

Theoretical, Practical and Pedagogical Implications for Inclusive Higher Music Education

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ABSTRACT: Educators worldwide increasingly realize that a change is needed in institutions, communities, educational systems and individual initiatives regarding the inclusivity and equity that all members of society should experience. In this theoretical paper, we will examine the experiences of students with special education needs (SEN) who are enrolled or have graduated from an undergraduate degree program in music at two institutions in Cyprus and Romania. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with students as well as teachers, and focused on the specialized support provided to these students by the two institutions. Findings from this study can shed light on current practices and guide administrators and decision-makers toward the necessary changes that need to be made in order to improve policies and practices for a more equitable educational context for all.

KEYWORDS: Inclusion; music; SEN (special education needs); higher education; frameworks for support

Introduction

During the late 20th century there has been an increased attention towards the lives, experiences and challenges of people with disabilities. This has led to the development of the new academic field of Disability Studies and to the realization that disability is not

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another medical condition but a social construct and that there many things that administrators, policy makers, educators and everyday people can do to improve the lives of those around us who experience some sort of disability. Undeniably, many of these necessary changes start, or should start, from the field of education, by removing barriers, allowing equal access to all, and providing increasing support structures throughout compulsory and higher education. Yet, much more needs to be done at the institutional, communal and structural level regarding the inclusivity and equity that all members of society should experience.

According to the Postsecondary National Policy Institute of the United States (2025), 13.6% of all civilians and 21% of all enrolled undergraduates reported having some form of disability. In another recent report of the National Disability Center for Student Success (2025) indicated, 38% of participating students identified themselves as disabled. In Europe various research findings exhibit similar results. According to The Higher Education Authority of Ireland (2023), an average of 17% of new entrants in the academic years 2019-2022 indicate that they have some sort of disability.

Nevertheless, according to the European Disability Forum's website, only 31% of learners with disabilities continue into tertiary education. Similarly, as official statistics of Eurostat (2025) indicate, in 2024 only 23.9% of people between 15 and 64 years of age with some disability and 15.3% of people with a sever disability had a high level of educational attainment from tertiary education, compared to a 33.6% of people without a disability.

In the field of music education, during the last two decades there has been a significant increase of voices, research and projects supporting and documenting the need for change in music education to better accommodate students with special education needs (SEN) (Abramo, 2012; Darrow, 2015; Dobbs, 2012; Grimsby, 2020; Hourigan & Hammel, 2019). Music is an irrevocable human and cultural right for all people, regardless of their ability or disability and it plays a fundamental role in the everyday life of people in all communities, societies and nations. Thus, all people should have the right to learn music at all levels and participate in music-making throughout their lives, either as professional or amateur musicians. This presupposes that students with SEN should be encouraged and supported to enter and complete their studies at higher education institutions of music, as well as be supported after their graduation in their professional lives as musicians.

What is IncluMusic

The European Union offers a wide range of opportunities for collaboration between universities in different countries, with the aim of finding solutions to specific challenges in the field of education. A concrete example of such a project is "IncluMusic – Developing Skills for More Inclusive Conservatories," which brings together seven partners and

focuses on finding effective solutions to improve the adaptability of students with special educational needs (SEN) to the university music environment. The partners involved in this project are five universities with expertise in education and music, and two associations from five different countries, represented as follows: ANMGD-Gheorghe Dima National Academy of Music (coordinator, Cluj-Napoca, Romania), RIAM-Royal Irish Academy of Music (Dublin, Ireland), LUMSA University (Rome, Italy), EUC-European University Cyprus (Nicosia, Cyprus), CONSPA-State Music Conservatory 'Alessandro Scarlatti' (Palermo, Italy), AEC-Association Européenne des Conservatoires (Belgium), and Resolvo (Florence, Italy).

The main objective of the project is to build inclusive higher education systems within the community by promoting and fostering excellence in teaching, learning, and assessment, and by developing the skills necessary for inclusive education. The secondary objectives focus on the following areas of interest (Cinque et al. 2023):

- Increasing access and participation for students with sensory and cognitive disabilities in Higher Music Education Institutions (HMEIs);
- Developing the competencies of teaching and administrative staff in the field of inclusive education;
- Introducing and training academic mentors to serve as mediators between students and the university environment;
- Promoting innovative practices and approaches for inclusive education and the development of an HMEI community focused on inclusion.

The project was complex, running for a period of 36 months (2022-2025), and was structured into five work packages, in which all partner institutions were equally involved. The first work package (*WP 1 – Project Management*) focused on managing the entire project lifecycle, coordinated by ANMGD with support from Resolvo, and addressed the coherent organization of activities, monitoring progress at every stage, and ensuring quality and results throughout the implementation period. The second work package (*WP2 – Design & Curriculum*) focused on defining the course design principles that must be considered by all those working in an inclusive education system, and on developing a European curriculum for the training of teachers, tutors, and administrative staff in HMEIs. The third work package (*WP3 – Course Development & Piloting*) involves the actual development of the training course content, the preparation of supporting teaching materials and assessment methods, and concludes with the internal piloting of the materials within the partner institutions. Next, external testing of the courses and the development of training manuals, which detail the pedagogical methodology and support their implementation, were carried out as part of Work Package 4 (*WP4 – Testing & Support Tools*). The final phase of the IncluMusic project (*WP5 – Dissemination & Exploitation*) aims to disseminate the project's results and capitalize on them through various contexts, such as conferences, workshops, social media channels, and various

groups within the academic music community, aspects that promote inclusion in HMEIs (Sârb & Miralis, 2025).

