

# WELL-BEING OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS AS VIEWED BY UNIVERSITY TEACHERS IN SLOVAKIA

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## ABSTRACT

**Aim.** The main objective of the study is to identify the students with the specifics needs as a part of university educational process from the perspective of surveyed university teachers working at Slovak universities.

**Method.** The study was conducted via the questionnaire method. The questionnaire was used to collect data in the quantitative research. It contained close-ended questions and was distributed to the respondents through an online platform. The respondents of the study were 96 university teachers working at Slovak universities. The analysis of the collected data was carried out using the statistical software SPSS

20. Univariate, bivariate and multivariate data analyses were used in the SPSS 20 to analyse the collected data.

**Results.** The submitted text is of a theoretical-empirical character. The theoretical part defines a university teacher and describes the specific needs of students. The empirical part contains the results of our empirical research. The results of the empirical research show that the students with specific needs are a part of university educational process. This group of the students must have their wellbeing supported. University teachers provide special needs students with suitable specific conditions for the implementation of the educational process, which support the well-being of the mentioned group.

**Conclusions.** The students with the specific needs are a part of university educational process. According to this, promoting the well-being of students with specific needs should be an essential part of the current higher education process. If a university teacher wants to provide special needs students with specific conditions for the educational process, he/she must be informed in advance of the fact that a student has been given the status of a student with specific needs.

**Keywords:** inclusion, specific needs, university teachers, well-being, university education

## INTRODUCTION

Inclusion is currently one of the topics widely discussed by both professionals and the lay public, and it is generally understood as part of an inclusive society. The inclusive approach is based on emphasising the creation and provision of equal opportunities for all individuals. Part of inclusion is well-being, which is most often understood as a state of feeling healthy and happy. We also consider the educational process to be one of the important parts of social life that should be associated with the application of the inclusive approach. The school environment is perceived as a place ensuring equal conditions for all participants in the educational process. The basic philosophy is that every pupil and student has a certain potential that can be used as a source for learning. The role of the educator is to recognise and respect this potential without discriminatory effects (Florian & Spratt, 2013; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2014). Well-being is a part of inclusion and in the context of education, it is also viewed as one of the approaches to learners. Well-being is most often understood as a state of feeling well. In the field of positive psychology, well-being is defined as a combination of feeling well associated with experiencing positive emotions, and functioning well, which includes the development of a person's potential, control of his/her own life and the opportunity to experience positive relationships (Huppert, 2009). If we talk about the inclusive approach to learners, it is necessary to focus in more detail on a growing group of participants in the educational process—pupils and students with specific needs. The applica-

tion of the inclusive approach in the educational process is necessary at all levels of the existing educational system, including universities. Therefore, we focus on characterising the possibilities of applying the inclusive approach in the higher educational process to university students.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

A university teacher is an educator who carries out educational activities in a university setting. Compared to the lower levels of the educational system, the work of a university teacher also focuses on scientific research activities and their results, which are implemented in university teaching (Sirotová, 2014). We see a university teacher as a professional operating in the higher education process. University teachers are expected to possess

professional competence while continuously enhancing their professional knowledge, possess and develop their social competence, competence in scientific research including the ability to master the knowledge of other scientific disciplines, the ability not only to create, but also present the results of a creative activity, and also the ability to convey the results of science to students in an understandable and inspiring way. (Kravčáková-Lukáčová-Búgelová, 2011, p. 73)

As we view university teachers as experts in a specific field or fields related to the university educational process, the said experts are able to manage the different activities related to the educational process which leads to the acquisition of knowledge by university students. Therefore, we need to emphasise that professional influence on university students through various organisational forms of university teaching is particularly important for the work of a university teacher. The most commonly used organisational forms of undergraduate teaching include a lecture and a seminar (Sirotová, 2014). University students participate in lectures, seminars, workshops and other organisational forms of university teaching depending on the requirements of a university teacher.

Higher education students are participants in the higher education process who take part in the various organisational forms of the higher education process. Students with specific needs are also participants in the higher education process. Slovak legislation defines a student with specific needs as follows (Ministerstvo školstva, výskumu, vývoja a mládeže Slovenskej republiky, Act No. 131/2002 Coll.):

- a student with sensory, physical and multiple disabilities;
- a student with a chronic illness;
- a student with a medical impairment;
- a student with a mental illness;
- a student with autism or other pervasive developmental disorders;
- a student with learning disabilities.

