

Sustainable inclusion in higher education: social innovation to support people with disabilities

Abstract: The perception of social innovation and its place in higher education is increasingly central to the curricula and programmes of higher education institutions. The aim of this paper is to present some innovative approaches that promote social responsibility. Educational methods can provide opportunities that allow students to engage in solving social problems while acquiring key competences such as problem solving, interdisciplinaryity, and community partnership building [1].

Creating an inclusive university environment means not only infrastructure and technological improvements, but also comprehensive advisory and mentoring services for higher education institutions. Developments that focus on sustainability and social innovation have a significant impact on the inclusion of students with disabilities studying in institutions. These systems not only provide academic support, but also offer opportunities to facilitate the social inclusion of students and promote their psychosocial development. Guidance systems play a central role in ensuring sustainable inclusion, helping students with disabilities to adapt to the higher education environment and overcome various barriers [2].

In the needs assessment process, counselling plays a key role in creating an inclusive environment, with a focus on fostering a sense of community and addressing barriers. Higher education institutions should also implement pedagogical and counselling improvements to ensure that students with disabilities have equal opportunities to participate in university life. The development of various university guidance systems can be operated as a complex system, creating long-term economic and social value in addition to the successful integration of students with disabilities, and promoting the employability and autonomy of people with disabilities in the labour market [1].

Keywords: Social innovation; higher education; equal opportunities; social change; inclusive education.

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Összefoglalás: A társadalmi innováció megítélése, helye, szerepe, hozadéka, egyre inkább központi szerepet játszik a felsőoktatási intézmények képzési és egyéb programjaiban. A tanulmány célja, hogy bemutasson néhány innovatív megközelítési módot, amelyek elősegítik a társadalmi felelősségvállalást. Az oktatási módszerek olyan lehetőségeket kínálhatnak, amelyek lehetővé teszik a hallgatók számára, hogy részt vegyenek a társadalmi problémák megoldásában, miközben olyan kulcskompetenciákat sajátítanak el, mint a probléma-megoldás, az interdiszciplinaritás, és a közösségi partnerségek kialakítása [1].

Az inkluzív egyetemi környezet kialakítása nem kizárólag infrastruktúrális és technológiai fejlesztéseket, hanem átfogó tanácsadói és mentorálási szolgáltatásokat is jelent a felsőoktatási intézmények számára. A fenntarthatóságot és a társadalmi innovációt előtérbe helyező fejlesztések jelentős hatással vannak az intézményekben tanuló fogyatékkal élő hallgatók integrációjára. Ezek a rendszerek nemcsak az akadémiai támogatást biztosítják, hanem lehetőséget nyújtanak a hallgatók társadalmi beilleszkedésének megkönnyítésére, pszichoszociális fejlődésének elősegítésére. A tanácsadói rendszerek központi szerepet játszanak a fenntartható inklúzió biztosításában, segítik a fogyatékkal élő hallgatókat a felsőoktatási környezethez való alkalmazkodásban és a különböző akadályok leküzdésében [2].

Az igénykielégítési folyamatban a tanácsadás szerepe a befogadó környezet megteremtésében kulcsfontosságú, a közösségi érzés erősítésével és az akadályok kezelésére irányuló fókusszal. A felsőoktatási intézményeknek pedagógiai és tanácsadói fejlesztéseket is végre kell hajtaniuk annak érdekében, hogy a fogyatékkal élő hallgatók egyenlő esélyekkel tudjanak részt venni az egyetemi életben. A különféle egyetemi tanácsadói rendszerek fejlesztése összetett rendszerként működtethető, így az érintett hallgatók sikeres integrációja mellett hosszú távú gazdasági és társadalmi értéket is teremt, elősegíti a fogyatékkal élő foglalkoztathatóságát és önállóságát a munkaerőpiacon [1].

Kulcsszavak: Társadalmi innováció; felsőoktatás; esélyegyenlőség; társadalmi változás; inkluzív oktatás.

