

## **PROVIDING THE ACCESS OF THE STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES OR SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS TO TERTIARY EDUCATION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF PETROȘANI**

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**ABSTRACT:** *Starting both from the urgent need to increase the degree of knowledge of the members of the academic community of the University of Petroșani with regard to the issue of the students with disabilities/special education needs (SEN) and from the necessity to implement a series of concrete steps in order to enhance the access of these young people to higher level education through adapting physical environment as well as educational and informational resources to their imperatives, I have designed this paper as a brief diagnosis of the present situation, accompanied by some suggestions for improvement meant to increase the chances of the students with disabilities/SEN to become graduates of university study programs.*

**KEY WORDS:** *students with disabilities, students with special education needs (SEN), tertiary education, social inclusion*

**JEL CLASSIFICATIONS:** *I20, I21, I23, M14.*

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Just as the corporations that operate in an external environment that is increasingly turbulent and difficult to predict, universities have nowadays to adapt rapidly to a series of external changes and requirements on an unprecedented scale, which demand the designing of “competitive academic organization models” (Dinescu, 2021). The globalizing tendency of the market of higher education, the enhanced labour migration, the emerging of sanitary, social or economic crises etc. compel a growing number of higher education institutions in Romania to identify efficient solutions capable of responding to the increased requirements of the stakeholders in relation to the quality of the services provided, the environmental protection or

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numerous social needs. Under such circumstances, I consider that the boosting of the degree of participation in academic life of the students with disabilities/SEN and of those belonging to disadvantaged communities represents an important dimension of the “third mission” of the universities, namely their social mission (Compagnucci & Sprigarelli, 2020).

At present, the number of the students with disabilities in Romania that are part of the national higher education system is extremely low. In accordance with *EUROSTUDENT VII National Report (2022)*, only 5% of the young people who are enrolled at full-time programs report a disability as compared to an average percentage which is three times higher at a European level: 15%. In addition, the fact that a rather significant share of these youngsters (37%) declare that they do not feel to require a supplemental support from the authorities with a view to complete their academic path is associated with the marginal importance paid to this topic by most players in the Romanian higher education environment (Lazăr, 2022). The data gathered by ANOSR during the period 2012-2021, corroborated with those displayed in the document entitled “*Diagnosis of the people with disabilities in Romania*”, showed the fact that *at the level of Romanian higher education system, there is a chronic need to adapt the physical environment as well as educational and informational resources*, in order to be able to meet the needs of the students with disabilities/SEN and also to increase the level of awareness of the academic staff, students and administrative personnel with regard to this highly important social issue (ANOSR, 2022; Grigori’s et al., 2021).

In the Romanian academic environment, best practice examples are limited, for the moment, to only a few universities, *which either have assigned their resources to create a series of organizational structures focusing on supporting the students with disabilities* (“Babeş-Bolyiai” University of Cluj-Napoca) *or have elaborated and implemented intervention procedures dedicated to the students with disabilities* (West University of Timisoara), *or have carried out projects financed from institutional development funds or other sources through which they set up punctual intervention mechanisms meant to increase the degree of inclusion of the young people with disabilities* (University of Bucharest, Polytechnic University from Timisoara).

## **2. CURRENT SITUATION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF PETROȘANI WITH REGARD TO THE ACTIONS TAKEN FOR THE INCLUSION OF THE STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES**

At the University of Petroșani, didactic activity is carried out according to three cycles of university training: bachelor, master and doctoral studies. At present, the three faculties include: *25 bachelor programs in 20 areas of study; 20 master programs in 14 areas of study and 4 programs of doctoral studies*. To these elements, a large offer of postgraduate improvement courses and professional conversion courses is added; the courses are organized within the three faculties included in the structure of the University - *Faculty of Mines, Faculty of Mechanic and Electrical Engineering, Faculty of Sciences* (University of Petroșani, 2021).

