

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF POLICIES FOR INTEGRATION OF VULNERABLE GROUPS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Diana-Maria CISMARU

National University of Political Studies and Public Administration
30A Expozitiei Blvd., 012104 Bucharest, RO
diana.cismaru@comunicare.ro

Abstract. *The paper explores the effectiveness of policies for the integration of students from vulnerable groups in higher education. The method used was the secondary analysis on the data obtained in a project funded with European funds, implemented in 2014-2015. The data were collected in eight Romanian universities (distributed in all regions and with different specialization) by interview and online questionnaire (respondents: 50 executive managers in the universities selected). The interviews were applied on several members of management in universities and of academic staff. The questions addressed to the general issue of vulnerable groups, and tested the opinions and knowledge of respondents regarding the criteria of defining a vulnerable group, the premises of success of different disadvantaged categories in higher education and the opportunity of different support measures. The findings allowed the analysis of implementation of the policy on five dimensions: the perspective of the university, the procedures of access, monitoring of the students' evolution, attitude of staff, and satisfaction of beneficiaries.*

Keywords: *higher education; access; equity; vulnerable groups.*

Introduction

Several studies linked the educational performance to GDP (Duru-Bellat & Suchaut, 2005), while underachievement was seen as a huge cost and a potential threat to the economic development of a country. On this emerging need to increase economic competitiveness and reduce inequalities, appeared the interest for the field of equity and social cohesion. Green, Preston and Sabates (2003) identified two ways in which the learning effects influence social cohesion: the traditional way, of improving socialization and community capital of trust by learning and education, and the second way (the main way in the present) by reducing income inequality and finally, in improving educational outcomes. The perspective in higher education changed slowly towards a commitment to affirmative action for increasing access of under-represented groups to higher education - groups which were defined accordingly to the social diversity of each country (Clancy & Goastellec, 2007). Some scholars consider equity one of the most important principles for developing an effective higher education system, along with quality and efficiency (James, 2007).

Meanwhile, studying the topic of implementation of equity policies, authors were concerned about the disparate approaches of equity mediated by factors as implicit school goals, low access to material resources, collective responses to sociocultural differences (Artiles, Kozleski & Waitoller, 2011). Some authors (Harbour & Jaquette, 2007) emphasized that the marketization perspective, focused on the satisfaction of beneficiaries (sometimes neglecting the final aim of education to improve skills and

learning capacity on long term), undermine equity, creating the need of a strategic agenda. More optimistic, other authors observe that, in the new context of marketization of university, the field of equity evolved and gained in value, being one of the components in the strategic objectives of policies, near the economic competitiveness (Savage, Sellar & Gorur, 2013, p.163).

While the early approaches centered on the identification of some characteristics of vulnerable groups (for example, poverty, difficult living conditions, discrimination and lack of possibilities of employment), the later perspectives placed the emphasis on the risk notion and social exclusion (Popescu, 2011, pp.9-11). In this regard, the vulnerability was defined as the exposure to uninsured risk leading to a socially unacceptable level of well-being” (Hoogeveen, Tesliuc, Vakis & Dercon, p.5).

In 2009, one third of the Romanian population was severely deprived at the material level (Popescu, 2011, p.23), a rate fourth times bigger than the similar rate at the level of European Union. Until 2015, this rate decreased to 22,7%, but the country has still one of the highest levels of poverty in Europe, after Bulgaria. These rates show the proportion of the issues of disadvantaged groups in Romania. The most frequently mentioned disadvantaged groups were: children in risk situation (orphans, with parents, left abroad), children and adults with disabilities, homeless adults, victims of family violence. As from social-economic categories, the most mentioned were: poor families, Roma people, families with many children, aging people, single parent families, people with chronic diseases, jobless people. The lack of strategies and of material resources made the measures in support of these categories to be ineffective so far. Some children and adults from these categories might and should be subjects of inclusive policies in education (and in particular in higher education). Therefore, in order to create the base for enlarging access to higher education, it is necessary to investigate the dimensions of implementation for education policies that targeted the increase of access for some of the disadvantaged groups.

