

Article

Analysis of the Factors Influencing the Favorable Participation of Students with Special Needs in Public Tertiary Education in Romania

Camelia Stăiculescu ¹, Violeta Mihaela Dincă ^{2,*}  and Andreea Gheba ³

¹ Department for Teacher Training, Bucharest University of Economic Studies, 010371 Bucharest, Romania

² Department of Business Administration, in Foreign Languages, Bucharest University of Economic Studies, 010371 Bucharest, Romania

³ The Executive Unit for Financing Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation (UEFISCDI), 010362 Bucharest, Romania

* Correspondence: violetamihaeladinca@yahoo.fr; Tel.: +04-745-005-005

Abstract: Even though research focused on inclusive education in Romania for institutions within the primary and secondary education system has been carried out, there are not many studies that approach the factors determining a favorable inclusion of students in higher education institutions. The central goal of the article consisted in investigating what impacts the willingness and openness for inclusive education for Romanian universities and the potential impact of five constructs of variables applied on fifteen universities from Romania. The outcomes of the quantitative (econometrical) analysis (a survey based on a questionnaire) showed the major impact of the variables of “policies and structures of the university”, “curriculum and pedagogy/teaching strategies”, “community and social integration”, and “accessibility and resources for students” (all focused on students with special needs) on the “willingness and openness for inclusive education” for Romanian universities. The variable of “communication and transparency” (focused on students with special needs) was associated with a medium influence on the “willingness and openness for inclusive education” for Romanian universities. This paper underlines the importance of incorporating the necessary training, support, flexibility, and resources to respond to a variety of student needs in order to improve inclusive education within higher education institutions in Romania.

Keywords: inclusive education; higher education; Romanian universities; students with special needs; participation of students with disabilities; university strategy



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Citation: Stăiculescu, C.; Dincă, V.M.; Gheba, A. Analysis of the Factors Influencing the Favorable Participation of Students with Special Needs in Public Tertiary Education in Romania. *Sustainability* **2022**, *14*, 10803. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su141710803>

Academic Editors: Muhammet Usak, Milan Kubiato, Kamisah Osman and Cem Birol

Received: 1 August 2022

Accepted: 26 August 2022

Published: 30 August 2022

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1. Introduction

In Romania, access to higher education for students with special needs is still a sensitive topic. At an international and national level, there are a number of legal provisions that relate mainly to children and less to young people (young adults) with special educational needs.

The notion of special educational needs was first introduced in 1978 (in the UK) and then discussed at the 1990 Cardiff International Congress on Special Needs Education and the 1990 International Conference in Jomtien, Thailand. The phrase was later taken up by UNESCO (1995). The 1994 UNESCO Salamanca Statement states that “*each child/young person has unique characteristics, interests, abilities and learning needs and therefore, in order for the right to education to be meaningful, educational systems must be designed and educational programs must be implemented which take into account the extreme diversity of these characteristics and needs*” [1].

Special educational needs are defined in the Romanian legislation as “additional educational needs, complementary to the general objectives of education, adapted to individual particularities and those characteristics of an impairment/disability or learning

or other disorders/difficulties, as well as complex assistance (medical, social, educational, etc.)” [2].

Since higher education must play its part in tackling Romania’s social and democratic challenges, this study concentrates on the elements that have an effect on students’ favorable participation. Therefore, this article will emphasize the main research question: what determines the favorable participation of students with special needs in public tertiary education in Romania?

2. Literature Review, Conceptual Model, and Hypotheses

2.1. Inclusive Education

Even though we are still discussing an underrepresented group in higher education, the number of students with disabilities or special needs has been increasing in recent years [3,4]. Moreover, this aspect has accentuated the needs and concerns for ensuring an inclusive educational process at the tertiary education level [5]. Encouraging measures that lead to an educational system based on inclusion and diversity rather than on the idea of integration was one of the main recommendations of the Salamanca Statement on Principles, Policy, and Practice in Special Needs Education and a Framework for Action (UNESCO), a document endorsed at the 1994 World Conference on Special Needs Education in Salamanca [6] (p. 18). The approach advocated in this statement is considered to have an important impact and influence on how the issue of inclusive education is understood and viewed among Western countries [7]. Thus, it can be stated, in a broad sense, that one of the cornerstones of the concept of inclusive education involves equal participation and access for all students (regardless of socio-economic background, ethnicity, gender or physical characteristics, etc.) to a quality education [3].

The recommended approach to ensuring an inclusive education system is rooted in Oliver’s [8] (p. 22) social model of disability, which suggests that disability should be viewed and analyzed in relation to barriers created by community and society (barriers that are more culturally defined). Thus, the focus should no longer be on individual responsibility but rather on society as a whole. Extrapolating this principle, Moriña [3] argued that in the university setting, the issue of ensuring inclusive education seems to be a rather specific responsibility of universities (as the primary environment in which students carry out their activities). Higher education institutions can develop, implement, and monitor mechanisms focused on developing and reforming an inclusive education system in which all students participate [3,9].

