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Higher Education Teachers' Attitudes towards Inclusive Education

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Abstract: *Inclusive education is a key aspect of quality assurance in higher education, closely linked to equity and diversity issues. The attitudes of higher education teachers play a crucial role at the decision-making and policy levels, as well as in their practical teaching approaches. This study aims to explore teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education both theoretically and practically. A review of the scientific literature revealed five main attitudinal trends: 1) predominantly positive towards the inclusion of students with special educational needs; 2) predominantly negative; 3) uncertain or undefined; 4) reported as positive but with undefinable behaviour; and 5) positively proactive. Our research was carried out using the methods of focus groups and qualitative content analysis, gathering data from 64 participants across five focus groups held between May and July 2024. The findings highlighted a gap between what academic staff teach and their practical actions, with many expressing support for inclusion in theory but showing reluctance or insufficient skills to implement inclusive practices effectively.*

Keywords: *inclusive education, higher education, students with special educational needs, teachers' attitude.*

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Introductory overview

Inclusive education has emerged as a significant focus in the past 20 years, both internationally (Yada & Savolainen, 2017) and in national educational practices and policies. This emphasis spans the entire educational system, including in Romania (Ministry of Education, Pre-University Education Law No. 198/2023; Romanian Academic Society, 2016), from pre-school to university and postgraduate levels. This shift also coincides with the increasing number of students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in higher education systems across Europe and worldwide (Al-Korbi et al., 2024; Gülsün et al., 2023; Fisseler, 2021; Fu et al., 2021; Lister et al., 2020; Martins et al., 2017; Kirillova & Faizrakhmanova, 2016).

A recent study by the European University Association (EUA) (Gaebel et al., 2024) offers an institutional perspective on the evolution of higher education. It examines how policies and actions are shaped in response to major strategic, societal, and economic priorities and challenges, specifically those "which foster equity, diversity and inclusion and respond to the needs of wider communities" (p. 44). Therefore, it highlights the importance of establishing a foundation for an inclusive higher education environment. All these approaches are rooted in the philosophy of equity in education (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002) according to which each participant has the right to receive education tailored to their abilities or disabilities (Gaad & Almotairi, 2013).

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, adopted by the United Nations (UN) in 2006, aims "to promote, protect and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities, and to promote respect for their inherent dignity" (Article 1). Regarding education, the document asserts that "people with disabilities have a right to education without discrimination". It emphasises the need to ensure inclusive education at all levels, including access to "tertiary education, vocational training, adult education and lifelong learning without discrimination and on an equal basis with others" (Article 24).

According to Angenscheidt Bidegain & Navarrete Antola (2017), inclusive education is about accepting diversity and identifying the answer to the question "how to learn to live with differences, and how to learn from differences" (p. 234). Additionally, inclusive education must manifest itself as an ongoing vector of the educational system and process (Bethere et al., 2023). Therefore, having the necessary legislation or material infrastructure alone is insufficient to support inclusive education at any given level. The major factor for turning this goal into reality is the human resource directly

involved in the process—teachers and managers. Their beliefs, values, and attitudes play an essential role in terms of action. Teachers' attitudes are a "a very important variable in the success of including students with exceptional learning needs in regular classrooms" (Gaad & Almotairi, 2013, 290), and "the successful implementation of any inclusive policy for students with disabilities depends largely on educators' attitudes" (Edna, 2016, 640; Bethere et al., 2023; Gülsün et al., 2023; Bandyopadhyay & Dhara, 2021; Fu et al., 2021; Jury et al., 2021; Yang & Yu, 2021; Angenscheidt Bidegain & Navarrete Antola, 2017; Avramidis & Norwich, 2002).

In other words, teachers' attitudes play a substantial part at both the decision-making and policy levels as well as the didactic and practical levels. These attitudes, shaped by their axiological orientation, are responsible for generating either a culture of acceptance or exclusion (Gülsün et al., 2023; Edna, 2016). Consequently, the study of teachers' attitudes towards SEN students has become an increasingly common endeavour over the last 25 years (Savolainen et al., 2020; Mâţă & Clipa, 2020; Saloviita, 2018; Avramidis & Norwich, 2002), considerably impacting how academic teaching approaches are restructured and how specific counseling services are provided for this broad category of students.

