studies in USA and Canada found that students with disabilities receive lower grades than students without disabilities (Eisenberg et al., 2009; Parsons et al., 2021).

At the European level, several political commitments have been made in recent years to strengthen diversity and inclusion in higher education, starting with the Declaration of Paris by EU member states in March 2015, promoting citizenship and common values of freedom, tolerance, and non-discrimination through education. This is also reflected in documents such as the Yerevan Communiqué of 2015 and the Paris Communiqué of 2018 within the Bologna Process. All these documents consolidate the importance of the social dimension of European higher education.

More recently, with a focus on social inclusion in higher education, one of the most important documents outlining principles and implementation recommendations at the European higher education level is the Rome Communiqué of 2020 (Annex II). Based on the report of the Working Group 1 on Social Dimension (2020), this document includes a set of 10 principles for conceptualizing policies to improve the social dimension.

Building on the aforementioned documents, several studies have been conducted at the European level to monitor the implementation of the social dimension of higher education. In a relatively recent report titled "Equity and Inclusion in European Higher Education Institutions: Results from the INVITED project," Claeys-Kulik et al. (2019) published the results of the INVITED project of the European University Association, which aimed to support universities in developing strategies for ensuring equity, diversity, and inclusion. The report provides a comprehensive picture through quantitative data collected from 159 higher education institutions in 36 European systems, gathered through a survey and subsequent interviews between the fall of 2018 and the summer of 2019. Unlike other similar studies that focused more on macro-level indicators (national policies and strategies), this report focused on institutional approaches (challenges and success factors). The project's design and data offer a wide range of possible institutional strategies, diversity dimensions, success measurement methods, levels of analysis, barriers, and ways to overcome them in ensuring social dimension/equity/inclusion.

Another study, conducted in 2022 by the European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, based on the general principles and recommendations of Annex II of the Rome Communiqué (2020), produced a report titled "Towards Equity and Inclusion in Higher Education in Europe," analyzing how the 10 principles are applied at the level of European national higher education systems. The conclusion was that few countries have taken the necessary subsequent measures since the adoption of the general principles and recommendations of Annex II of the Rome Communiqué in November 2020.

A similar study (Kaiser et al., 2022) identified indicators of social inclusion in higher education and developed a guide for building these indicators at the level of higher education institutions, based on the investigation of a sample of policymakers, practitioners, and student representatives.

Starting from the need to build a set of evaluation indicators for the social dimension of Romanian higher education, the general objective of this study is to investigate the social component of Romanian higher education for students with disabilities and foreign/immigrant students. The specific objectives are : 1. Identifying the perceived level of social dimension support for students with disabilities and foreign/immigrant students in the Romanian higher education, 2. Identifying how relevant stakeholders (experts and students) define success in guaranteeing the social dimension, 3. Exploring possible ways to measure the success of a higher education institution in designing and implementing measures to ensure equality of opportunities for students with disabilities or foreign/immigrant students, and 4. Exploring perceived barriers to ensuring the social dimension and solutions to overcome them.

2. Methodology

Participants. The study included two categories of respondents, experts, and students selected on a voluntary basis. According to the target student population the first category was divided into two subcategories: for students with disabilities, 8 experts in special psychopedagogy, inclusive education, multiple disabilities, counseling, and psychotherapy; for immigrant students 3 experts in mobility and international students. The experts in mobility and international students are the category of experts closest to the issue of immigrants at the level of a university.

The same grouping was followed in the student category: 8 students with visual, hearing, and motor disabilities respective, and 16 immigrant students (representing Moldova, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Guinea, Brazil, Bangladesh, and Ukraine. All students were enrolled at Babeș-Bolyai University.

Instruments. The focus groups were conducted based on an interview guide that addressed four main themes: 1. The perceived level of social dimension insurance for students with disabilities and foreign/immigrant students in Romanian higher education, 2. Defining success in guarantee the social dimension for students with disabilities and foreign/immigrant students, 3. Measuring the success of a higher education institution in providing the social dimension, 4. Barriers to ensuring the social dimension for students with disabilities and foreign/immigrant students and ways to overcome them.

