Article

Roma Youth's Perspective on an Inclusive Higher Education Community: A Hungarian Case Study

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Abstract: While the expansion of higher education increases access to higher qualifications, students from disadvantaged backgrounds are at an increased risk of dropping out. Research shows that student progression is more successful in inclusive higher education environments. The study focuses on the promotion of opportunities for Roma in higher education, contributing to the international discourse on this issue. A Hungarian higher education organization supporting young Roma people and students of socially disadvantaged backgrounds is presented, relying on the experiences of young people who have been members of this community over the past twenty years. The question is whether and how the inclusive characteristics of the organization are reflected in the recollections of our interviewees (N = 50) about the student society. The narrative content analysis of the interviews shows that the former students' entry into and time spent in the student society was embedded in a strong (peer and tutorial) social network, which framed and amplified the mentioned inclusive elements and forms of support of the organization. The inclusive approach and practices of the student society community played a key role in the mobility of Roma youth during their university years and beyond.

Keywords: higher education; Roma; inclusion; student society

1. Introduction

How could Roma students succeed at university, and how do they remember the community that supported them? In Hungary and Europe, the Roma population is the most underrepresented in tertiary education. In Hungarian universities, "Roma student societies" function to provide services and, importantly, a community for their members throughout their university life until their successful graduation. This paper is based on a complex research project, carried out in 2022, aiming to investigate the life courses of a student society's former members, aiming to gain new perspective on the role of this organization through the experiences of its members. The research took two years to prepare, with current members playing an active role in the process of data collection. Former members of the student society have given life course interviews. This paper presents some aspects of the research. In this analysis, the period of higher education and the role of the student society is discussed. Following a process-based method, entry to the society, students' motivation to join, and equitable services provided by the society are highlighted. A fundamental characteristic of the topic is that the situation of the Roma population in higher education is rarely discussed, with few international publications exploring it. There are, of course, historical-social-economic reasons for this, which are not discussed in detail in this paper, but which can serve as important contributions to the discussion of the situation of the target groups of inclusion. Additionally, student societies, as institutions providing equitable services, and community, are adaptable in international higher educational settings.

2. Theoretical Background

The right to quality education as a basic human right is declared in international policy papers [1,2], yet those in socially disadvantaged positions, such as the people of Roma minority groups, often have restricted access to quality education, study in segregated institutions, and have shorter educational paths [3,4].

The expansion of higher education and the diversification of entrants are becoming more common around the world, both as a consequence of the transformation of higher education and as a generator of its development. There is a growing body of research and development that explores the inclusiveness and good practices of higher education as an organization [5–8], one example being the Inclusive Excellence movement in the US [9–11], which outlined a multifaceted approach to developing a diverse learning environment and provided scientific evidence that diverse student environments contribute to the growth of academic excellence [12]. Inclusion is characterized by a broadening and continuous development of activities related to the successful management of diversity [13]. Creating an inclusive environment occurs at various levels of the system, involving leaders, training teachers, developing curricula, etc. Moreover, equitable services are provided by small communities created for the target groups—to which application is an individual choice. According to a Hungarian study, Roma and underprivileged students at universities are less likely to be involved in larger social and academic support programs; however, smaller communities can better support student involvement for them [14]. Inclusiveness is defined as a process-based approach [15] where the 'input' is the conditions that support entry into an inclusive organization, the 'process' covers all aspects of the time spent in the community, including the practice of equity, and the 'output' is captured in performance indicators.