UNESCO [7] defines the idea of inclusion using four conceptual dimensions: (a) inclusion as a process (which constantly enables the identification of mechanisms that encourage and support diversity); (b) identification and removal of barriers (awareness of factors that might limit and restrict access and participation in the educational process); (c) participation and achievement of all students (by ensuring active participation and focusing on learning outcomes rather than exam results); and (d) an emphasis on groups of students who are at risk of marginalization (taking affirmative action for groups that statistically are the most vulnerable in order to ensure their participation and involvement in the educational process) [7]. It is important to note that these principles are consistent with the achievement of the sustainable development goals (especially Sustainable Development Goal 4) promoted by UNESCO [10]. Ensuring an inclusive education system that puts at its center the idea of equal educational opportunities (including for this particular group of students whose needs have long been ignored) is also considered one of the pillars of a sustainable society in which solutions are being sought to issues that affect human well-being [10,11].

Taking into account the conceptual framework proposed by UNESCO as well as the types of limits and barriers that students face in the educational process in the university environment, such as those related to infrastructure, attitude, or educational resources [12], this study aims to determine the academic staff’s perception of the extent to which their

universities are concerned with providing an inclusive learning settings for students with disabilities and special needs.

Thus, the factors that can contribute to ensuring an inclusive education system cover a range of dimensions that are further conceptualized and translated into operational hypotheses (the dependent variable for all is the participation of students with special needs in public tertiary education in Romania):

- Strategies, policies, and visions adopted at the university level;
- Pedagogical and teaching strategies;
- Developing a sense of community and inclusion programs;
- Developing a relationship based on communication and transparency with students;
- Ensuring access to resources.

2.2. Strategies, Policies, and Visions Adopted at the University Level

In order to ensure an inclusive educational process and lower dropout rates among this group of students, methods and measures to include students with disabilities and special needs must be implemented at the university level. For example, studies such as Getzel's [13] indicate that students with disabilities tend to benefit when practices and programs are tailored to their particular needs. As the number of students with disabilities attending college has increased, U.S. higher education institutions have developed and implemented support measures aimed at exposing students to relevant job market experiences and equipping them with new skills to help them beyond academia, such as digitalization [13] (p. 209). Techniques such as widening participation for students with special needs [14,15], academic staff participation in programs centered on integrating special needs students [16–19], career counseling in higher education [20,21], creation of departments dedicated to providing support for this category of students [22,23], and integrated academic and non-academic support services [24–26] are important tools that universities can adopt to support and develop an inclusive and diverse environment for all categories of students. Hence, the following hypothesis will be tested in the Romanian context:

H1. *University strategy, policies, and structures have a positive and significant impact on the participation of students with special needs in public tertiary education.*

2.3. Pedagogical and Teaching Strategies

Another crucial dimension in the process of ensuring inclusive education is the adaptation of curriculum, pedagogy, and teaching strategies. Customizing teaching and adapting didactic materials and evaluation methods to the requirements and diversity of students is both a challenging and a necessary step to ensure access to an inclusive environment and to support students in reaching their academic potential [27–29]. In this regard, Konur [30] (pp. 356–357) identified four curriculum adjustments: presentation format (text, audio, video, etc.), response format, timing (which is more related to extended time for assessment), and setting (adapting the space and environment to the students' needs, including in the assessment stage) (with an impact on students' participation in the educational process).

The Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework [31,32] can be seen as a positive example in this context. The framework takes the notions of accessibility and inclusion further in practice than just the tangible settings in order to create teaching and learning-favorable contexts that are diverse, accessible, and appealing for all young people, involving those with different needs or disabilities [33]. However, studies such as the one by Griful-Freixenet et al. [34] indicate that an individualized, UDL-based approach would provide even more significant support for students with special needs.

Importantly, for any teaching or pedagogical strategy to work, universities must emphasize and invest in programs focused on improving the knowledge, attitude, or perception of academic staff towards people with disabilities and special educational needs [35–38]. One of the most difficult challenges for teachers in this process is a shortage

of information, counseling, and training methods that can be suited and implemented to meet the needs of students [39–42]. Hence, the hypothesis that emerges is:

H2. *Curriculum, pedagogy, and teaching strategies have a positive and significant impact on the participation of students with special needs in public tertiary education.*

2.4. Developing a Sense of Community and Inclusion Programs

Fostering an inclusive community (on and off-campus), social integration programs, and membership in social networks is another essential dimension in the educational process of special needs students [43,44]. For example, according to a research conducted in Australia, students with disabilities show that one of the most important support received in the educational process was related to the informal networks developed within the university as well as “human” and flexible relationships with academic staff [45]. In this context, peer support is vital to encourage the development of such a diverse environment, with university students being more likely to have positive attitudes and a high degree of awareness toward people with disabilities and special needs [46]. Therefore, the hypothesis that derives is:

H3. *Community and social inclusion programs have a positive and significant impact on the participation of students with special needs in public tertiary education in Romania.*

