



**POLICY BRIEF** No 2021/01, 26 April 2021

**ALL LIVES MATTER:  
PROMOTING INCLUSION OF STUDENTS  
WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN TERTIARY EDUCATION**  
Vasileia Kakarouka

**Key points**

During the previous Multiannual Financial Framework (2014-2020), the EU prioritized the promotion of inclusive education. By the end of this period, we observed that Greece has not managed to ensure equal opportunities for all especially in tertiary education. For this reason, this policy brief underlines the importance of inclusive education regarding students with disabilities and describes previous educational strategies. Taking into account the Covid-19 pandemic, it explains what the different aspects of the topic are, and how it constitutes a barrier to further integration. Since 2021 is a crucial year for the determination of the renewed policies and the updated long-term budget for the period 2021-2027, it proposes:

- The creation of scoreboards by the Education and Training Monitor regarding inclusive education.
- The provision of specific guidelines discussed during the European Semester, for the better allocation of resources to tertiary education by the Greek authorities.
- The design of operational programs focusing on vocational training for teachers and psychological support and guidance for students with disabilities.

**Introduction**

*Importance of the topic area*

In 2017, the EU launched the “European Pillar of Social Rights”, an agreement which contains 20 principles that all European states should respect. The first article underlines that “everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education”. One big step towards the achievement of this objective is the integration of children with special needs in the education system. Albeit that some European states, as Italy or Lithuania, have managed to ensure inclusive education, others face significant challenges. According to a recent Action Aid report, in Greece only 15% of children with disabilities have access to education. The EU in cooperation with the Greek government launched initiatives to support students with disabilities. However, they mainly focus on primary and secondary education, leaving aside tertiary education. The latter remains an important educational area that should not be neglected. Taking into account the Covid-19 crisis, what further measures should the EU adopt to reinforce inclusion in higher education?



### *Important Definitions*

- I. **Special Education Needs (SEN):** There is not a commonly agreed definition in EU regarding special education needs. In Greece, pursuant to law 3699 / 2008, students with disabilities include those who present learning difficulties during an entire or limited period of their academic life due to sensory, mental, cognitive or psychological disorder affecting the learning process. Students with special needs present specific impairments such as hearing and sight problems, motor disabilities, speech disorders and learning difficulties as dyslexia.
  
- II. **Inclusive Education:** According to UNICEF, inclusive education means “all kids in the same classroom”. To achieve this, inclusion embodies reforms in teaching methods in order to provide all students equivalent learning in an environment that corresponds to all the requirements.

### *Target Group and Previous Actions to reinforce inclusion*

Since inclusive education regarding students with special needs is a complex issue, this policy brief not only addresses to children with disabilities between 18-24 that study or intend to study in a Greek mainstream university but also to their families because their life is adapted to the necessities of their relatives with disabilities.

Although, Education Policy is designed and implemented by States, the EU has contributed to the elimination of the aforementioned problem. Firstly, it has adopted a number of International Conventions in order to reinforce the implementation of inclusive education at national level. Special notice should be given to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities emphasizing on article 24, to the UN Sustainable Development Goal 4 and to the European Disability Strategy (2010-2020). These agreements underline that states must ensure equal access to all levels of education for people with disabilities. Moreover, in the context of Education and Training Framework (2020), the EU established a working group on promoting common values and inclusive education so as to support states on fighting discriminations in education. In its last session, it highlighted the potential role of inclusive education in future working groups.

In order to boost inclusive education in Greece, the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education collects data and provide to the EU reports concerning the needs of children with disabilities. Based on these reports, the European Social Fund along with National Government financed via ESPA operational programs for the period 2014-2020 that mainly focus on primary and secondary education. However, no similar policy is launched for children with disabilities in universities. Nevertheless, tertiary education is crucial, as it shapes student personality before entering labor market. It is evident that if



the EU wants to guarantee equal opportunities for all, further elaboration in this field is a necessity.

## **Analysis**

### ***Higher Education and Students with SEN***

As far as higher education is concerned, Greek universities have the responsibility to ensure an “inclusive environment”, in respect with the guidelines of the Government. For this reason, universities’ efforts to combat social exclusion differ significantly. Although some institutions have adopted measures to enhance inclusion, such as the establishment of consulting centers for students with SEN, the majority of universities have still to encounter difficulties.