Methodology

The data were collected by half-structured interviews during study visits at the eight universities (placed in all areas of the country and having different specialization profiles). The interviews were organized with Rectors, Vice-Rectors, Deans, General Administration Directors, Campus Directors, Coordinators of Center of Orientation and Counseling, teachers, students. A total of 149 persons have been interviewed, from which 64 students. The topics investigated by interview and questionnaire were targeted to evaluate the impact of the policy of special reserved places for Roma candidates, but the data were relevant for all the vulnerable groups. The online questionnaire included 16 questions, using symmetrical ordinal scales with five options, for showing the intensity of opinions. The questionnaire was applied by monkeysurvey.com to Vice-Deans or Heads of Department of the faculties from the universities selected in the sample. 52 responses have been recorded, from which 24 men and 28 women and age structure: 1 under 35, 20 between 35-45 years, 21 between 45-55 years, and 10 over 55 years.

The results of the interviews

In order to build the frame of analysis, five variables have been considered: the university's approach to the access of vulnerable groups to higher education, the procedures of information and access, the monitoring procedures for students coming from vulnerable groups, but also the attitude of staff and the perspective of beneficiaries. Each of these variables has been operationalized in a set of criteria which, in sum, reflect the profile of each university (Appendix 1).

Managerial standpoints for the access of vulnerable groups to higher education

The analysis of interviews allowed the identification of several types of standpoints concerning the implementation of equity policies in university.

(a) Specific profile universities (with restrained majors of specialization) – showed either vaguely knowing the problems of disadvantaged groups and search of individual solutions per each case (U3) or exclusively defining disadvantaged groups depending on material assets (U2). On the other hand, U8 placed at the opposite extreme, being the most advanced university as for the level of equity policies within the field of access.

(b) Universities with generalist profile showed a difference of attitude according to the type of environment they are located: a university of big urban environment (U5) showed having included the problems of disadvantaged groups and implicitly of policies within equity field in the university insight, by making concrete steps towards a diversification of the education offer and having education accessible. The other three universities located in disadvantaged environments (U1, U7, U4) made the proof of either passive implementation of the policy (U1), or non-homogeneously knowing the aspects related to the integration of vulnerable groups in higher education (U4) or a visible removal of problems of vulnerable groups out of the university strategy correlated to individual treatment of cases (U7).

Mechanisms of information and access

The interviews in the universities detected no special measures for informing the beneficiaries. They were expected to inform themselves. When asked about the low proportion of accessing the specially reserved places, the respondents placed the cause in their lack of will or in the cultural background of the candidates:

First of all, they have problems of communication – they are refused by the social environment from small ages. Secondly, the problem is not of those who enter in high school on special reserved places, but of those who cannot access this support because they cannot finish the inferior secondary school. (Responsible for admission, U5)

In our investigation, we had also two positive cases (U5 and U8). The first university (U5) created a special section on the site for the policy and organized meetings with the potential candidates. The other case (U8) initiated contacts with the local communities of Roma people, in order to persuade a greater number of Roma candidates to access the specially reserved places.

Thus, the perceived barriers vary among different academic environments, from psycho-social causes as lack of interest or labeling to objective causes as decreasing the percentage of high school diploma, or lack of attractiveness of some profiles or lack of promotion activities.

Monitorization of the evolution of beneficiaries

Although the integration of the beneficiaries of the specially reserved places has been described as good, the proportion of finalization of studies is different from case to case (from 50% in U4 to 80% in U7). Dropout has not been described as being more important for the beneficiaries of the specially reserved places in comparison with the other students' level. As for the monitorization of their evolution, there are no formal mechanisms implemented, neither for dropout and neither for their potential problems of accommodation.

A sensitive aspect in the post-admission assistance is represented by the orientation of students from vulnerable groups to the centers of counseling, which could offer them solutions and support for the problems they face. Unfortunately, many of these centers were recently founded or they existed with limited resources (no independent projects, no permanent counselors) and confessed they were rather passive, making nothing to attract students. As a consequence, several respondents said they never asked the services of these centers:

"Their services are not popular, are not visible at all – and also, the center is too far from the buildings in which we study, which is a problem of accessibility" (Students, U5).

"We know they exist, however, we never requested their services" (Students, U4).

There were two positive exceptions from this situation: a center of counseling well developed in U7 (more developed in socio-psychological studies) and in U8 (more developed in individual counseling and preventing dropout):

Yes, we send them to this center, especially those who think of dropout, for motivation and support. Around 20-30% of students reach the center at least once. Students ask also services of orientation for specialization, in the last year of study (60-70% from the students). (Vice Rector, U8)

In conclusion, the mechanisms of monitorization after the admission of students from vulnerable groups could be improved in all cases – and also, the general services of counseling and orientation could be improved.