Research suggests that university students with specific needs show a higher prevalence of mental health problems compared to peers without disability, which requires a holistic approach to ensure their overall well-being and academic success in an inclusive educational environment (Solís García et al., 2024).

To ensure the undiminished participation of university students with specific needs in the educational process, it is essential, among other things, that university students with an approved status of students with specific needs inform every university teacher they cooperate with in lectures, seminars, workshops or other organisational forms of university teaching about the said fact. Informing the university teacher of the presence of a student with specific needs in a lecture, seminar or other form of university teaching is considered to be essential mainly in terms of promoting the well-being of the above-mentioned group of students. Only then can the university teacher take into account the special needs student's presence in education and react in a supportive way, for example by utilising teaching methods which help to create an inclusive environment (Valle-Flórez et al., 2021).

## METHOD AND OBJECTIVES

Empirical research on the promotion of undergraduate students' well-being can be conducted in several ways. We have chosen a quantitative approach to empirically investigate the stated issue. The advantage of the quantitative methodology is the examination of a larger number of respondents' answers. A preplanned questionnaire was used to collect the data. The questionnaire is one of the data collection methods most commonly used in quantitative research. The said method allows for obtaining a larger number of responses to preplanned questions. A larger number of answers makes it possible to draw general conclusions related to the issue under study. At the same time, general conclusions can verify the theoretical assumptions under investigation (Hendl & Remr, 2017). In our research, we used closed-ended questions in a questionnaire for university teachers. The questionnaire for university teachers was distributed through the online platform MS Forms. We considered the completion of the questionnaire via the online space a quick and efficient way to collect data. One of the questions in the questionnaire for university teachers aimed to ascertain the respondents' identification data — in particular their workplace (university and the faculty). The main objective of the study is to identify the students with specific needs as a part of university educational process from the perspective of surveyed university teachers working at Slovak universities. We identify the number of university students with the specific needs in the university educational process. Moreover, we analysed the existence of a statistical relationship between the respondents' workplace and the presence of a student with a learning disability at university classes as a partial aim of the study.

Further questions were asked to determine whether the respondents had been informed by special needs students about their status of a student with specific needs.

We were also interested in the timing of such disclosure. We, therefore, investigated whether the interviewed university teachers had been informed by university students about their approved status of a student with specific needs as early as during the semester or only during the exam period. It can be assumed that university teachers who came into contact with a student with special needs status during a lecture, seminar, workshop or other organisational form of university teaching had already been informed of this fact by the student during the semester.

We also determined what specific conditions the surveyed university teachers provided to their students with specific needs. The specific conditions applied in the higher education process can be seen as one of the ways of promoting the well-being of special needs students in higher education.

The data obtained from the questionnaire for university teachers were analysed using the statistical software SPSS 20. The interpretation of the recorded data was carried out based on the results of univariate, bivariate and multivariate analysis in SPSS.

## RESULTS

The research sample consisted of 97 respondents—university teachers. When it comes to the socio-demographic characteristics of the sample, we were interested in the particulars of the respondents' workplace (university and faculty). The obtained data are recorded in the table below (Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Composition of the Sample of University Teachers by Workplace*

Workplace	Quantity	%
Faculty of Arts UCM in Trnava (FF UCM)	23	29
Faculty of Natural Sciences UCM in Trnava (FPV UCM)	24	30
Faculty of Social Sciences UCM in Trnava (FSV UCM)	10	13
Faculty of Mass Media Communication UCM in Trnava (FMK UCM)	18	23
Institute of Management UCM in Trnava (IM UCM)	2	3
Faculty of Health Sciences UCM in Trnava (FZV UCM)	5	6
Department of School Didactics DTI in Dubnica nad Váhom (KSD DTI)	5	6
Department of School Pedagogy and Psychology DTI in Dubnica nad Váhom (KSPP DTI)	6	8
Department of Management and Economics DTI in Dubnica nad Váhom (DME DTI)	3	4
Department of Didactics of Professional Subjects DTI in Dubnica nad Váhom (KDOP DTI)	1	1

*Source.* Own research.