As a result the IncluMusic project produced two *e-learning courses*, one for teachers and one for administrative staff, as well as a *training manual* focusing on two areas of inclusivity training: pedagogical practices and broader institutional practices, and a website containing these support materials (PPT presentations, explanatory videos, links to other supplementary materials), all designed to build strong inclusive competencies and facilitate access for individuals with SEN to HMEIs. The e-learning self-paced course summarize the contents of the Training Manual, and it can be found at <https://elearn.inclumusic.eu/>. The modules it contains are relevant both for the project objectives and for all actors involved in higher music education (Mladin et al, 2025) and are presented in the following:

- *Module 1:* Disability studies, special pedagogy and inclusive music teaching (5 sessions)
- *Module 2:* Special Musical Methodologies and Assistive Technologies Workshops (5 sessions)
- *Module 3:* Legal and Ethical Principles of Inclusion: Strategies for Effective Implementation (6 sessions)
- *Module 4:* Mindfulness and Inclusive Music Teaching (6 sessions)
- *Module 5:* Music Therapy, Music and Health (6 sessions)
- *Module 6:* Inclusive MuEd and Community Music (5 sessions).

Research Methodology

As part of the *IncluMusic* project, to achieve the clearest possible picture of the reality in Europe, regarding inclusion practices at the university level, we conducted multiple research activities, such as: identifying courses or study programs at European universities, examples of best practices and events that promote inclusion in the university music environment, focus groups in each project partner's country, interviews with professors, students, administrative staff, and representatives from associations, as well as rectors and directors of institutions involved in inclusion.

In this paper, we will refer only to the interviews conducted in Romania and Cyprus with teachers and students of music. The research tool used was the structured interview, administered to faculty and students.

The interview for teachers began with questions about their professional experience, followed by open-ended questions regarding their experience with educational contexts and teaching strategies in an inclusive environment, challenges encountered, and support received from the institution (Appendix 1). The teachers' responses provided details about their perspectives on the inclusive environment.

In the interview designed for students, following some introductory questions

about affiliation, specialization, and level of study, we included questions related to institutional culture, inclusive policies and practices, learning and collaboration experiences, and the level of involvement of professors or other members of the institution, all of which facilitate adaptation to the inclusive university environment. Student responses were measured using a 3-point Likert scale: *Definitely agree* – *Agree to some extent* – *Disagree*. In addition to these three categories of questions, the interview concluded with an open-ended question asking students to name three important changes regarding inclusion and diversity that they would like to see in their institution (Appendix 2).

The research questions for each category of respondents were designed to enable a comparative analysis that provides a comprehensive picture of the inclusion of the two groups in question: teachers and students.

To better understand the needs and challenges faced by teachers and students, as well as to foster the creation of the most inclusive musical community possible, we conducted interviews with various groups, as follows:

a). HMEI students:

- Romanian and Cypriot students from our institutions (ANMGD and EUC);
- Erasmus students who study in our institutions;
- Romanian and Cypriot students who study outside the country.

b). HMEI teachers, music university centers from different cities in our countries:

- Romania: Cluj-Napoca, Timisoara, Oradea, Brasov, Arad, Bucuresti;
- Cyprus: Nicosia, Limassol, Larnaca.

Analysis of data

Data from Romania

Data analysis revealed that the most common condition mentioned by music students at ANMGD was ADHD and visual impairment. Music university indicated that the biggest challenge they faced was how to better adapt their teaching methods and materials to the specific needs of students with SEN, while maintaining integrity and fairness in their assessment. They were also concerned about finding appropriate ways to fight student isolation and promote smoother integration of students with SEN in their classes and in the university in general.

Music institution indicated that they approach these challenges with an open mind, flexibility and determination to overcome difficulties by improving their teaching methods, learning from their students' resilience and motivation and by being more creative in inventing games, tests and group activities that can be stimulating for all. They further identified various resources that are available to students with SEN, such as a student counseling center, psychological and financial support and various integration strategies that are followed.

Another issue brought up by Romanian music faculty is the importance of establishing good interpersonal relationships with and being empathetic towards SEN students. After all, they indicated, "we have to be human and try to see the world from their perspective." They also commented on the important role played by various related associations which provide qualified personnel, facilitate integration and encourage SEN people to carry out normal activities.

Despite various inclusive policies and practices followed at ANMGD, the problems are far from being resolved. Music faculty admitted that no special training was offered to them in order to face the challenges that the education of SEN students brings. They acknowledge that minimal training of teachers is needed, but, above all, what is equally important is empathy towards others who are different.