The literature review highlights a significant number of scientific papers which specifically address the role of teachers and their attitudes towards students with Special Educational Needs (SEN). These studies discuss their specialised training to work with this student category, the barriers encountered, solutions to overcome these challenges, and the similarities and differences in the implementation of inclusive education across various educational systems from different geographic regions. Below, we can list some of the most relevant research published in the past decade, arranged in descending chronological order: Al-Korbi et al., 2024; Alrusaiyes, 2024; Dağlı Gökbulut et al, 2024; Mareş et al, 2024; Svendby, 2024; Ediyanto & Kawai, 2023; Ignacio & Allit, 2023; Barnová et al., 2022; Charitaki et al., 2022; Gràcia et al., 2022; Belková & Zólyomiová, 2021; González-Castellano et al., 2021; San Martin et al., 2021; Zabeli et al., 2021; Mâţă & Clipa, 2020; Savolainen et al., 2020; Supriyanto, 2019; Ayub et al., 2019; Jenson, 2018; Saloviita, 2018; Galaterou & Antoniou, 2017; Martins et al., 2017; Moriña, 2016; Edna, 2016; Bruder & Mogro-Wilson, 2014; Gonçalves et al., 2014; Gaad & Almotairi, 2013).

The referenced studies collectively indicate that there is a general acceptance of including students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in higher education (Gaad & Almotairi, 2013, 292). However, the level of acceptance and the manner in which inclusion is manifested are influenced

by factors such as the type and severity of the disability, cultural, religious, and economic issues within the academic culture (Bethere et al., 2023; Jenson, 2018), and the matter of their positive discrimination compared to other student groups.

Literature review on the topic

Building on one of the conclusions drawn by Ignacio & Allit (2023, 3), which notes that "the results of the studies on teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education show inconsistencies", we propose a minimal systematisation of the literature on this topic. This has led us to highlight some perspectives related to the university teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education:

Although many higher education institutions implement policies supporting the SEN students, with over 90% of the institutions in the Trends 2024 study identifying diversity, equity, and inclusion as their core priorities and values, academic staff often exhibit a predominantly negative attitude towards the inclusion of SEN students (González-Castellano et al., 2021; Supriyanto, 2019; Edna, 2016; Gaad & Almotairi, 2013; Shadreck, 2012). Such attitude is particularly common among male professors (Jenson, 2018; Gaad & Almotairi, 2013). Negative attitudes in the academic environment, as in any other social contexts, represent some of the most significant barriers to inclusive education (Al-Korbi et al., 2024; Alrusaiyes, 2024; Bethere et al., 2023; Ediyanto & Kawai, 2023; Ignacio & Allit, 2023; Zabeli et al., 2021; Moriña, 2016; Edna, 2016; Bruder & Mogro-Wilson, 2014);

Academic staff generally tend to have a predominantly positive attitude towards the inclusion of SEN students (Al-Korbi et al., 2024; Alrusaiyes, 2024; Svendby, 2024; Ignacio & Allit, 2023; Gràcia et al., 2022; Guillemot et al., 2022; Bandyopadhyay & Dhara, 2021; Fu & al, 2021; González-Castellano & al, 2021; Ayub et al., 2019; Supriyanto, 2019; Saloviita, 2018; Martins et al., 2017; Bruder & Mogro-Wilson, 2014; Abu-Hamour, 2013; Baker et al., 2012). This positive attitude is particularly notable among female professors (Alrusaiyes, 2024; Bandyopadhyay & Dhara, 2021; González-Castellano et al., 2021; Galaterou & Antoniou, 2017; Jenson, 2018; Abu-Hamour, 2013; Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). Studies highlight the importance of such positive attitude within the academic community, especially among professors, for the effective implementation of inclusive practices in universities (Jenson, 2018). A supportive outlook facilitates SEN students' adaptation to the demands of higher education, helps them overcome various obstacles, and significantly contributes to their

academic success (Alrusaiyes, 2024; Charitaki et al., 2022; Supriyanto, 2019; Saloviita, 2018);

Academic staff have *an uncertain, relatively undefined, neutral attitude* towards the inclusion of SEN students, often characterised as "uncertainty, fear, and unawareness" (Mareş et al., 2024; Ayub et al., 2019; Supriyanto, 2019);

While academic staff usually claim to hold *positive attitudes, their practical behaviour* towards SEN students *is indeterminate and uncertain behaviour* (Greenberger & Leyser, 2010).