Introduction

Sustainable inclusion and social innovation in higher education requires an interdisciplinary and integrated approach that encompasses education, societal expectations, and ethical and social responsibility. The principles of inclusion are based on social justice, equality and equity, which are central to the successful inclusion of students with disabilities. It is of paramount importance for higher education institutions to ensure equal access to education and to support the psychosocial development and social inclusion of students. Ethical accountability in this approach means that universities focus not only on academic excellence but also on promoting individual and community well-being, with particular attention to the needs of vulnerable groups such as people with disabilities [3].

The ethical aspects of inclusive education are linked to the principles of social justice. Ethical responsibility, as a driver of social innovation, drives educational institutions to ensure equal opportunities and fair treatment for students with disabilities. Inclusion is not just about physical accessibility, but also about creating the social, emotional and intellectual environment that enables full participation in university life. In this way, the university community provides students with different abilities equal opportunities to achieve academic and social success and promotes social justice [4].

In this approach, it becomes clear to university communities that the inclusion of students with disabilities is not only an educational and infrastructural challenge, but also a social issue that touches on principles of equality and dignity. Inclusive programmes need to take into account the individual needs and backgrounds of students, while providing them with appropriate support and opportunities for personal and professional development. It is essential for educators and institutional leaders to be aware of the ethical dimensions of inclusion and committed to supporting students with disabilities in all aspects of their participation in higher education.

Social innovation that integrates different social and educational strategies can serve as an essential tool to promote the inclusion of students with disabilities [1]. Sustainability-based programmes and developments support not only academic but also social inclusion, ensuring that these students are

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able to participate in the wider society, including in the labour market (Pérez et al, The principles of ethical and social responsibility help educational institutions to consciously strengthen their social engagement, thus promoting social inclusion and equal opportunities [4].

Social innovation is not only the development of new technologies and products, but also the transformation of social structures and solutions for social purposes [5, 6]. Institutions play an important role in transmitting new knowledge and skills that students can acquire to actively contribute to social change. Innovative learning methods, project-based learning, activities for the community, interactive courses give students the opportunity to experience in practice how to respond effectively to problematic situations in society [7]. Equal opportunities efforts in higher education include initiatives such as inclusive teaching methods and support programmes that provide opportunities for disadvantaged students with fewer opportunities to continue their studies. Programmes such as scholarships, mentoring programmes and skills development initiatives that take into account social backgrounds serve to promote social mobility and enable active participation in social change.

For students with disabilities, a high level of social and academic inclusion becomes essential to ensure that they have equal opportunities and opportunities to actively participate in university life. Inclusion contributes not only to the academic success of students, but also indirectly to the development of society as a whole, by contributing to social equality and justice.

Social innovation and responsibility: the ethical dimensions of social innovation and sustainability

One of the fundamental aims of social innovation [8] is to create positive change in social problems such as alleviating poverty, inequality or catalysing efforts to tackle the exclusion of communities [9]. Programmes created through innovation often provide solutions directly to local communities, for example by creating jobs, expanding educational opportunities or improving local services.

This effort is not only important from an environmental or economic perspective, but also carries a moral responsibility, because current decisions will determine the living conditions and opportunities of future generations in the long term [10].

In Hungary, social enterprises supported by local governments provide solutions that help to develop the local labour market and promote equal opportunities, thus fulfilling the basic objective of contributing to the strengthening of the local economy and improving the quality of life. Innovative community programmes that focus on inclusive education or support for disadvantaged groups are essential to increase community cohesion and improve community well-being. The role of universities in promoting social innovation is not only indispensable from an academic or economic point of view, but also becomes a moral obligation, because one of the aims of higher education is to develop in students a responsible, socially sensitive approach [11]. To promote sustainability, social innovation often uses approaches that promote environmental responsibility and sustainable resource management [10].

