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Szerkesztőbizottság

Kissné Zsámboki Réka főszerkesztő

Szerkesztők:

Pásztor Enikő, Molnár Csilla

Kloiber Alexandra, Frang Gizella, Patyi Gábor;

Kitzinger Arianna angol nyelvi lektor

Szerkesztőbizottsági tagok:

Podráczky Judit, Varga László, Belovári Anita,

Kövérné Nagyházi Bernadette, Szombathelyiné Nyitrai Ágnes, Sántha Kálmán

Nemzetközi Tanácsadó Testület

Ambrusné Kéri Katalin, Pécsi Tudományegyetem Bölcsészettudományi Kar, Pécs, HU

Andrea M. Noel, State University of New York at New Paltz, USA

Bábosik István, Kodolányi János Főiskola, Székesfehérvár, HU

Horák Rita, Újvidéki Egyetem, Magyar Tannyelvű Tanítóképző Kar, Szabadka (Szerbia),

Tünde Szécsi, Florida Gulf Coast University, College of Education, Fort Myers, Florida, USA

Jaroslav Charchula, Jesuit University Ignatianum In Krakow, Faculty of Pedagogy Krakow, PO

Suzy Rosemond, KinderCare Learning Center, Stoneham, USA

Krzysztof Biel, Jesuit University Ignatianum in Krakow, Faculty of Education, Krakow, PO

Jolanta Karbowniczek, Jesuit University Ignatianum in Krakow, Faculty of Education, Krakow, PO

Maria Franciszka Szymańska, Jesuit University Ignatianum in Krakow, Faculty of Education, Krakow, PO

Abdülkadir Kabadayı, Necmettin Erbakan University, A.K. Faculty of Education, Konya, TR

Szerkesztőség

Kissné Zsámboki Réka főszerkesztő

Soproni Egyetem Benedek Elek Pedagógiai Kar

Képzés és Gyakorlat Szerkesztősége

E-mail: kissne.zsamboki.reka@uni-sopron.hu

9400, Sopron, Ferenczy János u. 5.

Telefon: +36-99-518-930

Web: <http://trainingandpractice.hu>

Web-mester: Horváth Csaba

Felelős kiadó: Varga László dékán

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VARGA, ARANKA¹ – VITÉZ, KITTI² – ORSÓS, ISTVÁN³ –
FODOR, BÁLINT⁴ – HORVÁTH, GERGELY⁵

Diversity and Inclusion in Higher Education⁶

Our study clarifies the concepts of inclusion and diversity based on domestic and international studies. We examine how diversity has become a feature of higher education, and the additional causes and consequences behind the focus of inclusivity. Our questionnaire study explored the extent to which the diverse group of students of the University of Pécs (N: 809) is involved in the university social and academic life, and whether those with social disadvantages show a difference in involvement. The results revealed that socially disadvantaged students are underrepresented in large university programmes, however, student colleges and other micro-communities are more able to address these students in a personal way and to provide an inclusive environment.

Introduction

It is good to observe how inclusive approach and practice have spread recently, yet this has also caused the erosion of the concept itself. In our study we attempt to clarify the meaning of inclusion and diversity, based on Hungarian and international scientific literature, as well as on our own research of the topic. We enumerate the groups in focus of inclusion, and provide specific details on the causes, means, and advantages of an inclusive higher education system.

The University of Pécs (UP) has been facilitating inclusive development programmes since 2015 (Arató–Varga ed., 2015). The ‘Inclusive University’ programme, founded in 2018, conducted a university-wide questionnaire and carried out in-depth-interviews. It explored inclusive programmes at the university, and identified lacking areas related to the creation of an inclusive environment. The main result of this exploratory research was that three main groups have been receiving support over recent years at the UP; foreign students, disabled students and disadvantaged and/or Roma students. From the organizational aspect, it became

¹ Associate professor, Director of Institute of Education, University of Pécs; email: varga.aranka@pte.hu

