

BREAKING BARRIERS IN MUSIC: DIVERSITY, INCLUSION, AND SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

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SUMMARY. This paper focuses on issues that have to do with the inclusion of students with Special Education Needs (SEN) in higher music education institutions (HMEIs). It addresses an examination of fundamental conceptual delimitations and shares information about the objectives, Work Packages from the *IncluMusic* European Project. In addition, it also presents the experiences, viewpoints and recommendations of three focus group interviews with a selected group of professionals from Cyprus and Romania, who have rich experience in teaching music and other subjects in all levels of education, from primary school to university.

Keywords: Inclusion, SEN (special education needs), higher education, support strategies, Design Principles

Introduction

Everyone agrees that music education should be available for all children, at least in compulsory education. The motto for NafME's Strategic Plan 2022 is "Equity in music education" and one of the core values of ISME is "Formal and informal music education programs should serve the individual needs of all learners, including those with special needs and exceptional competencies."³ Nevertheless, when it comes to furthering one's skills and knowledge in higher music education institutions, there is usually a different approach. One of the mainstream beliefs and misconceptions in the area of

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³ International Society for Music Education. About ISME. <https://www.isme.org/about> (accessed 14.09.2025).



music, at least in such countries like Cyprus, is that only the talented few will be able to be accepted to study music in higher education and have a successful career in the field. This belief is, in one way, justified by the numerous examples of extraordinary composers and performers such as Mozart, Beethoven, Shostakovich, Theodorakis, Enescu, to say a few, who exhibit an abundance of musical talent throughout their lives. Moreover, it is also supported by the numerous examples of young children and youth around the world who can play a musical instrument at an extraordinarily high level from a very young age. There is an abundance of such examples from music competitions and concert series worldwide, as well as through YouTube. Moreover, many of us have experienced such reactions during our teenage years as „you are not talented enough to make it in the music world,” or „practicing only 2-3 hours a day is not enough to be accepted as a music student.” Finally, in case of students with special educational needs (SEN) or any physical disabilities, the prevailing reaction is usually that there is no place for them in higher education in music.

Such a reaction is not only unfair and undemocratic but also unsubstantiated and deceiving. Thankfully, there are various examples of extraordinary musicians with special educational needs (SEN) or any physical disabilities who have had amazing careers in music. One can name individuals such as percussionist Evelyn Glennie, singer/songwriter/pianist Stevie Wonder, violinist Isaac Perlman, as well as drummer Rick Allen, guitarist/songwriter Jose Feliciano, singers Ray Charles and Andrea Bocelli, guitarist Django Reinhardt and saxophonists Neill Duncan, Roland Kirk and David Nabb. Nevertheless, what happens with those aspiring musicians who are not of such high caliber? Should the right to study music in higher education and/or to aspire to be involved with music professionally be reserved only for those few individuals who are extremely talented and who are “guaranteed” to be successful? What happens with those of us who are not such musical geniuses? After all, does somebody who is an “average” student and musician, have the right to study music in higher education? And if (s)he manages to enter in the music program of an “average” university of music academy, does this mean that (s)he will be an “average” musician/music educator/composer/musicologist/conductor in the future? What are, after all, the prerequisites of success for a future career within the various diverse fields of music? And is our goal, as music teachers in higher education, to “safeguard” the music field from those “average,” SEN and/or disabled students who are probably not going to be exceptional performers and winners of national or international music competitions? Or maybe our role as music educators should be to support and encourage each and every one of our students to become the best musicians they can be and meet their needs and expectations at the highest level?

Conceptual delimitations

Before we engage in an attempt to answer the above questions, we should have a better understanding of the different terms used in our discussion. According to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, persons with disabilities are defined as „those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others”.⁴ In this definition a clear distinction is made between the term disability and impairment. Having an impairment does not necessarily mean that one is disabled and in a clear disadvantage with others who are not impaired. In an ideal world there should be equal access to opportunities in education, in the arts, in sports, in professional and everyday activities etc. for all, impaired or unimpaired. Unfortunately, this is not the case in many countries, societies and cases and, therefore, impaired people usually have much less opportunities, or have to fight much more than others, in order to be able to study at a university, to perform at a band, to participate in sports, or to find a decent and/or well-paying job. This is not their fault, and it is not due to their impairment. It is because society regards their impairment as a major disadvantage and does not take the extra measures to support them. Thus, their impairment becomes a disability.