Research around the world is identifying new groups that have been underrepresented in higher education [16] and exploring ways to make institutions more inclusive [17]. Examining the Spanish higher educational setting, researchers have detected various student groups, highlighting that their heterogeneity manifests in diverse student needs [18]. Based on their interview research, they have found that these students need to overcome more difficulties, attempts at which are often not supported or recognized by the university; thus, they feel invisible [18]. In Hungary, people with disabilities, disadvantages, parents of young children, Hungarians living outside the borders, and foreign students are identified in legislation as social groups to be supported when entering higher education, while research is also looking at Roma youth in particular. The phenomenon of intersectionality along the intertwining of multiple categories of inequality is also highlighted [19,20], which makes upward educational social mobility difficult. The student groups that are the focus of inclusion share the common feature that the socio-historical context influences their growth [10], as well as the ways in which they experience their mobility personally and socially [21]. And their underrepresentation in higher education is underpinned by both structural oppressions and differences in their capital types [22,23].

Several studies have found that in European countries where data are available, between 1% and 4% of the estimated Roma population has a tertiary education, often making them the most underrepresented group in higher education [24–26]. In various educational settings, estimated data are to be found about the (under)representation of Roma populations in higher education [27]. This very low rate is also true for Hungary and it shows a huge gap compared to the non-Roma population. Research demonstrates that a large proportion of successful Roma individuals are characterized by a supportive family background as part of a strong community capital [28], with exemplary relatives [29,30], and the combined presence of ties to the majority society [31–35]. Research comparing Roma and non-Roma students found that Roma students are resilient because they rely on their teachers and community when facing obstacles [36]. Spanish researchers inquired about Roma students who did not belong to any supporting organizations [37]: through their individual social mobility, their Roma identity has varied between ethnic invisibility and positive self-identification. Another Spanish research study found Roma university students who were accepted because of their similarity to the majority of the society; thus,

their Roma identity was pushed to the background [29]. Boros et al. [38], examining the life course of first-generation Roma intellectuals in Hungary, identified the communities and resources available to Roma youth through support programs as 'Roma cultural capital', which could significantly reduce or compensate for the costs of mobility. Several studies point to the increasing value of schooling in Roma communities and the skills and mobility that can be acquired through it, but despite aspirational capital [28], inequalities in schooling persist. Recognition, a network of contacts, and active involvement can open pathways to mobility for families and students who turn to school [39,40]. Thus, it is essential to identify and study organizations that provide equitable support for students.

In the Hungarian tertiary education system, support of Roma students was led by civil organizations in the first decade of the new millennium; then, the program development and supervision were taken over by the government. With the support of EU funding schemes, the Network of Roma Student Societies was established in 2011. Nowadays, supported by the Hungarian government, this network is created by 10 institutions throughout the country, helping nearly 300 disadvantaged—mostly Roma—university students to acquire a university degree. Joining the student society is voluntary, and a certain ratio of non-Roma and non-disadvantaged students are also accepted (but not to exceed 25% of all members). To scaffold the input of the process-based model of inclusion, Roma student societies carry out various activities to recruit students. During the time spent in the student society (the process of inclusion), dormitory placement, community space, cultural programs, and individualized support are provided for all members. Another study supports the finding that Roma student societies decrease the chance of drop-out (output of inclusion) [15]. According to researchers, this result is due to the fact that Roma student societies provide inclusive small communities and safe spaces for Roma and/or disadvantaged students, creating a bridge between family and the university environment. Additional research on Roma student societies in Hungary reports that for first-generation Roma students, the social capital inherent in this community network provides strong support in overcoming challenges in higher education [41,42]. Dunajeva [43] argues that the retaining power of the social network is particularly important in crisis situations and especially for those who also face other difficulties.

3. Materials and Methods

In this research, we aimed to explore the inclusive characteristics of a higher education institution that has been in operation for 20 years, particularly in the context of how it has responded to the needs of its former students based on the respondents' perceptions. The focus was also on the aspects of a particular Roma student society that were important in supporting social mobility, as most of its students were first-generation intellectuals and young Roma. We considered anyone to be Roma who identified themselves as Roma and to be of disadvantaged background if at least one parent did not have a school leaving certificate or higher qualification. Low education was invariably intertwined with low family income. The data collection phase of the research was carried out in 2022–2023 and started with the compilation of a database of former members of the Roma student society, based on the analysis of the student society's documents. In total, 134 persons were identified who were members of the student society for at least half a year during the 20-year period, but who are not members in the current period (Table 1).