² Assistant teacher, PhD student, University of Pécs; email: vitez.kitti@pte.hu

³ Student college member, University of Pécs; email: orsos.istvan@pte.hu

⁴ Assistant teacher, PhD student, University of Pécs; email: fodor.balint@pte.hu

⁵ Student college member, University of Pécs; email: horvath.gergely@pte.hu

⁶The study was carried out as a part of the EFOP-3.4.3-16-2016-00005 project by the ‘Inclusive University’ programme, and it was a joint cooperation of student college members, PhD students and university teachers.

apparent that the support of students with inclusive needs mostly happens on an individual basis or by micro-communities, rather than with institution-wide interventions affecting their broader environment (Varga–Deli–Fodor, 2019).

On the same topic, another current research is examining the university citizens (students, teachers, and staff) of the UP from several aspects, focusing on the time period from 2010 to 2020. It specifically examines the groups in focus of inclusion, and through different research methods it attempts to reveal the means of support that contributed to students' success, while identifying causes of drop-out as well. This allows us to identify lacking areas that require further development in order to create a more inclusive university environment.

Approaches and the practice of inclusion

Inclusion and diversity

From an educational point of view, the basis of mutual inclusion is equity, signifying an integrated learning environment. This is supplemented by individualized support and content, which therefore reinforces equity, contributing to the educational success of the students in the scope of inclusion (Varga, 2015b). Inclusive educational environment enhances the success of every participating student by involving and supporting the excluded individuals (UNESCO, 2009a, 2009b).

Diversity of students can mean the personal, inherited perks, and/or their socio-economical background, and the effects of these on their cultural environment. On the individual level, diversity is multi-dimensional, as it is made up of several (advantageous or disadvantageous) traits and perks (Dezső, 2015). These characteristics of the individual are strongly influenced by social and cultural environment, while the ones in scope define the current life-situation of that individual. The norms of society create an advantageous or disadvantageous situation by stressing some diversity characteristics of the individual, while others are being ignored or rejected.

Nowadays, researchers observing educational environments constantly underline the importance of understanding the needs of individuals and communities, in order to succeed in creating equity-focused environments. Their approach to inclusivity is based on the idea that every individual's unique personal, social, and cultural characteristics contribute to a cooperative and supportive educational environment. Inclusive environment and the successful treatment of diversity is achieved by effective reactions to the individuals' personal needs. This positive attitude of the individuals involved assumes open-mindedness, while embracing the

idea that diversity is valuable. The pedagogical professionalism of pedagogues involved is indispensable, so that they may understand the individual walks-of-life of their students in order to personalize support. This professionalism is characterized by joint action and partnership-centred approach, while constant renewal is essential for successfully reacting to the changing nature of diversity (Varga, 2015b).

International research and models

The essential endeavour of the American Civil Rights movement was the desegregation of the Afro-American minority in all segments of education. This was the first time in the era when the terms “equal education opportunities” and “equality and equity” appeared in publications and in judicial deliverances, that guided the pursuits of the 1960s which aimed the integration (later inclusion) of the minority (Maples, 2014, p. 30). Its positive consequence is that based on social and cultural aspects diverse student groups have appeared in higher education as well. Reflecting on this the Diverse Learning Environment Model (DLE) (Hurtado et al., 2012) connects the internal (micro) and external (macro) forces on the institutions that influence the equitable educational outcomes. The results of researchers have confirmed that the emergence of equity goes hand in hand with the increasing of the quality of education and academic excellence (Hurtado-Ruiz, 2015). The almost two decade long higher education-developing movement of the United States, named Inclusive Excellence is based on these results (Milem–Chang–Antonio, 2005; Williams–Joseph–Shederick, 2005; Baumann et al., 2005).