2.5. Developing a Relationship Based on Communication and Transparency with Students

The integration process is equally dependent on inclusive communication that offers students with disabilities the sense that they are not treated distinctly but at the same time feel sufficiently comfortable in the teaching space created by the teachers [47]. In this respect, a recommended approach would be the instructional communication competence that Cornett-Devito and Worley [48] define as the sum of skills and capabilities of teachers who successfully adapt their interactions with students to meet their needs in order to achieve their academic potential (including language use, messages delivered, type of behavior, movements, etc.) [48]. The importance of how to communicate with students is also revealed in studies such as the one by Frymier and Wazner [47], whose results indicated that “students with learning disabilities perceived their professors as less appropriate and effective communicators” [47] (p. 184) but also felt less understood by their teachers [47] (p. 186). This may be explained by teachers’ lack of training or communication skills given that they are expected to accommodate the various demands of students [49]. The hypothesis that can be drawn from this dimension is:

H4. *Effective/attentive communication and transparency in interaction with students have a positive and significant impact on the participation of students with special needs in public tertiary education in Romania.*

2.6. Ensuring Access to Resources

As previously mentioned, one of the greatest obstacles students face in universities is the lack of an infrastructure adapted to students’ needs or limited access to resources designed to provide support [28,32]. A study conducted at a Canadian university shows that the educational outcomes of students with disabilities are negatively affected when, for example, during an examination, students do not receive support such as human assistance or other support tools [50]. Thus, accommodations that allow them a greater degree of mobility on campus, adaptation of classroom resources, and “counting on auxiliary support staff” [42] are seen as vital elements in providing an inclusive environment for students with disabilities [42].

These types of limitations and barriers, which can create a sense of dependence on other colleagues or academic staff, were cataloged by Moriña and Morgado [51] in five

dimensions: “urban barriers (streets and public spaces, sidewalks, inadequate urban furniture, etc.), transportation (both public transport or difficulties when using one’s vehicle), buildings (obstacles inside university buildings, spaces, and classrooms), environmental (those elements within the classroom, including furniture) and communication (affect students with hearing and visual disability)” [51] (p. 4). As such, the hypothesis is:

H5. *The degree of accessibility and resources for students has a positive and significant impact on the participation of students with special needs in public tertiary education.*

An outline for all hypotheses is provided in Figure 1 below.

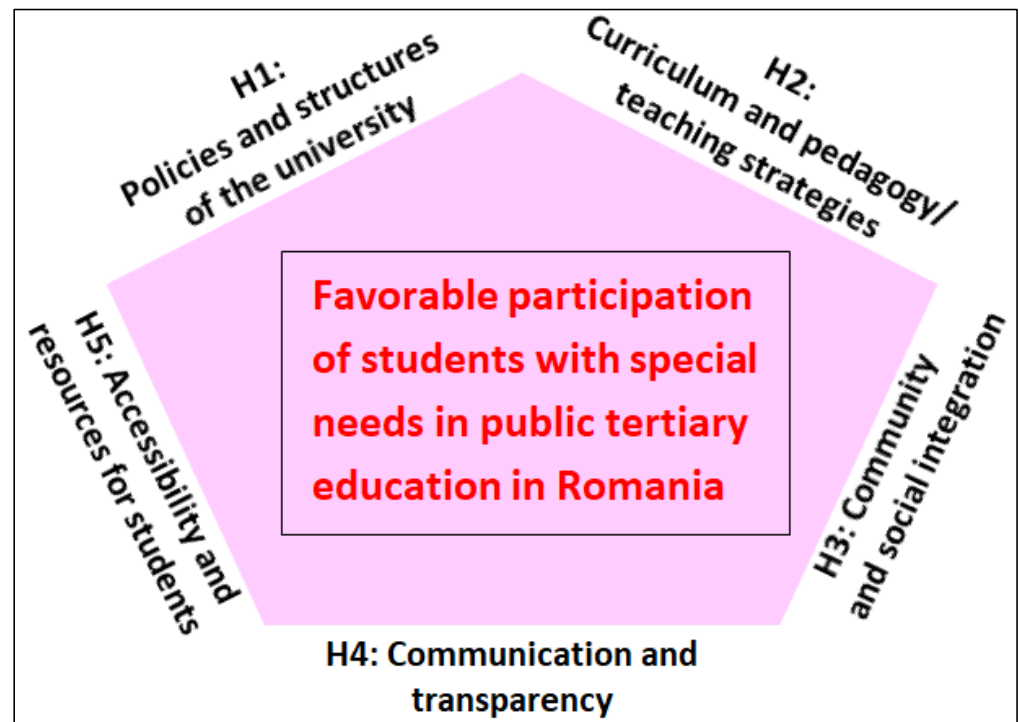


Figure 1. Synopsis of the hypotheses covering the factors influencing the favorable participation of students with special needs in public tertiary education in Romania.

3. Summary of Research Design

Research Instruments, Data Selection, and Analysis

At the moment, in 2022, there is a scarcity of studies about inclusive education in universities from Romania. Therefore, an investigation on the factors influencing the favorable participation of students with special needs in public tertiary education in Romania could be helpful. To gain data, a questionnaire was sent to potential participants coming from 15 different universities in Romania. The data were gathered between June and July 2022. We used the technique of the convenient random sample to secure respondents for the survey. Overall, 395 filled-in questionnaires were provided; however, these inputs were polished, and an entirety of 312 final responses were applied in the next steps of this research.