As a research tool, a life course interview was applied with structured questions covering the whole life course of the individual, focusing also on the components of the development of resilience. Resilience is understood (similarly to the above-cited research of Rayman and Varga [35], based on Masten's concepts) as the ability to resist difficulties when individuals overcome social disadvantages occurring in their lives and proceed successfully on their educational path. The factors of resilience were identified as the individuals' internal difficulties and personal strengths, as well as the barriers and supportive events and the people surrounding them. In the interview questions, the period before entering

university was also inquired about; however, in this analysis, only their experiences in higher education and the role of the student society in their life are discussed.

Table 1. Attributes of the student society members and those participating in the interview.

		Number of People	Gender		Social Background		Being of a Minority		Duration Spent in the Student Society		
Total			**Male**	**Female**	**Disadvantaged Background**	**Non-Disadvantaged Background**	**Roma**	**Non-Roma**	**Not More than 1 Year**	**1–2 Years**	**More than 2 Years**
Interviewed (Research sample)	No.	50	22	28	43	7	39	11	17	17	15
	%	37.3%	44.0%	56.0%	86.0%	14.0%	78.0%	22.0%	34.0%	34.0%	30.0%
Not interviewed (Not in the sample)	No.	84	33	51	63	21	54	30	61	17	4
	%	62.7%	39.3%	60.7%	75.0%	25.0%	64.3%	35.7%	72.6%	20.2%	4.8%
Total	No.	134	55	79	105	29	93	41	78	34	19
	%	100.0%	41.0%	59.0%	79.1%	20.9%	69.4%	30.6%	58.2%	25.4%	14.2%

The life course interviews were conducted in person or online between the autumn of 2022 and the spring of 2023, following a joint preparation with current students of the student society. The students' possible inexperience as researchers was compensated by the advantage that their task was to have honest conversations with former students, who were older than them but on a familiar life path. Similarly to Goenechea et al. [37], the research group writing this paper believes that the most effective approach is to work in an intercultural team. Both among the authors and researchers, Roma and non-Roma scholars are represented, all of whom are connected to the student society in some ways.

Participation in the research was voluntary, and at any point during the interview, participants could decline to answer. The interviews were recorded, and a written version of the audio materials was produced by the interviewers. Both versions of the interviews are anonymized and stored on a computer accessible by code, with access restricted to the researchers and research managers coding the materials. The research on which this study is based has followed the ethical guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki and has been approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Pécs. Research participants have received notification, signed a consent form, and agreed to participate in the research.

Based on the process-based model of inclusion, the following questions are explored:

1. How did research participants enter the student society, and were there any support or tools provided to aid access to the organization?
2. What motivation and expectations did they have towards the student society at the time of entry?
3. What did the student society offer to the research participants and why was this important to them?

The content analysis of the interviews was carried out by two independent coders based on a pre-designed coding scheme that was slightly modified during the coding process. The coding scheme reflected the model of inclusion, resilience factors, and types of capitals. These have been analyzed by themes and divided into subcategories. In the descriptive statistics, no matter how many times a topic was mentioned, only whether it appeared in the narrative (1) or did not appear (0) was recorded by the coders. The categorization is explained using the interview passages extracted from the narratives. During the coding process, multiple mentions of a theme in different instances were also recorded. Repetition of the same content was not coded twice. The analysis could be carried out in two ways: (1) if a theme appeared or not and (2) the frequency of the theme appearing is also considered. Three of the tables (Tables 1–3) show the number of respondents mentioning the categories of the interview questions at least once. Tables 4–6 are supplemented by frequency. Repeated mentioning was understood as a strong relationship to the theme mentioned.

Table 2. Answers for the question: "How did you learn about the student society?" (All mentions: 54). Answers to the interview questions per capita.