The sample of interviewed university teachers included 30% of university teachers working at the FVP UCM in Trnava. 29% of respondents classified themselves as university teachers of the FF UCM in Trnava. 23% of respondents identified their workplace as the FMK UCM in Trnava. 13% of interviewed university teachers identified the FSV UCM in Trnava as their workplace. 8% of respondents identified their workplace as KSPP DTI in Dubnica nad Váhom. 6% of the respondents work at the FZV UCM in Trnava and 6% at the KSPP DTI in Dubnica nad Váhom. 4% of the respondents recorded their work at the DME DTI in Dubnica nad Váhom. IM UCM in Trnava was represented in the research by 3% of the respondents. 1% of the respondents identified themselves among the university teachers working at the KDOP DTI in Dubnica nad Váhom.

The following table (Table 2) provides an overview of the recorded responses identifying the number of undergraduate students with specific needs from the perspective of the interviewed university teachers.

**Table 2**

*University Students with Specific Needs from the Perspective of the Interviewed University Teachers*

University students with specific needs	Quantity	%
sensory, physical or multiple disabilities (blind, deaf,...)	29	30
chronic disease (diabetes, asthma, epilepsy,...)	25	26
health impairments (allergies, scoliosis, post-operative conditions,...)	36	38
mental illness (depression, bipolar disorder,...)	13	14
autism or other pervasive developmental disorders (Asperger's syndrome)	13	14
learning disabilities (dyslexia, dysgraphia,...)	44	46

Source. Own research.

Through their answers, the interviewed university teachers confirmed that students with specific needs at least partially participate in the university educational process at UCM in Trnava, as well as at the DTI in Dubnica nad Váhom. 46% of the respondents said that university students with a learning disability are part of the higher education process. 38% of the respondents identified students with a disability during their lectures, seminars, workshops or other organisational forms of the higher education process. 30% of the interviewed university teachers identified university students with sensory, physical or multiple disabilities during the higher education process. Learning disabilities rank among the most frequently occurring specific educational needs even at lower levels of the educational system. Students with a learning disability are aware that this condition constitutes no insurmountable barrier to higher education and consequently, students with learning disabilities are less and less likely to finish their education at the secondary level but instead decide to enter the univer-

sity environment while inquiring about the possibilities of participating in the higher education process as wholly as possible with the goal of obtaining a university degree. The number of students according to the types of disabilities that they formally have been diagnosed with are described in the following table (Table 3)

**Table 3**

*The number of students according to the types of disabilities that they formally have been diagnosed with*

University students with specific needs	Quantity
sensory, physical or multiple disabilities (blind, deaf,...)	11
chronic disease (diabetes, asthma, epilepsy,...)	2
mental illness (depression, bipolar disorder,...)	4
autism or other pervasive developmental disorders (Asperger's syndrome)	7
<i>learning disabilities (dyslexia, dysgraphia,...)</i>	25

*Source.* Univerzita sv. Cyrila a Metoda v Trnave, 2025. Counselling and legal centre for students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds and students with specific needs UCM, Coordinator of students with specific needs in DTI v Dubnici nad Váhom

The number of students according to the types of disabilities that they have formally been diagnosed confirms our results. Students with learning disabilities are the most numerous group of students with specific needs in surveyed universities. The second large group of the students with specific needs at the UCM and DTI are students with sensory, physical or multiple disabilities. In our opinion, the most problematic is the identification of chronic and mental illness. Surveyed university teachers identify students with mental and chronic illness in a significantly large scale as formal numbers at the researched universities.

There are differences between answers of surveyed university teachers and formal numbers of students with specific needs in the statistics of the Counselling and legal centre for students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds and students with specific needs UCM and statistics of the Coordinator of students with specific needs in DTI v Dubnici nad Váhom. Official statistics of the students with specific needs at the researched workplaces have a lower number of students with specific needs as given in answers of surveyed university teachers. This statement is based on the fact, that the education for the one student can be realised by several surveyed teachers. Detailed interpretation is provided in table 5.

To complement the results of our investigation, we present the results of a bivariate data analysis. In a two-stage data sorting, we examined whether the contact of the interviewed university teachers with students with a learning disability was conditioned upon the respondents' workplace. The results of the bivariate analysis are recorded in table below (Table 4).