The attitude of teachers and staff

The attitude of teachers and technical staff varied between acceptance and unacceptance, with a greater percentage in favor of unacceptance (identified in six of the eight universities in the sample). The refuse of a policy of special reserved places was more obvious in case of executive directors of technical staff in comparison with the members in the management of universities. Some of the respondents qualified negatively the policy:

The other students are discriminated by these policies. To us, all students are treated equally. (General secretary, U3)

We consider it a discrimination policy because the beneficiaries could enter on normal places. They have access to elite this way. (General secretary, U4)

It is discrimination for the other students, from my point of view. I don't see why we should have a special concern for them. (Responsible with admission, U7)

The perception of beneficiaries

The interviews with the beneficiaries of the special reserved places included 19 persons (6 females, 13 males) in four of the universities in the sample (U2, U5, U6, U8). In all cases, it was reported that the family supported them during academic studies, offering them a place to stay (at home or by renting – five case from 19). The number of students who have the family in another city that the university was small. These elements traced the table of a conditioned access to higher education: family with residence in the same city of the university, parents with a medium or higher level of instruction and without material difficulties.

The results of the online questionnaire

The passive or reluctant attitude identified during the interviews has been confirmed by the results of the online questionnaire. The most frequent categories indicated as vulnerable were the children coming from institutions (orphans), candidates with disabilities and children from very poor families. Other categories are not considered vulnerable: single parent families, children with parents for working abroad, Roma children (Figure 1).

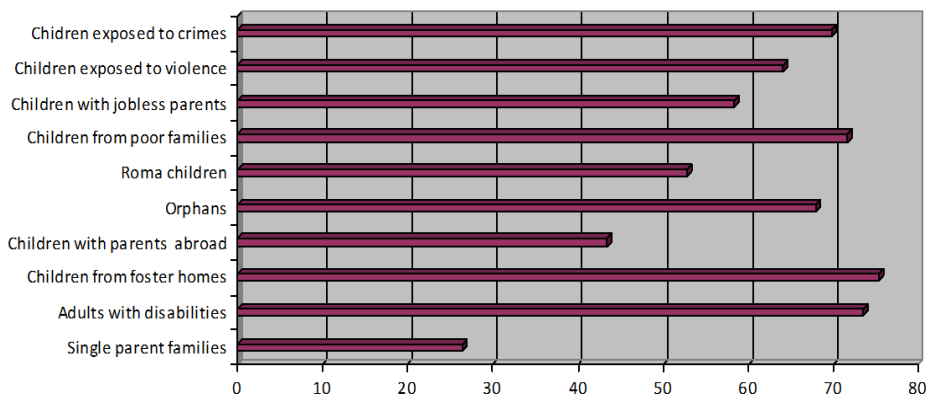


Figure 1. Vulnerable groups (several choices)

Children from poor families and children with disabilities are considered with the most rights in receiving support, in the view of respondents (Figure 2).

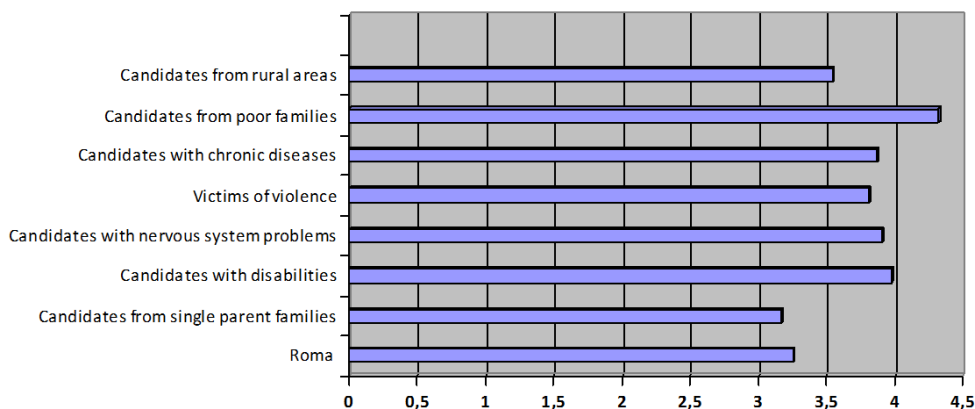


Figure 2. Evaluation of the need of support for vulnerable groups' candidates, from 1 (small) to 5 (intense)

Another question referred to the types of disability which should be considered for according support for the admission contest (Figure 3):