According to the European Commission (2013) there is not a shared, agreed-upon definition in European countries as to what we mean with special education needs (SEN).⁵ This is partly because of the different educational and cultural context in each country, but also because of the distinction between normative and non-normative difficulties that one experiences. Normative difficulties are obvious and distinct physical and sensory difficulties for which there is an objective agreement about the clear assessment measures that need to be taken. On the other hand, non-normative difficulties are a wide range of difficulties that require professional assessment and for which there is less agreement in regard to diverse measures that need to be taken. Such examples of non-normative difficulties are emotional difficulties, dyslexia, autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and others, which are becoming more and more common to children in many countries.

⁴ European Commission. (2013). Persons with disabilities. https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/disability/persons-disabilities_en (accessed 15.09.2025).

⁵ European Commission. (2013). Support for children with special educational needs (SEN). Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion. European Commission. (2013). Support for children with special educational needs (SEN). Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (accessed 14.09.2025).

As defined by the *Dictionary of Pedagogy*, school inclusion is "a set of multidimensional measures and actions carried out in the field of education, with a focus on including all children and young people in the educational system, in line with the goal of school for all and the paradigm of education for all and for each person."⁶ These measures aim to enhance the potential of each individual, regardless of their individual particularities, and to ensure equal opportunities and access to quality education.

In regards to inclusion, UNESCO states that in order for an educational system to be inclusive it should identify and remove any barriers regarding curricula to pedagogy and teaching that hinder or exclude people because of their..."gender, sexual orientation, ethnic or social origin, language, religion, nationality, economic condition or ability."⁷ As the European Pillar of Social Rights states that „everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labor market."⁸ Adapting this statement for music we can, thus, support that everyone has the right to quality and inclusive music education, training and life-long learning in order to maintain and acquire musical skills and knowledge that enable them to participate fully in diverse musical contexts and situations and manage successfully transitions in the music market.

***IncluMusic* European project**

IncluMusic - Increasing skills for building more inclusive conservatoires is a project which expresses ideas for solving problems faced by higher music education, regarding the enrollment of students with special educational needs (SEN). The partners involved in the project are specialists in the field of music and educational sciences, as follows: ANMGD-*Gheorghe Dima* National Academy of Music (coordinator, Cluj-Napoca, Romania), RIAM-Royal Irish Academy of Music (Dublin, Ireland), EUC-European University Cyprus (Nicosia, Cyprus), LUMSA University (Rome, Italy), CONSPA-State Music Conservatory 'Alessandro Scarlatti' (Palermo, Italy), AEC-Association Européenne des Conservatoires (Belgium), and Resolvo (Florence, Italy). The project runs for 3 years (36 months), from November 2022 to October 2025.

⁶ Bocoș, Mușata (coord.). *Dicționar de pedagogie (Dictionary of Pedagogy)*. Editura Presa Universitară Clujeană, Cluj-Napoca, 2021, p. 752.

⁷ Unesco. (2013). Inclusion in education. <https://www.unesco.org/en/inclusion-education> (accessed 14.09.2025).

⁸ European Commission. (2013). Support for children with special educational needs (SEN). Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (accessed 14.09.2025).

The main goal of the project is to help students with special educational needs to adapt better in the university music environment. Depending on the type of need, Higher Music Education Institutions (HMEIs) should find effective solutions that cover both appropriate learning strategies and the materials and resources needed in the field of music.

The project has a very important motivation, which relates to the lack of support in the practice of inclusive policies for adapting curricula, training teachers, providing specialized support services, and educational assistance for students with SEN in higher music education institutions (HMEIs) in most EU countries.

The objectives of the project, formulated based on some realities identified in the university music system, focus on the following directions:

- Increasing the number of students with sensorial or cognitive disabilities enrolling in HMEIs;
- Reinforcing the competencies of HMEI teachers and HMEI administrative staff in the field of Special Education;
- Creating a new professional role – that of the Academic tutor – aimed at monitoring on social inclusion practices within HMEIs and on the training process of HMEI teachers;
- Preparing the Academic tutor with the role of intermediation between students with disabilities and the Academic staff;
- Reinforcing the skills of Academic staff to help them work for inclusion together with the Academic tutor for Inclusive Music Teaching;
- Defining new approaches for training HMEIs students with SEN;
- Creating a community of HMEIs adopting social inclusion practices.