Procedure. Five focus group meetings were conducted, including face-to-face sessions with expert participants and online meetings with students. At the beginning of each meeting, participants were informed about the study's objective and assured that confidentiality and anonymity of responses would be respected in all forms of presenting the study results. The average duration of the meetings was one and a half hours.

3. Results

3.1. Analysis of the Social Dimension Issues for Students with Disabilities

3.1.1. Perceived Level of Social Dimension Insurance for Students with Disabilities in Romanian Higher Education

Student Perspective. Overall, respondents appreciated that students with disabilities benefit from various facilities contributing to the social dimension, such as assistance during exams, sign language interpretation, etc. Among the highlighted issues were problems with wheelchair ramps, successive classes held in different buildings or areas of the city without sufficient time between them for a student with motor disabilities to arrive on time, and blocked access routes for students with motor disabilities during university building repairs.

Expert Perspective. From the experts' perspective, the social dimension concerning students with disabilities should be ensured primarily through a unified strategy/policy at the university level, which should then be reflected at lower levels: faculties, departments, and ultimately in individual behaviors of teaching and non-teaching staff. In this regard, respondents noted a mismatch/discrepancy between the university's policies regarding diversity for students with disabilities and actual practices. This means that there are often formal structures or procedures at the university level designated to manage the problem of students with disabilities but they are not always implemented correctly or completely.

3.1.2. Defining Success in guaranteeing the Social Dimension for Students with Disabilities

Student Perspective. The students highlighted several important characteristics, including the provision of resources needed for a student with disabilities to navigate independently in the university environment (e.g., building maps for the visually impaired, bibliographic materials adapted for each type of disability, etc.), communication (with university staff and peers), congruence between formal institution procedures and policies and their implementation in the field, and inclusion from all perspectives (formal and informal, both in the educational process and in student organizations and extracurricular activities).

Expert Perspective. The experts outlined the need to monitor adherence to values of equality, equity, diversity, and inclusion, having a specific vision and strategy, and implementing them in daily university activities.

3.1.3. Measuring the Perceived Success of a Higher Education Institution in Providing the Social Dimension for Students with Disabilities

Student Perspective

Recruitment Key indicators resulting from the interviews were: 1. Presentations of the educational offer for potential students with disabilities, 2. Online promotion explicitly recruitment services for students with disabilities, 3. Availability of career guidance services, including vocational counseling.

Admission. The most important aspects highlighted were: 1. Preparation for the entrance exam, 2. Assistance during the entrance exam (extra time, separate space if necessary, assistance in writing, etc.).

Retention. The main indicators mentioned were: 1. Psychological counseling services for students with disabilities, medical services, 2. Allocation of mentors or tutors for groups of 2-3 students with disabilities to guide them throughout the study program, 3. Adaptation of examination methods (oral exams, extra time, writing support), 4. Adaptation of bibliographic materials, course presentations (Braille, audio), adjustment of the volume of information, etc., 5. Existence of scholarships for financial support, 6. Mandatory training for academic university staff to raise awareness of issues faced by students with disabilities, interaction models with this category, 7. Monitoring the results of this training.

*Graduation/Post-graduation (*by post-graduation we mean both the transition to the labor market and the enrolment into postgraduate study programs such as master or PhD programs). For this sequence,/phase students identified the following indicators: 1. Facilities for participation in graduation ceremonies alongside other students, 2. Monitoring the progress of graduates, 3. Centralized information related to employment opportunities, 4. Providing support for integration into the job market, 5. Offering internship opportunities, collaboration with private companies, 6. Post-graduation counseling related to job market integration, 7. Facilitating the connection of graduates with disabilities with private companies.

Expert Perspective

Recruitment From the experts' perspective, the main indicators for this stage could be: 1. Promotional activities for university specializations among potential students with disabilities, especially those compatible with certain disabilities. These can be identified through an analysis of the specializations most sought after by students with disabilities (existence of promotional materials adapted for this category of potential students), 2. The existence of a strategy to open the university to special high schools (summer schools, workshops, collaboration protocols), 3. The existence of a designated structure, teams responsible for promotional activities, 4. Vocational guidance services for potential students.

Admission. For this stage, experts listed the following indicators: 1. Accessibility in university buildings where entrance exams or competition file processing take place, 2. Providing complete and transparent information about accessibility services (assistance/support) offered by the university for specific activities (e.g., assistance during registration), 3. Special places for students with disabilities, accompanied by very clear information about eligibility criteria for those places.