Our study was conducted with these systematised findings in mind.

Research objectives and hypotheses

The overall aim of this research is to identify teachers' opinions regarding their attitudes and approaches towards students with Special Educational Needs (SEN).

Research Hypotheses

This exploratory study was inspired by the authors' observations based on their professional experience on how colleagues engage with SEN students in university settings, but also highlighting the challenges and facilitators encountered by teachers when working with SEN students. The formulated research hypotheses aimed to uncover valuable insights for future inclusive practices at the university level:

General Hypothesis 1 - We hypothesise that teachers generally hold positive attitudes towards the inclusion of SEN students.

General Hypothesis 2 – Teachers' opionions on the inclusion of SEN students can offer meaningful insights into potential areas for intervention, both at the organisational and individual levels.

Research methodology

Type of research

The type of our study was exploratory and observational, applying the focus group method. As a qualitative approach, this method enabled the collection of valuable insights into teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of students with Special Educational Needs (SEN). Additionally, its experimental aspects facilitated the identification of major areas for improvement, including the need for teacher training, the adaptation of the physical environment, and the development of innovative teaching and intervention methodologies at the university level.

Research methods and tools

The focus group method is highly effective for qualitative research, particularly when the goal is to explore elements related to social changes and societal needs (Kristiansen & Grønkjær, 2018; Krueger & Casey, 2005). It equally serves as a dynamic platform for the exchange and negotiation of ideas, allowing participants to inspire one another, deepen mutual understanding, and identify new perspectives (Belzile & Öberg, 2012; Johnson & Johnson, 1997). In designing the research framework, three key dimensions were addressed: attitudinal perspectives, approaches to challenges, and prospective strategies, each dimension being further on broken down into sub-categories. The questions developed were aligned with these dimensions to ensure comprehensive data collection across the areas of investigation (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009; Carey, 1994; Carey & Smith, 1994).

Research procedure

A focus group interview guide (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009; Carey, 1994; Carey & Smith, 1994) was designed based on insights from the literature review. The guide aimed to capture two key perspectives: 1. declarative: teachers' knowledge and information regarding the inclusion of students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) and 2. actional: specific actions undertaken by teachers to support the inclusion of students who are excluded or at risk of exclusion, reflecting their attitudes toward these students. The focus groups were facilitated by a main moderator and an assistant moderator, who documented participants' responses both in writing and through audio recordings for transcription and coding.

Research group

The study included 64 teachers, selected as a convenience sample (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009), and organised into five focus groups, one for each faculty level, conducted between May and July 2024. Participation in the focus groups required being a member of the university's teaching staff. Their involvement in the study was voluntary, with invitations extended to teachers from all faculties. All participants were faculty members at at "Vasile Alecsandri" University of Bacău, Romania, representing five different faculties: Engineering, Letters, Sciences, Economics, and Movement, Sport, and Health Sciences. The participants came from diverse academic disciplines, with their experience in higher education distributed as follows: 2 teachers with 1–5 years of experience, 11 teachers with 5–10

years of experience, 18 teachers with 10–15 years of experience, 21 teachers with 15–20 years of experience, 12 teachers with over 20 years of experience.

Data analysis

Content analysis, a widely utilised qualitative method for examining the focus groups' responses, was employed to analyse the data. Recognised for its objectivity, systematic nature, and integration of both qualitative and quantitative elements (Agabrian, 2006), this method involves several steps. These include: formulating research questions, compiling a database from the focus groups' responses, developing thematic categories and subcategories, and analysing the data based on frequency and its association with these categories. Each participant and focus group was assigned a unique identification code before the analysis commenced, allowing for a comprehensive overview of the data (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009; Krippendorff, 2019; Lindgren et al., 2020).

Using elements of classical content analysis, categories and subcategories were constructed based on recurring themes in participants' responses. This approach facilitated the organisation of data into predefined categories (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009; Kristiansen & Grønkjær, 2018; Krippendorff, 2019).

Our analysis strategy focused on systematically comparing responses across participants, emphasising the meaningful and consistent nature of the content across all groups (Neuendorf, 2017; Glasser & Strauss, 1967; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009).