To begin with, one massive issue is the access to Greek universities. Most students with disabilities have trouble reaching universities since there are no special vehicles for their transportation. Moreover, a common phenomenon is the lack of audible warning on the traffic lights around universities, a useful tool for the safe circulation of students with sight problems. Furthermore, some establishments do not dispose the required number of ramps for students with mobility difficulties. As a result, to ensure the safety of their children, parents have to accompany them or if they are busy, they do not allow them to attend university by their own.

Furthermore, the access to learning material is limited. Library resources are not adequate and supportive to students with disabilities. In most cases, there are not appropriate textbooks for students with sight problems or trained staff to assist students with disabilities in upper limbs. In addition, it is observed that students with disabilities are sometimes deprived of free psychological support and vocational guidance. As it was mentioned before, not all universities include council units for students with special needs. On the other hand, the Ministry of Education has established centers of educational and counselling support (K.E.S.Y.) but not all students can benefit from them. More specifically, individuals over 18 that have never been evaluated by this public service, are out of its mandate. This phenomenon could affect negatively students that cannot afford private psychological support services.

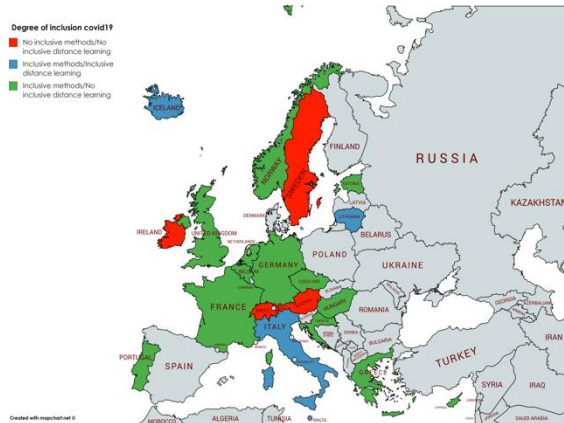
### ***The impact of Covid-19***

To slow down the spread of Corona virus, in March 2020, Greek universities closed, and education continued remotely through electronic platforms. Distance learning constitutes a barrier to inclusion for several reasons. Since e-learning is a new reality, it is evident that platforms are not adjusted to all students’ needs. Professors have not received additional training to be able to provide students inclusive education material such as extra videos of them teaching with the use of subtitles to facilitate students that can not hear.

Another issue is the lack of one-to-one support. Given the fact that there is no physical



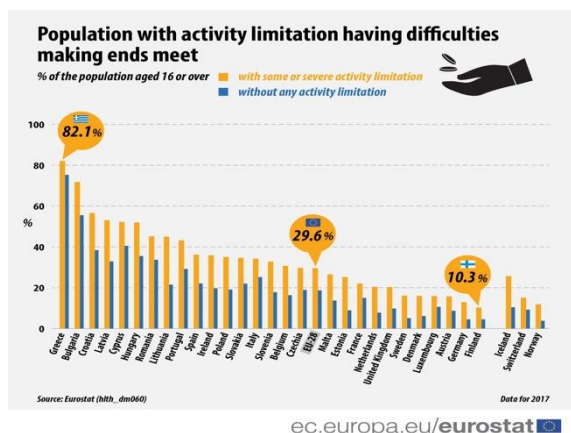
contact between professor and student, the latter is not able to follow the instructions of the professor during distance learning. Therefore, parents have to support their kids themselves. The following map confirms that Greece has not ensured inclusive distance learning.



Graph1: Degree of inclusion covid-19  
Source: European Disability Forum

### Social Exclusion and Students with SEN

The aforementioned difficulties can lead to social exclusion and provoke psychological problems. If students with SEN cannot attend courses and academic events by their own, they may feel marginalized and it is likely to encounter mental issues as stress or depression. Without the appropriate support, they may decide to cease their studies. As a consequence, it is possible not to pursue a career or enter into the labor market meaning that their income will be severely decreased. It is no coincidence that in 2017, Greece had the highest rate of people with disabilities that confront economic problems.