The identification questions included information about the participant’s educational (teaching) degree, the university in which they are active, seniority within the academic environment, if they ever worked with students with special needs, and what kind of special needs these students had. After these identification questions, the respondents of the survey had to fill in information regarding the various constructs of the econometrical model built for the research. More specifically, five different independent constructs were assessed: policies and structures of the university, curriculum and pedagogy/teaching strategies, community and social integration, communication and transparency, and accessibility and resources for students. To estimate the independent constructs of our model, all

answers were appraised with a four-point Likert-type scale organized between (1) “Not at all important” to (4) “Very important”. For “the willingness and openness for inclusive education for Romanian universities” construct (the dependent variable), we used a four-point Likert scale spanning from (1) “Very low” to (4) “Very high”.

The initial phase to investigate the data was to perform descriptive statistics of the identification questions/answers of the respondents at the survey. The second phase was to assess the reliability and validity of the data with help of tools such as Cronbach’s alpha, average variance extracted (AVE), and convergent reliability (CR). Furthermore, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was used to evaluate the model fitness, while subsequently, for the hypotheses’ testing, the procedure of structural equation modeling (SEM) was applied to examine the relationships among the variables of the research. All analyses were performed with the software AMOS vs. 25 and SPSS vs. 22.

4. Findings

4.1. Descriptive Statistics of Respondents

In Table 1, we show the collected general details about the respondents following the assessment of the identification questions. As pointed out in Section 3, the total sample included 395 respondents, and incomplete or insufficient questionnaires were eliminated; the final sample gathered 312 final questionnaires to be analyzed. The participants included 26 Ph.D. students with full-time teaching (8.7%), 37 assistant professors (11.7%), 70 university lecturers (22.3%), 97 university associate professors (31.1%), and 82 university professors (26.2%). The seniority within the academic environment was represented the most in the sample by the category of participants with over 10 years of experience in the field (221 people and 70.9%), followed by the ones with experience between four and ten years (55 people and 17.5%), and lastly the ones with experience between one and three years (36 people and 11.6%). It should also be mentioned that respondents came from various Romanian universities, and the number of respondents per each university along with their respective percentages can be observed in the Table 1 below.

224 (71.8%) mentioned they worked with a few students with special needs, and the special requirements that these students had were predominantly physical/motor impairments (61.3%), emotional or behavioral disorders (46.7%), and visual impairments (32.2%).

4.2. Evaluation of the Model Fitness

Before calculating the concrete statistical investigation for the hypotheses’ testing, we estimated the model’s fitness. First of all, the reliability and validity were analyzed, and second of all, a confirmatory factor analysis was carried out. We assessed the reliability with the Cronbach’s alpha and the convergent reliability (CR), while the validity was evaluated applying the average variance extracted (AVE). The minimum discrepancy function divided by degrees of freedom (CMIN/df) was 2.173—a value perceived as optimum because in the literature, a CMIN/df value smaller than 3 signals a suitable match across a proposed model and the concrete evidence of a survey [52], while a CMIN/df value smaller than 5 points suggests feasible fitness of a model [53]. To further check if the model is relevant enough, other indices were also computed. For example, the normed fit index (NFI—also called the Bentler–Bonett) was performed, and it took the value of 0.857, which is a good fit for the model since this index takes values from 0 to 1, where 1 is a perfect fit. Another index that was performed was the root mean squared error approximation (RMSEA), which was assessed with 0.035 and confirmed again the good fit of our model since the threshold values smaller than 0.01, 0.05, and 0.08 for RMSEA show a very solid, reliable, or passable fitness, respectively [54].

To analyze the model’s reliability, Table 2 provides the values of all the factor loadings of the five constructs along with their composite reliability (CR) and their Cronbach’s alpha. The CR and Cronbach’s alpha results for the five proposed constructs recorded values bigger than the supported limit of 0.7 [55]: CR values ranged between 0.81 and 0.97 and Cronbach’s alpha between 0.801 and 0.992. The (discriminant) validity for the constructs

of the model was performed using the average variance extracted (AVE), and it spanned from 0.572 to 0.679, which was feasible taking into account that an AVE of minimum 0.50 is strongly supported [56]. It is worth specifying that a factor loading represents the variance explained by the variable on that particular factor [57]. For the SEM method, the general guidelines recommend a 0.7 or bigger factor loading so that the factor could extract enough variance from its variable [58], and this occurs for this particular model as well (observed in Table 2).

Table 1. Details of identification for the participants.