**Table 4***Students with a Learning Disability and Respondents' Workplace*

Workplace		A student with a learning disability attending a lecture, seminar, workshop or other organisational form of higher education			Total
		Yes	No	Unable to say	
<i>FF UCM in Trnava</i>	Quantity	10	2	11	23
	%	10	2	11	23
<i>FPV UCM in Trnava</i>	Quantity	10	4	11	25
	%	10	4	11	25
<i>FSV UCM in Trnava</i>	Quantity	3	1	5	9
	%	3	1	5	9
<i>FMK UCM in Trnava</i>	Quantity	13	1	4	18
	%	13	1	4	18
<i>IM UCM in Trnava</i>	Quantity	1	0	1	2
	%	1	0	1	2
<i>FZV UCM in Trnava</i>	Quantity	1	3	1	5
	%	1	3	1	5
<i>KSD DTI</i>	Quantity	2	2	1	5
	%	2	2	1	5
<i>KPP DTI</i>	Quantity	1	1	4	6
	%	1	1	4	6
<i>KME DTI</i>	Quantity	3	0	0	3
	%	3	0	0	3
<i>KDOP DTI</i>	Quantity	1	0	0	1
	%	1	0	0	1
<i>Total</i>	Quantity	45	14	38	97
	%	46	14	39	100

*Source.* Own research.

Through the results of the bivariate analysis, we can conclude that the workplace of the interviewed university teachers did not condition the respondents' contact with a student with a learning disability during any of the organisational forms of university teaching. It means that according to the views of the interviewed university teachers, university students with learning disabilities are part of the university educational process regardless of their studies in a particular faculty or department.

We can describe the number of students with leaning disabilities that they formally have been diagnosed as a proof of their participation at the university educational process. The number of of students with leaning disabilities they formally have been diagnosed with defines the following table (Table 5).



**Table 5**

*The Number of Students with Learning Disabilities that they Formally have been Diagnosed with*

University students with learning disabilities	Quantity
FF UCM	6
FPV UCM	1
FSV UCM	2
FMK UCM	8
IM UCM	-
FZV UCM	-
KSD DTI	1
KPP DTI	1
KME DTI	1
KDOP DTI	1

*Source.* Univerzita sv. Cyrila a Metoda v Trnave (2025). Counselling and legal centre for students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds and students with specific needs UCM, Coordinator of students with specific needs in DTI v Dubnici nad Váhom.

The highest number of students with learning disabilities are at the FMK UCM. This fact declares the results of our research – the greater number of university teachers from FMK UCM have a contact with student with learning disability in their lectures, seminars and other forms of higher education. There are differences between the number of students with learning disabilities by the view of surveyed university teachers and formal number of students with learning disabilities at the researched workplaces. This statement is based on the fact, that the education for the one student can be realised by several surveyed teachers. For example, one student who is studying at the FMK has lectures, seminars and other forms of educational process with five teachers. Five teachers in our research declare contact with student with learning disabilities during their lectures, seminars and other forms of educational process but he or she is still one student in the official statistics. In our opinion, surveyed teachers are particularly able to recognise students with learning disabilities.

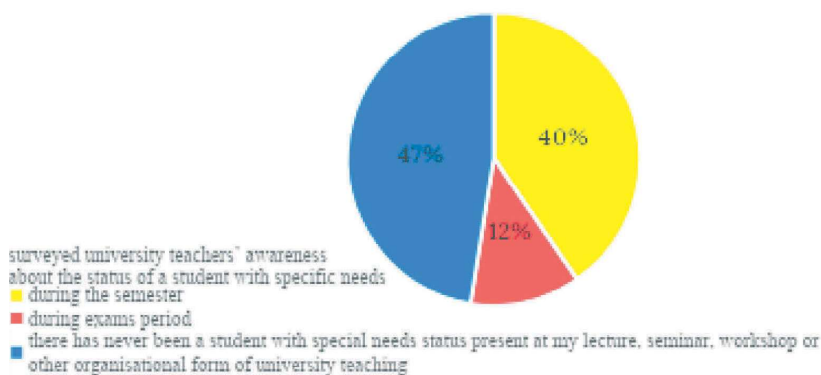
Moreover, we want to impress on the fact that all university teachers should pay close attention to their students to be able to determine whether a student with specific needs participates in their lectures, seminars, workshops or other organisational forms of the university educational process. Also, approaching students who manifest any signs of special needs students and suggesting to them to contact the coordinator for students with specific needs can contribute to the subsequent promotion of the well-being of these students during their university studies.

