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# The journey towards Universal Design in the Teaching and Learning Environment in Hungarian Higher Education

## Introduction

The article provides a brief overview of both legislation and practice of teaching and learning environment of higher education in Hungary. The article discusses support provision for students with disabilities and maps challenges and enablers of moving into the direction of Universal Design in the teaching and learning environment. The results of empirical data collection by the author is discussed. It is hoped the work will act as a catalyst to create a dialogue among various higher education professionals to discuss access and inclusion in higher education in Hungary.

## Students with disabilities in Higher Education

During the move to mass higher education, an increasing diversification in the composition of the student population has been witnessed (UNESCO, 1998). A growing number of students with disabilities appeared among students (Galindo & Rodriguez, 2015). In Hungary, this ratio is around 1% today (Laki, 2009, 2010, 2015; Kiss, 2014), but in some (mainly Western European countries) this ratio is significantly higher. For example, the proportion of students with disabilities is 12% in the UK (HESA, 2018). The increased presence of students with disabilities has led to a particular path within the process of expanding higher education. Although the proportion of students with disabilities among the total number of students is relatively low, the legal regulation of access to higher education and participation in higher education is gradually increasing. It started in the third of the 20th century and became even more important since the 1990s (Jameel, 2011; OECD, 2011, Kooij, 2015, Tempus, 2016).

## Legislation in a nutshell

With the accession of Hungary to the European Union in 2004 and as a participant of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), and a full member of the Bologna process, the legal background of the development of the unified European education and training framework is established with 2005.139 Higher Education Act. The provisions of Regulation 29/2002 (V.17) OM (Ministry of Education, Hungary) have been renewed and further elaborated in the 2005.139 Higher Education Act and the subsequent 2011.204. Higher Education Act and its implementing Government regulations. In the history of Hungarian higher education legislation, Regulation 29/2002 (V.17) OM stands out, as it was the first to regulate the access to and participation in higher education for students with disabilities. The law was issued on the basis of 1998.26. 'Ensuring rights and equal opportunities of persons with disabilities' Act which is the first law in the Hungarian legislation after the political change (1989/1990) that specifically targets the rights and equal opportunities of people with disabilities in various areas of life. The Regulation 29/2002 (V.17) OM was essentially aimed at compensating for the disadvantages of different types and degrees of disability, both in the recruitment process and in the continuation of studies. Currently enrolled or prospective students with disabilities can apply for various accommodations during the admission procedure or during their studies based on the justified medical proof/certificate of their impairments or condition. 2011.204. Act on National Higher Education is currently in force with its implementation of Government Regulation Act No.

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87/2015 (IV. 9.), Article 110.§ 11 paragraph which governs:

- the procedure for verifying disability,
- the principles of studies for students with disabilities,
- rules of accommodations and procedural rules,
- the role and function of the coordinator supporting student studies.

53.§ 2 paragraph (g) of Chapter 17 of the Regulation, entitled 'Principles for the compilation of the institutional guide', states that higher education institutions must indicate the name and contact details of the coordinator for students with disabilities at their institution's various information channels. 62-65. § 1 and 2 paragraphs of chapter 20, 'Promoting Equal Opportunities for Students', provides information on accommodations and exemptions for students with different types of impairments. **In addition, the Act and its Implementing Government Regulation require higher education institutions to include in their overall institutional rules and their operating rules study obligations, and accommodations for students with disabilities.**

## Models of support provision

According to the international literature review, support principles for people with disabilities, can be classified into three groups. These are the following:

1. Equal treatment for people with disabilities (**Same Support for everyone**));
2. Equitable treatment (**Different Support for People with Disabilities**)
3. Removing Barriers (**Creating an Inclusive Environment**).

Support provision under the first principle ignores people's differences and backgrounds, providing the same support for everyone. The second principle takes into account the differences between individuals, such as barriers students with disabilities might face, and these barriers are attempted to be overcome with a retrofitting approach. An essential feature of this practice is that the obstacles themselves are not removed. The third principle does not strive to balance the differences but seeks to create conditions (at the highest possible level) that eliminate barriers, by making the environment accessible to everyone, taking into account the diversity of the human population. (Silcock, 2016, p.1.)