Ethical issues

Ethical approval for this study was obtained in accordance with the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki, as the research involved human participants. All participants voluntarily provided informed consent, and were made aware of their right to withdraw from the study or to omit responses to specific questions at any time. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of "Vasile Alecsandri" University of Bacău, Romania.

Results

The study offers valuable insights into teachers' attitudes towards students with special educational needs, as well as identifies preferred strategies and methods for working with this student group. Regarding the first dimension of our study—the attitudinal one—the data collected and analysed are summarised in Table 1:

Table 1. Categorical descriptors of attitudinal dimensions related to the inclusion of students with special educational needs

Attitudinal categories	Categorical descriptors	Participants (P)/focus group(fg)
proactively positive	- Affirming that every student has the right to education, and that teachers must adapt to the individual needs of their students, which they are already doing. - Highlighting the importance of teachers being prepared for the challenges posed by today's generation, including the ability to work with students with special educational needs (SEN), and acknowledging that many have already engaged with resources such as readings or videos on effective approaches. - Emphasising that, in addition to specialised training, empathy is essential, and that teachers must provide the support they are capable of to ensure the inclusion of SEN individuals within the education system, including at the university level.	P3, 11/fg1; P3, 7 /fg2; P2, 10/fg3; P6, 9, 11, 13/fg4; P2, 12/fg5
predominantly positive	- Eager to learn about the unique characteristics of students with special educational needs (SEN). - Actively seeking practical training resources to effectively address the challenges of working with SEN students. - Demonstrating an interest in exploring new, flexible, and youth-oriented teaching methods.	P1, 6, 9/fg1; P 2, 5, 8/fg2; P1, 5, 7, 8/fg3; P3, 8/fg4; P3, 8, 11/fg5
uncertain-undefined	- Acknowledging that specific interventions are necessary for students with special educational needs (SEN), but considering such interventions are difficult or even unfeasible to implement. - Agreeing that action should be taken for this group of students, but feeling that now is not the right time for it. - Using statements such as: *"I wish I could do something, but..."*	P2, 7, 10/fg1; P 1, 9/fg2; P3, 4, 9 11/fg3; P1, 2, 10/fg4; P1, 6, 10/fg5
reported as positive but uncertain behaviour	- Considering that universities lack sufficient resources to effectively work with and include students with special educational needs (SEN) in their programs. - Feeling powerless to make a difference and believing that additional specialists are required. - Expressing a willingness to support the inclusion of SEN students, but citing a lack of time as a barrier. - Indicating a desire to work with SEN students, but lacking the necessary specialised training.	P5, 8/fg1; P10, 13/fg2; P14/fg3; P4,12/fg4; P1, 7, 13/fg5
predominantly negative	- Arguing that students with severe health or adjustment issues should not be included in mainstream education, as higher education is not compulsory. - Considering that students with special educational needs (SEN) should be placed in specialised university programmes tailored specifically for this group. - Stating that working with SEN students is highly stressful for teachers. - Suggesting that the inclusive approach is a utopian ideal that is unlikely to succeed.	P4/fg1; P11/fg2; P6/fg3; P5/fg4; P4, 9/fg5

The responses from the majority of focus groups' participants indicate a positive and open attitude toward the challenges faced by people with special educational needs (SEN). For example, one participant shared, *"I have a blind student in my class... When I show diagrams, pictures, and photos, I describe them to her"* (P2/fg3). Another noted, *"At first, it was difficult, and I wondered how I would manage, but gradually I realised that I could rely on the other senses she has, and now everything seems to be OK"* (P3/fg5). However, further analysis of the responses revealed some inconsistencies, suggesting that this positive attitude may be more theoretical than practical. For instance, one participant stated, *"I would do something, I would work one-on-one with them, but I need a specialised person with me when I teach"* (P13/fg2), while another said, *"I always wanted to learn more about working with special needs students, I even wanted to give some lessons, but unfortunately, I don't have enough time"* (P7/fg5). Additionally, some responses highlighted reluctance to work with this group of students, or even an outright belief that inclusive teaching is undesirable or unfeasible. One participant expressed, "*It is very difficult to work with such students. Most of them don't understand when we explain something, and they think they should somehow be in a special group"* (P5/fg4).