Distribution (N)		From a Society Student	Teacher from Secondary School	University Teacher	Internet
Disadvantaged background	43	17	4	21	4
Non-Disadvantaged background	7	3	0	4	1
Roma	39	16	4	18	3
Non-Roma	11	4	0	7	2
Total participants mentioning the category	50				
All mentions	54	20	4	25	5

Table 3. Answers to the questions "What did you expect and what did you get from the student society?" (Number of positive mentions). Answers to the interview questions per capita.

	Distribution	N	Educational Support	Inclusive Community	Programs	Financial Support	Teachers' Support	Roma Identity
Expected	Disadvantaged background	43	8	27	6	15	8	3
Got			23	39	23	20	34	10
Expected	Non-Disadvantaged background	7	1	6	1	1	1	0
Got			4	7	1	2	4	1
Expected	Roma	39	6	28	5	14	8	3
Got			21	37	20	18	32	11
Expected	Non-Roma	11	3	5	2	2	1	0
Got			6	9	4	4	6	0
Expected	Total	50	9	33	7	16	9	3
Got			27	46	24	22	38	11

Table 4. Answers to the questions "What did you expect and what did you get from the student society?" (At least two positive mentions of one "got").

	Distribution	N	Educational Support	Inclusive Community	Programs	Financial Support	Teachers' Support	Roma Identity
Expected	Total	50	9	33	7	16	9	3
Got			10	34	12	1	25	1

The independent variables were gender (male/female), length of time spent in the student society (less than 1 year, between 1 and 2 years, more than 2 years), Roma/non-Roma origin, and social status (parents' education and financial situation). Data on the total membership of the student society are available from the organization's documentation. SPSS was used for the analysis and, in addition to descriptive statistics, Chi-square tests were performed to explore correlations. Due to the small size of the sample, the reliability of this is severely limited, so we only point to a few correlations that are not mathematically significant. The strength of the significant relationship between variables was measured using Cramer's V index. In addition to this, quotes from the narratives that are specific to a particular theme were highlighted.

Table 5. Out of the six categories assessed, how many benefits were mentioned by each student in the interview as positive examples?

Number of Mentioned Benefits	Mentioning at Least Once		Mentioning at Least Twice	
	N	**%**	**N**	**%**
0	-	-	7	14.0
1	5	10.0	16	32.0
2	9	18.0	15	30.0
3	11	22.0	9	18.0
4	15	30.0	3	6.0
5	8	16.0		
6	2	4.0		
Total	50	100.0	50	100.0

Table 6. Has the student society provided you with close tutoring support (min. two mentions)?

		Yes	No	Total
Disadvantaged background	N	24	19	43
Non-Disadvantaged background	N	2	5	7
Total	N	26	24	50
Roma	N	23	16	39
Non-Roma	N	3	8	11
Total	N	26	24	50

4. Results

With the help of the database created, the population of the research was analyzed; additionally, this provided an opportunity to compare the data of the population and sample (Table 1). Among women, there were fewer disadvantaged and Roma, while a higher proportion of men had been members of a student society for more than 2 years. There is a significant and relatively strong correlation between disadvantaged status and Roma ethnicity: the vast majority of Roma (90.3%) are disadvantaged, compared to only 53.7% of non-Roma having disadvantaged backgrounds. This data indicates the intersectional situation of Roma. There is no significant difference between Roma and non-Roma in terms of the length of student society membership, although a slightly higher proportion of Roma were members for at least two years. All ex-student society members were invited to participate in the interview survey. Those who accepted the invitation (N = 50) represent our sample, with a distribution of 21 males and 29 females, 39 Roma and 11 non-Roma, 43 from disadvantaged backgrounds, and 7 from higher-status families. Here again, there is a significant correlation between Roma and disadvantaged background: almost three-quarters of the students (72%) are both Roma and of disadvantaged background, while only four students (8%) do not belong to either group. The age of the respondents ranges from 26 to 41 years (average 31.6 years); 44 out of 50 have a degree, 3 are still studying, and 3 are working without a degree.