Retention. Indicators suggested for this stage were: 1. Opportunities to express requests for flexibility in teaching, learning, and examination methods, 2. University partnerships with organizations/foundations/companies to provide certain services for students with disabilities in interaction with the university (e.g., translation into sign language for students with hearing impairments, adaptation of tactile resources for the visually impaired, assistance for non-mobile individuals, etc.), 3. Ensuring infrastructure that allows accessibility in university buildings, classrooms, seminars, laboratories, 4. Level of participation of students with disabilities in educational and more general social activities organized by the university, 5. University collaboration with the families of students, 6. Academic staff training to adapt teaching, learning, and evaluation methods to the specific needs of students with disabilities, 7. Training for typical students to interact with individuals with disabilities, 8. Anti-discrimination training 9. Availability of adapted examination methods (additional time, a special room, oral exams, a special place in the examination room, etc.).

Graduation/Post-graduation. In this stage, experts stated indicators such as: 1. Pass rate, 2. Graduation results, 3. The percentage of those who want to continue their studies after graduation, 4. The percentage of students with disabilities who have entered the field in which they completed their studies.

3.1.4. Barriers in Ensuring Social Dimension/Equity/Inclusion and Ways to Overcome Them

Student Perspective. The main barriers identified by students were poor management and reduced involvement in the administrative/decisional structures of the university

Solutions mentioned for overcoming these included: 1. The existence of an online interface where students with disabilities can present their problems and needs, and the university can provide support or allocate a support person, 2. The number and regularity of meetings with students with disabilities to obtain feedback on implemented measures and the need for new measures, 3. Representation of the category of students with disabilities in university leadership structures (e.g., the faculty council, the board of directors), 4. Universities receiving support in implementing measures related to the social dimension (e.g., from the Ministry of Education), 5. The development of hybrid higher education (with a focus on the online component) that would favor students with disabilities (compensating for the difficulties of access for some students), 6. Flexibility of teaching staff flexibility in teaching and evaluation activities. regarding course organization.

Expert Perspective. A first barrier identified by experts, manifested in the resistance to flexible assessment methods (extended exam time, oral exams, etc.), was the fear of professors for not breaking institutional regulations (fear of disadvantaging other students). The proposed solution to overcome this barrier is the development of clear university-level policies related to managing students with disabilities, accompanied by implementation guides that are popularized among university staff, both teaching and non-teaching.

A second barrier identified was that respect for diversity (an open attitude toward diversity) is not necessarily an intrinsic characteristic but needs to be educated and trained at the level of university staff through explicit programs. The solution could be the introduction of courses on inclusive education, diversity skills, awareness for both students and university staff.

The third identified barrier is legislative gaps regarding the status of people with disabilities or disabling conditions. The solution coming from experts would be to provide feedback from university representatives to decision-makers to address these gaps.

The fourth identified barrier was the existence of certain stereotypes among teaching staff that adapting methods to the specific needs of students with disabilities would lower the quality of higher education (the quality of teaching the respective discipline). The solution could involve, on the one hand, the existence of a university-level strategy regarding the social dimension for students with disabilities popularized among teaching staff, and on the other hand, their participation in training targeting equality, equity, diversity, and inclusion for students with disabilities.

The last highlighted barrier was that the international evaluation of universities and the rankings do not include the social dimension. From this perspective, universities do not have a strong motivation to introduce policies/strategies to ensure the social dimension. Also, at the institutional level, professors are not evaluated for ensuring the social dimension. The solution to this problem would be the lobbying of universities and other institutions to introduce the social dimension as an indicator of university performance. Additionally, at the institutional level, the solution would involve introducing in the evaluation criteria for teaching staff by the institution indicators related to involvement in activities adapting teaching methods for students with disabilities

Table 1. Barriers to ensuring the social dimension for students with disabilities and solutions (students vs. experts)

