



Crossing Internal and External Borders: Practices for an Effective Psychological Counselling in the European Higher Education

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THE INCLUSION OF STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CRETE

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Abstract

Inclusive Higher Education means enabling college students with special needs to participate in all kinds of activities that take place at the University or other post-secondary education Institutions, to the maximum possible extent that their disability allows. The purpose of this study is to investigate the problems students with special needs face during their studies at the University of Crete. We also examine the influence of social contact and relationships between students with and without special needs, course or seminar attendance, gender and age on the perception of inclusion issues. The total sample of the study consists of 655 students, of which 23 were with special needs. Using a 20-item structured questionnaire we asked respondents to indicate their response on a 3-point Likert scale to statements that cover a variety of issues regarding inclusion and participation in learning and the university life overall. The results of the study revealed that students with special needs have difficulties in accessing the learning facilities and resources, participating in academic life and interacting socially with other students. The perception of the difficulties did not differ significantly between students with and without special needs. We conclude that inclusion in Higher Education should involve the reduction of learning barriers and participation for all students, the promotion of a culture that acknowledges diversity and the development of a support network.

Keywords: Inclusion; students with special needs.

1. Introduction

Education is a precious human good and access to it is the right of every citizen. Higher Education enables graduates a good financial and social status, equal social participation, personal development and good living conditions in general (Efklides, 2005). This should also apply for people with Special Needs. "In today's information-

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based global economy, a postsecondary education is no longer a luxury of the wealthy but a necessity for anyone who wants to enjoy a decent lifestyle" (Wall & Sarver, 2003, p. 282). The University as an institution has an educational and scientific mission: it aims at the production and transmission of scientific knowledge as well as the training of people who will be able to produce and transmit this kind of knowledge to others (Tsaousis, 1996).

Young people's entrance to Higher Education is a transmission period during which they face new situations and conditions of life. Issues of adjustment to this new kind of life, the redefinition of family relationships, the development of more intimate relationships with the other gender and career anxiety (Kalanτζi-Azizi, 1996a), are only a few of the issues that young people have to deal with at this phase of life. It is therefore, a period during which students need support, to face the challenges and meet the demands of university life successfully. Psychological counselling, therefore is of pivotal importance (Kalanτζi-Azizi, 1992, 1996a; Sarris, 2005), so that all students (with or without Special Needs) have equal opportunities for inclusion and settling into this new environment, away from the familiar and warm family life (Kounenou, 2001).

In the present study "... inclusion has been defined as including a number of key perspectives, policies and practices such as, firstly, reducing barriers to learning and participation for all students and, secondly, learning from attempts to overcome barriers to the access and participation of students" (Booth & Ainscow, in: Fuller, Bradley & Healey, 2004, p. 455). Inclusion is not realized just through the co-existence of students with or without Special Needs in the same environment but through the development of conditions that will combat and defeat biases and discriminations (Kalanτζi-Azizi, 1996b; Kypriotakis, 2001). Inclusion is to be realized through the interaction between the members of the academic community (students, teaching and administrative staff etc). "Inclusion means interaction between the members of the group. It is not about adjustment and assimilation of a single person but socialization processes that stem from interaction" (Kypriotakis, 2001, p. 18).

In this study, we also use the term *Students with Special Needs* to indicate students that have movement, sensory, and psycho-emotional problems or a history of chronic diseases such as thalassemia (a form of hereditary hemolytic anemia), diabetes (a metabolism disorder), epilepsy etc (see Kalanτζi-Azizi, 1996b). Some impairments, diseases and disorders unavoidably affect the quality of people's lives. As, for example, with sight or learning problems or any disability; they cause general difficulties in social life and have financial consequences for those they suffer from them. In this case, the physical, social, financial and cultural environment plays a decisive role in the development of life conditions that will encourage isolation or inclusion (Riddell, Tinklin, & Wilson, 2005).

The scientific stance of this study recognizes the importance of inclusion for people with Special Needs in all levels of education and promotes the development of support services for the implementation of inclusion. The transmission from Secondary to Higher Education presupposes commitment for the development of facilities and support that will enable Students with Special Needs to succeed in their studies (Sahlen & Lehmann, 2006).

“There is evidence that disabled students are now being recognized more fully as a group experiencing particular disadvantage” (Tinklin, Riddell, & Wilson, 2004, p. 640). However, Students with Special Needs are likely to find serious obstacles during their course of studies (Bagnato, 2004). “Disadvantaged groups are likely to experience inequalities in accessing services, further exacerbating their cultural and economic marginalisation” (Riddell et al., 2005, p. 624). “While disabled students may be just as concerned with the general issues affecting all students – workload, money, having a social life and housing for some, learning issues associated with their impairment may come to the fore as they enter the less protected environment of higher education” (Fuller, Bradley, & Healey, 2004, p. 466).

Initially, Students with Special Needs have limited choice with regards to the subjects of study. This is due to the lack of suitable facilities in lecture rooms and labs, the discouragement they receive from the family environment (Beck – Winchatz & Riccobono, 2007), as well as the lack of information and advice before their entrance to Higher Education (Ralph & Boxall, 2005). Although there have been some rapid developments that benefit people with Special Needs in recent years, there are still acute problems related to the inclusion of Students with Special Needs in Higher Education. This is due to the lack of a thorough and integrated framework that will enable and promote the inclusion of Students with Special Needs in Higher Education, the lack of awareness and people’s complete ignorance about the existing legislation.