There is no significant difference between the demographics of all student society members and those interviewed. Almost three-fifths of all students were female, and our sample is representative of the entire student society community according to the gender variable. Nearly four-fifths of all students were disadvantaged, and more than two-thirds of all students were Roma (69.4%), meaning that some of them are in an intersectional position and resilient as they could enroll in tertiary education contrary to obstructing factors. A slight difference appears in the variable "Roma and those of disadvantaged backgrounds";

participants who met this criterion have given interviews in higher proportions. Almost half (44.8%) of the professional students had been members for less than one year, 35.8% for 1–2 years and 19.4% for more than 2 years. Deciding to give an interview was significantly influenced by the length of time spent in a student society: one-fifth (22%) of those with less than 1 year of membership were interviewed, while more than three-quarters (79%) of those with more than 2 years of membership were interviewed. We interpret participation in the interview as a measure of involvement and commitment to the student society and thus conclude from the sample-to-population ratio that the student society gave Roma and disadvantaged people a slightly stronger sense of attachment, with a longer time in the student society clearly multiplying involvement.

A limitation of our research is that we were only able to include less than half of the total student body. A minority of the others were not available or did not respond at all, and many of them responded to our inquiries but, for whatever reason, were unwilling or unable to be interviewed. Thus, it is likely that our interviewees are more likely to be those with more positive perceptions of the student society, which may distort the results and make any weaknesses less apparent. Nonetheless, we believe that our interviewees' recollections can provide a picture of the main aspects of an inclusive organization in higher education.

The analysis of the responses from our interviewees' life stories concerning the student society follows the process-based model of inclusion, looking at its aspects. Supporting factors of the input were inquired from the individual's point of view. The question is: Why did the research participants join the student society, what did they expect, and what did they receive from this organization?

A small group of respondents (N = 4) mentioned more information sources, in all instances mentioning another individual and an organization. A small number (N = 4) of the respondents reported getting involved in the student society were reported by support programs that help Roma and disadvantaged young people in secondary education. This indicates that student societies aim for a network of cooperation and "reaching down" to their partners, which is a sign of inclusion (Table 2).

Half of the respondents mentioned university teachers (25 people) and/or students of the community (20 people) who had involved them in the society. In the case of university teachers, specific names were listed by the former students, mentioning the link, which indicates that teachers in the Roma student society have open-minded attitudes, and notice that their students need such a society. This attitude at the organizational level is an attribute of inclusion, as the network of the student society helped facilitate student involvement.

> "I heard about it from X.Y, who I knew from the Faág (Tree Branch) Association", "XY encouraged me to join, who my father knew."

In most cases, the names were accompanied by a specific story as well as a personal connection, which points to the importance of remembering the entry.

> "X.Y. (university teacher) caught me in one of her classes and then she said that she would definitely like to see me in the student society, so I should go there. We were in a class together shortly before the MA application and you know, she told me everything and I was hooked by this "woman". . . I was like a little kid, I was running after her, I just loved her personality. . . I was thinking about applying for the MA, after all I already had the BA degree, I could work with it. . . Anyway, then the student society came, and I carried on."

In the same way, the degree students mentioned in the interviews came from the respondents' network of contacts.

> "Several of my friends were members of the student society", "My groupmate told me that I should come here."

Similar to the recollections of the lecturers, students as professionals often recruited new members as a result of a longer process.

"I joined the student society straight away. You could say I knew about the student society before I applied to university, because my partner was in the student society, and I went to a lot of student society programs as an extern."

The answers to the following questions (What did you expect and what did you get from the student society?) are compared. It is important to note that in the case of expectations, brief and rather schematic mentions were made, while the answers to the question "What did you get?" included personal stories, emotional sentences, and reflective explanations.