Based on the analysis of the Hungarian legal environment it can be declared that supporting the participation of students with disabilities in higher education happens according to the second classification - Different Support for Equal Access (Equitable Treatment of Students with Disabilities in Higher Education). Prospective students with disabilities or current students with disabilities may apply for different support provisions, accommodations, exemptions (justified with a medical proof/certificate of their impairments or condition) facilitating the admission process and the continuation of their studies. Government Regulation (87/2015 (IV.9)) of the 2011.204 Higher Education Act defines details of the fulfilment of the academic obligations.

- positive discrimination,
- support provision,
- partial, and
- full exemption rules.

This practice is applied in many countries, however, there is a current trend in many countries (USA, Canada, UK,

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Ireland, etc.) to move into the direction of Universal Design of teaching and learning environment of higher education.

## Empirical data collection

The goal of empirical data collection was to measure the inclusiveness of teaching and learning environment in Hungarian higher education for students with disabilities. (Fazekas, 2018) The empirical data collection aimed to gather the opinions and experiences of:

- coordinators/officers supporting students with disabilities in higher education institutions,
- students with disabilities, and
- lecturers.

The empirical data collection was conducted using both quantitative and qualitative methods. The qualitative data collection complemented the quantitative data collection. The tools/methods used in the empirical data collection were:

- semi-structured interviews (lecturers, students, coordinators and experts);
- self-completed questionnaires (among lecturers, students);
- secondary-analysis of statistical data;
- analysis of documents related to support the provision of students with disabilities

In the 2016/2017 academic year, a total of 287,018 students studied in higher education institutions in Hungary, information provided by the Ministry of Human Capacities, Hungary (EMMI) and the Education Authority, Hungary (OH). During the same timeframe, the number of registered students with disabilities (those who disclosed their disabilities to coordinators supporting students) was 2,437 which represented 0.849% of the total student population. In Hungary, students with learning difficulties (dyslexia, dysgraphia, etc.) are the largest, 63% among all students with disabilities (OH, 2017) By comparison, in the United Kingdom and Ireland and Western Europe, this ratio ( total registered students with disabilities) is around 12% (HESA, 2018) (AHEAD, 2016).

The primary concern for the choice of the higher education institutions involved in the empirical data collection was to choose those higher education institutions where most of the students with disabilities are studying. Out of the sixty-five higher education institutions, 23 higher education institutions were invited to participate in the research. Out of these officially contacted 23 higher education institutions, 13 coordinators /officers supporting students with disabilities of higher education institutions accepted the participation in the interview. It gives an illustration of the situation in Hungary, as the dominant proportion of the student population is studying in these higher education institutions.

The teaching and learning environment has been assessed with all three of the target groups. It is important to emphasise that the empirical data collection is not based on a representative sample; therefore, it only provides a snapshot of the issue, gives a brief overview of the situation.

The novelty of the collection and design of the set of questions used in the empirical data collection is that they are based on a particular system of criteria which is not or little known in the domestic professional environment in Hungary. These are **Inclusive Teaching Strategy Inventory** (Lombardi, 2012) and the **UDL Guidelines** (CAST,

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2018) On the other hand, they do take into account the national practice, circumstances and a number of issues including accommodations of access needs.

Based on a preliminary analysis of the various roles and responsibilities of disability coordinators, semi-structured interviews were conducted with them in the following thematic areas:

- Legislation regarding supporting students with disabilities
- Equal opportunity strategies and action plans;
- Organisational structures of support provided for students with disabilities;
- Visibility and impact of coordinators' work;
- Professional background of disability coordinators;
- Job monitoring of disability coordinators;
- Training provision for disability coordinators;
- Training provision for lecturer and relevant personnel;
- Professional collaborations and grants;
- Financial resources supporting students with disabilities;
- Provision of support services for students with disabilities;
- Projects;

### Questionnaire for students

- socio-demographic questions
- About studies
- About access to higher education
- Analysis of teaching and learning environment (course design, the design of course atmosphere, teaching materials and tools, forms of teaching and supporting learning, teaching methods, shapes and types of assessment)
- About support provision for students with disabilities
- Disclosure of disability and use of support services