After their admission to their institute, the most common difficulties Students with Special Needs face are in access to the building, teaching, learning and social experiences. To these we should add the lack of state support and relevant legislation (Hall, Healey, & Harrison, 2004). More specifically, Students with Special Needs have limited access to most parts of a university campus (administration offices, library, students union, lecture rooms, tutors’ offices etc) due to the lack of suitable facilities such as ramps and lifts. Students with sight impairments suffer from lack of resources and teaching aids such as books in Braille writing, special computer packages etc, whilst there are no sign language interpreters for students with hearing problems. Moreover, Students with Special Needs are insufficiently informed about their rights, relevant legislation and the institution’s liability for providing support. They are not normally represented nor do they participate in committees themselves so decisions are made without taking them into account (Kalantzi-Azizi, 1992, 1996b, 1999; Kalantzi-Azizi & Tsinarelis, 1994; Sahinoglu & Koukkos, 1994; Konur, 2000; Mitsopoulou, Efklides, Kouris, & Christides, 2002; Doikou-Avlidou, Moustaka, Pita, & Kostaridou-Efklides, 2002; Polihroniou, Christofs & Katsiotis, 2003; Hatzopoulou, 2005). Furthermore, Students with Special Needs have to deal with social isolation, lack of support and lack of awareness within academic community; this is due to the lack of knowledge and information about the student’s condition, the lack of support and alternative assessment methods for Students with Special Needs and the lack of interest on the promotion of social integration between Students with and without Special Needs (Tinklin & Hall, 1999; Sharp & Earle, 2000; Konur, 2002; Fuller, Bradley, & Healey, 2004; Fuller, Healey, Bradley, & Hall, 2004; Tinklin et al., 2004; Taylor, 2005; Konur, 2006). The University’s incapability to actively support Students with Special Needs in

accessing knowledge actually means the University's failure to combat biases, accept and accommodate difference and stop marginalisation. In this way the University also fails to take advantage of some crucial contribution Students with Special Needs can make to the academic life (Ralph & Boxall, 2005).

There has been some research in Greece carried out at the Universities of Athens and Thessaloniki. This focused on tracking down the Students with Special Needs and investigating the way they perceive their problems (Kalantzi-Azizi & Tsinarelis, 1994; Mitsopoulou, Efklides, Kourtis, & Christides, 2002; Polychronopoulou, 2005).

Research carried out in the Student Counselling Centre at the University of Athens tracked down 318 Students with Special Needs in a total of 28 Departments at the University of Athens during the academic year 1991-92 (Kalantzi-Azizi and Tsinarelis, 1994). The Students with Special Needs were classified into five main categories: students with thalassaemia (3.3% of the total student population), students with deafness or hearing problems (0.45% of the total student population), blind students or students with sight problems (0.45% of the total student population), students with paraplegia or other physical disability (0.18% of the total student population) and other Special Needs (officially recognized by the state) (0.20%).

Efklides et al. traced and registered the difficulties Students with Special Needs have to deal with during their studies at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (Mitsopoulou, Efklides, Kourtis, & Christides, 2002). Their research purported to be the preliminary stage of a series of developments in conditions and structures that would enable the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki to improve the learning conditions and promote the integration of students with and without Special Needs. Efklides et al. concluded that a) the University regulations did not provide clear guidance for the full support of Students with Special Needs b) overcoming the obstacles Students with Special Needs meet depends on their own initiative and the staff's good will or positive attitudes c) each Department has its own framework of support d) lack of information and awareness about the learning needs and the vocational rehabilitation of Students with Special Needs is common among the University staff e) Students with Special Needs have problems outside the University buildings too, due to the difficulties in access and transportation in general f) during their free time student gatherings take place mainly at the private space of their house and g) Students with Special Needs wish for the constitution of their own association that will represent them in committees and make their voice heard.

Polychronopoulou (2005) in her study of students with sensory deficiencies in eight different Schools of the University of Athens tracks down, analyses and reports issues of educational and social inclusion these students have to deal with when it comes to Higher Education. She also looks into their wishes and solutions they propose themselves. Polychronopoulou's ultimate goal was the development of support services within the Department of Primary Education at the University of Athens. Some of her conclusions are: a) the majority of the University Departments of the Attiki Prefecture do not offer equal opportunities to students with sensory deficiencies and b) access to learning and isolation from the academic cultural and community life are amongst the most significant problems students with sensory deficiencies face.

Koliades et al. (2000) carried out a research on pre-school and primary trainee teachers to look into the defining characteristics of people with Special Needs, the criteria used for defining their condition, the society's attitudes towards them, and the problems these people face upon their entrance into Higher Education. One of the main results of this research showed that trainee teachers' attitudes and behaviour towards people with Special Needs was related to their knowledge about Special Needs (Ibid.).