Almost half of the students came to the student society with multiple, complex expectations, the same number mentioned one expectation, while six students mentioned none. Expectations about the student society on entry most (N = 33) highlighted community, with the narratives most frequently mentioning the importance of getting around campus, friendship with others from similar backgrounds, and a sense of security. In this, the non-disadvantaged jump out, with expectations of naming the community outstandingly.

"I'll meet other people; I'll have contacts and then things will be easier at university."

"It was important for me to be in community with young people in roughly similar situations and so I thought, if it is targeting Roma young people, that's where I could be really good."

"I was expecting it to be a [...] super community where I, the little village girl in the big city, could feel a bit [...] enveloped or could provide a safe environment."

The services expected from the student society are more of a bulleted list, with the scholarship opportunity mentioned most often (N = 16). One-fifth of respondents said they did not expect anything from the student society, but mentioned a personal connection and need (scholarship or community) that motivated them to join.

"At the beginning it was financial, but then later there were a lot of courses and programs that I liked. I also liked the weekends anyway. There was joint research, there was language teaching, we also travelled abroad together on study trips. So, it's a long list... I think I got more than I expected, but I don't know what my expectations were."

According to the calculation about the received support mentioned at least twice (Table 4), it is striking that financial support was mentioned more than once by only one person, while tutors were positively mentioned at least twice by half of the respondents.

Overall, in terms of meeting expectations, all students mentioned at least one of the six areas surveyed at least once (Table 5), but three quarters of the respondents also listed at least three, and some mentioned five or all six. The inclusive community and the close relationship with teachers and tutors were the main benefits of the student society for most.

When analyzing the question "What have you been given?" in more detail, the category of educational support included mentions the contribution to university studies and thus to social mobility. For example, language exam preparation, help with courses, and development in student society were mentioned. Often, the academic research carried out at the student society was mentioned, which provided knowledge for the subsequent writing of a thesis. Many participants highlighted tangible experiences and a broad knowledge and perspective. The number of mentions in this category is three-times higher than expected.

"...it academically and financially provided me an extra family."

"You can grow professionally and academically and make friends and build a family at the same time."

"It's a great community, lots of experiences, lots of knowledge that you can get by not learning it from a textbook, but by putting it into practice."

The recollections of the inclusive community can be divided into three groups. The physical space itself is important, the 'community room' shaped and occupied by the students, and its physical and psychological components.

"How nice it was to have our own community room with a computer."

"Together we started to create a student room for the society and then we felt that, well, we had something."

"We could talk to each other there, read, study, surf the internet, whatever... We could also talk to the teachers in there a lot... because it's an awkward situation if you try to get emotional in the teachers' room, but when we went to the community room, it was easier."

The emotional support received from peers is part of the community and also indicates the beginning of peer support, where the respondent becomes an active member of the community, helping others. In several cases, this is seen in conjunction with the respondent's lack of well-being in other communities at the university (e.g., in his/her own faculty).

"What is absolutely great about [student society] is that you know and feel that you are not so disconnected."

"It was nice to come in after university and be around people I could identify with..."

"For me, the student society gave me a family-like, inclusive environment where I could be with people in similar situations, it gave me a lot of friends that are still with me today..."

"We had a peer mentor who I still have a very good relationship with, and he motivated me a lot and I learned a lot from him..."

"I was always looking out for those who were passive or on the periphery and working on how I could somehow include them. Because a lot of them didn't know how much of a good community they belonged to, and you need to help them a little bit to feel that."

The experience of community was often intertwined with the programs and services offered by the student society. This was interpreted as the community framework multiplying the use of these.

"The first real experience that was very defining was our first [student society] Christmas, which was very intimate, and we really had a lot of people here. Then the research in Tisza, that was brilliant too. We went wild down to Tisza and went into the families... that was the first interview of my life, and it was very well organized. We went back in the summer and did this Indian camp. And the trip abroad, Genoa, that was brilliant too."