On October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2022, a total number of 3,828 bachelor students, master students and doctoral students learnt at the University of Petroșani, of which 2,827

were enrolled at state-subsidized programs and 1,001 studied under tuition fee programs. About 73.17% from the total number of students (that is 2,801 of them) were enrolled at bachelor studies, 22.73% at master studies (870 master students) and only 4.10% at doctoral studies (157 doctoral students). To these, the 879 students enrolled at a series of postgraduate professional conversion programs, at the psychopedagogic program, at the preparatory program for learning Romanian, as well as those that improved their education to get the pre-academic didactic degrees at the University of Petroșani should also be added - see table 1 and table 2 (University of Petroșani, 2022).

**Table 1. Report on the students of the University of Petroșani on October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2022**

No.	Cycle of study	Total	Budget	Tuition fee
1	Bachelor studies	2,801	2,283	518
2	Master studies	870	516	354
3	Doctoral studies	157	28	129
4	<b>Total</b>	<b>3,828</b>	<b>2,827</b>	<b>1,001</b>

Source: Yearly Report of Quality Self-Assessment, University of Petroșani, Board for the Quality Assurance, 2022

**Table 2. Report on the doctoral students enrolled at the Doctoral School of the University of Petroșani**

Domain	Full-time			Part-time		Foreigners				Total
	FT Scholarship	FT No fee	FT Fee	PT, no fee	PT, fee	Foreigners No fee CPNV*	Foreigners Scholarship	Foreigners Fee CPV**	Foreigners Fee CPL***	
Systems Engineering	2	1	8	0	1	0	1	0	1	14
Industrial Engineering	1	2	21	0	2	0	0	1	0	27
Engineering and Management	0	3	5	0	2	0	1	0	0	11
Mines, oil and gas	8	5	59	0	5	0	4	0	4	85
<b>137</b>										

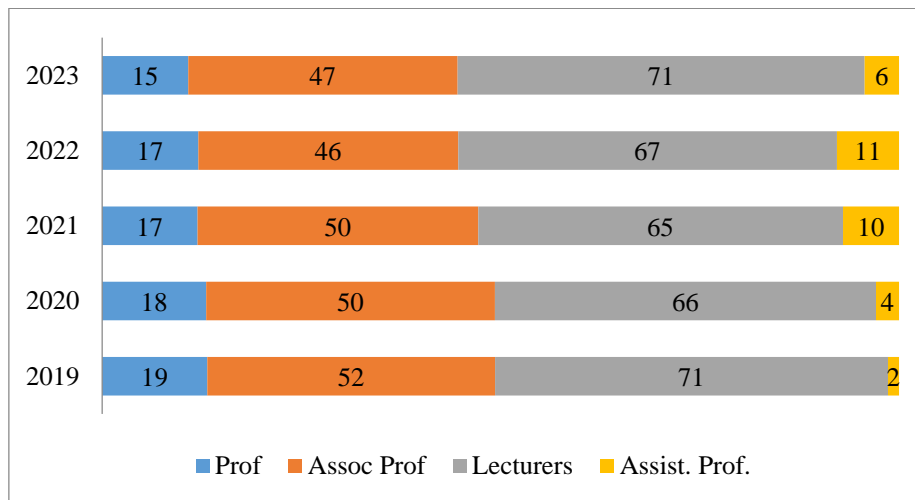
Caption: \*CPNV – personal account no currency; \*\*CPV – personal account in currency; \*\*\*CPL – personal account in RON.

Source: Yearly Report of Quality Self-Assessment, University of Petroșani, Board for the Quality Assurance, 2022

The statistics available for the current academic year show that, at present, there are no enrolments of students with disabilities/SEN at the three academic cycles and/or other forms of education. Despite these circumstances and in consideration of the data according to which such students used to study at the University of Petroșani in the past, and of the fact that training such students required a high degree of involvement of their families in providing the necessary support and in backing the motivation for participating in educational activities, I consider that it is imperative to

elaborate a well-conceived strategy able to establish a consistent institutional support in this direction.