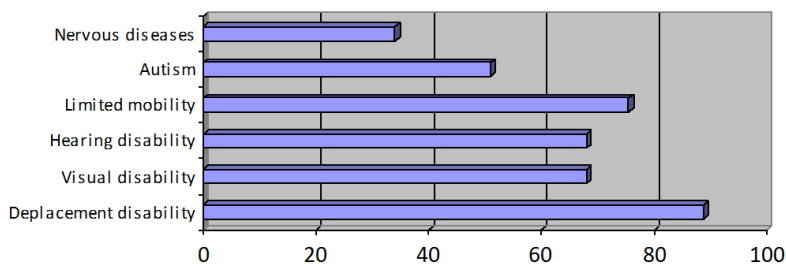


Figure 3. Priority of different categories of disadvantaged groups to support for admission in higher education

Adults and children with a physical or psychological disability should receive support, in the view of respondents (by stressing that only people with reduced mobility should receive this support, with priority. The next category that should have priority, in the opinion of respondents, are the candidates with visual and hearing disability, and the last should be the students with nervous and psychological disabilities.

In the view of respondents, candidates have different chances to finish the academic studies (Figure 4). Roma students, chronic disease students and students with nervous diseases are considered as having the smallest chances in finish the studies and integrate with success in the professional environment.

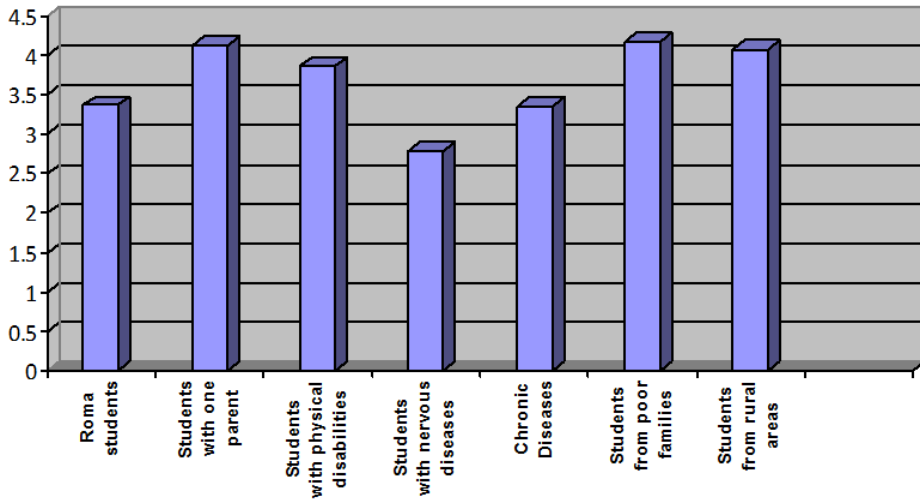


Figure 4. Chances of different categories to graduate higher education, from 1 (small) to 5 (big)

Among factors which limit the success of Roma people in the academic environment, the first three which were considered by respondents are: dropout in previous cycles of study, lack of support from families and lack of good examples (Figure 5).

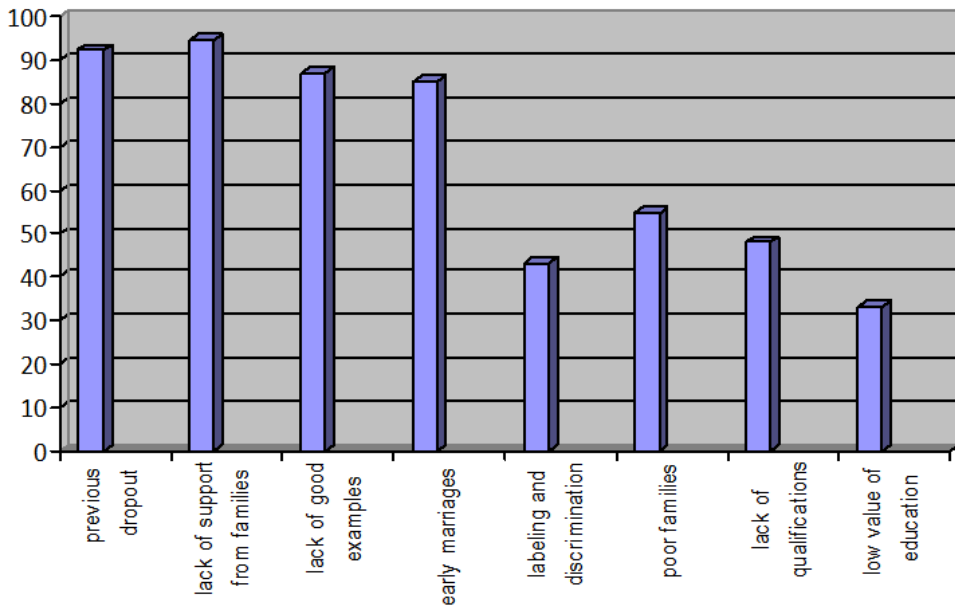


Figure 5. The perceived intensity of factors which limit the access of Roma candidates to higher education