Research around issues of inclusion and the quality of services to Students with Special Needs in Higher Education was also carried out in other countries. Fuller et al. (Fuller, Bradley, & Healey, 2004; Fuller, Healey, Bradley, & Hall, 2004) took a closer look into the experiences and the perceptions of Students with Special Needs in Higher Education. They concluded that Students with Special Needs face particular problems in teaching, assessment and learning in general (e.g. using the library, IT, or technical support). They also have difficulties in cooperation with the teaching staff very much due to the staff's ignorance and limited awareness. However, their research highlights the fact that some students had less negative experiences in Higher Education than others. To this, we should add a research carried out by Tinklin and Hall (1999) which showed that Students with Special Needs face problems at five different levels: access to the physical environment, learning, advice for making an informed choice of Department, the varied assumptions of normality/abnormality and the ignorance of the academic community. A different study (Tinklin et al., 2004) about the quality of services provided to Students with Special Needs in Scottish and English Universities stressed that, although there is some substantial progress on this matter, there is still an urgent need for some deep changes that will accommodate teaching and learning for Students with Special Needs in Higher Education.

As it is evident, Students with Special Needs face a variety of problems when they come to Higher Education. Namely, they have to deal with problems in accessing buildings, difficulties in learning and difficulties in establishing relationships with other students. These problems can become more acute when there is lack of awareness and sensitivity and lack of acceptance or understanding in the academic community. This justifies the purpose of this research which was carried out at the University of Crete. The importance of our research is also justified by the limited number of relevant studies in Greece, the absence of research about Students with Special Needs at the Rethymnon Campus and the deficiencies in the country's legislation about people with Special Needs. This study attempts to trace students' perceptions about the inclusion of Students with Special Needs in the University campus of Rethymnon and to identify problems Students with Special Needs deal with during the course of their studies at the University of Crete.

The study developed to test the following hypotheses:

1. There are differences between Students with and Students without Special Needs with regards to their perception of the difficulties Students with Special Needs face during their studies at the University of Crete.
2. Students with Special Needs have difficulties in learning and access to the academic life as well as in social interaction with other students.

3. Students who have social contact and relationships with Students with Special Needs can identify more problems Students with Special Needs face than students who do not have any interaction with them.
4. Students who attended courses or seminars on Special Needs are more aware of and sensitive to the needs and the difficulties Students with Special Needs face.
5. Gender and age affect students' perception of the difficulties Students with Special Needs face at the University of Crete.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The sample of the research was selected by cluster sampling. We collected responses by 655 students who study at the University of Crete at the Rethymnon Campus. Clusters represent the students of each Department of the Rethymnon Campus. Students with Special Needs were separated from each cluster. The sample of Students without Special Needs, then, was comprised of the students who attended a randomly selected lecture from each Department. 23 students appeared to have some kind of Special Need whilst the rest 631 students do not classify themselves as having Special Needs. One student did not indicate whether he/she had any kind of special need.

From those 23 students, three appeared to have diabetes Type A, two had multiple sclerosis, and two students had some kind of physical impairment. Two students suffered from Kidney Deficiency Syndrome, two students suffered from cancer and one student suffered from the Behcet Syndrome. One student suffered from epilepsy, one had sight problems, and one had vassal dysplasia. One student was dyslexic and seven students did not want to specify the kind of Special Need they had.

536 (82%) of the students were female, 118 (18%) were male and one student did not respond to this question. 419 students (64,1%) were 18-20 years old, 170 (26%) were 21-23 years old, 27 (4,1%) were 24-26, 14 (2,1%) were 27-29 and 24 (3,7%) were over 30 years old. With reference to their permanent residence, 439 (67,2%) students were residents in an urban setting, 142 (21,8%) were living in rural areas, 72 students (11%) were living in rural places and two students did not respond to this question.

The number of participants from each Department is shown in Table 1. With regards to the time of their studying, 19 students were going through their first semester, 294 students were going through the second, 1 student was in his/her third semester, 121 students were in their fourth semester, 1 was in the fifth, 49 students in the sixth, 7 students in the seventh, 128 students were going through the eighth semester, 34 of the participants were on an extension and one student did not respond to this question. 426 (65,1%) students indicated that they had attended courses or seminars on Special Needs, 228 (34,9%) indicated they had not had such an experience and one student did not respond to the question. The majority of students (87%) answered that they had not had any social contact and relationships or friendship with Students with Special Needs whilst 13% answered that they had some kind of social contact with Students with Special Needs.

Table 1
University Departments

s/n		%	(N)
1.	Department of Pre-school Education	35.3	(231)
2.	Department of Primary Education	6.4	(42)
3.	Department of Psychology	9.9	(65)
4.	Department of Philosophical and Social Studies	19.1	(125)
5.	Department of Sociology	1.7	(11)
6.	Department of Political Sciences	11	(72)
7.	Department of History and Archeology	0.5	(3)
8.	Department of Financial Studies	15	(98)
9.	Department of Letters	0.5	(3)
10.	Other Departments	0.6	(4)
	Total	100	(654)
	Not responded: 1		

2.2. Data Collection

The assessment of students' attitudes and awareness about the inclusion of Students with Special Needs in Higher Education was carried out by a 20-item structured questionnaire, the *Issues of Inclusion Scale*. The respondents indicated the position which most represented what they felt by putting a mark on a 3-point Likert scale (true, partly-true, it does not apply).