The implementation of the bachelor and master programs, of the program for psycho-pedagogical training and of postgraduate courses relies on a teaching body that includes: 139 full-time members of the teaching staff, 11 members of the teaching staff employed for a determined period (Figure 1), and 59 associated members of the teaching staff. Of these, 9 are PhD coordinators without being full-time members of the University's teaching staff (University of Petroșani, 2022).



**Figure 1. The dynamic of the teaching staff involved in the bachelor and master programs during the period 2018-2023**

As far as the measures undertaken during the interval 2020-2024 are concerned, the following initiatives are worth mentioning:

- The efforts to adapt the *teaching-learning strategies to the peculiarities of the special-needs students*. From this perspective, we should notice the carrying out of a project financed by the Ministry of Education, through the External Financing Management Unit, from the Grant Scheme for Universities – Learning Centres, Projects regarding secondary education - ROSE. This project aimed to create the *Educational Remedial Centre of the Capacitated Students of the University of Petroșani (C.R.E.S.C.-UPET)*, whose general objective is the improvement of the degree of active participation to the educational process for a number of 210 1<sup>st</sup>-year students of the University of Petroșani displaying poor learning results or in risk situations, during the period 2019 - 2023, in order to increase their chances to a better life. One of the main objectives of the project regards the *development of the learning, exploring, deepening and strengthening of the cognitive capacities and learning performance of the 1<sup>st</sup>-year students (70 students/year) from the Faculty of Sciences, Faculty of Mechanic and Electric Engineering and Faculty of Mines, by, at least, 30% compared to their initial cognitive development level*. In order to completely achieve the objectives of the project, the following categories

of activities have been designed and implemented or are under progress: vocational counselling and career guiding; remedial activities – learning / exploring / deepening educational services; guidance and support activities – tutoring services; workshops, discussion sessions, analysis and information transfer; personal development activities, individual and group support counselling (<https://www.upet.ro/proiecte/>).

- The purchasing, in 2022, by using the funds of POR 122888 project – “*Rehabilitation and Equipping of the University of Petroșani*” – of an elevator for the mobility of the individuals with disabilities, which was installed and it is functional at the main entrance of building C;
- The implementation, during 2023, of the project financed from the institutional development funds CNFIS-FDI-F-0033 – “*Increase of the degree of inclusion of the career counselling and guidance services for the students of the University of Petroșani*”. The project was aimed, besides other objectives linked to the consolidation of the package of the counselling and support services given to the students, to the acquiring of a mobile platform for providing the access of the students with motor disabilities into building A of the university.

Despite these punctual interventions, for the moment, there are very few direct and/or indirect references to the condition of the students with disabilities/SEN in the planning documents of the institution. Therefore, I consider that for the future planning exercise (2024-2028), documents like *Strategic Plan of the University of Petroșani*, *Yearly Operational Plans* elaborated at the institutional level and at the level of the component structures, *Strategy for Digital Change* and the *Policies for Quality Providing* should include concrete adjustments measures in line with the advanced institutional standards and policies in the field promoted by the universities from the other countries of the European Union.

### **3. MEASURES PROPOSED FOR INCREASING THE DEGREE OF INCLUSION OF THE STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES INTO THE STUDY PROGRAMS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF PETROSANI**

According to the data displayed by the previous paragraphs, the elaboration of a sustainability strategy of the University of Petroșani, where social inclusion, equity and the development of support-services for the students with disabilities/SEN constitute important strategic options, represents an absolute must for the period 2024-2028.

