

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES AS A MARGINAL GROUP IN THE  
UNIVERSITY ENVIRONMENT

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**Abstract**

*The paper analyzes the demographic dynamics and structure of a marginal group, represented by students with disabilities, in the University "Dunarea de Jos" of Galati. It was given by the context of the development of a European project which facilitated access to university education for people with disabilities. The processed data cover a period of four years and have revealed several types of relations between the majority and the demographic structure of marginal group. The study took into account both the strictly demographic indicators - sex and age - and the options for study programs chosen by students. The research results show that students with disabilities represent a distinct category in terms of structural features. However, a number of general features of the macro-university system configuration is reflected in the marginal group, according to the principles of part-whole.*

**Keywords:** disability, university, demographic structure

**1. Introduction**

Throughout history, people with disabilities, similarly to other demographic structural categories, such as members of certain races, ethnicities or denominations, have been subjected to forms of discrimination and social exclusion due to the stereotypes, preconceptions and stigmas manifested by the majority of society's members.

Although greatly diminished today, the level of discrimination directed at people with disabilities remains quite frequent and it exists as a result of a double standard, according to which the life of the majority, of the "normal" people, is considered the "normal life". This led to unequal

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treatment in public or private places, in terms of services, education and social care for this category of people. Fortunately, there seems to be a change in the general attitude of the community towards its disadvantaged members, even though it is much slower than the dynamics of the society in other areas of social life.

The current article aims at emphasizing the manner in which a policy of opening and support for people with disabilities can reduce their handicap in accessing higher education. The paper includes data gathered during the implementation of the POSDRU/86/1.2/S/63951 project concerning the access of the disabled to higher education at “Dunărea de Jos” University between 2011 and 2014.

In these three years, the proportion of students with disabilities changed considerably within the university.

In terms of methodology, two entities – the group of students with disabilities and the general mass of “Dunărea de Jos” University students – were compared diachronically. The analysis revealed the structural composition of the group of students with disabilities, on the basis of data available in the project, in connection with the general structure and dynamics of the number of university students, according to the annual statistics produced in the university.

## *2. Demographic marginality – a concept with complex social, cultural, as well as political and economic implications*

The attempt to capture marginality in its general form is a delicate enterprise, in the sense of defining the concept, selecting the indicators, the weighting and aggregation methods for the variables and socio-economic importance given to the quantitative results. In any case, it seems as if at every step arbitrary classifications are compulsory, since, although they are based on a conceptual frame and a good empirical knowledge of the phenomenon, they reflect the subjectivity and the ideological orientations. Global analysis usually leads to the formation of a synthetic index whose significance is very difficult and which is often taken for minority. In effect, such a synthetic index has the disadvantage of reducing to a single

numerical value a very complex reality which affects people of the same community (Dugas, 1988).

The issue of marginality was often defined in terms of socio-economy. Marginal is any territory with chronic employment problems, with an activity almost exclusively centred on local resources, with a low standard of living and situated relatively far from any service. From a geographic regional perspective, marginality refers to identifying those situations that are below the value of the national average (NICHOLLS, 1968, Cazalis, 1976).

A similar application seems to characterise the demographic approach, where marginality represents, on the one hand, a low value of a demographic phenomenon, while, on the other hand, designating the identification of those areas where the phenomenon is dominant. Thus, to exemplify, the rate of the advanced age group (over 75) was, for a long time, a marginal aspect, the number of people in this category being extremely low by comparison with the other age groups. The last decades, however, show a tendency towards the numeric increase of this group, at least in the developed regions, which removes it from the marginality area.

Similarly, the demographic classification (structuring) according to language, ethnicity or religion systematically generates minority groups in relation to a national majority, who represent marginal values in a purely quantitative analysis, in large systems of quasi-homogeneous population. Moreover, at a more careful analysis, we will notice that, actually, at any moment in a community there will be majorities and minority groups, namely dominants and marginalities, which is not surprising. Problems appear when marginal categories are also marginalized. And this sometimes happens precisely because of their low number. From this perspective, disabled people are a good case in point for demographic marginality often associated with educational marginalization.