	Barriers	Solutions
Students	-dysfunctional management - legislative barriers	-The existence of an online interface where students with disabilities can present their problems and needs, and the university can give them support or assign them a support person -The number and regularity of meetings with students with disabilities to obtain feedback related to the implemented measures and the need for new measures -Representation of the category of students with disabilities in the management structures of the university (e.g. faculty council, board of administration) -Universities should benefit from support in the implementation of measures aimed at ensuring the social dimension (e.g. from the Ministry of Education) - The development of hybrid higher education (with an emphasis on the online component) would favor students with disabilities (it would compensate for the access difficulties of some students) - The flexibility of teaching staff.
Experts	- teachers' fear of violating regulations at the institutional level	-the existence of a university regulation on ensuring the social dimension for students with disabilities

	- respect for diversity is not necessarily an intrinsic characteristic, it must be educated - legislative gaps regarding the status of people with disabilities or with a disabling condition - stereotypes of teachers according to which, if they adapt their methods to the specifics/needs of students with disabilities, this would decrease the quality of higher education	- inclusive education courses, skills for diversity, awareness - providing feedback to decision-makers from university representatives to fill legislative gaps -teacher evaluation grids that include ensuring the social dimension for students with disabilities

3.2. Analysis of the Social Dimension Issues for Immigrant Students

3.2.1. Perceived Level of Social Dimension Assurance for Immigrant Students in Romanian Higher Education

Student Perspective. Overall, immigrant students appreciate the efforts made by universities to ensure the social dimension, but they highlight several issues related to the social, political, and university environment. The issue of paperwork, specifically residence permits, is emphasized. Respondents point out a gap between entering the university and obtaining a residence permit, negatively affecting access to facilities normally offered by the university. Respondents also note that the immigration center is poorly organized, with slow case processing leading to long queues and wasted time.

Articulation issues between institutions that immigrant students interact with are also mentioned. Lack of collaboration between immigration centers and universities is highlighted. Sometimes, students are required to make more trips than necessary to resolve certain documents because university staff are not sure about the required document format. The lack of a common database between the two types of institutions is also noted.

Communication barriers, both general and language-related, are mentioned. Students sometimes face challenges in obtaining clear and transparent information about the percentage of courses/seminars conducted in a foreign language, building/room locations, accommodation facilities, libraries, and other study resources. Immigrant students mention having to often gather information from social media groups. Other times, language barriers arise when instructors do not sufficiently master the foreign language, preferring to teach in Romanian.

Discrimination issues, whether at the institutional or student level, are raised. At the institutional level, respondents mention that foreign students, even with excellent grades, cannot receive merit or performance scholarships. Regarding Romanian colleagues, respondents report sometimes encountering hostile attitudes, citing the argument that immigrant students are taking the place of local students.

Expert Perspective. The interviewed experts highlight two categories of problems: general issues related to cultural differences (especially for non-EU students) and university-specific issues (logistic problems).

In the first category, cultural differences are mentioned, perceived as significant. Without support to understand Romanian cultural specifics and guidance through the bureaucratic system and all formal university requirements, many foreign/immigrant students struggle.

In the second category, logistical problems are primarily signaled. The structures responsible for managing these students lack personnel, clear protocols for interaction with immigrant students, efficient means of communication regarding the rights and obligations of this student category. In the absence of this infrastructure, the pressure is felt by the employed staff, who must solve specific problems of these students sometimes using their own resources and under their pressure (social cases). Experts also emphasize the need for representation of immigrant students in the leadership structures of faculties or universities (e.g., faculty councils) to facilitate communication regarding their needs and university policies in this regard. Lastly, the need for social and psychological assistance is highlighted.

3.2.2. Defining Success in guaranteeing the Social Dimension for Immigrant Students

Student Perspective. The main characteristics defining a successful university in ensuring the social dimension for immigrant students are: accessibility (feeling integrated into the higher education institution's policy), equality (providing specific opportunities), inclusion/non-discrimination (students from Africa signal discrimination compared to European students, whom they consider privileged), transparent communication (feeling that the university thinks about them, cares about them, considers their needs; communicating the specific requirements of the university for this category of students and the opportunities offered), respect for cultural diversity, social and psychological assistance, and financial support (reducing financial disparities between local and immigrant students).

Expert Perspective. From the experts' perspective, a successful university in ensuring the social dimension for immigrant students is one that is conceptually prepared (having a vision and strategy targeting all stages of the educational process, from promoting the university's educational services to graduation and post-graduation) and logistically prepared (personnel, interaction protocols, efficient and transparent communication infrastructure, collaborations with other involved institutions, social, psychological, and medical assistance services) to manage the number of foreign students and the diversity of issues they face (generated by cultural diversity but also specific social cases).