Graph 2: Population with activity limitation having difficulties making ends meet

Source: Eurostat



### ***How the EU is affected***

It is evident that Greek authorities must adopt a renewed approach for the integration of students with disabilities in tertiary education. The Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027) envisions a high quality and inclusive education in the EU. However, how will EU achieve this target when certain students in a member state are led to social exclusion?

### **Recommendations**

Since Education Policy is a supportive competence of the EU, we would like to propose to the EU, the adoption of new orientations or the expansion of the existing ones in order to promote inclusive education. In particular, the annual reports of the Education and Training Monitor should include special scoreboards for inclusion in education. These data, among others, will analyze what percentage of children with disabilities have entered university, how many students with special needs complete their studies and to what extent they participate in labor market. This will be a useful tool for the decision-making organs so as to propose new policies or changes to existing programs.

During the European Semester, specific guidelines should be provided for the proper distribution of national budget to education based on the aforementioned reports. According to the 2020 Education and Training Monitor report, tertiary education in Greece remains underfunded. More specifically, in 2018 and 2019 Greece dedicated approximately 4% of its GDP to all levels of education, one of the lowest shares across the EU. These guidelines are necessary for Greece for in depth investments in education, focusing on reinforcing educational facilities, and guaranteeing equal opportunities for all.

Lastly, new operational programs via ESPA, for academic personnel and students with SEN should be launched for the period 2021-2027. On the one hand, academic personnel can benefit from vocational training emphasizing on how to support students with SEN during distance learning. On the other hand, the programs related to students will be divided in 3 periods. The first one will ensure the smooth transition from secondary to tertiary education by providing psychological services and career guidance. The second one will take place during tertiary education and its target is to support and consult the student facing adapting difficulties. The last period will occur after students finish their studies and when they intend to work. Students will be informed individually by specialists on how to pursuit a career based on their needs.

### **Conclusion**

It is evident that inclusive education is considered as a priority by the EU. However, further elaboration in higher education, especially in Greece remains a necessity. The recommendations above can be a part of a long-term strategy in order to promote integration in a constant changing environment.





## References

Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (2020). *Education and Training Monitor 2020 – Greece*. Retrieved from: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/c952f294-2497-11eb-9d7e-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF/source-171316620> [Accessed 28/01/2021]

Drakopoulou E. (2020). *Inclusive Education and the impact of Covid-19 on learners with disabilities*. Retrieved from: <https://www.edf-feph.org/content/uploads/2021/01/Inclusive-Education-and-COVID-19-Eleni-Drakopoulou.docx> [Accessed 30/01/2021]

European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2020). *Country Information for Greece – Legislation and Policy*. Retrieved from: <https://www.european-agency.org/country-information/greece/legislation-and-policy> [Accessed 30/01/2021]

European Commission (2020). *Education and Training Monitor*. Retrieved from: [https://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/strategic-framework/et-monitor\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/strategic-framework/et-monitor_en) [Accessed 30/01/2021]

European Commission (n.d.). *EU funding programmes 2014-2020*. Retrieved from: [https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/eu-budget/long-term-eu-budget/2014-2020/funding-programmes\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/eu-budget/long-term-eu-budget/2014-2020/funding-programmes_en) [Accessed 27/01/2021]

European Commission (2017). *The European Pillar of Social Rights in 20 principles*. Retrieved from: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/priorities/deeper-and-fairer-economic-and-monetary-union/european-pillar-social-rights/european-pillar-social-rights-20-principles\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/priorities/deeper-and-fairer-economic-and-monetary-union/european-pillar-social-rights/european-pillar-social-rights-20-principles_en) [Accessed 27/01/2021]

European Disability Forum (n.d.). *Education Policy*. Retrieved from: <https://www.edf-feph.org/education-policy/> [Accessed 30/01/2021]

Eurydice (2020). *Greece – Funding in education*. Retrieved from: [https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/funding-education-33\\_en](https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/funding-education-33_en) [Accessed 30/01/2021]

UNICEF (n.d.). *Inclusive Education*. Retrieved from: <https://www.unicef.org/education/inclusive-education> [Accessed 26/04/2021]