In Romania, approximately 3.5% of the population consists of people with disabilities<sup>1</sup>. The relatively low (marginal) number is one of the reasons why, for a long time, there was a lack of concern on the part of society for these people's needs other than strictly existential or medical. The re-evaluation of the concepts of disability/ handicap clearly

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<sup>1</sup> INSEE, 2013

highlighted the fact that a large number of the disabled people can perform a useful socio-economic activity, in which case the need of education and higher training becomes a natural and implicit reality.

**3. *Demographic characteristics of the marginal group of students with disabilities at "Dunărea de Jos" University of Galați***

Between 2011 and 2014, the project "Development and implementation of an integrated pilot-programme to increase the access to higher education of people with disabilities" was carried out at "Dunărea de Jos" University of Galați. It was a project initiated by the Romanian Ministry of Education and Research and co-financed from the European Social Fund through the Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development 2007-2013. Its major objective was to create a favourable framework (educational mentoring and training in the use of the e-learning platform, supporting scholarships, etc.) for people with difficulties who wanted to attend a higher form of education.

The creation of opportunities for improving access to higher education at undergraduate and graduate levels targeted 300 people with disabilities in three universities, also by the use of ICT.

The main achievements of the project were supporting the access to higher education for over 300 disabled people (in three institutions of higher education from the South Muntenia, Centre and South East regions), providing course materials by means of an eLearning system adapted to the student's type of disability, so that they should be able to access the resources, implementing a programme of educational mentorship appropriate for the specific needs of the disabled, organizing a professional body of educational mentors to guide the students with disabilities and granting scholarships in support of education to the 300 students.

Throughout the implementation of the POSDRU/86/1.2/S/63951 project, the group of students with disabilities enrolled in one of "Dunărea de Jos" University's programmes had a series of structural characteristics (tables 1, 2, 3) that provided a basis for the qualitative evaluation of the particularities of this segment of students.

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*Table 1. Structure according to gender and age*

University year	Number of students with disabilities	Femininity index	Mature students (%)
2011-2012	104	1	46,1
2012-2013	107	1,27	47,6
2013-2014	87	0,97	50,5
2014-2015	32	1,90	37,5

*Table 2. Structure on type of disability*

	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014	2014-2015
Total of which:	104	107	87	32
<i>Somatic disability</i>	47	44	34	15
<i>Neuromotor disability</i>	35	41	32	13
<i>Visual disability</i>	14	14	14	3
<i>Psychological disability</i>	4	5	4	1
<i>Auditory disability</i>	4	3	3	-

*Table 3. Structure on areas of study*

	2011-2012		2012-2013		2013-2014		2014-2015	
Total of which:	104	100%	107	100%	87	100%	32	100%
Engineering and exact sciences	25	24,2	25	23,4	20	23	14	43,7
Humanities and arts	12	11,5	17	15,8	19	21,8	8	25
Social sciences	58	55,7	56	52,4	37	42,6	7	22
Medicine and kinesiotherapy	9	8,6	9	8,4	11	12,6	3	9,3

Thus, the first aspect highlighted by the quantitative analysis is connected to the numerical dimension of the analysed group, namely the variation of the number of students with disabilities along the period of time analysed. More exactly, students with disabilities represent less than 0.7% of the total number of students in the university, which accounts for

the classification in the category of marginal demographic group. Moreover, the number recorded in the first two years (2011-2012) becomes significantly lower in the following years, the number declining with the conclusion of the project (0.26% students with disabilities in 2015).

In terms of the relation between the marginal group represented by the people with disabilities and the majority of population, the recorded values entitle us to state that the university, generally speaking, remains an extremely selective and not easily accessible place, if we take into account that people with disabilities at national level (as marginal group) are 3.5% of the population, while the marginal group within the university, even under the conditions of a punctual support, did not exceed 0.7%.