Working packages

The project was based on five work packages, with one of the partners responsible for each package. The project was based on five work packages, with one of the partners responsible for each package. The first package refers to project management and is led by ANMGD, as coordinator, and ValueDo (initially) / Resolvo, throughout the entire implementation process. ANMGD is responsible for organizing the activities and tasks proposed by the project, while Resolvo is the agency that monitors progress, quality of activities, and project achievements.

Work package no. 2 focused on defining and configuring in detail a set of design principles and a curriculum for the training course for teachers, tutors, and administrative staff at European level, with the aim of building an inclusive higher education system. This design was configured based on an analysis of the state of the arts of inclusion in HMEIs in Europe.

The third stage of the project, work package no. 3, had as its main results the concrete creation of the training course for the three interested groups from institutions, teachers, tutors, and administrative staff, the delivery of course materials (such power point presentation resources, videos, external resources, scientific papers, various exercises), assessment methods in the shape of quizzes for the staff members involved in the training activities, and the internal piloting of the course, provided by each of the partner institutions.

Work package no. 4, external testing and delivery of support tools, provides as outputs the courses for teachers and administrative staff and the training manuals related to the courses, which explain the pedagogical methodology of each session and other useful information about the delivery of the training course.

The last work package refers to the dissemination of project results and the exploitation of all possibilities for maximizing the project's value, such as presenting project ideas at international conferences and other events, on various social media channels, and posting regularly on partners' websites about the stages of the project. The main goal is to create a community of HMEIs adopting social inclusion practices to make them inclusive environments for learning.

The general expected results of the project include two online e-learning courses, handbook/training manual and website. Partners involved in the project will develop two e-learning courses (one for HMEI teachers and one for administrative staff/tutors), aimed at improving the learner's skills and break down the barriers that limit the access to HMEIs to people with SEN. Training materials will be freely and openly available on an e-learning platform in English and partners' languages. The partners will also create a community of practices around the project topic.

Design Principles

Based on a well-documented analysis of the current situation in Europe regarding the existence of a system that facilitates the integration of students with special needs into music universities, the project team established a set of fundamental principles. The process started from the methodology known as 'From the basket to the pyramid', which allows the transition from the generation of several ideas, placed in an electronic basket, to their classification in a hierarchical pyramid, summarizing the most important ideas, which are presented below (Table 1).⁹

⁹ Cinque, Maria; Bălan-Budoiu, Oana; Zagrean, Ioana. "IncluMusic - new skills for inclusive higher music education institutions". In *Review of Artistic Education* vol. 27, 2024, pp.105-110, DOI: 10.35218/rae-2024-0012, https://rae.arts.ro/filecase/filetypes/documents/archive/rae27/rae_2024_0012.pdf (accessed 09.07.2025)

Table 1

Fundamentals
- General educational philosophy
General Principles
- Empathy
- Flexibility and creativity
- Inclusion of student voice
Methodological Principles
- Theoretical and pedagogical knowledge and training
- Creative approach
- Customized teaching strategies
- Inclusive evaluation approaches
Specific Principles
- Dedicated staff
- Technology
- Designing appropriate assessment for BES
- Adapting learning and teaching environments

Hierarchical pyramid of design principles

Research methodology

The main objective of this descriptive study is to crystallize a set of design principles for developing an effective curriculum for training teachers and administrative staff in HMEIs.

The secondary objective of the research is to create an international academic community in the field of music, which ensures participation in future activities of the IncluMusic project and also for external testing of the training course platform.