2.3. Procedure

The questionnaire consisted of two sections. The first section included questions which aimed to collect some demographic data (i.e. gender, age, permanent residence, University Department, semester, attendance of courses or seminars on Special Needs, contact with Students with Special Needs and the nature of Special Needs students had). The second section (*Issues of Inclusion Scale*) was comprised by questions referring to several issues/problems Students with Special Needs might meet during the course of their studies. In the second section responses were elicited by the use of a three-point Likert scale.

An introduction to the questionnaire informed the participants about the aim of the study and encouraged them to provide true and unbiased answers so as to promote the validity and reliability of the results. The introduction also reassured participants about the anonymity of the research.

In most cases the questionnaire was distributed personally by the researchers. With regards to students with Special Needs some specific procedure was followed: The researchers asked each University Department's administrator to provide the phone numbers of Students with Special Needs who had enrolled since the academic year 2000-2001. One of the Departments refused to provide this piece of information on the basis of data protection. Another Department claimed that there were no Students with

Special Needs enrolled with them. Following this, the researchers contacted Students with Special Needs over the phone and asked them to fill the questionnaire in. Please note that some of the phone numbers were invalid. Once the students accepted they had their questionnaire sent to them by post or e-mail. In some cases, the researchers handed the questionnaire to the student personally after setting an appointment. The time of questionnaire completion ranged from 10 to 15 minutes. The research was carried out during the academic year 2006-2007.

3. Results

3.1. *Issues of Inclusion*

The responses to the *Issues of Inclusion Scale* were subjected to an exploratory factor analysis (Principal Axis Factoring Method) in order to assess the construct validity of the scale. Table 2 shows the four factors revealed from the orthogonal factor rotation when we used Varimax with Kaiser Normalization. We used Varimax because the four factors did not correlate sufficiently with each other. We came up with the four factors taking into account the following criteria: a) the Scree Plot (Howitt & Cramer, 2003), b) every factor had to explain at least 5% of the total variance of the questions in the *Issues of Inclusion Scale* c) our final choice had to reduce the possibility of a question-variable to correlate with more than one factor and d) our final choice had to have meaning and be compatible with the existing theoretical models.

The four factors which explained the 21, 7% of the total variance were the following:

- 1) *Awareness and support by the academic community*: This factor explained 7% of the variance and includes questions about raising the awareness and gaining support from the academic community for students with Special Needs (i.e. support from students, awareness and understanding by the administrative and teaching staff, support through the development of social relationships outside the university life etc.)
- 2) *Learning facilities, access to knowledge and academic representation*: This factor explained 6.6% of the variance and includes questions about access to learning facilities such as library with audio resources or books in Braille writing, sign language interpreters for students with hearing problems, cooperation with Universities and Colleges overseas for equal opportunities on student exchange programs etc. It also includes questions about academic representation that is, representatives of students with Special Needs in University committees, constitution of a Students with Special Needs Association etc.
- 3) *The promotion of social interaction between Students with and without Special Needs*: This factor explained 5.3% of the variance and includes questions about the promotion of social relationships between Students with and without Special Needs such as activities that take students' Special Needs into account, events to raise awareness about Special Needs and Disabilities, activities that encourage students with Special Needs to participate in academic life etc.
- 4) *Building access*: This factor that explained 2.8% of the variance includes questions

Table 2
Issues of Inclusion Scale Factors, Loadings, Means (M) and Standard Deviations (Sd)

Awareness and support by the academic community ($\alpha=.57$)	Varimax	M	SD
	Loadings	.76	.50
The whole academic community (students, administrative, cleaning and teaching staff) is sensitive towards the Students with Special Needs at the University of Crete.	.55	.90	.65
Students with Special Needs receive support by their fellow students during the course of their studies at the University of Crete (help with transportation to and from the University Campus, help to access the building, help during registration, updating on running events, help with reading and studying, sharing of lesson notes etc).	.53	.69	.67
The University administrative and teaching staff shows sensitivity and understanding towards the requests and queries raised by Students with Special Needs and they provide an effective response.	.47	.81	.65
Students develop social relationships with their fellow Students with Special Needs outside the University Campus.	.36	.57	.67
Learning facilities, access to knowledge and academic representation ($\alpha=.64$)	1.16	.74	
The University of Crete organizes transportation for Students with Special Needs to enable them to attend sporting, social and cultural events and activities.	.40	1.37	.75
The University of Crete liaises with Universities abroad to ensure equal opportunities for participation in student exchange programs (e.g. Erasmus) for Students with Special Needs.	.42	.48	.69
The University of Crete provides special library facilities with audio books or books in Braille writing for Students with Special Needs.	.50	1.07	.90
The University of Crete provides sign language interpreter for students with hearing impairment.	.34	1.68	.63
There is an established association of Students with Special Needs at the University of Crete.	.39	1.32	.82
Students with Special Needs are regularly and efficiently represented in committees or other meetings.	.45	1.30	.79
The promotion of social interaction between Students with and without Special Needs ($\alpha=.70$)		1.17	.68
The University of Crete accommodates Students with Special Needs in academic (conferences, exams, graduation ceremonies), social, cultural and other events.	.36	.97	.77
The University of Crete promotes students' awareness about Special Needs (through the distribution of leaflets, discussions about Special Needs and inclusion, seminars about Special Needs etc).	.39	1.22	.81
The University of Crete organizes events that anticipate and encourage the participation of Students with Special Needs (e.g. participation in drama workshops).	.52	1.41	.74
Building access ($\alpha=.39$)	.95	.59	
The University of Crete provides the necessary building facilities (lifts, special ramps, etc.) to enable easy access to every part of the University Campus (Administration Offices, library, students union, lecture rooms, tutors' offices etc) for Students with Special Needs.	.45	1.15	.64
The University of Crete provides special parking spaces for disabled students near their department, the library, the restaurant etc.	.33	.65	.74