The analysis of the challenges universities face in *promoting social inclusion for students with special needs revealed the following issues*:

Table 2. Academic challenges to achieving social inclusion of SEN students

Challenge Categories	Categorical descriptors	Participants (P)/ focus group(fg)
Teacher-related challenges	- Reluctance and resistance to the inclusive approach due to the need for additional training. - The necessity of dedicating extra time to prepare teaching activities, learn new methods, and tailor the content to individual students. - Acknowledging their own limitations and seeking specialised support when their knowledge and skills are inadequate to work with SEN students.	P1, 3, 9/fg1; P1, 6, 8, 13/fg2; P1, 3, 4, 7/fg3; P5, 9, 11/fg4; P2, 3, 4, 10/fg5
University-related challenges	- A very limited number of teachers with training or expertise in special psychopedagogy or in working with students with special educational needs (SEN). - A shortage of materials, assistive devices, and technologies at the university level that could enhance student access and inclusion. - The need to adapt educational spaces to improve access and create better learning opportunities for SEN students. - The establishment of dedicated structures within the university to offer counselling, learning support, guidance on entitlements, and legal assistance as required. - Managing diversity presents a challenge, particularly for institutions with traditional or conservative cultural models.	P2, 3, 7, 9/fg1; P1, 2, 8, 9, 11, 12/fg2; P2, 3, 5, 7, 8, 12/fg3; P1, 3, 6, 9, 10/fg4; P2, 3, 5, 8, 9, 11/fg5

Ethical challenges	- Ethical dilemmas arising from inconsistent standards (marked by subjectivity and compassion) in the assessment of SEN students compared to their typically developing peers. - Inclusive approaches and compensatory measures may lead to frustration, as the criteria for prioritising are shifted for students on the one hande and for teachers, on the other hand. The aspect of positive discrimination creates cognitive dissonance and raises implicit moral dilemmas. - Subjectivity in grading, due to compassion, pity, and an exaggerated fear of discrimination.	P2, 4, 6, 11/fg1; P3, 7, 11, 13/fg2; P1, 4, 5, 8, 10, 12/fg3; P1, 2, 8, 11/fg4; P1, 2, 4, 10/fg5

The focus groups' participants identify several categories of challenges related to issues specific to SEN, including teacher-related, university-related, and ethical challenges. The analysis of their responses suggests that they recognise the complexity of the inclusive education process and are capable of reflecting on their own approaches to these challenges. The most difficult challenges, however, are those related to the individuals involved, particularly the teachers, making them the hardest to address. As one participant put it, *"I can do it. I have enough experience, but time does not allow me to focus specifically on this category of students"* (P5/FG4). While it may be possible to quickly purchase materials, assistive devices, and technologies, or to set up appropriate spaces (assuming the necessary financial resources are available), the same cannot be said for addressing the inappropriate attitudes some teachers have toward inclusive education. As one participant remarked, *"Through recent projects, a lot of equipment has been acquired for this category of students, but neither we nor they know how to use it, and yet I think more specialised equipment would still be needed"* (P7/FG3). Similarly, overcoming ethical dilemmas in inclusive education is more challenging. One participant raised a concern: *"What should I do now? For the same type of answer, I have to give one student a lower grade while giving a higher grade to another, simply because there's no problem with giving a lower mark. Is that right?"* (P4/FG1). Additionally, dilemmas stemming from the subjectivity of grading out of compassion were also highlighted: "*I just felt sorry for him because I saw how much effort he put into coming to school and passing the exam. But I don't feel good when I think about the others"* (P8/FG3).

The collected data has been organised in Table 3 in order to investigate how the academia might proactively address the following question: *What steps can academics and universities take to become more inclusive in the future?*