The promotion of well-being among students with specific needs is often based mainly on the application of specific conditions of the educational process by the university teacher. On the other hand, however, we need to point out that a student

with the status of a student with specific needs should inform the university teacher about this fact. 41% of the interviewed university teachers stated that they had been informed by the student about the status of a student with specific needs as early as during the semester. 12% of the respondents indicated that they were only informed of the status of a student with specific needs during the exam period. As many as 61% of the respondents indicated that no students with special needs were present at any of the lectures, seminars, workshops or other organisational forms of university teaching taught by the surveyed teachers. The above findings are also presented in the graph below (Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

*Surveyed University Teachers' Awareness about the Status of a Student with Specific Needs*



Source. Own research.

The majority of respondents said that they had learned about their students' special needs status during the semester and not just during the exam period, which we consider a positive finding. In our opinion, the university teacher must be informed by the student about his/her special needs status as early as possible, since the application of specific conditions for the participation of the special needs student in the university educational process depends on it.

As we found that most respondents were informed about their students' special needs status, we subsequently carried out a two-stage data sorting through which we were trying to ascertain if the respondents who were aware of the presence of a student with specific needs in their lectures or seminars, had also been informed about this specific need of the student by the student himself/herself during the semester. The results of the two-stage data sorting are recorded in the table below (Table 4).

**Table 6**

*Contact with a Student with Special Needs Status in Full-Time University Study and the Teacher's Awareness of the Special Needs Status during the Semester*

<b>Contact with a student with specific needs in full-time university study</b>		<b>Awareness of the status of a student with specific needs during the semester</b>			<b>Total</b>
		<b>Yes</b>	<b>No, I only found out about the student's special needs status during the exam period</b>	<b>there has never been a student with special needs status present at my lecture, seminar, workshop or other organisational form of university teaching</b>	
<i>Yes</i>	<i>Quantity</i>	27	6	1	34
	<i>%</i>	28	6	1	35
<i>No</i>	<i>Quantity</i>	4	1	29	34
	<i>%</i>	4	1	30	35
<i>Can't say</i>	<i>Quantity</i>	8	5	16	29
	<i>%</i>	8	5	16	29
	<i>Quantity</i>	39	12	46	97
<i>Total</i>	<i>%</i>	40	12	47	100

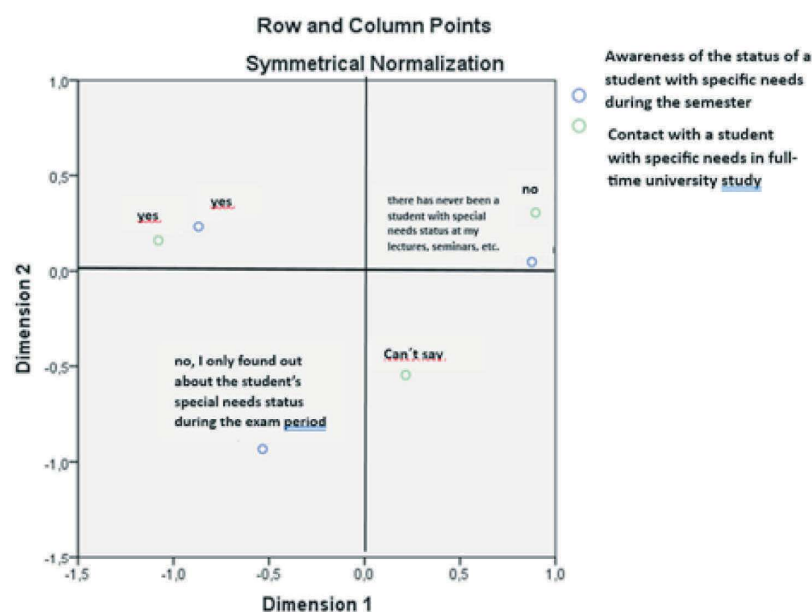
*Source.* Own research.

Based on the two-stage data sorting and the data recorded in the table above (Table 4), we can state that 28% of the respondents who came into contact with a student with specific needs during a lecture, seminar, workshop or other organisational form of a full-time university study were informed of this fact by the student during the semester. It follows that if a student applies for the status of a student with specific needs, and this status is granted, informing the university teacher about this fact early is seen as one of the ways of promoting the well-being of the above-mentioned group of students. Only a university teacher who is adequately informed about the presence of a student with specific needs in a lecture, seminar, workshop or other organisational form of university teaching can subsequently apply the relevant specific conditions of university teaching and thus promote the well-being of students with the special needs status.