In what concerns the demographic structure, the selected variables were "gender" and "age". Thus, the structure according to gender revealed small variations from one year to another, the values of the femininity index indicating, however, a slight feminization of the group. This reality can be explained in two ways. The first could be provided by gender psychology expressed by means of a more voluntary and determined attitude to overcome limitations in the case of the female gender than in the male. The second explanation could rather be connected to an exogenous factor, namely the structure of the fields of specialization offered by the university, as revealed in what follows.

In terms of the structure according to age, a classification adapted to context was adopted, two age categories being proposed. Considering the fact that, in Romania, the social age for being a student is situated between 18 and 26 years old, specific to the general mass of students, the category of those over this limit<sup>1</sup> was named the category of mature students. In our case, the weight of those over 26 years old was constantly exceptionally high. The fact that among students with disabilities, there is a significant percentage of students older than 26 can be proof of the marginalization experienced by these people when they were at the age of young studentship, when they did not have the opportunity or were not encouraged to attend a higher form of education because of their deficiency.

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<sup>1</sup> Limit established by art.499 of the New Civil Code.

The structure according to type of disability is an ad hoc criterion, adopted for the relevance the type of handicap has in accessing higher education. The numbers reveal an evident majority of those with somatic and neuromotor deficiencies. This is due, on the one hand, to the much higher frequency of these impairments at the general level of the entire population, and, on the other hand, to the fact that they are, to a certain extent, less limitative in the learning process, than the visual, auditory or psychological disabilities.

In terms of the options for the fields of university education, the analysis reveals a major tipping of the scale towards social sciences and humanities. They attracted, in the four years between 2011 and 2014, much more than half of the students with disabilities who chose to enrol in a form of higher education. The lower attractiveness of the exact sciences and engineering could be accounted for by a longer period of undergraduate study, as well as the difficulties raised by the rigors of the exact disciplines, especially in the case of mature students who graduated from secondary school a longer time before.

#### *4. The general and structural evolution of the number of "Dunărea de Jos" University students*

A simple structural analysis of the group of students with disabilities would be of little relevance without its integration in the body of the entire community of students. Thus, applying the same indicators of demographic analysis to the entire university will reveal the extent to which there are certain structural patterns between the majority and the marginality, namely similarities and differences.

A first aspect to be considered is the fact that "Dunărea de Jos" University is an institution of higher education and research whose evolution reflects quite closely the phenomena and processes of the Romanian society, sometimes synchronically, other times with a delay. Thus, the demographic decrease recorded in the last 20 years in the entire population of Romania is noticeable in the general number of university students (table 4).

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In terms of the demographic structure, the university is characterised by a feminine dominant, the index of femininity being greater in all four years analysed.

*Table 4.* The evolution of the number of “Dunărea de Jos” University students

	Total	Masculine	Feminine	Femininity index
2011-2012	15296	6586	8710	1,32
2012-2013	13706	5938	7768	1,30
2013-2014	12840	5715	7125	1,24
2014-2015	12018	5453	6565	1,20

In terms of the structure on age groups, data analysis reveals that the weight of mature students (over 26 years old) remains under 20%. Extrapolating the manner of determining the demographic age of a population according to the weight of the elderly out of its total number, it can be stated that “Dunărea de Jos” University of Galați is a “young” university (table 5). This can have both positive and negative effects. In any case, considering that the current European educational paradigm is oriented towards lifelong learning, it is perfectly possible for the future to bring a significant change in the average age of the students.

*Table 5.* The weight of mature students (over 26 years old) among the “Dunărea de Jos” University students

Year	Students over 26 years of age	% of total
2011-2012	2862	18,7
2012-2013	2395	17,4
2013-2014	2355	18,3
2014-2015	2365	19,6

According to the structure on fields, the numbers of students allow for the identification of the two power axes in the university – engineering, on the one hand, social sciences and humanities, on the other – situated on relatively equal positions.