In the 2000s, in the EU, the study of the correspondence of diversity and inclusion became a part of higher education research, with unfolding the different learner groups’ attributes and describing the methods for supporting them (Cooper ed., 2010, 2012; Varga ed., 2015). The research summary (Claeys-Kulik–Jorgensen–Stöber, 2019) of the European Universities Association (EUA) was published in 2019, which examined 159 higher education institutions, and revealed that increasing equity and diversity appeared in the aims of the European institutions at a significant rate (88%). Mentoring, accessible buildings, and financial support all contribute to this goal, for which three main factors are mentioned by the respondents: the commitment of higher education leaders/decision makers (76%), direct inclusion of the target groups (43%), and forming of a diverse learning environment (22%).

In the international studies the effectiveness of the application of inclusive models are confirmed by the results of research. In the USA, for the formation of the inclusive environment the term of “inclusive excellence” is applied (Milem–Chang–Antonio, 2005), for which the extension of the activities aiming inclusion in the higher educational environment is necessary.

The leaders of the universities consider diversity as a central value, supporting the success of students and the competitiveness of the institutions (O'Donnel et al., 2011; Danowitz–Tuit, 2011).

The interpretation of diversity is differing in the international studies, researchers of different countries apply the term for the diversity of underrepresented groups in the higher education, the term for instance in the USA is used for African American and Latin-American students (Harris-Lee, 2019) and for disabled students (Lombardi–Murray–Dallas, 2013; Burgstahler, 2015); while in Canada (Guo-Jamal, 2007) and in Western Europe (Cooper ed., 2010) the students of immigrant families are referred to with the term. In several studies sexual orientation is mentioned as a component of diversity (Magnus–Lundin, 2016; Harris–Lee, 2019), additionally the representation of women is transparent in all the institutions (Guo–Jamal, 2007; Harris–Lee, 2019).

Researchers state that the strategies of equitable support of the learner groups' academic performance, as a responsibility and aim of the university, are indispensable both for enhancing the reputation of the institutions and the well-being of the students (Bailey–Dynarski, 2011; Myers, 2016). The strategies for innovation are extended for students of ethnical minorities (Musu-Gillette et al., 2016), who implicitly are to be involved in programmes because of their different cultural heritage, thus the majority and minority can be enriched by mutual understanding. The target group of students with disabilities besides the inclusive, equitable services, are helped with the (re)forming of the physical space, with creating equal accessibility in practise in the buildings of the universities (Burgstahler, 2015). In the studies of the 21st century, the inclusion of students of different sexual orientation, named as sexual minorities, is highlighted, their inclusion can be supported with sensitizing programmes (Magnus–Lundin, 2016). The underrepresented groups in the higher education, such as the students of low socio-economic backgrounds, are helped with disadvantage compensating interventions which result in lower drop-out rates (Sweeny, 2013). It must be highlighted that the acceptance and valuation of diversity in the international studies is understood in the sense that increasing inclusivity is not only beneficial for the groups that need support, but all the social groups in the common space are benefiting from it (Varga, 2015b).

Research supports the development of academic excellence considering the interventions supporting inclusivity, thus the effort for inclusion is the essential aspect of the innovations in the universities (May–Bridger, 2010; Solomon et al., 2017; Brusoni et al., 2014). The creation of the inclusive university environment is realized in different stages, in harmony with the above description of target groups and the ways for addressing and involving them. In the

strategies of innovation, the programme elements of the development of the learning environment (Burgstahler, 2015), the broadening of the activities of tutors (May–Bridger, 2010), and the services aiming the students (Burgstahler, 2015) are all given emphasis. For the sustainability of the inclusive development, continuous interventions are necessary for reaching further success (Arató-Varga ed., 2015, Nolan–Targett, 2017).

Research questions and methodology

The more inclusive a university is, the more it can address its students (regardless of their socio-cultural background), involving them in different social and scientific activities, therefore enhancing academic excellence. Our research focused on Hungarian, full-time students of the UP. We examined to what extent they are involved in campus life, and if there are any differences in the case of disadvantaged and/or Roma students. We were also trying to uncover the reasons behind students' absence from university events, and whether these reasons are different in the case of the groups in the focus of inclusion. Some of our questions concentrated on finding out if formal institutions of student cooperation (student colleges) supporting talent development (academic excellence) can address students better. We also wanted to disclose if there was a correlation between participation in social/cultural events and academic activity.