These answers to the above question (Figure 5) show the persistence of stereotypes to respondents, the majority identifying limits in the cultural environment, while objectives limit as poverty and discrimination are less mentioned.

For the candidates from disadvantaged groups, respondents proposed a variety of measures, with an accent on ensuring an elementary living level by hosting in campus and free meals (Figure 6), but less by facilitation of employment or specially reserved places:

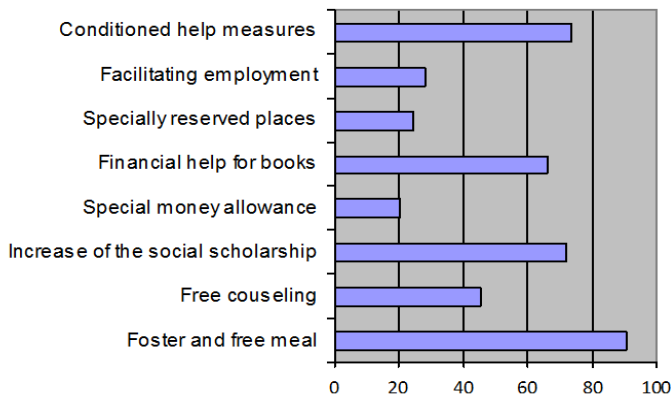


Figure 6. Measures proposed for students from different categories

As it follows, the respondents have been asked what disadvantaged groups benefit by special measures in their university and which these measures were. The perception has been too large in comparison with the situation described in interviews. Thus, a variety of disadvantaged groups were presented as beneficiaries of an extended assistance (Figure 7):

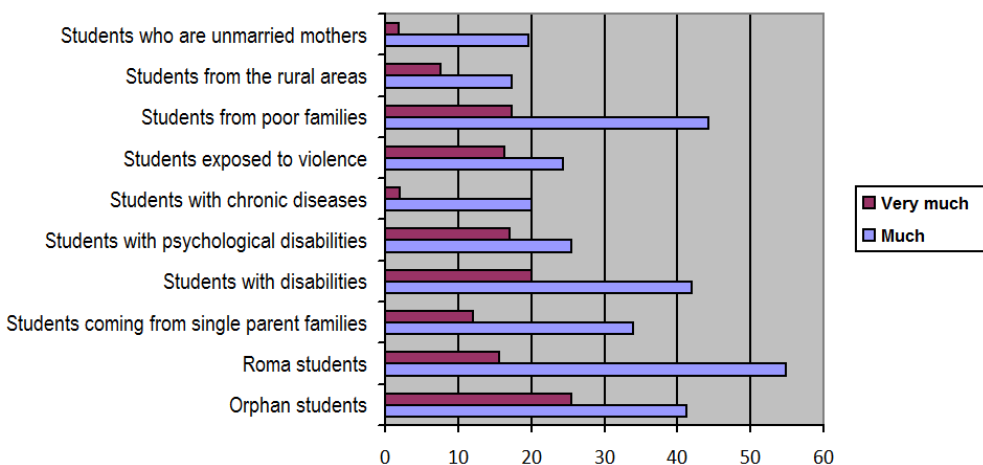


Figure 7. Categories of students perceived as beneficiaries of support measures

The responses to this question show either incorrect information, either an oversized perception, either responses given from conformity. Thus, some categories which are not beneficiaries of public measures or university measures are still mentioned: unmarried single mothers, victims of family violence, students from single parent families.