Note. Where 0=true, 1=partly true, 2=it does not apply

about the building facilities that enable access to students with Special Needs at the University campus e.g. lifts, ramps, parking allocations etc.

Each factor consisted of items which had a positive loading of over .30. The internal reliability of the four factors was medium for the first three factors (.57, .70, .64 respectively) and low for the fourth one (.39). The *Issues of Inclusion Scale* which consisted of 15 questions in its final form (all of which satisfy the above criterion) had a high level of reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .86$).

In the analysis that follows the four factors (Awareness and support by the academic community; Learning facilities, access to knowledge and academic representation; The promotion of social interaction between students with and without Special Needs; Building access) are used as individual variables in the hypothesis-testing procedure. Each factor is considered to be a separate group of issues Students with Special Needs might encounter with at the University of Crete. Table 2 shows the factor loadings and the descriptive statistics for each of the 15 retained items assigned to the four factors.

3.2. Differences In The Perception Of Inclusion Issues Between Students With And Students Without Special Needs At The University Of Crete

As can be seen in Table 3, there were no significant differences between Students with and Students without Special Needs in the factors' Means.

Table 3
Differences in the Perception of Inclusion Issues Between Students
With and Students Without Special Needs

	Students without Special Needs (N=631)	Students with Special Needs (N=23)	Mann-Whitney Test	p		
	M	SD	M	SD	z	p
Awareness and support by the academic community	.77	.50	.65	.47	-1.1	>.05
Learning facilities, access to knowledge and academic representation	1.15	.74	1.37	.82	-1.3	>.05
The promotion of social Special Needs interaction between Students with and without	1.17	.68	1.38	.64	-1.2	>.05
Building access	.95	.60	.97	.56	-.84	>.05

Note: Where 0=true, 1=partly true, 2=it does not apply

3.3. Students' Perception Of The Problems In Learning And Academic Representation And Social Interaction Between Students With Or Without Special Needs

Table 2 shows that the Mean for the factor "Learning facilities, access to knowledge and academic representation" (Mean= 1.16, SD=.74) shows that the students believe that students with Special Needs have to deal with obstacles in learning and academic inclusion. The Mean for the factor "The promotion of social interaction between students with and without Special Needs" (Mean= 1.17, SD=.68) shows students' belief that the conditions within the academic community of the University of Crete do not actually encourage effective interaction between students with and students without Special Needs.

3.4. The Influence Of Social Contact And Relationships Between Students With And Students Without Special Needs On The Perception Of Inclusion Issues

Table 4 shows that there was no influence of the social contact and relationships between students with and students without Special Needs on any of the four factors, that is, on their perception of Inclusion Issues.

Table 4
The Influence of Social Contact and Relationships Between Students With and Students Without Special Needs on the Perception of Inclusion Issues

	Existence of Social contact and relationships with Students with Special Needs (N=87)		Non-existence of Social contact and relationships with Students with Special Needs (N=549)		t test	p
	M	SD	M	SD	t	
Awareness and support by the academic community	.71	.46	.78	.51	-1.05	>.05
Learning facilities, access to knowledge and academic representation	1.27	.78	1.14	.72	1.36	>.05
The promotion of social interaction between Students with and without Special Needs	1.22	.70	1.16	.68	.79	>.05
Building access	.94	.57	.95	.59	-.10	>.05

Note. Where 0=true, 1=partly true, 2=it does not apply

3.5. *The Effect Of Course Or Seminar Attendance On The Perception Of Inclusion Issues*

Table 5 shows that it is only the factor "Learning facilities, access to knowledge and academic representation" which is significantly influenced ($t= 4.51$, (652), $p<.05$) by students' attendance of courses or seminars on Special Needs.

Table 5
The Effect of Course or Seminar Attendance on the Perception of Inclusion Issues

	Attendance of courses or seminars on Special Needs (N=228)		Non-attendance of courses or seminars on Special Needs (N=426)		t	test	P
	M	SD	M	SD			
Awareness and support by the academic community	.80	.50	.76	.51	.78		>.05
Learning facilities, access to knowledge and academic representation	1.37	.72	1.05	.72	4.51		<.05
The promotion of social interaction between Students with and without Special Needs	1.18	.66	1.16	.70	.36		>.05
Building access	1.0	.56	.93	.60	1.23		>.05

Note: Where 0=true, 1=partly true, 2=it does not apply

3.6. *The Effect Of Gender And Age On The Perception Of Inclusion Issues Held By Students Without Special Needs*

The statistical analysis showed that it is only the factor "Building access" that showed significant differentiation between genders in Students without Special Needs $t= 2.20$ (629), $p<.05$ (Table 6).