Educational/Teaching Degree	Frequency	Percent	University in Which the Respondents Are Active	Frequency	Percent
Ph.D. student with full-time teaching	26	8.7%	Bucharest University of Economics	120	38%
Assistant professor	37	11.7%	Transilvania University of Braşov	36	12%
University lecturer	70	22.3%	Stefan Cel Mare University of Suceava	31	10%
University associate professor	97	31.1%	National School of Political studies and Public Administration, Bucharest	25	8%
University professor	82	26.2%	University of Bucharest	22	7%
Seniority within the academic environment	Frequency	Percent	Spiru Haret University	22	7%
Between 1–3 years	36	11.6%	Babes-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca	18	6%
Between 4–10 years	55	17.5%	Carol I National Defence University, Univ. of Craiova, Univ. of Pitesti, Univ. Constantin Brancoveanu, Univ. Hyperion, Univ. Vasile Alecsandri, Univ. Valahia, UPG of Ploiesti	38 (4 or 5 from each university)	12%
Over 10 years	221	70.9%			
Context of working with students with special needs	Frequency	Percent	Special requirements the respondents have identified for the students with special needs they encountered (multiple answers)	Frequency	Percent
The respondent did not work with such students	76	24.3%	Physical/motor impairments		61.3%
The respondent worked with a few such students	224	71.8%	Visual impairments		32.2%
			Emotional (affective) and behavioral disorders		46.7%
			Hearing impairments		13.6%
			Learning difficulties/disabilities		20.4%
			Language disorders		28.2%
			Developmental delay/mental retardation/severe learning difficulties/disabilities		7.8%
The respondent worked with many such students	12	3.9%			

Table 2. Analysis of the reliability and validity for hypotheses of the model.

Construct	Item	Cronbach's Alpha	CR	AVE	Loading
Policies and structures of the university (POL)	POL 1—Integrating certain points on inclusive participation of students with special needs into the university strategy	0.992	0.86	0.582	0.751
	POL 2—Reassessment of the university strategy emphasizing inclusive participation of students with special needs in line with strategies of prestigious EU universities				0.762
	POL 3—Enhancing awareness and understanding of institutional policies on inclusive participation of students with special needs by professors, students, and administrative staff				0.754
	POL 4—Providing training courses at university level (in the field of diversity/practices for students with special needs) for university professors				0.714
	POL 5—Ensuring good cooperation between university support services and professors in order to provide support for students with special needs				0.777
Curriculum and pedagogy/teaching strategies (CURR)	CURR 1—Adaptation of the disciplines' syllabuses by the professors, taking into account students with special needs	0.983	0.97	0.607	0.723
	CURR 2—Adaptation of teaching/learning materials taking into consideration students with special needs				0.795
	CURR 3—Use of dynamic/active teaching–learning–assessment methods to support students with special needs				0.783
	CURR 4—Paying more attention to students' workload and anxieties about assessments/final exams (taking into account students with special needs)				0.810
	CURR 5—Use of varied/flexible assessment/final examination arrangements taking into account students with special need				0.802
	CURR 6—Professors' inclusive approach to students with special needs				
Community and social integration (COMMUNITY)	COMMUNITY 1—Establishment of a program to monitor the academic engagement of students with special needs with academic tutors/supervisors (vice-deans or undergraduate/master program leaders)	0.985	0.93	0.572	0.817
	COMMUNITY 2—Providing opportunities for students to form bonds and show peer support (organizing inclusive events)				0.849
	COMMUNITY 3—Motivating students to adopt an inclusive attitude within their individual learning environments				0.898
	COMMUNITY 4—Providing equitable work experience opportunities for all students, including those with special needs				0.888

Table 2. Cont.

Construct	Item	Cronbach's Alpha	CR	AVE	Loading
Communication and transparency (COMMUNIC)	COMMUNIC 1—Use of clear and comprehensive language in communication with students (face-to-face, electronic) by professors and administrative staff, including in relation to students with special needs	0.801	0.81	0.664	0.713
	COMMUNIC 2—Conducting progressive and ongoing assessments of the academic progress/achievement of students with special needs, providing feedback				0.704
	COMMUNIC 3—Use of promotional and marketing materials of faculty programs that demonstrate inclusiveness (appealing to people with special needs who want to become university students)				0.709
Accessibility and resources for students (ACCRES)	ACCRES 1—Providing public spaces outside the university for access by students with special needs	0.874	0.92	0.679	0.858
	ACCRES 2—Providing university-wide financial support for public transport for students with special needs				0.892
	ACCRES 3—Accessibility inside university buildings and premises for students with special needs				0.897
	ACCRES 4—Providing facilities for students with special needs in university premises (furniture, lighting, appropriate equipment; classrooms, dormitories, canteens, libraries)				0.881
	ACCRES 5—Accessibility of information for students with special needs (public address system, display boards, computers, tablets, etc.)				0.873
Openness (and willingness) of the academic institution for a favorable inclusion of students with special needs (FAVINCL)	FAVINCL 1—At university level of university management	0.887	0.90	0.648	0.839
	FAVINCL 2—At university level of the infrastructure				0.847
	FAVINCL 3—At individual level: professors				0.876
	FAVINCL 4—At the level of administrative staff				0.868

4.3. Structural Equation Modelling

With the goal to analyze the five hypotheses, the structural equation modeling (SEM) was used; it provided a more precise exemplification of the relationships among the constructs and their respective items (of this research). The estimation of the SEM model is shown below (Figure 2).