The existing statistical dependence between the analysed answers of the respondents allows for a tertiary analysis of the recorded data through the multivariate data analysis. The results of the multivariate data analysis are recorded in the graph below (Figure 2). On the correspondence map, it is possible to see a clear grouping of the answers of respondents who came into contact with a student with special needs status during a lecture, seminar, workshop or other organisational form of full-time study, as well as the answers of respondents who were informed of this fact by the student himself/herself during the course of the semester.

**Figure 2**

*Correspondence Map Contact with a Student with Special Needs Status in Full-Time University Study and the Teacher's Awareness of the Special Needs Status during the Semester*



Source. Own research.

If we consider students with specific needs a part of the higher education process, then another goal of our investigation was to identify the provision of specific conditions for students with specific needs by the university teacher. The findings are presented in the following table (Table 5).

**Table 7**

*The Provision of Specific Conditions for University Students with Specific Needs by University Teachers*

Specific condition	Quantity	%
individual study schedule	29	30
extended time to work on various assignments during the semester	45	46
extended time for the exam during the exam period	44	45
the possibility of oral examinations instead of written examinations during the exam period	31	32
lesson record	16	16

Specific condition	Quantity	%
teaching with an interpreter	2	2
assistant for taking notes	10	10
verbalisation of the material used during a lecture, seminar, workshop or other organisational form of university teaching	8	8

*Source.* Own research.

Based on the above data, we can conclude that the interviewed university teachers most often provide special needs university students with extended time to complete assignments during the semester (46%), as well as extended time to complete exams during the exam period (45%). The above findings can be mainly explained by the fact that special needs university students usually need more time to prepare assignments as well as to pass their exams. Being allowed more time, they can concentrate better and more consistently on their answers and can also avoid coming under time pressure, which may prevent them from adequately presenting the acquired knowledge. Last but not least, we want to draw readers' attention to the fact that in 2% of cases, teaching was carried out with an interpreter, as there are university students who do not understand the teaching in the Slovak language. However, not many foreigners/migrants use interpreters, since they understand the Slovak language or the instruction for the above-mentioned group of university students may also take place in another language, for example, English, German, Russian and others. Application of the individual specific conditions for university students with specific needs by the university teacher will support the comfortable feeling within them. It is a very important part of their wellbeing. Moreover, this part of wellbeing support of university students with specific needs will make university educational process available for this group of the students. They will be able to participate in the university educational process more comfortably.

We believe that the introduction of specific conditions for the implementation of the higher education process for university students with specific needs is a necessary feature of the application of an inclusive approach to education. The application of the above specific conditions for the higher education process will contribute to ensuring equal educational opportunities for all higher education students without distinction.

## CONCLUSION

Students with specific needs are part of university educational process. Promoting well-being, which is part of inclusive education, should concern all university students, regardless of whether they belong to a specific group or not. It is essential for students with specific need(s) to apply for the status of a student with specific needs, and once

this has been granted, it is equally essential that students in question inform their university teachers of this fact. On the basis of being informed of the special needs status, a university teacher shall apply the specific condition or conditions arising from the specific need of the student to the higher education process. Specific educational conditions facilitate the participation of students with specific needs in the higher education process. The application of a specific condition related to the participation of the learner in the higher education process can be considered a way of promoting the well-being of the special needs learner. Studies show that university teachers are an essential factor in the success of university students with special needs (Lombardi & Murray, 2011; Shaeffer, 2019; Valle-Flóez et al., 2021). At the same time, it is often emphasised that their approach to inclusion is also influenced by a number of negative factors such as insufficient training in inclusive procedures (González-Castellano et al., 2021), confusing inconsistency of theoretical definition of inclusion (Ainscow, 2020) or the fact that in the university environment, inclusion is viewed as highly technical (Stentiford & Koutsouris, 2022).

In connection with the importance of further and more detailed investigation of the above-mentioned issue, it is necessary, in our opinion, to conduct semi-structured interviews, especially with a group of university students with specific needs, and to investigate the subjective importance of individual specific conditions applied by the university teacher during the various organisational forms of university teaching, and also during the exam period, in order to find out in what way these conditions contribute to the promotion of students' well-being. In addition, it is possible to expand the questionnaire research by broadening the research sample of university students to several faculties or to several universities in Slovakia. The second proposal of the detailed empirical research is the extension of the presented answers by the detailed description of the students disabilities by the surveyed teachers view.

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