3.2.3. Measuring the Perceived Success of a Higher Education Institution in Providing the Social Dimension for Immigrant Students

Student Perspective

Recruitment Respondents highlighted two ways of promoting educational services to potential students: formal and informal. Regarding formal promotion, students mentioned the need for information to be

presented on the university's platform in a centralized form, in multiple languages, and accessible from anywhere in the world. The participation of the university in university fairs or other international promotion events was also mentioned. Regarding informal promotion, respondents believe that the best advertisement the university can have among potential foreign students is how it provided quality services and supported the post-graduation integration of immigrants who have already graduated.

Admission. Respondents mentioned three dimensions of evaluation/measuring success. 1. Legal/bureaucratic dimension (optimizing the relationship between the university and other responsible institutions, simplifying bureaucratic/legal procedures, complete digitization of legal procedures associated with admission) 2. Linguistic support (language preparation courses for the host country and foreign languages) 3. Optimization of internal procedures (extended admission process for immigrant students, special places for immigrant students in all faculties and specializations).

Retention. For this stage, respondents mentioned the following measures: 1. The existence of procedures/protocols through which the university can continuously monitor the progress of immigrant students, the issues they face. 2. Integration measures. 3. Involvement of PhD students in teaching and research activities. 4. Permanent guidance services through the administrative system. 5. Providing scholarships.

Graduation/Post-graduation. For this stage, respondents mentioned the following measures: 1. The existence of university strategies/procedures to monitor the integration of graduates into the workforce. 2. Providing equal internship opportunities for immigrant and local students. 3. Assisting graduates in finding their first job after graduation.

Expert Perspective

Recruitment. The main indicators highlighted by experts were: 1. Fairs, workshops, webinars promoting the university's educational offerings. 2. Presence on international platforms for university promotion. 3. Promotion on social media (social networks), recruitment agencies from the foreign countries. 4. Recommendations from existing/graduated students that attract other students.

Admission. Experts believe that the success of this stage depends on two factors: a positive result in the admission itself and obtaining a visa. They recommend that all links/structures involved in the admission process work together and do not send contradictory messages to students (e.g., the minimum number of credits required to move from one year of study to another, attendance at courses, seminars, laboratories). From this perspective, relevant indicators would be: 1. Coherent articulation between the various structures responsible for the admission process of international students and 2. Clear and transparent communication of all rights and obligations of this category of students in the educational process.

Retention. Although experts acknowledge that the cultural diversity of the body of immigrant students is a challenge, they consider that the teaching staff is sufficiently internationalized and does not need specific training on cultural diversity. They also appreciate that there are no issues related to delivering courses in international languages. Instead, experts believe that teachers should monitor the progress of immigrant students enrolled in their courses, and if they observe unsatisfactory progress, offer counseling. Another proposed solution is for immigrant students to have a tutor from among Romanian students to provide support.

Graduation/Post-graduation. Experts consider that the graduation rate among immigrant students could be an indicator. For the post-graduation stage, useful indicators would be: 1. Monitoring the progress of foreign graduates (the existence of a database in this regard). 2. Employment rate in the field in which they completed their studies or 3. The percentage who manage to start a business after graduation.

3.2.4. Barriers in Ensuring Social Dimension/Equity/Inclusion and Ways to Overcome Them

Student Perspective. The first barrier mentioned is the gap between the formal strategies and procedures of the university and their actual implementation. The proposed solution is monitoring how formal protocols and procedures are implemented in practice. The second barrier is cultural, religious, and racial differences. In this context, respondents highlight cases of discrimination in relation to local students. The proposed solution could be the organization of events by the university that bring together foreign and local students. The third barrier is linguistic: communication in international languages with both teaching and non-teaching staff. The suggested solution is additional training in the use of international languages for both immigrant students and university staff. Other proposed solutions include: 1. Building comparative indicators at the European level, separately for university specializations, such as the percentage of integrated immigrant students in higher education. 2. Constructing representativity indicators covering cultural diversity. 3. Explicit social integration programs for immigrant students. 4. Adaptability of study programs for immigrant students, evaluating program flexibility based on the specific needs of immigrant students. 5. Financial support for immigrant students and open communication of all financial opportunities available to this student category. 6. Involvement of students in research activities. 7. Use of indicators quantifying the number of immigrant students participating in international conferences, members of scientific article author teams, etc. 8. Procedures to evaluate feedback from immigrant students regarding university services and mechanisms to integrate this feedback for service improvement. 9. Creation of student organizations (including immigrant students) to mediate communication between immigrant students and the university. 10. Training programs for university teaching and non-teaching staff to raise awareness of cultural and religious diversity and anti-discrimination training.