The fitness of the SEM model was assessed as acknowledged above on point 4.2 of this study, and the results for the CMIN/df ratio, NFI, and RMSEA showed the model was solid, and it was suitable to proceed to testing the research's hypotheses. The hypotheses' testing is showed within in Table 3.

Commonly, the literature related to statistics and econometrics recognizes that standardized path coefficients (β) estimated below 0.10 would signify a "minor" impact, the ones close to 0.30 denote a "medium" impact, and the ones above 0.50 signal a "major" impact and the consistency of the relationship between the variables and therefore of the respective hypothesis [59]. Keeping this general theoretical rule in mind, it could be stated that the path coefficients of the "policies and structures of the university" H1 ($\beta = 0.603$, $p < 0.01$) validated that covering ideas of inclusive participation of students with special needs within the university strategy and policies positively and significantly, with a major effect, influences the willingness and openness for inclusive education for Romanian universities. Subsequently, H1 was accepted. Uniform with the first hypothesis, the path coefficients for "curriculum and pedagogy/teaching strategies" H2 ($\beta = 0.774$, $p < 0.01$), "community and social integration" H3 ($\beta = 0.616$, $p < 0.01$), and "accessibility and resources for students" H5 ($\beta = 0.539$, $p < 0.01$) showed that these three constructs also

influence positively and majorly the willingness and openness for inclusive education for Romanian universities.

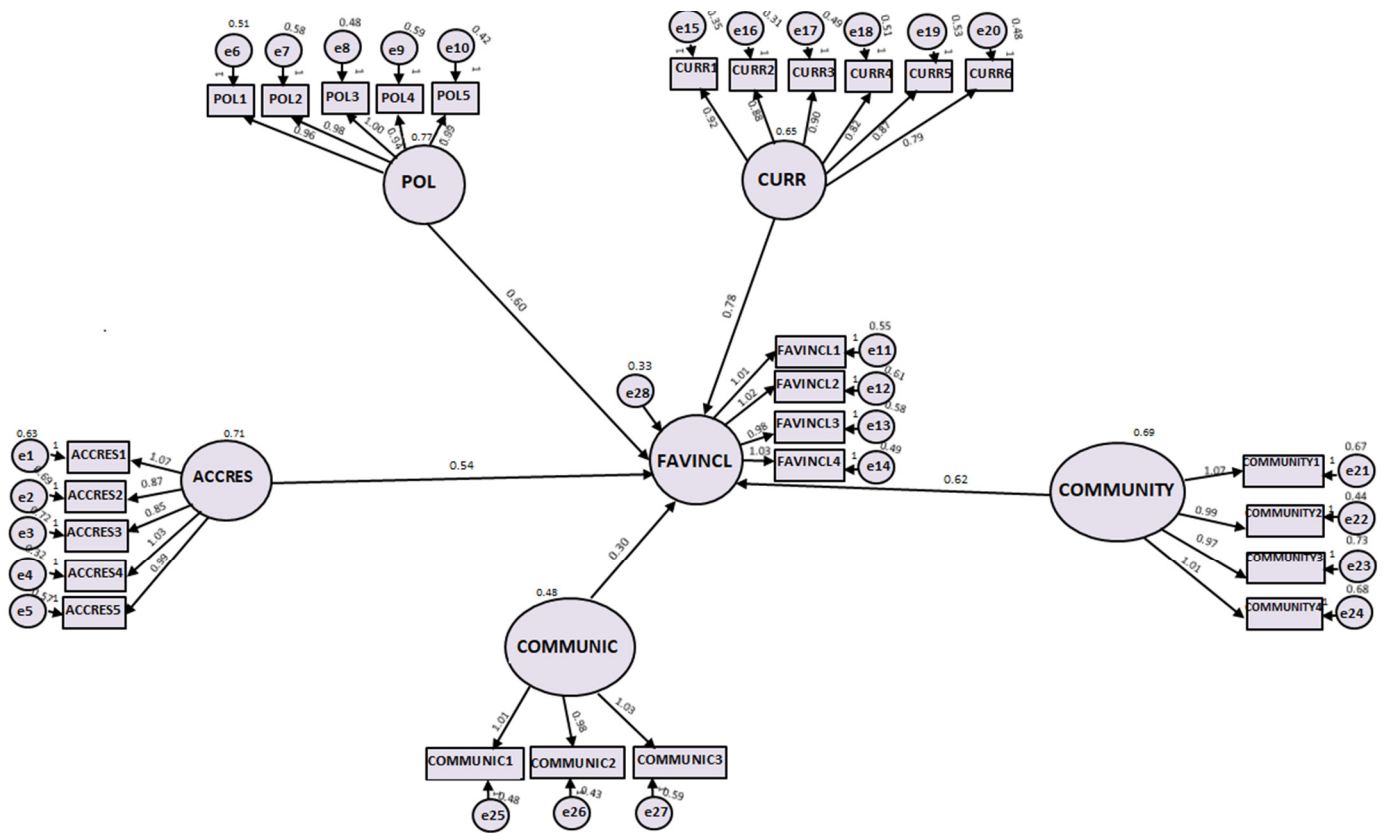


Figure 2. Presentation of the output for the SEM Model.