The research was carried out by an access-based sampling, an online questionnaire. The questionnaire was sent to every Hungarian, full-time student of the UP via Neptun database in December 2019 (N:11384, source: UP database, 2019). However, only 880 students returned the questionnaire, from which 809 responses were analysable (7,1% of all Hungarian, full-time students) therefore our study is not representative.

Results

About the sample

By analysing the demographic data, we examined the ratio of Roma and/or disadvantaged students in the sample. We have no data regarding the overall ratio of these students at the UP, therefore we relied on official national figures and estimates to determine representativity. The ratio of disadvantaged students receiving extra points when entering higher education between 2015 and 2018 was less than 1% (0.98-0.88%) (Proity, 2020). According to the estimates of the Roma Student College Network, Roma students are present at universities in even smaller numbers. We were only able to estimate the overlap between the two groups, therefore we set the representation of disadvantaged and/or Roma students at 1,5%.

Table 1 demonstrates the distribution of our research sample (N:809): disadvantaged responders (N:12), Roma responders (N:14), and responders who have put themselves into both groups (N:10). Because of their low numbers, we considered them as one group (N:36), and refer to them as ‘Focus’ (as the group in the focus of inclusion). Responders who do not belong to these groups (N:773) are referred to as ‘Control’, being the control group of the research. The distribution of our sample (Focus 4.45%, Control 95.55%) shows that students in the focus of the research are represented three times more than the national estimate.

Sampling aspects		ppl.	%	female	male	female%	male%
Focus group (total)		36	4.45%	19	17	54.29%	45.71%
-	Disadvantaged	12	1.48%	6	6	50.00%	50.00%
-	Roma	14	1.73%	6	8	42.86%	57.14%
-	Disadvantaged and Roma	10	1.24%	7	3	70.00%	30.00%
Control group		773	95.55%	551	222	71.28%	28.72%
Total		809	100.00%	570	239	70.46%	29.54%

Table 1 – Sample distribution based on social background (N=809)

Community involvement and academic activity

It is important to examine participation at social and cultural events, as we are able to measure inclusivity through student involvement and to what extent the institution can address university citizens by its events.

Event	Total (ppl.)	Total (%)	Focus (ppl.)	Control (ppl.)	Focus (%)	Control (%)
None	371	45.86%	19	352	52.78%	46.18%
Freshmen inauguration (ball)	294	36.34%	3	291	8.33%	37.65%
Department Night	164	20.27%	8	156	22.22%	20.18%
Oktoberfest	114	14.09%	9	105	25.00%	13.58%
Department Week	64	7.91%	2	62	5.56%	8.02%

Table 2 – In which events did you participate? ⁷

⁷ We have indicated events that were the most or least popular among responders.

About half of the responders indicated that they never get involved in social activities on campus (Table 2). Reasons of Control and Focus students do not differ: students of both groups complained about their lack of free time and financial problems, along with the difficulties of commuting. Responders of the Control have also indicated the lack of information, and that the nature of these events were out of their scope of interest. Students mostly participated in the events because their friends and peers had also attended, while their interest in the events themselves was less significant. No differences were found between the Focus and the Control in this respect, therefore we can underline the common importance of peer groups. The most popular event was the Freshmen Inauguration Ball – however, the participation of the Focus was significantly low. The Ball is the first major event of campus life, therefore it is considered as an important milestone of becoming a university citizen. The significant absence of Focus students suggests that it should be extremely important to address and support students who have no real picture of university life yet. Interestingly, participation of both groups was 20% at the second most popular event (Department Night). Already being familiar with a smaller group of peers, Focus group students were more willing to participate this event (taking place further down the semester).