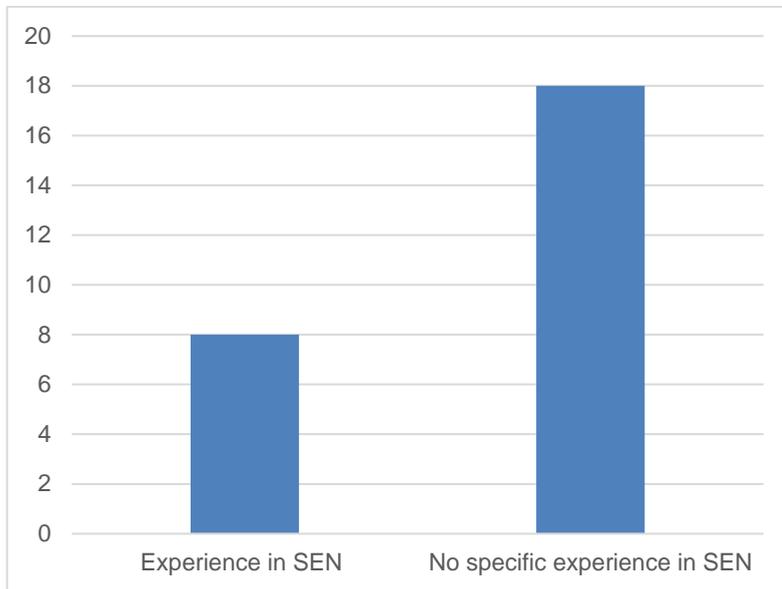
As a research tool, this paper is based on an international focus group with teachers from Cyprus and Romania, involved in educational institutions, from primary school to university.

Focus group in Cyprus and Romania

The people who participated in the focus group in Cyprus and Romania are teachers with experience in general education, but who have encountered inclusive contexts, as well as people who work in schools with

students with different types of special needs (deaf, blind, autism, ADHD) or collaborate with various relevant associations. There were 26 participants in total, including 8 men and 18 women, and in terms of teaching experience in institutions with students with special needs, there are several people who have no training in this area, as can be seen in the figure below (E.g. 1). The aim of the IncluMusic project is precisely this: to familiarize teachers with specific learning situations in the field of music and to create a guide for music universities, that will enable those involved in education, including students, teachers, and administrative staff, to receive and give superior training.

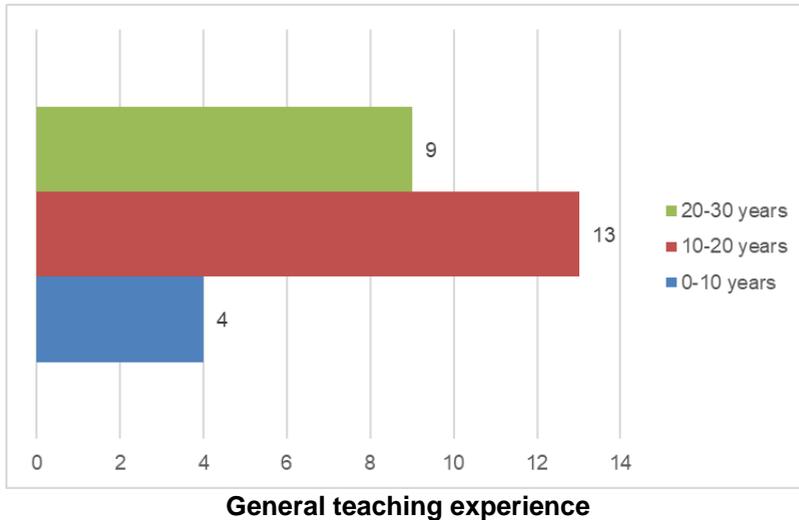
E.g. 1



Teacher's experience in SEN

Most of the participants have extensive experience in teaching, with a small proportion having been teachers for less than 10 years. The detailed situation regarding general teaching experience in the field of music can be seen in the following image (E.g. 2).

E.g. 2



The Focus Group is organized into three parts, as follows:

1. *Introductory phase*: project presentation and collection of participants' socio-demographic information, teaching experience in SEN.
2. *Core phase*: work on Design Principles (DP= through specific questions, the votes assigned by each participant before the focus group and through the three metaphors (mirror, microscope and binocular) to be presented during the focus group.
3. *Closing phase*: thanking the participants and proposing future collaboration in IncluMusic project.

The most important part of the focus group meeting was the second one, in which participants analyzed the design principles proposed by IncluMusic and then added ideas or suggestions for completing and improving them.

Metaphors as a guide in analyzing design principles

The facilitator explains to the participants that they will be guided in the group reflection, in order to validate the list, through three metaphors. Each one offers a progressive perspective for analyzing design principles and ensures consistency in understanding the educational contexts where they will be applied. Below, we present each metaphor in more detail:

- *the mirror metaphor*: the focus is on one's own personal teaching experiences with students with SEN; participants think of an experience related to inclusion in the field of music in higher education (but not

only) in which they participated (directly or indirectly) and which they consider to have worked very well, with the task of noting the fundamental aspects, in terms of design principles, that contributed to the success of that project; then check whether the aspects mentioned are included in the list proposed by the project;

- *the microscope metaphor*: will ask participants to look at things closely, in depth; analyzing each element separately, how could it be improved?
- *the binocular metaphor*: Attention now turns to the future of inclusion and inclusive education in higher music education institutions; participants will analyze which design principles are essential for the effective functioning of education involving students with SEN.