Table 3. Evaluation of the hypotheses.

Hypothesis	(Path) Relationship	β (Estimation)	Acceptance or Not of Hypothesis (Level of Effect)
1	POL → FAVINCL	0.603 ***	Accept (Major effect)
2	CURR → FAVINCL	0.774 ***	Accept (Major effect)
3	COMMUNITY → FAVINCL	0.616 ***	Accept (Major effect)
4	COMMUNIC → FAVINCL	0.301 ***	Accept (Medium effect)
5	ACCRES → FAVINCL	0.539 ***	Accept (Major effect)

Note: *** $p < 0.01$.

Nevertheless, one hypothesis (H4) was accepted but underlined the medium effect of the respective construct on the independent variable, with its respective path coefficients being significant but with a smaller impact than was identified for the other hypotheses: $\beta = 0.301, p < 0.01$. Subsequently, we can conclude that “communication and transparency” has a medium influence on the willingness and openness for inclusive education for Romanian universities. The SEM method was very useful to analyze the structural relationships between our variables and to test our hypotheses, with four of them being accepted with major effect and one of them accepted with medium effect, making our model suitable for further discussion about the results in the next section.

5. Debates on the Results Obtained within the Econometrical Analysis

5.1. Relationship between Policies and Structures of the University and the Willingness and Openness for Inclusive Education for Romanian Universities

This research's outcomes showed a majorly significant and positive relationship between policies and structures and developing the willingness and openness for inclusive education for Romanian universities. This involves that all sub-factors: "integrating certain points on inclusive participation of students with special needs into the university strategy", "reassessment of the university strategy emphasizing inclusive participation of students with special needs in line with strategies of prestigious EU universities", "enhancing awareness and understanding of institutional policies on inclusive participation of students with special needs by teachers, students and administrative staff", "providing training courses at university level (in the field of diversity/practices for students with special needs) for university professors", and "ensuring good cooperation between university support services and professors in order to provide support for students with special needs" all influenced the stakeholders within Romanian universities to be more willing and more open towards inclusive education. These findings match the results of a research developed by Pappas et al. [60], which uncovered (for the university environment) that even though professors may have a favorable and emphatic approach toward inclusion, there can exist several points in question and difficulties to the assimilation of inclusion; therefore, policy-makers have a very important role to improve inclusion, and they should target university educator training and increase funding for inclusive higher education.

5.2. Relationship between Curriculum and Pedagogy/Teaching Strategies and the Willingness and Openness for Inclusive Education for Romanian Universities

This research identified a positive and majorly significant impact of the variable "curriculum and pedagogy/teaching strategies" on developing willingness and openness for inclusive education for Romanian universities. It proves that the factors encompassed in this construct, particularly "adaptation of the disciplines' syllabuses by the professors, taking into account students with special needs", "adaptation of teaching/learning materials taking into account students with special needs", "use of dynamic/active teaching-learning-assessment methods to support students with special needs", "paying more attention to students' workload and anxieties about assessments/final exams (taking into account students with special needs)", "use of varied/flexible assessment/final examination arrangements taking into account students with special need", and "professors' inclusive approach to students with special needs" all had an effect on the stakeholders within Romanian universities to be more willing and more open towards inclusive education. These outcomes concur with the study elaborated by Bunbury [36], whose article concentrated on the significance of inclusive curriculum schemes in tertiary education and the good effect of feasible modifications and adaptation of the curriculum in securing inclusive practices. The findings of this qualitative research provided some applicable and constructive answers in order to understand that special needs students may require to be dealt with in a different manner so that their full potential can be fulfilled, and curriculum design is an important tool for universities to rearrange their attention to the social model of disability (based on attitudes) as a way of remodeling the vision and viewpoints of different categories of academic staff towards disabled students.

5.3. Relationship between Community and Social Integration and the Willingness and Openness for Inclusive Education for Romanian Professors and Scholars

The construct of community and social integration was associated with a positive and major influence on the stakeholders within Romanian universities to become more willing and more open towards inclusive education. This confirms the findings of Corcoran and Kaneva [61], who emphasized the necessity to understand experiences through shared narratives and dialogue (beginning with professors' know-how to enhance pedagogies and cultivate inclusive communities) in order to improve inclusive education within the

university environment. The study elaborated by Fedulova et al. [62] also underlined the role of community in raising the university awareness towards the rights of students with disabilities and their importance in empowering them to work as self-advocates for their rights and engage in academic social participation.

5.4. Relationship between Communication and Transparency and the Willingness and Openness for Inclusive Education for Romanian Universities

A positive and significant relationship but with a medium effect was identified between communication and transparency and the willingness and openness for inclusive education for Romanian universities. This reinforces the results obtained by Page et al. [63], who emphasized the utility of connectedness in supporting inclusive education through communication with supportive adults, creating a context of feeling accepted and beneficial cooperation, reinforcing commitment in studying, and shaping a framework of a positive ambiance. The results of the research indicate that, regardless the attempts of educators, students with special educational needs have more trouble with missing attachment from an academic but also an emotional point of view, and therefore, more measures should be implemented about this topic.