From the types of support measures, the respondents know that some are introduced by public authorities (Figure 8):

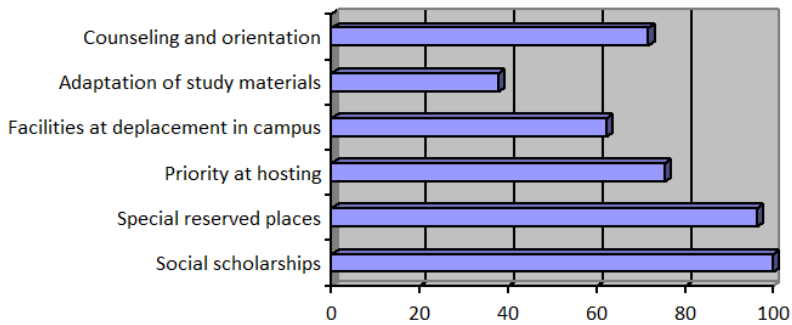


Figure 8. Perceived intensity of support measures from the state

At the question of what measures are implemented by their institution, respondents indicated a variety of measures: counseling and adaptation of study materials, priority at places in holiday recreation programs, special scholarships, assistance to sustaining exams, support with food, clothing, money for study materials, cutting admission taxes, tutors for monitoring of performances. However, some of these responses confused the public measures with the measures adopted by the university. A majority of measures indicated by respondents placed themselves at the level of material support, scholarships or cutting taxes or of support measures for all students (not only for the students coming from vulnerable groups or families).

Interpretation of results

The qualitative and quantitative results revealed the lack of interest shown by the academic management in the issue of equity in several cases (vaguely knowing the problems of disadvantaged groups, lack of vision concerning them), lack of pro-activity and passive attitude concerning the implementation of policies within equity field. Also, the interviews identified in some cases the belief that policies for reserved places (or other measures for increasing equity) takes from the right of regular candidates or students. This type of antagonist thinking belongs to the model of “limited resources” and to the paradigm of competition in the detriment of cooperation and does not take part in the principles of an advanced management.

The background for implementation of the policy is represented by the issue of vulnerable groups’ access to higher education. The lack of interest of university management for the topics of equity as well as for enlarging access shows a general lagging behind of Romanian universities versus the present-day trend to the European level. The sense of direction declared by several respondents towards “over-achievement” in the detriment of equity is associated with the fact that many Romanian universities do not stand out for any index on the level of institutional performance (reflected in the level of training, involvement in research or employability). A quality higher education works for both increase in social capital in its assembly and lowering the lagging behind to social level and for stimulation of tops and preparation of quality experts.

When comparing the five dimensions of the implementation of policy, the university standpoint, the access and information procedures, the monitoring, the attitude of staff

and the satisfaction of beneficiaries (Figure 9), they have different levels, as resulted by applying the criteria. Thus, the procedure dimension is the most advanced (the procedure of admission is flexible and the collaboration with the non-profit organizations is fine) while the standpoint of the university varied from advanced (U5 and U8) to conservative (U7, U6, U3). The monitoring mechanisms were not present in most of the cases, remaining at the level of occasional information. Inside the psychosocial frame, there was a contrast between the satisfaction of beneficiaries of the equity policy and the neutral or even hostile attitude of some respondents and even students.

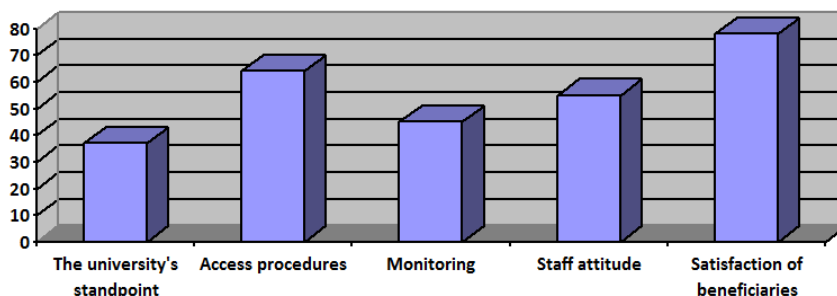


Figure 9. Implementation of policy, on dimensions

Thus, if we consider a continuum in which at „plus” is situated the acceptance of the policy and the completion with internal policies from own resources, six from the eight universities that composed the sample are at the beginning of the road in the inclusion of vulnerable groups. Only two universities (U5 and U8) prove understanding and alignment to the issues of equity (Figure 10). U5 addressed generally to vulnerable groups, while U8 targeted especially Roma candidates as a vulnerable group.