Social enterprises that aim to increase recycling or the use of renewable energy, for example, have the dual benefit of reducing environmental pressures, creating new jobs and developing local communities. These types of innovations help communities to gradually move towards a more sustainable economic model that also takes into account the interests of future generations [12]. Social innovation has the potential to mobilise communities and bring different sectors together to achieve common goals. In this approach, it creates the potential for the business sector, civil society and governments to contribute together to sustainable development. This kind of cooperation also implies a sense of moral responsibility, according to which social actors have a duty to contribute to promoting the common good and reducing social inequalities. In Hungary, an increasing number of initiatives are being launched as joint programmes between universities and local communities to increase social well-being and promote environmental sustainability [1]. The growing interest in social innovation is reflected in the fact that more and more countries are applying these innovative approaches in their social policy programmes.

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In Hungary, for example, local communities and civil society organisations often work together with higher education institutions to develop innovative solutions to local social and economic challenges. The normative basis of such initiatives is rooted in the principle of distributive justice, according to which social and economic benefits should be distributed in a fair and equitable manner. This type of cooperation not only makes use of the research capacities of universities, but also involves students as active participants in the project work, through which they gain practical experience [13].

As higher education becomes more service-oriented, an interdisciplinary approach is becoming increasingly important, providing students with the opportunity to integrate knowledge from different disciplines. Integrated knowledge not only offers new perspectives, but also contributes to the development of innovative solutions to complex problems (Bauer et al, The role of community partnerships and collaboration in education is becoming increasingly important as a basis for successful implementation and effective social innovation [14]. Hungarian higher education institutions play an important role in promoting social innovation, especially in the field of social responsibility [15]. Community programmes, innovation competitions and practice-oriented education organised by universities contribute to the development of students' competences for active citizenship and responsible social engagement [16]. Programmes not only improve the quality of education, but also enhance the sustainability of social innovation by providing students with the opportunity to contribute directly to solving local and global societal challenges [17]. This type of development also takes into account the aspects of inclusion and sustainability, supporting equal opportunities for the wider society.

Aligning social and business innovation to ensure equal opportunities

The concept of social innovation is a complex one, aiming to create new products and services and to transform social structures and processes [5]. This approach requires the active participation of community and societal actors, and involves joint thinking by NGOs, local governments and citizens.

This type of innovation is most responsive to local problems, and is particularly effective in communities where the capacity of public institutions is limited. Among its philosophical underpinnings, the notion of community learning, whereby communities discover and apply new problem-solving processes, is prominent [18]. Business innovation, on the other hand, is primarily focused on economic growth to achieve competitive advantage. This type of innovation focuses on improving products and services and optimising business processes. The emergence of mediatised communities has a significant impact on social innovation. Through the use of new communication technologies, the distinctions between physical and virtual communities are blurring, and a complex process of trust is emerging that is shaping new community and social roles. The development of technologies such as automation and artificial intelligence play a key role in business innovation, making business operations more efficient and cost-effective [19]. Increasingly, companies are recognising that the integration of social responsibility and innovation contributes to increasing brand value and achieving positive social impact [12]. The overlap between social and business innovation is illustrated by the emergence of hybrid organisations that seek to create social value and increase profits simultaneously. Such organisations are also increasingly emerging in Hungary and are playing a significant role in areas such as the development of green technologies or the creation of social enterprises [1]. The philosophical approach to social innovation is closely intertwined with the promotion of social responsibility and community values. The intertwining of social economy and social innovation creates new opportunities for social modernisation.

Some social enterprises not only create jobs for disadvantaged communities, but also ensure sustainability by generating market income. The theory and practice of social innovation is closely linked to the EU policy framework, which explicitly supports this type of initiative. The EU has launched a number of programmes aimed at stimulating social innovation and promoting sustainable economic growth, particularly in local communities and rural areas [20]. The European Commission mentions the European Solidarity Corps 2021 volunteering scheme, which offers young people the opportunity to volunteer in various social, cultural and environmental projects, as a key driver of social responsibility.

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Through the programme, participants can contribute to the well-being of the community while gaining valuable experience and developing their social skills [21]. In the EU, initiatives to promote social innovation include the European Social Innovation Competition, which encourages young entrepreneurs to develop innovative solutions.