Data from Cyprus

The most common condition mentioned by music students at EUC was learning difficulties such as dyslexia and dysgraphia, as well as mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression or social and emotional distress. Music students with visual and hearing impairments and students on the autism spectrum were also accepted and graduated from the music program at EUC.

Music faculty from EUC indicated that the biggest challenge they faced was the reluctance of students to move forward because of their fear of being exposed and stigmatized for their disability. Despite the various advancements made over the years, such feelings of reluctance and fear are still experienced by students. Another challenge has to do with the time management of the course and the need to adjust the course content to accommodate students with SEN. One colleague indicated that, when resources are not available, differentiation is a challenge.

In regards to accessibility, it was indicated that about a decade ago all necessary adjustments (i.e. reserved parking, specialized lift for wheelchairs) and classroom changes were made in order to accommodate an incoming music student with mobility impairment. Currently, such amenities are commonplace, and the campus is accessible to all.

As with their colleagues in Romania, music faculty at EUC also indicated that they have not received any specialized training on how to better accommodate students with SEN. They expressed sincere interest for more training, education and awareness raising regarding the various types of sensory disabilities and impairments that students have, in order to become more capable of better supporting their students. They further indicated that, without good knowledge and skills in this area, teachers can do harm or affect SEN students in a negative way. The university has established a specialized committee for students with SEN, through which their specialized needs are identified and support is provided to both students and faculty. On the other hand, music faculty indicated that currently the university does not have any collaboration with any association focusing on

issues of disability and this reality needs to be changed for the benefit of the students. They further added that faculty need to take advantage of what assistive technology can offer.

Results and recommendations

Interviews with music students and faculty in Romania and Cyprus revealed some common trends. Faculty in both institutions welcome and support students with SEN in higher music education institutions. They also acknowledge their lack of training on issues pertaining to disabilities and are eagerly looking for specialized training in order to enable them to better identify the needs of their students and to provide the necessary support for them in order to succeed in their studies. This could take the form of in-service training, better communication and discussion amongst faculty and staff, closer connection and collaboration with local or national disability associations, incorporating assistive technologies, as well as enhancing communication and fostering empathy with and understanding of students with SEN. As one faculty stated, when available resources are limited, differentiation is a challenge.

Conclusions

Based on an examination of the context of inclusive music education in Cyprus and Romania, we can conclude that the situation has evolved significantly in recent decades in both countries.

The findings from interviews with teachers demonstrate that all those involved in education possess basic inclusive competencies, are conscious of the importance of appropriate and effective perspectives on the inclusive educational context in higher education, and are eager to further improve their knowledge and skills. However, teachers face many problematic situations and highlight the lack of specialized training for the diverse range of issues in the field of inclusion that may arise in education and affect pedagogical approaches.

Students pointed out several positive aspects regarding the facilitation of adaptation for students with various special educational needs in higher music institutions, which reflect the support and concern offered by the host institutions. However, difficulties and obstacles related to the educational climate were also noted, particularly regarding the adaptation of academic learning content or challenges related to social integration.

The development and improvement of an inclusive educational environment in music universities is an ongoing and long-term process that requires both specialized training for faculty members in the specific aspects of inclusive education and the adaptation of teaching, learning, and assessment strategies to the variety of special educational needs, including the use of assistive technologies. This highlights the importance of disseminating the results of research on inclusion and projects

organized with partners from different academic backgrounds and cultures, such as the *IncuMusic* project.

All of the aspects mentioned confirm that a robust inclusive environment specifically requires a paradigm shift regarding educational practices as well as institutional culture, through a focus on empathy, flexibility, and ensuring genuine and effective communication.

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Appendix 1-Interview with teachers

1. The kind of SEN most present in HMEIs
2. The challenges reported
3. The opportunities/resources offered
4. The different perspectives
5. Competencies needed to build inclusive HE systems
6. Presence of tutors and other staff devoted to students with SEN
7. Teacher education and training
8. Methodologies of music classes / Classroom organization
9. Inclusion: policies/laws versus practice
10. Partnership and support from associations, families and colleagues.

Appendix 2-Interviu with teachers students

Please rate the following sentences:

(using Likert scale: *Definitely agree* - *Agree to some extent* – *Disagree*)

Directions	Questions
CULTURE	- Everyone is made to feel welcome at my Conservatory / HMEI. - Students help each other. - Staff work well with each other. - Staff and students treat one another with respect. - Parents feel involved (?) - Staff and governors work well together. - Teachers do not favor one group of students over another. - Teachers try to help all students to do their best. - Teachers think all students are equally important.
POLICIES	-The Institution makes it easy for students with impairments to come and study music. - When you first join this Music institution you are helped to feel settled. - Teachers like teaching all their classes. - The teachers work hard to make the institution a good place to come to.
PRACTICES	- Teachers try to make the lessons easy to understand for everyone.

	- Students are taught to appreciate people who have different backgrounds to their own. - Students generally know what will be taught next in lessons. - In lessons teachers expect students to help each other. - Teachers help everyone who has difficulties with lessons. - Teaching assistants work with anyone who needs help. - Homework helps with learning and is properly explained. - There are activities arranged outside of lessons which interest everyone.
What three changes would you like to see at your institution? - - -	