Results

Overall, participants commented positively on the proposed definition of Design Principles. Specifically, most participants indicated that the definition is comprehensive and encompassing. It was, nevertheless, suggested that additional clear information should also be given on how students with SEN can be invited to work in groups with other students. Another participant highlighted the importance of providing a strong foundation for assisting students with SEN in their future musical involvement and employment. Finally, it was also pointed out that a few students with non-normative difficulties often go undetected during their compulsory years in school or may be unaware of their specific special condition until their early adulthood stage.

Some of the other comments made regarding the Design Principles are that it might be useful to produce two different leaflets, one for academics and educators and another for the general public. The two different versions, it is proposed, can share similar information but will be presented in a different manner and language to be more applicable and useful to the different groups. Both leaflets will address definitions, typologies, different conditions of SEN and the importance of early diagnosis and specialized assistance, to receive the most appropriate support to overcome the educational obstacles that students face.

Regarding the mirror metaphor, participants focused especially on the importance of the experience lived through the body and without necessarily being confined in a school classroom, but, instead, enabling students to connect with their classmates in smaller and more personal group circles and through movement, rhythm, chanting and singing. They also indicated that educators should be aware that each student case is different and requires an individualized and specialized approach from a team of professionals. Most of the participants pointed out that they have not received any relevant training during their studies and, thus, they emphasized the importance of sharing

experiences and successful approaches, pursuing in-service training and encouraging collaboration with specialists.

Regarding the microscope metaphor participants emphasized the need to adapt course curricula, requirements, evaluation and teaching approaches to the individual conditions and needs of our students. Many shared experiences with students with normative difficulties such as deafness and blindness and described how talented these students were, how much they loved music and how they managed to graduate and successfully continued to be involved with music. They also indicated that in their students' educational path the use of appropriate assistive technologies and/or a support worker or scribe was of crucial importance in their success. The need for and diversity of technologies is increasingly highlighted in the context of inclusive education, and studies mention that there is a wide variety of applications and programs used to provide important and valuable resources to people with special educational needs, disabilities, or neurodiversity.¹⁰ Thus, the importance of appropriate legislation and knowledge of one's rights regarding inclusive education is of primary importance.

Finally, in regard to the binocular metaphor participants stated the importance of continuous research and advancement in the area of assistive technologies, while, at the same time, pointing out the importance of human support from classmates and teachers, of empathy, understanding and collaboration with others. It was recommended that some university courses can be redesigned as laboratories in which older and more experienced students assist and guide younger and novice students in the program with their assignments and skill development. This can be part of their overall music practicum/internship, or as preparation for a community outreach project in the schools and the community. It was also suggested that administrators, educators and institutions should showcase and promote more clearly the examples of renowned musicians with SEN such as the ones mentioned in the beginning of this article. Through their life experiences they will serve as role models for future generations of musicians and as exemplary examples of human perseverance and determination.

Overall, participants emphasized the importance of cultivating an inclusive and supportive culture in the institution/organization. They also indicated the need to restructure and modernize the curriculum of the typical bachelor's in music, by including specialized courses that offer the necessary

¹⁰ Mladin, Paula; Pascu, Cristina; Bailey Fallen, Kim; Harris, Jessica; Lawrence, Andrea. "IncluMusic Course: An E-learning Platform for Building More Inclusive Conservatories". In ICTMF, Vol. XVI, No. 1/2025, pp. 17-32, DOI 10.47809/ICTMF, https://tic.ediuramediamusica.ro/reviste/2025/1/ICTMF_ISSN_2067-9408_2025_vol_15_issue_1_pg_no_017-032%20-%20MLADIN-PASCU-BAULEY-HARRIS.pdf (accessed 12.09.2025).

training to future music teachers and musicians in order to prepare them to work with people with SEN. Another recommendation is to incorporate opportunities for collaboration between abled and disabled people, as well as between teachers in special education and music students.