The statistical analysis also showed that age affects students' perception with regards to the factor "Learning facilities and academic inclusion" (Table 7). The one-way ANOVA revealed that the Means of the factor "Learning facilities, access to knowledge and academic representation" showed significant variation with regards to the age of the Students without Special Needs: $F= 8.00$ (4,626), $p<.05$. *Post hoc* analysis with the Bonferroni adjustment showed that there is significant difference between the Means of students aged 18 to 20 years and students aged 21-23, but there was no significant variation between the other age groups.

Table 6
The Effect of Gender on the Perception of Inclusion Issues Held by Students Without Special Needs

	Female (N=521)		Male (N=110)		t	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
Awareness and support by the academic community	.76	.50	.82	.51	1.22	>.05
Learning facilities, access to knowledge and academic representation	1.16	.75	1.14	.65	.21	>.05
The promotion of social interaction between Students with and without Special Needs	1.16	.68	1.21	.67	.67	>.05
Building access	.97	.59	.83	.58	2.20	<.05

Table 7
The Effect of Age on the Perception of Inclusion Issues Held by Students Without Special Needs

	18-20 years (N=414)	21-23 years (N=165)	24-26 years (N=25)	27-29 years (N=10)	Over 30 years (N=17)	F(df)	p					
	M	SD	M	SD	M			SD				
Awareness and support by the academic community	.75	.51	.80	.50	.84	.50	.83	.27	.68	.57	.53(4,631)	>.05
Learning facilities, access to knowledge and academic representation	1.02	.72	1.45	.65	1.33	.80	1.23	.90	1.18	.92	8.00(4,631)	<.05
The promotion of social interaction between Students with and without Special Needs	1.13	.70	1.22	.67	1.26	.68	1.13	.50	1.26	.60	.61(4,631)	>.05
Building access	.93	.60	.99	.55	.97	.57	.66	.50	1.08	.60	1.08(4,631)	>.05

Note: Where 0=true, 1=partly true, 2=it does not apply

3.7. The Effect Of Gender And Age On The Perception Of Inclusion Issues Held By Students With Special Needs

Statistical analysis showed no variation between gender groups among the Students with Special Needs. Table 8 shows that the age groups of Students with Special Needs is differentiated with regards to the factor "Learning facilities, access to knowledge and academic representation". The one-way ANOVA showed that only the Means of the factor "Learning facilities, access to knowledge and academic representation" showed significant variation according to age: $F=5.74 (4, 18)$, $p<.05$. Post hoc analysis with the Bonferroni adjustment showed that there is significant difference between the Means of students aged 18 to 20 years, students aged 21-23, students aged 24-26 and students aged 27 to 29 years.

Table 8
The Effect of Age on the Perception of Inclusion Issues Held by Students With Special Needs

	18-20 years (N=5)	21-23 years (N=5)	24-26 years (N=2)	27-29 years (N=4)	Over 30 years (N=7)	F(d)	p					
Awareness and support by the academic community	M .41 SD .32	M .41 SD .32	M .80 SD .76	M 1.06 SD .71	M .73 SD .30	1.66(4,23)	>.05					
Learning facilities, access to knowledge and academic representation	.25	.50	1.65	.47	2.00	.00	2.00	.00	1.42	.82	5.74(4,23)	<.05
The promotion of social interaction between Students with and without Special Needs	.83	.28	1.00	.86	1.50	.70	1.77	.38	1.73	.43	1.98(4,23)	>.05
Building access	.80	.27	.50	.61	1.50	.70	1.25	.50	1.16	.51	2.28(4,23)	>.05

Note: Where 0=true, 1=partly true, 2=it does not apply

4. Discussion

The aim of the present study was first, to trace students' perception about the inclusion of Students with Special Needs at the University of Crete, at the Rethymnon campus. Second, the study aimed to track down issues and problems Students with Special Needs encounter with during the course of their study at the University of Crete. Our initial hypothesis was that there are differences between Students with Special Needs

and Students without Special Needs with regards to their perception of difficulties and Students with Special Needs have to face when studying at the University of Crete.

According to the results, there are no significant differences between Students with and Students without Special Needs with regards to the perception of inclusion issues and Students with Special Needs have to deal with at the University of Crete (Table 3). This is best explained by students' increased awareness of the problems and issues Students with Special Needs face and the general improvement in the way society accepts, defines and deals with Special Needs. This is an important finding as students significantly influence the inclusion process of their fellows (Students with Special Needs). Besides, inclusion in Higher Education is a process which continues from the primary and secondary years (Alexiou, 2005), although it also depends on the attitudes and stance of the academic staff, the attitudes of fellow students (Konur, 2006) and the existing financial, cultural and physical environment (Riddell et al., 2005).