In Hungary, some universities are involved in innovative social initiatives to a very high standard. The University of Debrecen and the University of Miskolc cooperate with local communities through various community projects, thus contributing to regional development and social innovation [22]. Corvinus University of Budapest and the University of Debrecen have launched projects that address the problems of local communities and promote community-based cooperation. The University of Pécs is increasingly focusing its research on the development of educational methods to promote social responsibility.

The university's programmes include making community service compulsory in some degree courses, where students actively participate in the work of local communities. One of the most important tools for social innovation is the practical training and research infrastructure provided by higher education institutions.

Universities' laboratories, technology parks and research centres all contribute to the realisation of innovations to solve societal problems. The resources provided by higher education institutions allow social innovations to be not only theoretical but also practical. The practical training and research infrastructure of higher education institutions are key to the realisation of social innovations. According to Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff's (2000) triple unit model, collaboration between science, industry and government facilitates the success of innovation processes, especially in the creation and sustainability of social innovations [23].

Social innovation as a tool to improve the well-being of communities and promote sustainability

Innovation programmes often deliver solutions directly to local communities. By creating jobs, expanding educational opportunities, improving local services. As a good practice in Hungary, social enterprises supported by local governments provide the type of solutions that help develop the local labour market and promote equal opportunities [24]. This can help to meet the fundamental objective of contributing to strengthening the local economy and improving quality of life. Innovative community programmes that focus on inclusive education or support for disadvantaged groups are essential to increase community cohesion and improve community well-being.

Promoting sustainability provides an opportunity to find long-term solutions to social and environmental problems, as well as social problems. To promote sustainability, social innovation often adopts approaches that promote environmental responsibility and sustainable resource management [10]. Social enterprises that aim to increase recycling or the use of renewable energy, for example, have a number of benefits: they reduce environmental pressures, create new jobs and develop local communities. These types of innovations help communities to gradually move towards a more sustainable economic model that sets opportunities and goals with a significant perspective [12]. This approach creates the opportunity for the business sector, civil society and government to contribute to sustainable development together. In Hungary, several initiatives are being launched as a joint programme between universities and local communities to increase social well-being and promote environmental sustainability [1]. The introduction and use of innovative teaching methods not only serves to improve the knowledge and skills of students, but also provides opportunities for future leaders and active citizens. Project-based learning is one of the most effective innovative methods that encourages students to work together on real problems. This approach not only promotes the application of knowledge but also fosters teamwork, critical thinking and social responsibility.

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Focus on student needs

Higher education institutions use an interdisciplinary approach that allows different disciplines to work together. This type of education helps students understand the context of complex societal problems and prepares them to find creative solutions. Interdisciplinary education allows students to approach societal challenges from multiple perspectives, which enriches their problem-solving skills. The use of online learning platforms and digital tools provides students with the opportunity to connect with others on a global scale, exchange experiences and collaborate in solving societal challenges [1]. University research and programmes need to respond directly to societal needs and higher education institutions need to adapt to the ever-changing environment. The role of an inclusive higher education system is of growing importance today, especially in the context of supporting students with disabilities. Inclusion is not only about reducing discrimination, but also about enriching university communities, for which inclusive policies and social innovations provide opportunities for fuller participation. Such measures also contribute to the long-term sustainability of higher education systems, creating a system that can foster both social equality and economic development [25]. Inclusiveness in higher education is a major focus of the Education and Training 2020 Framework Programme in the European Union to promote the implementation of inclusive education and support for vulnerable groups, including people with disabilities [26].