Expert Perspective. The main barrier mentioned by experts is cultural diversity (difficulties in understanding local specifics, university requirements, and the rights and obligations of both parties: students and the academic staff). The suggested solution is assigning tutors from among local students for small groups of immigrant students to guide them throughout their studies and formal/bureaucratic interactions with the higher education institution. The second barrier is logistical (staff shortage, protocols/procedures necessary for proper management of the foreign student population). The suggested solution is strengthening the institutional interface in relation to immigrant students.

Table 2. Barriers to ensuring the social dimension for immigrant students and solutions (students vs. experts)

	Barriers	Solutions
Students	-formal/implementation inconsistency at the level of protocols and procedures	-monitoring the level of implementation of formal procedures/protocols - organization of integration events/projects

	-cultural and religious differences - language barriers	-language training for university staff and students - comparative indicators at the European level (e.g. immigrant students integrated into the higher education system - indicators of representativeness to cover cultural diversity - indicators for evaluating the flexibility of study programs by referring to the specific needs of immigrant students -financial support for immigrant students - communication of available financial opportunities -involvement of students in research activities. - indicators regarding the number of immigrant students participating in international conferences, members of the collective of authors of scientific articles, etc. - procedures to evaluate the feedback of immigrant students related to the services offered by the university and mechanisms to integrate this feedback to improve the services offered - the integration of foreign students into student organizations - anti-discrimination training
Experts	-cultural differences -logistic deficiencies	- tutors/mentors assigned from among local students - strengthening the institutional interface

4. Conclusions and Discussions

This study analyzed the main issues related to the social dimension of a Romanian multicultural higher education institution with respect to students with disabilities and immigrant students, as well as a series of indicators to measure this dimension. The study collected information from experts in these fields

(special education, inclusive education, diversity education, mobility, immigrant students) as well as from students with disabilities and immigrant students.

Both experts and students identified common and specific issues. Regarding the current situation of ensuring the social dimension for both categories of students, it can be observed that both students with disabilities and immigrant students appreciate the efforts made by the university in this regard. However, both categories of students also point out aspects that can be improved.

For students with disabilities, most issues are related to facilities that the university should provide to enable them to navigate independently in both physical (buildings, classrooms, seminars, laboratories) and non-physical environments (regulations, bureaucratic/legal elements, etc.), as well as issues related to the flexibility of teaching staff in teaching and evaluation activities. As for immigrant students, they cite specific legal issues, particularly those related to coordination between institutions (university, immigration centers, etc.) and communication problems with the university, language barriers, and even discrimination.

The perspective of experts on the same issues is largely consistent with the views of the students. Experts confirm the need to optimize the aspects highlighted by students, emphasizing the need for a broader institutional vision to guide and legitimize individual behaviors in specific situations. In other words, there is a need for a top-down institutional approach, where teaching and non-teaching staff act guided by protocols, explicit procedures for interacting with students with disabilities or immigrant students, and the need for additional investment in infrastructure.

Starting from definitions or characteristics of success in ensuring the social dimension, relatively similar between students and experts, with an emphasis on communication, flexibility, counseling, and financial/logistical support, the study participants generated a series of concrete proposals to assess this success. Although only one criterion of analysis was explicitly targeted, the stage of the educational process (access, admission, retention, and graduation/post-graduation), the indicators highlighted in the focus groups discussions can be grouped according to other criteria aligned with those highlighted in various previous European studies.