The second hypothesis of the study has been confirmed. Students in general realize that Students with Special Needs face problems and have difficulties in learning and access to the academic life as well as in the development of social interaction with other students. More specifically, the Mean of the factor "Learning facilities, access to knowledge and academic representation" is 1.16 and the Mean of the factor "the promotion of social interaction between Students with and without Special Needs" is 1.17 (see Table 2). This finding comes to an agreement with a study by Polychronopoulou (2005) which focused on the issues of inclusion students with sensory problems have to deal with at the University of Athens. It is also similar to that of Mitsopoulou et al. (2002) study, which concluded that there are no special measures that ensure equal opportunities for Students with Special Needs in learning and students are bound to monitor and organize their progress themselves whilst they receive no support in the emerging difficulties. This results in missing opportunities and a less vigorous participation in the academic life. It reveals the need of an association which is going to promote the rights of Students with Special Needs. Konur (2000) also highlights the need for students' representation in committees and the lack of regulation which ensures academic representation. Other studies which take a closer look at the difficulties Students with Special Needs face with regards to learning, teaching and assessment in Higher Education come to similar conclusions (Tinklin & Hall, 1999; Fuller, Healey, Bradley, & Hall, 2004; Fuller, Bradley, & Healey, 2004). Policy and provision also seems insufficient in the Higher Education institutions of England and Scotland (Tinklin et al., 2004). Namely, Students with Special Needs find it difficult to attend their lectures due to lack of resources, difficulties in accessing the building (lack of parking spaces, no suitable access to lecture rooms), difficulties in accessing services such as the library, or the IT room, difficulties in their assessment due to the ignorance and limited awareness of the teaching staff and problems of social isolation. Similar problems have been identified in other Greek Universities as well (Kalanτζi-Azizi, Zoniou-Sideri, Papaspyrou, Tsinarelis, & Sidiropoulou-Dimakakou, 1996).

The findings of the present study are significant because they show that the majority of issues revolve around learning and academic representation as well as the promotion of effective social interaction between Students with and Students without Special Needs.

Students with Special Needs at the University of Crete do not seem to face serious problems regarding the “awareness and support by the academic community” (Mean=.76, Sd=.50) or the building access (Mean=.95, Sd=.59) (see Table 2) according to this study (for more information on accessing University of Crete see: Stefanidis & Yourou, 2003).

The data collected in this study showed that no factor was significantly influenced with regards to the development of social contact and relationships between Students with and Students without Special Needs (Table 4). More specifically, the development of social contact and relationships with Students with Special Needs does not affect students’ perception of the Inclusion Issues. This finding contradicts the findings of other studies. It has been found, for example, that students who have social contact with Students with Special Needs are more positive towards them (Beh-Pajoo, in: Koliades et al., 2000). It has also been noted that students with previous experience of people with Special Needs can deal with Students with Special Needs easier (Ash et al. in: Koliades et al., 2000). Moreover, Thomas et al. (in Konur, 2006, pp. 360-361) carried out research with students of Higher Education and found that “social discomfort, empathy, and fear of having the disability affected their attitudes towards disabled people. These factors were a function of self-esteem, amount of prior contact experience with and the closeness of relationships with disabled people”. To this, we should add findings by Tafa and Manolitsis (2003) which showed that parents’ communication with people with Special Needs influenced positively their attitudes towards inclusion and concluded that the development of interpersonal relationships influences parents’ perceptions about people with Special Needs. Future research could focus on and investigate the issue of developing social contact and relationships with Students with Special Needs and how that might influence students’ attitudes towards people with Special Needs in general. The way a development of relationships between Students with and without Special Needs can promote the inclusion of Students with Special Needs in the academic community is also worth of investigation.

The fourth hypothesis of this study is satisfied only in relation to the factor “Learning facilities, access to knowledge and academic representation” (See Table 5). Results showed that students who attended courses or seminars on Special Needs are more aware and better informed about the learning difficulties Students with Special Needs are encountering with. Namely, students who attended courses or seminars on Special Needs realize that the University does not provide suitable services to Students with Special Needs (transportation to social and athletic events and activities, partnership schemes with Universities abroad for student exchange, suitable building facilities and resources for students with sight and hearing impairments) nor does it support participation into other aspects of academic life (representation into committees etc.). This finding shows that courses or seminars on Special Needs contribute to the development of awareness and understanding of Students with Special Needs and the problems they face during their studies. It also comes to add to the general effort made in recent years for raising the public awareness about issues in the life of people and students with Special Needs (Parker, 1998). It comes to an agreement with findings from other research (Kypriotaki, 2007) which investigated pre-school teachers’ perception and understanding of inclusion. This study showed that pre-school teachers who had attended seminars on Special Needs

were more positive towards inclusive education than those who had not had any kind of update. It shows that knowledge about Special Needs enables and promotes positive attitudes towards inclusion. The research carried out by Koliades et al. (2000) showed that attendance of compulsory or optional courses on Special Needs does influence students' perception about Students with Special Needs to a significant degree. "71% of the students who have attended compulsory and optional modules on Special Needs Education believe that Students with Special Needs cannot progress in the same pace as other students. 77% of them also believe that the use of alternative methods of assessment is necessary for Students with Special Needs" (ibid., 84).

The results of the present study showed that only the factor "Building access" was differentiated according to the gender of Students without Special Needs (See Table 6). Specifically, female students found building access more difficult than male students. This allowed us to assume that female students were more aware and sensitive to the movement problems of Students with Special Needs. This finding is similar to that of Tervo, Azuma, Palmer and Redinius (2002) which shows that gender affects stances and attitudes towards people with Special Needs. Their research showed that a) female students of medicine had more positive perception of people with Special Needs than the male medical students and b) female students of medicine were less preoccupied towards people with Special Needs.