An inclusive higher education system provides opportunities for students with disabilities to participate fully in the education process. The philosophical underpinnings of an interdisciplinary approach to higher education are intertwined with the educational concept of pragmatism, which identifies objective reality with experience. This approach encourages students to prepare for life and social tasks based on experience, facilitating the development of creative responses to real problems [1]. The philosophical foundations of inclusive education are based on the principles of human dignity and equality

Inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education

At the institutional level, the key objective is to ensure that students with disabilities studying at university have equal access to studies and services. The core tasks include the development of disability policies in higher education institutions to promote an inclusive approach. An important task is to make proposals to make universities physically and info-communication accessible. Successful implementation will be based on the organisation of awareness-raising lectures and training sessions for university staff and teachers. It is essential to provide services for students with special needs: skills development. Higher education policy: inclusion is currently being implemented in specific segments of higher education as a whole. Legal regulators (laws, regulations and internal university regulations) are in place. An analysis of teaching competences, methodological skills - lecturing style shows that frontal teaching predominates in seminars.

Overall, the trainers' knowledge of disability is low and their attitude is one of regret. In the legislator's approach, people with disabilities have the right, like everyone else, to play a full part in society in any area of life. Based on the 2023 survey of the Ministry of Culture and Innovation [27], which summarises data from 36 higher education institutions (voluntary respondents), the following findings can be made.

The physical environment - educational and other buildings, dormitories, sports centres, libraries – is characterised by difficulties of equal access. For older buildings, retrofitting accessibility is a feature, which involves trade-offs. Universal design principles are only applied to new buildings. In the case of electronic interfaces and platforms – e-learning systems: the systems can be considered as having limited accessibility. Students with disabilities, according to the survey, prefer individual consultations the most. A total of 26 institutions indicated support for administrative assistance, while 16 institutions highlighted the role of psychological counseling. Additionally, 15 institutions emphasized the importance of office support, and 14 institutions also mentioned the role of peer support. In examining the most frequently utilized services by students with chronic illnesses, it can be observed that this target group primarily values the opportunity for a flexible study schedule (27 institutions), alongside counseling services (26 institutions) and extended deadlines. Furthermore, 17 institutions reported requests for temporary exemp-

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tions, while 16 institutions noted the demand for access to notes and audio recordings.

Higher education institutions are placing increasing emphasis on providing specialized support for students with disabilities and chronic illnesses. Such support enhances the inclusivity of higher education and contributes to student success, ensuring equal educational opportunities for students with special needs.

Summary

The concept of social innovation extends beyond the development of new technological solutions; it encompasses the necessity of transforming social structures, such as educational methods and support systems. In higher education, these innovative efforts increasingly focus on promoting equal opportunities and supporting students from disadvantaged backgrounds. University programs, scholarships, mentoring initiatives, and skill development projects provide opportunities to enhance social mobility and encourage students' active participation in social change [5].

Innovative community programs that prioritize inclusive education and the support of disadvantaged groups play a fundamental role in improving social cohesion and equal opportunities [24]. Initiatives such as municipal social enterprises and university-led projects contribute to fostering sustainable economic and social development. A crucial factor for success in these efforts is collaboration between higher education institutions, the business sector, civil society, and government. Such partnerships enable educational institutions to directly address the needs of local communities, particularly by supporting vulnerable groups, thereby promoting the establishment of a long-term inclusive educational system [26].

In many cases, the physical and digital infrastructure of Hungarian higher education institutions does not provide equal access for all students. The principles of universal design are primarily applied in newly constructed facilities, which are built with accessibility requirements in mind [28, 29]. However, digital accessibility remains an unresolved issue, as university electronic

study systems are not always fully accessible to all students.

This poses a significant challenge, particularly for students with special needs, who may struggle to access educational materials due to the lack of barrier-free platforms [28].

Higher education institutions are placing increasing emphasis on providing specialized support for students with disabilities and chronic illnesses. Surveys indicate that students with disabilities primarily prefer individual consultations, which allow for personalized assistance. Key support services include administrative assistance, psychological counseling, and the presence of office and peer support, all of which facilitate students' integration into university life.

The significance of social innovation in higher education is becoming increasingly evident, as universities have emerged as key actors in addressing social challenges. Ethical and social-philosophical considerations are essential in these innovative efforts. Higher education institutions must actively engage in representing and implementing values, ensuring that all students – regardless of background or ability – have access to quality education and the necessary support services.

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