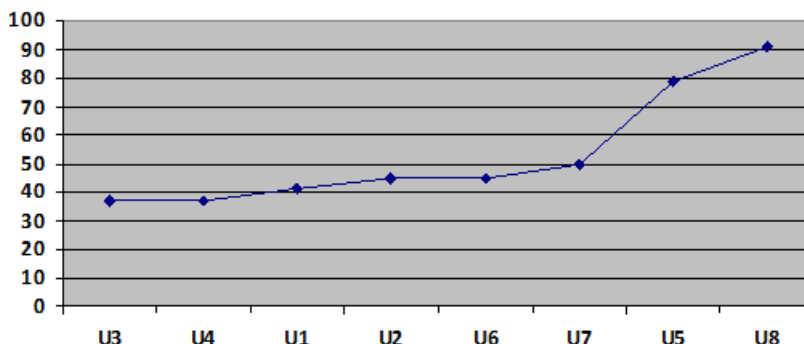


Figure 10. The implementation of policy (specially reserved places for Roma people) in the eight universities

The obstacles which limited the effectiveness of the politics of increasing equity and access to higher education have their routes in several causes. On one hand, the demographic decrease and the decrease of a number of high school graduates determines the decrease of the number of potential candidates. Another aspect refers to the decrease of the social value of education, the distinction between education and success models in society. On the other hand, there are increasing gaps between minorities and majorities, and decreasing chances of the vulnerable groups to finish

secondary school; labeling, social exclusion, and discrimination are still active and might discourage the initiatives of entering in a university.

Finally, universities show their limits by a passive attitude, treating cases as individual and circumstantial.

The results of the online questionnaire revealed a lack of information in the problems of vulnerable groups, and also a latent hostile attitude (stronger than expressed in interviews).

Conclusions

After evaluating the implementation of a policy (special reserved places for Roma students) and the identification of the general attitude towards equity and access of vulnerable groups to higher education, we can draw some conclusions about the implementation of equity policies:

(a) There is a lack of strategy to the vulnerable groups, even if these groups are persistent in Romania. There was an artificial opposition between equity and performance, even if the recent European recommendations redefine the social role of the university and its performance, including new variables (as the increase of access of disadvantaged groups);

(b) Lack of consistency in the implementation of some policies, which are introduced formally, as a procedure, but are not accompanied by a significant change in attitudes, which are more important for the final result of the policies. Interviews showed the tacit exclusion of vulnerable groups, with the motivation of "orientation to performance" (which, in these conditions, is only a mask for the "law of natural selection");

(c) As a positive conclusion, the elimination of bureaucracy and introduction of flexible procedures may be considered an improvement in the implementation of policies with the scope of increasing access and equity in higher education.

Recommendations are addressed not only to universities in approaching the disadvantaged categories but to the institutions that want to implement policies for increasing access and equity in higher education. For the universities, recommendations are to change the perspective on vulnerable groups – from non-relevant, assisted people, or categories without any relevance for the solving of material issues that universities face in present, to the important social resource. The demographic decrease affected school fundamentally and will stress more and more the necessary management of a diversity of students and candidates. To invest resources in assisting disadvantaged groups is a resource in building the reputation of the university and in strengthening its social role.

The change in perspective should be accompanied by two important consequences: (a) the education of teachers in the spirit of tolerance and opening to candidates and students from disadvantaged groups; (b) elaboration of specific internal measures for different vulnerable groups would eliminate the lack of persistence and the individual treatment of cases. These measures would include also additional procedures of monitoring the cases.

Recommendations of the institutions refer, on one hand, to the follow-up of the implementation of public policies for increasing access to higher education, and also to generating enforcers for the best practice cases in the academic environment (for example, awarding distinctions or facilities for universities who prove a greater opening or concern about the field of equity). Policies should be correlated with procedures and norms for implementation, or with additional support measures (for example, as it was suggested in interviews, the building of complete educational packages), which would increase their effectiveness.

There should be emphasized two more aspects important in the construction of equity policies. On the one hand, there is possible that some policies stimulate only the advantaged category inside a larger disadvantaged social group (for example, only the ones who live in large cities or in traditional academic centers). The effectiveness of a policy might be obtained also by adequate targeting of beneficiaries and by measures who increase the access of persons truly disadvantaged in higher education. On the other hand, our research discovered that many disadvantaged groups are ignored by all the actors and have extremely low chances of entering in a university. A real orientation to the increase of equity means to build policies adapted for all the categories of people who need them. For the institutions and for the universities, the challenges will refer, in the next years, to offering solutions in increasing access to higher education, even if the priorities seem to be placed in other areas, as the internationalization, increase of quality or the effective administration and development.