5.5. Relationship between Accessibility and Resources for Students and the Willingness and Openness for Inclusive Education for Romanian Universities

This study found a positive impact and significant with a major effect of the accessibility and resources for students on the willingness and openness for inclusive education for Romanian universities. It shows that a deeper and more developed degree of accessible public spaces outside the university, financial support for public transport; accessible university buildings, premises, and facilities (such as furniture, lighting, appropriate equipment, classrooms, dormitories, canteens, libraries); and accessible information (public address system, display boards, computers, tablets, etc.) (all designed for students with special needs) does induce a higher and more openness of favorable participation of students with special needs in Romanian universities. This research's relevance of how useful a thorough process of ensuring access to resources for students can be for becoming more open toward inclusive education as a university corroborates the findings of Beyene et al. [64], who underlined the significance of accessible digital resources and assistive technologies (for example, audio resources for students with hearing impairment) and of e-library resources. Other studies emphasizing the relevance of ensuring appropriate accommodations and campus infrastructure for students (with special needs) were carried out by Johnstone and Edwards [65] and by Heron et al. [66], and they proved how research about this topic can help in generating solutions that could tackle accessibility challenges and reinforce inclusive (higher) education.

6. Conclusions

There are some research papers dedicated to inclusive education in Romania for primary and secondary education institutions, but not many studies have debated on the factors determining a favorable inclusion of students in higher education institutions. Consequently, the goal of this article was to investigate the elements impacting the willingness and openness for inclusive education for Romanian universities, and the impact of a series of five constructs (with specific items) was examined.

This study used a quantitative method (the tools of CFA and SEM) to analyze the data, which were collected from fifteen universities in Romania. The results revealed the major impact of policies and structures of the university, curriculum and pedagogy/teaching strategies, community and social integration, and accessibility and resources for students (all focused on students with special needs) on the willingness and openness for inclusive education for Romanian universities. The communication and transparency (focused on students with special needs) point was identified to have a medium influence on the willingness and openness for inclusive education for Romanian universities.

6.1. Implications

Special educational needs refer to a wide range of special educational problems, from severe and profound impairments to mild learning difficulties/disabilities and problems associated with giftedness. Based on these considerations, our study, carried out among university professors, aimed to identify which factors favorably influence the participation of students with special needs in higher education institutions. Therefore, this article underlines the importance of implementing special educational measures, both at the level of learning, teaching and assessment, and systemic measures for teacher training and development along with the creation of specific infrastructure in universities, especially regarding the background of the sustainable development goals (especially Sustainable Development Goal 4) promoted by UNESCO, which underlines the major significance of inclusive education on all levels. The results of the paper can be useful for stakeholders within universities from university professors, administrative staff, and management units but also for public authorities within the education system, drawing attention to the fact that special educational needs induce the idea of equalizing opportunities for access and educational and social participation for young people who need extra attention and educational assistance.

6.2. Recommendations

Acknowledging our outcomes and corroborating with the setting of inclusive education in Romanian universities, some recommendations were formulated.

The first one would be that more concern should be given by higher education institutions for the accessibility needed by students with disabilities, in the same time implementing measures (simpler or more developed) related to students with disabilities, such as making university websites accessible for people with visual impairments, providing more accessibility for the entrances and for the sanitary spaces in the university buildings, equipping classes with specialized furniture designed to provide greater ease of use and access for students with special needs or optimizing lighting with sources that can reduce glare, fatigue, and eyestrain, etc. A recommendation that could help campuses become more welcoming of students with special needs involves encouraging professors and instructors to become familiar with the use of the UDL framework and, more particularly, to encourage them to plan and design curriculum with variability in mind and to use digital media to create flexible learning environments. Naturally, the enforcement of UDL should be supported by the universities' management teams by providing those necessary digital technologies and ensuring that learning opportunities are inclusive of all from the beginning. Another significant recommendation that can be formulated is that a system should be implemented that monitors the conditions that universities provide to students with disabilities and the respective results.

6.3. Limitations of the Research

A few limitations of the research could be noted in this section. Firstly, the study was conducted in Romania, deliberating on Romania's social and cultural traits and specificities. These details are not necessarily similar to those from other countries; therefore, capitalizing on these results within other regions or states should be undertaken with caution. Another point taken into consideration for improvement for future research is that more universities should be included in the sample and also considering that this aspect is both time-consuming and financially costly.

Author Contributions: All authors have contributed substantially to the entire work reported. Conceptualization, C.S., V.M.D. and A.G.; methodology, C.S., V.M.D. and A.G.; writing—drafting, C.S., V.M.D. and A.G.; writing—reviewing and editing, C.S., V.M.D. and A.G. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the University Management Board of the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania (approval code 9-5/CCOC/28.05.2022 and date of approval 28 May 2022).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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