Thus, it can be observed that beyond the stage of the educational process that is not revisited here (being explicitly treated in the results section), the study has identified indicators that directly target services for students and indicators that target university staff. The first category includes most indicators (e.g., psychological counseling services, vocational guidance, social assistance, language support, financial support, internship opportunities, employment, etc.), and the second category includes a smaller volume of indicators such as anti-discrimination training, inclusive education courses, diversity skills, intercultural communication, awareness, evaluation grids for teaching staff that include ensuring the social dimension for students with disabilities or immigrant students, etc.

Another aspect that can be looked at is the direction of the institutional process: top-down indicators vs. bottom-up indicators. In the first category, respondents mentioned the existence of an institutional vision, strategies, regulations, protocols, and procedures at the institutional level to guide the individual behaviors of university staff in relation to students with disabilities or immigrant students, the representation of both categories of students in the university's leadership structures, etc. The second category corresponds to indicators such as mechanisms/interfaces through which students with disabilities or immigrant students can present their needs, specific problems, so that these can be acknowledged and addressed by the university leadership.

Another implicit criterion resulting from the participants' responses is the level of implementation of indicators: primary measures vs. secondary or meta-measures. By primary measures we mean those measures that directly target students or academic and non-academic staff and by secondary measures or meta-measures, we mean those mechanisms by which the primary measures are monitored and adjusted or optimized. The primary measures category incorporates, various facilities, structures, processes through which students with disabilities or immigrant students are supported. Here we include indicators such as financial support, the existence of a structure responsible for managing these categories of students, the existence of inclusive training programs for students or teaching staff. The secondary measures or meta-measures category incorporates strategies or mechanisms through which, based on the analysis of the results of the measures or through the analysis of feedback, the process of ensuring the social dimension is optimized. For example, meetings with students with disabilities or immigrant students to obtain feedback on the implemented measures and evidence of adjusting procedures according to feedback, the existence of a monitoring mechanism for student performance and adjustment of teaching activities for optimization, monitoring the evolution of graduates in the labor market and adjusting their preparation and the type of support for employment, etc.

Also, the indicators can be classified according to the objective they aim for, into structural indicators vs. functional/process indicators. The first category, will include those indicators that evaluate the existence of institutional structures, teams, interfaces designed to manage the problems of students with disabilities or immigrant students (the existence of an office for students with disabilities, the existence of a structure responsible for monitoring the evolution of graduates, the degree of representation in the Faculty Councils/Senate/Board of Directors, etc.). In the category of functional/process indicators, we can include monitoring mechanisms, feedback, optimization, promotion activities for educational services, collaborations with other institutions, recruitment centers, etc. From our point of view, the categories called structural and functional (process) indicators are very important in evaluating the quality of higher education in general and the inclusion of vulnerable students in particular. Thus, it is first of all important to have structures, formally appointed teams with the management of these problems (structural component), but then it is of even greater interest how these structures work, the various processes at play and their dynamics (functional component). It is very important that structures are not just empty forms, but living entities that perform their functions.

In this context, it is worth mentioning that any comprehensive evaluation of ensuring the social dimension of higher education must take into account a set of multi-criteria indicators. Ultimately, we suggest a final criterion (but not the least important), that of the specificity of Romanian higher education (European vs. national). In other words, although an evaluation system for ensuring the social dimension must include common elements of the European higher education system, it is important for the evaluation to incorporate indicators derived from the national context.

The last topic addressed was the barriers to ensuring the social dimension and solutions to overcome them. The mentioned barriers were both individual, such as the mentalities and stereotypes of teaching staff or Romanian colleagues, and general, such as legislative gaps, university motivation, and cultural diversity. However, what stands out is that for each barrier, study participants, whether experts or students, proposed constructive solutions to overcome them, solutions that ultimately can become good indicators of a (desirable) assurance of the social dimension in higher education.

Of course, this study is not without limitations. The main ones are the limited heterogeneity of study participants, under the specter of geographical areas of origin, in the case immigrant students, in terms of the type of disability for students with disabilities, and in terms of the specializations that both

categories study. Also, the number of participants is relatively small, which may have limited the richness of issues, solutions, and indicators identified in this study. Last but not least, it is possible that the interaction with the researcher or just the awareness of participating in a study generated a certain reserve in expressing all needs or problems.

Even taking into account all the above, the results of this study offer a broad basis of options or at least starting points for building an evaluation method to assess the social dimension of Romanian higher education that has not only an evaluative but also a constructive-formative value.

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