Among the measures that will determine the increase of the degree of inclusion of the students with disabilities/SEN to the activities in the academic environment, I propose the following ones:

1. *Elaboration of an operational procedure of intervention for the students with disabilities*, through taking account of the model of good practice of the University of the West in Timisoara, the Centre for Pedagogical Support and Integration. The procedure will include operating models and clear responsibilities that might enable:

- a. Identifying the students with disabilities/SEN beginning with the moment of their application/enrolment;
- b. Diagnosing the individual needs for assistance and support of each young person who faces disabilities and/or learning difficulties;
- c. Implementing individualized action plans, conceived for each particular situation;
- d. Rigorous planning of interventions for each particular case;
- e. Monitoring and evaluating the quality of the support-services provided.

Let's also note that, at the moment, there is no distinct organisational structure for the students with disabilities/SEN at the University of Petroșani; therefore, the stipulations of the procedure previously mentioned are going to be first implemented by the staff of the Centre for Career Guiding and Counselling (CCOC); subsequently, depending on the needs, the University will consider the option of founding a distinct office/department to take up the respective responsibilities.



**Figure 2. Stages of the intervention process in the case of the students with disabilities/SEN**

**2. Offering quality counselling and support services** with a view to enabling the students with disabilities/SEN overcome adaptation obstacles and difficulties (Racu & Agapii, 2018):

- a. *Pedagogic and organisational support*: organizing remote didactic activities in case of an illness, training for partial and/or final exams/projects, requiring a minimal attendance to didactic activities, consultations with the teaching staff with regard to adapting the teaching methods and resources to the characteristics of the deficiencies each student faces etc.;
- b. *Providing therapeutic support for the recovery/improvement of the condition of the students with disabilities*: activities of psychological counselling for the students with psychic, emotional and mental issues as well as therapeutic support for the young people who display learning, communication or social insertion difficulties or adaptation issues to the academic environment or curricular requirements;
- c. *Technical support* – facilitation of physical access to the teaching environments through building ramps, mobile platforms, support bars, elevators for those with motor disabilities; providing auxiliary technical means that support the teaching-learning process of the students with various types of deficiencies (possibility to render flexible and adjusting the benches and chairs in the classrooms, means to secure learning environments etc.).

- 3. *Making the members of the teaching staff aware and preparing them for employing the required curricular adaptations, that is the identification and implementation of the most appropriate teaching – learning – evaluation technologies.*** Fortunately, owing to the explosive development of informational and communication technologies, over the last period, specialists have brought about various methods and training means that facilitate the presentation and absorption of the data by the students with disabilities. In Romania, about 8 out of 10 households can access the Internet from home, while in the case of the 16-34 years old age group, the percentage of those who use World Wide Web represents 98,4% (<https://economedia.ro/>). As a result, students are able to access a series of software components adapted to the needs of those with visual or hearing issues or of those who are dyslexic (and others), from learning environments or from home, through which curricular and extracurricular information is structured and adapted in a manner that is correlated to the students' capacities and learning willingness. Owing to the most recent progress in the field of computers, students with visual deficiencies will be able to access audio means of communication, while those with hearing issues will have at their disposal learning technologies and resources relying mainly on the visual factor.
- 4. *Professional development of the members of the teaching staff for inclusive education and the pedagogy of disabled individuals.*** The main components of the professional development for inclusive education target the acquiring, by the teaching staff, of a series of abilities that regard: the possibility to offer individualised consultations for the students with disabilities/SEN; identification of a series of solutions for adapting the didactic content and the specific activities of individual study in the course syllabus to the students' capacities of learning; adapting didactic technologies and assessment practices to the capacity of the students with disabilities. Besides the aspects that regard the pedagogical means and methods that might be applied to the domain of the tertiary education of the students with disabilities, both a high degree of awareness and training of the teaching staff are required so that they are prepared to assume new responsibilities and implement teaching-assessing methods specific for inclusive education. In accordance, in addition to the formal means of training – materialized through getting certifications and/or diplomas in the required field – others means of informal training should be considered, which may be carried out throughout the entire didactic career: participation in implementing awareness campaigns that refer to the topic of inclusive education; engaging in organizing events and debates with the stakeholders at a regional and national level in order to adjust the public policies that facilitate the access of disabled individuals to higher level education; engaging in elaborating financing requests with a view to access the resources required for supporting the inclusive educational system etc.
- 5. *Providing the access of the students with disabilities to various components of the material resources of the University of Petroșani: student dorms, student restaurant, sports grounds, library, and adapted learning resources.*** The University of Petroșani has its own campus in a natural park of about 10 ha, 22 buildings and facilities that include learning and research environments specific for