Discussions

The analysis of the results revealed that institutions and professionals in the two countries are taking active measures to support students with normative and non-normative difficulties in entering their respective higher education music institutions and pursuing a career in the music field. As indicated above in the introduction, the music field is widely diverse, and it can accommodate the talents, strengths, and interests of a wide range of students. Pursuing a career in music should not be limited only to the talented few who are extraordinary performers. As Christopher Small stated, "There are many kinds of excellence, and the individual technical dexterity that we prize so much is only one of them."¹¹

Our role as music educators should be to support and encourage each of our students to become the best musicians they can be and meet their needs and expectations at the highest level. Within the field of music there is a need for great performers, composers, arrangers, musicologists and ethnomusicologists, songwriters, improvisers, conductors, sound engineers, music administrators, music educators, as well as people in the fields of music medicine and music technology. All these professional and amateur musicians can express themselves through music, leave their imprint and make an impact in the lives of others. Using Small's (2001) position about musical excellence, each of those individuals should strive to achieve the best that they can with what they have at any given point of time. Specifically, he supported that "My own formula for excellence is to do the best you can with what you have. It is by doing the best you can with what you have that you are empowered to explore, affirm and celebrate those relationships you value, and to say, to yourself and to anyone who may be paying attention, *this is who we are.*"¹²

In music, unlike the field of sports, there are no winners or losers. A community music ensemble comprising of amateur musicians can have an equally important (and sometimes even greater) impact in the lives of people than an amazing soloist. There is space for everyone to learn and participate

¹¹ Small, Christopher. Acts of musicking. Lecture for Taonga. In Drummond, John & Sell, David (Eds), Taonga of the Asia Pacific Rim - proceedings of the NZSME & ISME conference 2001. NZSME. (2002), p.11.

¹² Idem.

in music making, to become engaged, to be inspired and, hopefully, transform the lives of others through music. Music should not exclude people but unite people of all abilities, races and cultures.

As a conclusion we would like to share the real story of one of our ex-students. As a prospective music student, Vasilis auditioned for the music program at EUC. He was provisionally accepted since he could not read notation for drums, he did not have adequate training as a drummer and his GPA in high school was average. Nevertheless, we could see in his eyes that he had a passion for music and was excited to study at the university. He was informed that we will need to reaudition to enter officially in the program. During his first semester in the program Vasilis worked hard and continued doing so until the end of his studies. He graduated with a high GPA and performed one of the best final student recitals. He was later instrumental in establishing a trio with which he recorded two CDs with their own compositions. Since then, he has been performing extensively as a drummer and percussionist, establishing his own teaching studio and becoming one of the leading players of the hand pan. He is also involved in the reconstruction of the hand pan to allow it to perform melodies based on eastern/non-diatonic modes. Finally, he realized that he has SEN, which justifies the difficulties he faced in reading and writing and why he felt so bored and isolated in compulsory education. Because of his acceptance in the music program at EUC, Vasilis is now a happy professional musician who inspires others to pursue their passion for music. He is a clear example of perseverance and determination to succeed. His career path also illustrates the importance of providing the necessary support and assistance to students with SEN in higher music education.

Conclusions

This study highlights the need to further support the inclusion of people with special educational needs in the higher education music institutions and the importance of ensuring their access to education in all levels and fields of activity, including music.

Their inclusion in higher education music institutions must be based on certain guidelines that facilitate their accommodation in the music education system by adapting teaching, learning, and assessment strategies to the needs of students. These strategies can be based on the design principles developed through the IncluMusic project, which are based on a rigorous analysis of existing special education systems and take into consideration the experiences of teachers in general education.

Data was obtained through two focus groups in Cyprus and Romania, as a result of analyzing musical educational contexts from the perspective of

the three types of metaphors, reinforce the idea of including students with special educational needs in higher music education institutions, but participants also mentioned other important ideas. Among these are the existence of clear specifications regarding possible collaborations between students with SEN and other groups of students, the lack of awareness among students with non-normative difficulties, who are not always aware of their specific condition until early adulthood, which makes it difficult for them to adapt to school requirements, as well as special conditions for admission to universities and additional assistance offered by HMEIs in finding a job after graduation for students with SEN.

In line with the objectives set out in the IncluMusic project, along with the development of a training manual for teachers and administrative staff and an educational platform containing various useful materials, we demonstrate that we care and want to break down barriers in higher music education to find optimal educational solutions for all students.

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