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Table 6. Structure on fields of study

	2011-2012		2012-2013		2013-2014		2014-2015	
Total of which:	15296	100%	13706	100%	12840	100%	12018	100%
Engineering and exact sciences	6422	42	5765	42	5421	42	5355	44,5
Humanities and arts	1501	10	1442	10,5	1353	10,5	1195	10
Social sciences	5139	33,5	4220	31	3593	28	2967	24,5
Medicine and kinesiotherapy	1701	11	1740	12,5	1788	14	1802	15
Physical education and sport	533	3,5	539	4	685	5,5	699	6

The weights of the two macro-fields are relatively comparable in the first two years under analysis, but the situation changes in the last two years, when engineering registers a slight increase (followed by medicine).

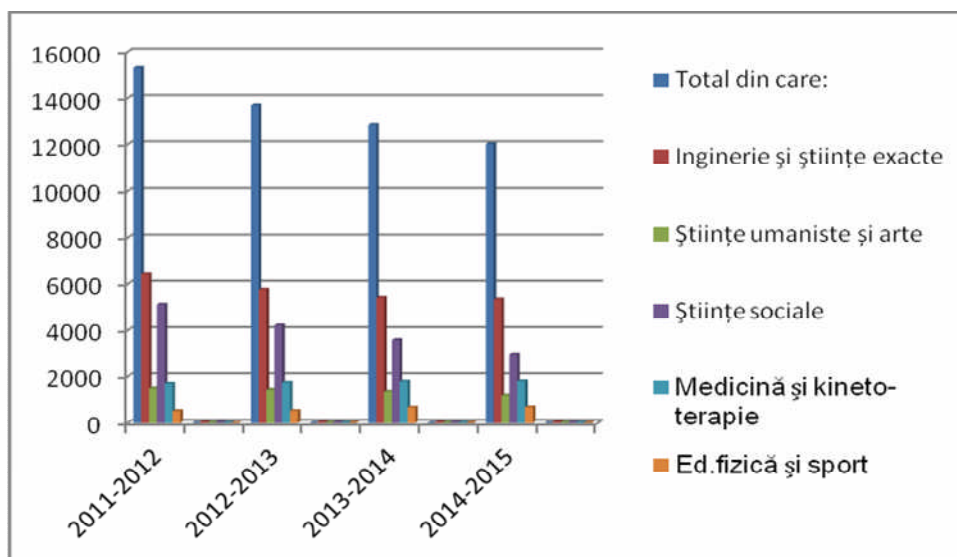


Figure 1. The distribution of the number of students on fields of study

This short radiography highlights the fact that the university has its own characteristics and speeds resulted from the interference of all marginal groups it contains.

### *Conclusions*

In Romania there are over 100.000 un-institutionalized people with disabilities, their age between 18 and 34 years old. Of them, only 8% have access to higher education, mainly because of: the great cost of university studies (in the cases where the student does not fill a place funded from the state budget, but needs to pay tuition fees) by comparison with the pension /social allowance at their disposal, the unavailability of the universities in providing the disabled with appropriate means of assimilating the curriculum, material obstacles (the inability to attend the university in person or to access the course materials in the standard printed format), the lack of qualified personnel to provide educational mentoring to people with disabilities and the lack of appropriate guidance/supervision to ensure a good educational process and for motivation.

The project carried out at “Dunărea de Jos” University revealed the fact that attracting people with disabilities presupposes concerted actions from a material point of view, in terms of logistics, as well as in matters of behaviour. Once included in the higher education system, the majority of the disabled students remain a distinct category with respect to special needs. On the other hand, however, a series of general traits of the academic macro-system is also reflected by the configuration of this marginal group. Above all, the current study reveals the fact that there is a close correspondence between certain structural characteristics of the student community, derived from the principle of the part-whole relation.

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