the activities carried out. The University completely covers students' needs for accommodation in refurbished dorms and also includes spaces for social, cultural and sports activities: student restaurant, Sports Club, Students' Cultural Centre, academic staff centre, accommodation in Parang Mountains, etc. The spaces for didactic activities include: 16 auditoriums and lecture halls, 11 seminar/project rooms, 113 specialized laboratories (equipped with computer technology, too), 128 bureaus of the teaching staff and 52 offices. There is also a large auditorium including 496 seats and a surface of over 376 square meters, University's Central Library and a computer centre (useful surface of 2,364.12 square meters), 5 dorms (680 places for accommodation), a student restaurant, 1 workshop for learning, specialized in mechanics, 1 testing laboratory for *Rocks' Mechanics*, 1 sports ground, 1 medical practice, 1 typography workshop and 1 publishing house (Universitas Publishing House). Providing the access of the students with disabilities/SEN to these components of the material base will surely represent an important part of the inclusion strategy meant to enable both the use of those facilities and the stimulation of students' social interactions with the members of the teaching staff and the other categories of students, while decisively contributing to the building and strengthening of a system of values relying on tolerance, trust, concern and mutual aid.

6. **Accessing ERASMUS + grants, practical trainings and internships for the students with disabilities/SEN.** According to the data published by the European Commission, Erasmus+ program includes a special component dedicated to the students with special educational needs, who can be granted supplemental funds for taking part in study, practical training or teaching mobilities. The funds that can be accessed through the Erasmus+ program to support the students with disabilities are meant for eliminating the obstacles they face in carrying out mobility programs: special accommodation needs; physical and health support during the trip; costs required for a potential accompanying person; acquiring adapted didactic resources; other support equipment. Providing the opportunity of accessing Erasmus+ mobilities on an equal basis with the students belonging to the other categories represents a priority of the policy for fighting discrimination, through fair access to resources and equal opportunities for all the students and the members of the teaching staff that are active in the University of Petroșani.

Besides, the support structures of the students with disabilities will focus on organising practical trainings and internships that will provide the competences and practical skills able to facilitate the easy insertion of the students with disabilities on the labour market as well as the possibility to fully develop both personally and professionally.

7. **Accessing projects that enable getting financial support for providing decent life and learning conditions for the students with disabilities.** Although according to the stipulations of the *National strategy regarding the rights of disabled individuals "An Equitable Romania" 2022-2027*, the decisional factors at the Ministry of Education consider the reviewing of the methodology for financing the tertiary education and the inclusion of specific criteria for the students with disabilities/SEN in the methodology for the basic funding, I believe that the package of measures



proposed by the hereby paper requires a more important financial support in order to insure an inter-correlated implementation.

In accordance, I propose that the University of Petroșani continues identifying other sources of financing, different from those provided by the state budget, through elaborating financing requests and/or participating in programs of social responsibility where it might identify players, partners and representatives of the business environment ready to support quality inclusive education.

#### **4. CONCLUSIONS**

The package of measures proposed is not an exhaustive one, but rather reflects the most urgent actions that should be implemented with a view to initiate the process of building a successful inclusive university. I hope that through elaborating and implementing a coherent policy of social responsibility able to promote openness to innovation and society, academic management will succeed in getting a large participation of the internal and external stakeholders that would provide a rapid increase of the degree of inclusion of the young people with disabilities/SEN that live in the area of the Jiu Valley and in other regions that are part of the recruitment area for the students of the University of Petroșani.

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