Students' academic life, talent development and its formal community (namely student colleges) can also support student involvement. This is especially true for Focus students, as less of them engage in academic activities than the number of student college members from their ranks. Furthermore, only three students participated in research out of the eight student college members. We assume that for them the student college could be considered as a supportive community. This assumption is further supported by the fact that most of them were members of the Roma Student College Network colleges (WHSz and PERSZ-E⁸), and some of them are even members of several student colleges at the same time (Table 3). Students of the Control engage in academic activities without formal (student college) help. Therefore, Focus students' academic engagement should be supported at the organizational level.

⁸ Wlislöcki Henrik Roma Student College, and The Roma Evangelical-Lutheran College for Advanced Studies of Pécs

	Total (ppl.)	Total (%)	Focus (ppl.)	Focus (%)	Control (ppl.)	Control (%)
Student college member	78	9.64%	8	22.22%	70	9.06%
Engages in scientific activity	149	18.42%	6	16.67%	143	18.50%
Engages in scientific activity and student college member	40	4.94%	3	8.33%	37	4.79%
Engages in scientific activity, but not a student college member	109	13.47%	3	8.33%	106	13.71%
Student college member, but does not engage in scientific activity	38	4.70%	5	13.89%	33	4.27%

Table 3 – Scientific activity and student college membership

Student college members were also more likely to participate in social and cultural events, proving that their involvement in campus activities is generally greater. Student colleges support several aspects of students' lives, therefore these are an important target area of inclusive development strategies. Being a member of a micro-group (e.g. student college, university department) makes it easier to personally address students.

	ppl.	%	
At least one of the parents has graduated from secondary school, or obtained a university degree (in the Control group)	683	88%	
One of the parents has not graduated from secondary school (in the Control group)	90	12%	
Including:	Mother only has 8 primary grades	23	3%
	Father only has 8 primary grades	9	1%
	Both parents only have 8 primary grades	6	1%
	One of the parents only has 8 primary grades	20	3%

Table 4 – Distribution of Control based on parents' level of schooling

We have noticed how socially layered the Control group students were (N=773), therefore we decided to separately examine students whose parents are not secondary graduates (N=90). From the aspect of mobility, they were similar to the Focus (Table 4). More than half of these students (52.2%) never participate in social and cultural events – a ratio equalling the Focus group students. Student colleges are able to address these students even less than they can address the Control group (8.8%). Only 14.4% of them engages in academic activity, which is

also less than in the case of both examined groups. Those few who have joined a student college and/or engage in academic activity, are less likely to research individually (just like we have seen in the case of the Control), rather being more typically engaged in their communities.

Therefore, the Control group indicates diversity from those aspects that influence student involvement in university life. Student composition of the university is diverse beyond the examined aspects, which necessitates the re-evaluation and extension of current supportive services. It is also important to note that besides the Focus group (members of which have indicated their disadvantaged status), there is another significant student group, which would also require equitable support. However, they are the ones the university is able to address the least, may it be events or academic communities.

Summary

We have observed how university events can only address a minor fraction of the students, especially disadvantaged individuals. It is important to re-evaluate how to attract students more effectively from the very beginning of their university studies, therefore enhancing their involvement, and making them more engaged. Lower organizational levels (such as departments) could succeed in this by providing community-building opportunities for their students – a more personal and differentiated support. Student colleges are also important as small communities and should be further strengthened. They simultaneously provide a supportive peer community, talent development benefiting academic excellence – therefore contributing to the prevention of drop-out. Unlike university events, student colleges provide such a personal connection and support, which students on the path of social mobility desperately need during their university years.

An important result of the research is a more detailed definition of student diversity, as we have uncovered further groups, which have not been identified as disadvantaged previously. It is necessary to provide these groups equitable support, and their involvement is essential for their successful studies. The development of inclusive programmes on a strategic level is insufficient: equitable services must become transparent, attractive and personal, in order to successfully reach out to groups in the focus of inclusion. Only this can counter the prevalent reason for students' absence "*I am ashamed of being poor*". The new aspects of diversity, and the lacking reactions of the unprepared institutional system and the environment necessitate further and deeper examination, in order to develop, enhance, and extend inclusivity.

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