The fifth hypothesis of our research is also partly satisfied since age appears to influence the factor "Learning facilities, access to knowledge and academic representation" only. There seems to be significant difference between Students without Special Needs aged 18-20 and 21-23 with regards to their perception of access facilities and resources for Students with Special Needs (see Table 7). Namely, students aged 21-23 can identify access difficulties for Students with Special Needs to a greater degree than other groups. This might be due to the fact the students become more aware of the problems after the first 2 or 3 years of their studies. During this time students come to terms with the problems their fellow Students with Special Needs encounter, the deficiencies of the services provided, the lack of representation in committees and the limits in their social and academic life which make inclusion difficult.

In the present study, no factor showed significant difference in reference to the gender of Students with Special Needs. This means that part of the fifth hypothesis was not satisfied. EKlides et al. (see Mitsopoulou et al., 2002) found that male students focus more on issues of studying, exams and the improvement of their marks with the aid of some techniques as well as the development of professional skills and their professional development after graduation. Female students on the other hand are less occupied with issues related to learning, exams and the professional development.

The fifth hypothesis is partly satisfied by the correlation between the ages of Students with Special Needs and "Learning facilities, access to knowledge and academic representation" (see Table 8). There seems to be significant difference between the age groups 18-20, 21-23, 24-26 and 27-29 when it comes to the way they perceive difficulties in accessing the facilities and resources. Students aged 21-23, 24-26 and 27-29 find access more difficult than students aged 18-20. This shows that 2 or 3 years after registration Students with Special Needs find academic life harder and they come to

realize the limitations the building and resources impose on them. Students do not seem to be knowledgeable before they enter University so they can actually make a more informed choice about the subject and the Department they would like to study in (see also: Ralph & Boxall, 2005).

In summary, the present study showed that:

- a) There are no differences in the students' perception of problems Students with Special Needs face during their studies.
- b) Students in general agree that Students with Special Needs encounter difficulties in accessing learning resources and academic life, including the development of social interaction with their fellow students at the University of Crete.
- c) The development of social contact and relationships between students with and without Special Needs does not influence their perception of the inclusion difficulties.
- d) Students who attend courses or seminars on Special Needs can easily identify the problems Students with Special Needs encounter in learning and academic development.
- e) Female Students without Special Needs identify more difficulties in the building access than their male counterparts.
- f) Age affects students' perception of the difficulties Students with Special Needs encounter with in learning and participation in academic life on the whole.

One of the limitations of the study is that the questionnaire was distributed in the Rethymnon campus of the University of Crete only. It means that the research did not cover the total number of the University Departments. It is of equal interest to collect information about the rest of the University, especially the Departments located in Iraklio. Besides, this research could well be carried out in other Greek Universities so that there is a greater coverage of the student population enrolled in Higher Education (please note, this kind of research has already been conducted in the University of Athens and the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki). It is also important to examine the teaching and administrative staff's attitudes towards Students with Special Needs. We could even investigate the way teaching staff and Students without Special Needs see alternative methods of assessment used for Students with Special Needs. Parents of students could also be contacted so that we find in detail how families deal with their children's inclusion difficulties during their studies in Higher Education. Students' stances and attitudes towards people with Special Needs in general could well be the focus of further investigation. Equally, it is important to find out how students see the professional development of their fellow Students with Special Needs. This strand of research can effectively contribute to the combat of biases towards people with Special Needs and promote their professional and social inclusion.

Following the analysis of data and the review of the relevant literature we would like to propose some further action that needs to be taken:

- People need to be informed about learning difficulties, diseases, impairments, disabilities and Special Needs in general so that they understand the impact of disability on people's lives, the problems they accrue, and the support which is necessary for effective treatment. Although the whole society should be addressed,

public services, institutions and staff which directly deal with this vulnerable social group i.e. the people with Special Needs should be particularly targeted.

- Current legislation needs to be updated, reformed and re-developed into a detailed, coherent and integrated framework that covers all the different cases of Special Needs and disabilities. Upon diagnosis each family should receive a copy of the legislation and updated copies after that. This will ensure the continuous updating of people about their rights. It will also raise the awareness of the society and remind citizens about their obligation to help and support people with Special Needs.

- There is a need for development of facilities and support networks for people with Special Needs. This includes the promotion of inclusion in Higher Education, the provision of technical support such as computers and audio-visual equipment, the training of specialists, the maintenance of a detailed register of Students with Special Needs as well as the provision of direct support and consultation for the continuous development of every aspect of students' academic life. There is a need for a support unit in every University which will organize:
 - Voluntary groups of support
 - Activities and events for social interaction between Students with and Students without Special Needs
 - The establishment of associations that will participate in committees and ensure the academic representation of Students with Special Needs.
- Strong liaison needs to be developed between support units of other Universities in Greece and abroad. This can be extended to other agents and services (See also: Kalantzi-Azizi, 1996b, 1999; Kalantzi-Azizi et al., 1996; Mitsopoulou, Efklides, Kourtis, & Christides, 2002; Stein, Manco, & Manco, 2001; Kaltsogia-Tournaviti, 2003; Wall & Sarver, 2003; Taylor, 2005).

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