Table 3. Prospective Dimension of academic environment

Aspect categories	Categorical descriptors	**Participants (P)/focus group(fg)**
Personal aspects	- Providing the option for hybrid or online delivery of curriculum content, where feasible; - Offering personalised support services, ideally within a framework led by qualified professionals specialising in SEN assistance.	P1, 4, 5, 7, 9/fg1; P2, 8, 9, 11, 12/fg2; P1, 2, 5, 6, 8, 12/fg3; P2, 3, 6, 11, 12/fg4; P1, 3, 9/fg5
Organisational aspects	- At the institutional level, specialised training courses could be offered to help teachers become more informed and equipped to recognise and work with people with SEN; - Providing mentoring, counselling, and support programs for teachers to help them successfully manage relationships with SEN students and assist them in making necessary curricular adaptations; - Promoting team teaching and ensuring that there is a teacher or support person available for situations where a student's functional limitations are significant; - Promoting a philosophy of diversity at the university level so that teachers are both sensitised to and open to working with individuals who are functionally impaired or have other special needs and characteristics.	P1, 2, 3, 6, 9, 12/fg1; P1, 3, 7, 9, 12, 13/fg2; P1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 9, 12, 13/fg3; P2, 5, 6, 9, 10, 11/fg4; P2, 3, 6, 7, 9, 12/fg5
Social aspects	- A series of national or international projects should be implemented, with the central topic focused on the inclusion of people with SEN, and international projects promoting good practice exchanges or job shadowing should be encouraged; - Providing incentives and financial support, particularly for students from disadvantaged social backgrounds; - Conducting descriptive studies and research, preferably interdisciplinary, to identify the needs and expectations of both SEN students and teachers regarding specific aspects of social inclusion.	P3, 4, 7, 11/fg1; P2, 6, 9, 10, 13/fg2; P2, 3, 7, 10/fg3; P1, 2, 5, 6 11/fg4; P 2, 3, 4, 7 11/fg5

We can observe that the participants' responses within the focus groups enabled us to identify three important areas for action from the perspective of the prospective dimension of the academic environment in relation to the specific challenges faced by the people with SEN: personal, organisational, and social. The analysis of their responses revealed that they are capable of proposing strategies to enhance the inclusive approach within the academia. Their suggestions, which are both insightful and diverse, integrate psycho-pedagogical and managerial perspectives, as well as attitudinal and financial considerations.

The teachers' opinions on how to make both the university and its activities more inclusive highlight the importance of addressing both the physical environment and its adaptation, as well as raising an open-minded attitude. Teachers should aim to minimise prejudice and demonstrate a willingness to support SEN students by helping to identify the root causes of their challenges and finding solutions to alleviate or resolve these issues. One participant provided the following example: *"I think we need to create conditions where they truly feel valued for their potential, rather than making concessions due to their health or economic challenges. Teachers need to understand the circumstances that have led students to this point, but they also need to recognise that they can play a role in helping these students overcome their difficulties"* (P12/FG2).

In addition to addressing environmental factors and ensuring that all teachers are better trained to teach and manage relationships with SEN students, some focus groups' participants emphasised the importance of involving teachers with psycho-pedagogical training at the institutional level. These teachers could contribute to the development of highly specialised structures focused on counselling both SEN students and teachers working with them. As one participant noted, *"The creation of a permanent counselling and support office for both students and teachers is essential, because sometimes we feel helpless and unsure of how to proceed"* (P7/FG2). Furthermore, it was considered crucial to involve teachers in the planning and organisation of environmental adjustments. For instance, given the presence of students with mobility challenges, participants suggested solutions such as: *"Organising most lectures and seminars on the ground floor of the faculty"* (P3/FG4), and *"Working in teams of two or three teachers in classes with SEN students so that we can assist them in keeping up with their peers and participating in practical activities alongside them"* (P7/FG3).

Discussion

All the data collected and presented are consistent with the findings of the specialised studies consulted on the topic. However, in each of the three categories of systematisation (Categorical descriptors of attitudinal dimensions related to the inclusion of students with special educational needs, Table 1; Academic challenges to achieve social inclusion of SEN students, Table 2; Prospective dimension of the academic environment, Table 3) there are specific features, nuances, elements specific to the institution. These may align, confirm, expand upon those highlighted at the international level. The results obtained and analysed offer several benefits: for the teachers, who are encouraged to reflect on the aspects studied and gain greater self-awareness; for the SEN students, who will receive enhanced, more personalised academic support; for the institution, which

can make better-informed decisions with a clearer understanding of its internal environment; and for the broader community, which will benefit from an institution more responsive to the needs of SEN students and from graduates who are more capable and independent.

The results presented above suggest that teachers typically adopt a positive and proactive attitude towards the inclusion of SEN students, a view corroborated by much of the literature referenced in the theoretical synthesis of the study's first part. This positive attitude—highlighted in the reviewed literature—is evident in how the research group engaged in focus groups and responded to the questions, as well as in their actual answers.