### Questionnaire for lecturers

- socio-demographic questions
- Questions about teaching
- Analysis of teaching and learning environment (course design, the design of course atmosphere, teaching materials and tools, forms of teaching and supporting learning, teaching methods, shapes and types of assessment)
- About support provision for students with disabilities
- Opinions and experiences of helping students with disabilities and the provision of accommodations

### Interviews with students

- Career (studies) and motivation
- Experiences of admission procedures
- Experiences of teaching and learning environment (course design, course atmosphere, knowledge transition, applied teaching and learning)
- Support provision for learning (by lecturers, coordinators and other personnel)
- Disclosure of disability, requesting support

### Interviews with lecturers

- Career
- Experiences of teaching and learning environment (course design, course atmosphere, knowledge transition, applied teaching and learning)
- Support provision, accommodations of access needs
- Opinions and experiences of supporting students with disabilities and the provision of accommodations

## Main findings

Opinions and experiences of a total of 170 participants have been recorded in some way in this area (as students with disabilities, lecturers, or disability coordinators). In total 13 disability coordinators, 15 teachers and 13 students and 11 experts were interviewed. Among students with disabilities, 87 completed questionnaires, 31 questionnaires returned from lecturers. The empirical data collection was conducted by one person. Face to face interviews with Disability Coordinators has been conducted both in Budapest and other cities in Hungary). Disability coordinators sent questionnaires according to the data protection regulations.

Due to the low number of students with disabilities and their proportion within the total student population in Hungary, access and participation in higher education for this cohort is seen as being a lower priority/pressuring issue compared to the Western European countries where the proportion of students with disabilities is more than ten times higher in higher education. This situation explains why the development of inclusive teaching and learning environments in national higher education does not appear to be such a pressing/burning necessity, or task.

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Findings show that in the Hungarian higher education institutions the **Equitable treatment (Different Support for People with Disabilities)** type of support provision works successfully and effectively, which is the result of devoted work of the disability coordinators. As a general experience, it can be concluded that making education more accessible (inclusive) requires considerable additional work and time, but recognition of this does not always happen. The current system does not reward lecturers for this additional work.

Interviews with lecturers and students revealed that in the national system if only sporadically, there were also methods, teaching techniques, and initiatives which were already in line with the principles of universal design for learning. It is also important to emphasise that lecturers, disability coordinators as well as students, have been interested in creating an inclusive teaching and learning environment. Some have suggested receiving more information about UDL, UID (Universal Instruction Design), etc. principles and methods. As a follow-up, it is planned to compile such a guide. Expertise and experience of disability coordinators can serve as a basis for the creation of an inclusive teaching and learning environment.

The results basically reflect that the disability coordinator system fulfils its function, it works in an adequate manner. However, it should be seen that the overall picture is only positive because the proportion of people with disabilities in the student population is negligible. Thus, it is possible to solve, remove obstacles in the educational and learning environment, in an almost individual way. However, individual solutions also mean that the accessibility, inclusive nature of the learning and learning environment does not escape the bubble of individual problem management, it is not a mainstream solution or practice. Changing a situation that is not yet a constraint does not bring a driving force to change everyday practice.

## The way forward

Universal Design Educational Models according to the American practice known (concurrent brands), Universal Design for Learning (UDL); Universal Instructional Design (UID); Universal Design for Instruction (UDI) are not yet applied widely in the practice of Hungarian higher education, and consequently there is no domestic experience either. It is also important to keep in mind that in the Hungarian higher education environment the student population (especially in comparison with the situation in Western Europe and North America) can be considered as 'homogeneous'. Consequently, the problems arising from the diversity of the student population do not appear to be really intense in the domestic environment. This finding is explained by the fact that less than 1 % of students in Hungary disclose a disability while in North America and Western Europe the same ratio is ten times higher, around 10-12%.

However, there is another aspect of the issue that clearly speaks of learning about and possibly applying these new Universal Design Educational Models in Hungary. It is essential to acknowledge that the various universal design models (UDL, UID, UDI) result in a number of advantages and efficiencies also in the general student population which is considered 'homogeneous'. David H. Rose (Rose et al, 2014) referred to this when he said about the method he developed (UDL) that in the learning process everybody accepts and processes new knowledge (this kind of behaviour of the brain is just as typical for every individual as individual fingerprints). **The Universal Design approach is capable of improving the effectiveness of teaching and learning for all.**

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