References

- Artiles, A.J., Kozleski, E.B., & Waitoller, F.R. (2011). *Inclusive Education: Examining Equity on Five Continents*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- Clancy, P., & Goastellec, G. (2007). Exploring access and equity in higher education: Policy and performance in a comparative perspective. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 61(2), 136-154.
- Duru-Bellat, M., & Suchaut, B. (2005). Organisation and Context, Efficiency and Equity of Educational Systems: what PISA tells us. *European Educational Research Journal*, 4(3), 181-194.
- Eurostat (2017). Material deprivation rate for the 'Economic strain' and 'Durables' dimensions, by number of item of deprivation - EU-SILC survey. Retrieved from http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=ilc_sip8&lang=en.
- Green, A., Preston, J., & Sabates, R. (2003). Education, equality and social cohesion: a distributional approach. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 33(4), 453-470.
- Harbour, C.P., & Jaquette, O. (2007). Advancing an equity agenda at the community college in an age of privatization, performance accountability, and marketization. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 40(3), 197-207.
- Hoogeveen, J., Tesliuc, E., Vakis, R., & Dercon, S. (2004). A guide to the analysis of risk, vulnerability and vulnerable groups. World Bank. Washington, DC. Retrieved from <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTSRM/Publications/20316319/RVA.pdf>.

- James, R. (2007). *Social equity in a mass, globalised higher education environment: the unresolved issue of widening access to university*. University of Melbourne, Centre for the Study of Higher Education. Retrieved from <http://web.education.unimelb.edu.au/news/lectures/pdf/richardjamestranscript.pdf>, accessed at 1.08.2017
- Popescu, R. (2011). *Grupurile vulnerabile și economia socială. Romi și femei în dificultate – manual de intervenție [Vulnerable groups and the social economy. Roma people and women in difficulty]*. Bucharest: Expert Publishing.
- Savage, G.C., Sellar, S., & Gorur, R. (2013). Equity and marketisation: Emerging policies and practices in Australian education. *Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 34(2), 161-169.

Appendix 1. Frame of analysis (criteria)

- A. The standpoint of the university in approaching the vulnerable groups
1. There is a correct identification of vulnerable groups.
 2. There is a strategic approach of university of one or more of these groups.
 3. The policies and measures for vulnerable groups are considered legitimate and useful.
 4. The university initiates additional support measures for vulnerable groups (implemented with own resources).
 5. There is a set of procedures to implement policies addressed to vulnerable groups, applied in a unified way in faculties and departments.
 6. There is a correlation of state policies for disadvantaged groups with other available facilities (meals, hosting etc.)
- B. Procedures of information and access
1. There are efforts to promote the measures for the beneficiaries.
 2. The staff cooperates with intermediate actors in the process of occupying special places or in according other social stimuli (scholarships, facilities).
 3. There is a flexible procedure of distributing the facilities (reserved places, or other).
 4. The procedure is simple, avoiding bureaucracy.
 5. The percentage of occupying places and using other resources (social scholarship fund) is more than 75%.
 6. The rate of retention of beneficiaries is more than 80%.
 7. The barriers for the implementation of policy and other measures are reduced to minimum.
 8. The actors involved make recommendations of improvement.
- C. Evolution and monitoring of the evolution of beneficiaries
1. Faculty/university has procedures of monitoring the route and performance of the beneficiaries.
 2. The responsible factors inform themselves about the situation of beneficiaries.
 3. The candidates who apply for special reserved places benefit of consultancy and orientation
 4. Dropout rate for the beneficiaries of the policy is not higher that the dropout rate of the other students.

5. There is a consensus on the reasonable chances to success of the beneficiaries of the policy.

D. Attitude of teachers, technical staff and students

1. They understand and agree with the need to support vulnerable groups.
2. They support, if needed, the inclusion of the members of disadvantaged groups.
3. They don't manifest behaviors of labeling and exclusion of the members of disadvantaged groups.
4. They have a positive attitude and show a reduced level of stereotypes addressed to vulnerable groups.
5. They facilitate, according to their institutional role, the solving of punctual problems of the beneficiaries of equity policies.

E. The perception of beneficiaries

1. They appreciate the policies and measures applied to vulnerable groups as being useful.
2. They appreciate the transparency and the flexibility of institution in the implementation of policy.
3. They evaluate the admission procedure as being simple.
4. They have a low intention of dropout, and a high level of confidence in their possibility to graduate.
5. They self-evaluate their performance as being close to the colleagues' performance.
6. During the admission or learning process, they don't feel labeled or discriminated.
7. They evaluate the behavior of teachers and colleagues as positive or neutral.
8. They feel supported by families and by the university staff for graduating studies.