However, within the group of participating teachers, some responses fell into other attitudinal categories, including uncertain or undefined, reported as positive but uncertain, and predominantly negative. These findings are consistent with the idea noted in the international literature that "the results of studies on teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education show inconsistencies" (Ignacio & Allit, 2023, 3). When discussing the academic challenges to achieving the social inclusion of SEN students, the responses were grouped into three areas: teacher-related, university-related, and ethical. Notably, the teachers in the focus groups did not highlight the challenges presented by the SEN students themselves, such as their specific educational needs, characteristics, and difficulties. Instead, the teachers only mentioned their inadequate preparation in addressing these needs, without identifying them as challenges in themselves. Regarding the prospective dimension of the academic environment, personal, organisational, and social factors were discussed. While these categories generally align with those identified in other studies, it would be valuable to explore which of them are most significant or whether it is possible to assess their impact on teachers' attitudes and behaviours towards SEN students.

Our study is indeed a small-scale, qualitative micro-analysis. Nevertheless, it provides both validation of previously established theoretical positions and a concrete, specific approach at the level of a small regional university, which is focused on the issues faced by SEN students and open to suggestions for addressing them. Naturally, some of the responses from the teachers or the frameworks we have proposed could be valuable for similar institutions—whether in size, concerns, geographical region, or beyond—or could serve as questions or starting points for further research.

Conclusions

Our research indicates that teachers generally adopt a positive attitude towards the broader philosophy of inclusive education. The analysis of the focus groups' responses reveals that, although many of the ideas encountered in the literature regarding teachers' attitudes toward SEN students are validated, each higher education institution has its own unique characteristics. Teachers are a complex category of educational partners: trained at different times, with diverse experiences, ages, and specific stereotypes. Therefore, it is essential for a qualitative micro-study on this topic to be followed and complemented by a quantitative one, which takes into account the multitude of variables that influence teachers' attitudes toward SEN students.

The main limitations of our study include the partial investigation of an exceptionally complex issue and the relatively small number of faculty members involved in the research. Additionally, the limited duration of the research, the geographical location of the institution represented by the interviewed teachers, and the cultural specificity of some of their training are other factors which constrain the scope and relevance of the findings.

Most of the approaches highlighted in the focus groups suggest a favourable disposition towards students with special needs (SEN). These findings confirm our initial hypothesis.

The key factor influencing how teachers engage with inclusive education is their initial and ongoing professional training. Teachers involved in the focus groups expressed concerns that they are inadequately prepared to effectively teach and interact with students with special educational needs (SEN). As a result, they frequently require specialised training which includes learning about differentiated teaching methods and assessment strategies, with a focus on personalising the curriculum (including the online classes). A comprehensive approach to this training should consider not only the number of SEN students, but also the specific types of needs they have, such as learning disabilities, attention deficit, and hyperactivity. Preparing teachers to effectively implement the principles of inclusive education will remain a persistent challenge in the academic world, particularly in terms of training teachers and staff who will work with students with special educational needs (SEN) at all levels of the education system.

This highlights the importance of having a resource and counselling centre for SEN students at the university level, or at the very least, a designated specialist who can provide guidance to both students and staff

whenever faced with specific challenges or uncertainties about how to support these students effectively.

Based on the feedback from the focus groups, it is obvious that the academic management should prioritise improving infrastructure and resources to ensure that spaces and learning environments are accessible to students with a range of disabilities, not just physical or visual impairments.

Universities are increasingly adopting a broader perspective on inclusive education, one that moves beyond simply ensuring access and mobility for SEN students (although these are essential components) to addressing the more dimensions of inclusion. This includes providing assistive technologies and offering tutoring support (whether from faculty, senior students, or peers within student organisations) to ensure that SEN students can fully engage with academic activities. These considerations align with and support our second research hypothesis.

Our future research will build upon the findings from this study and may focus on several strategic areas, including: expanding the focus groups to include students, administrators, and decision-makers; broadening the analysis to explore the factors that influence the attitudes of teachers, students, administrators, and decision-makers toward SEN students; identifying institutional solutions to improve the training provided to teachers and administrators working with SEN students; and developing a set of new, additional, or updated measures to enhance the inclusion of SEN students.

The path to inclusion is challenging and requires extensive collaboration and engagement with all relevant stakeholders. Among these factors, teachers, along with their values, attitudes, and practices, remain the most influential element in shaping successful inclusion.

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