"It was such a great experience for me to see the sea for the first time on the trip with the society... I remember turning into Trieste and the whole bus knew that I had never seen the sea before, and the whole bus, even in the back, said 'look [interviewee's name, ed.], there's the sea', and then I looked out and everyone was looking and was happy that I was happy that there was the sea."

"I was very scared to speak in community when there were more of us... I was nervous, I couldn't speak, I was sweating, I had all the problems. I managed to overcome this thanks to the professional. X.Y (instructor) threw me in the deep end several times. We had a research—the Tiszabő research—and it had a conference. It had to be presented. Phew! In Budapest, when we were at university. And then we had to speak in front of everybody. My mentor sat next to me and motivated me. And he/she (the instructor) taught me to always start my talk by talking about myself, introducing myself and then the rest would come. And I still use this when I have to speak."

The student society's community appeared in all but four interviews and with more mentions, well above the high proportion (two-thirds) that appears in the expectations.

The previous interview data also illustrate the diversity of professional and cultural programs, which were coded separately when not linked to a community experience. This is why student society programs are mentioned at a relatively low rate, only by half of the respondents.

The community and variety of programs may seem to overshadow the more briefly described financial aid, but the mentions suggest that it was essential in proceeding in the university and pursuing a degree. In addition to the monthly scholarship paid by the student society, other resources available through the student society network are also important.

> "The scholarship helped me not to have to take on another job in addition to university."

> "I came to university as a poor boy and the university provided me with a living. And the student society was everything. But the university gave me enough to bring me a lot of scholarships."

In the student society, university teachers acted as tutors, providing personalized support to students. This service was the second-most frequently mentioned. In the narratives, the tutors are seen as role models and encouragers, with whom the majority of respondents keep in touch after leaving the student society. Tutors also provided emotional support alongside academic support and provided security. Other staff members are also mentioned in the same way. Based on the frequency of mentions (Table 6), the development of close relationships with tutors and teachers seems to be more important for Roma students and students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

> "There was always someone to turn to at the student society."

> "The tutors helped us with everything, in quotes, they looked after us."

Support that respondents expected and received can be described as capitals. Economic (financial support = scholarship), cultural (educational support or programs), and social (teachers' support and inclusive community) capitals were both expected and received by members of the Roma student society. The strengthening of Roma identity was mentioned as an entry expectation by only a few (N = 3) participants, while it was mentioned by a fifth of respondents in their recollections of the student society. There are some who reflected on their identity at the student society, some who came with a strong identity, but also some who acquired a positive Roma identity at the student society.

> "So, it's a Roma student society and somehow there was an opportunity for people from disadvantaged backgrounds to get in. I didn't identify myself as a Roma, but in the meantime, I learned more about my family, that they were among my ancestors. . . but I never said it like that, that I was a Roma. . ."

> "When I entered, there was a group of Roma children. Really, everyone looked really weird. Everybody was like chocolate! I saw them and my God, where did I get to! Then the first weekend was so brilliant, I felt like I'd come home. Here I am, starting out on a career as a Roma intellectual, just starting all this, I don't know what I'm doing. There are a lot of young people here who are already masters' students, they all have a really strong Roma identity, and it gave me this kind of I don't know what, kind of strength, that my God, there are so many of us, but it's cool that we're going in the same direction and how great it is. . ."

There were also general summarizing and emotive statements about the student society, which were coded into other categories.

> "The student society is once a refuge, once a home, once someone who slaps us to go through life. We got everything we needed."

> "For a lot of people, it's a stepping stone that, if it wasn't for that, a lot of people wouldn't be able to make a change in that situation in life."

The findings of the research are concluded in Figure 1, following the framework of the process-based model of inclusion. The results show that the student society could help students' involvement through its network. After students joined the student society, they were provided services embedded in a peer community and personalized support network. The engagement of the respondents is apparent through their participation in the research and they are characterized by a stronger identity and capital growth.
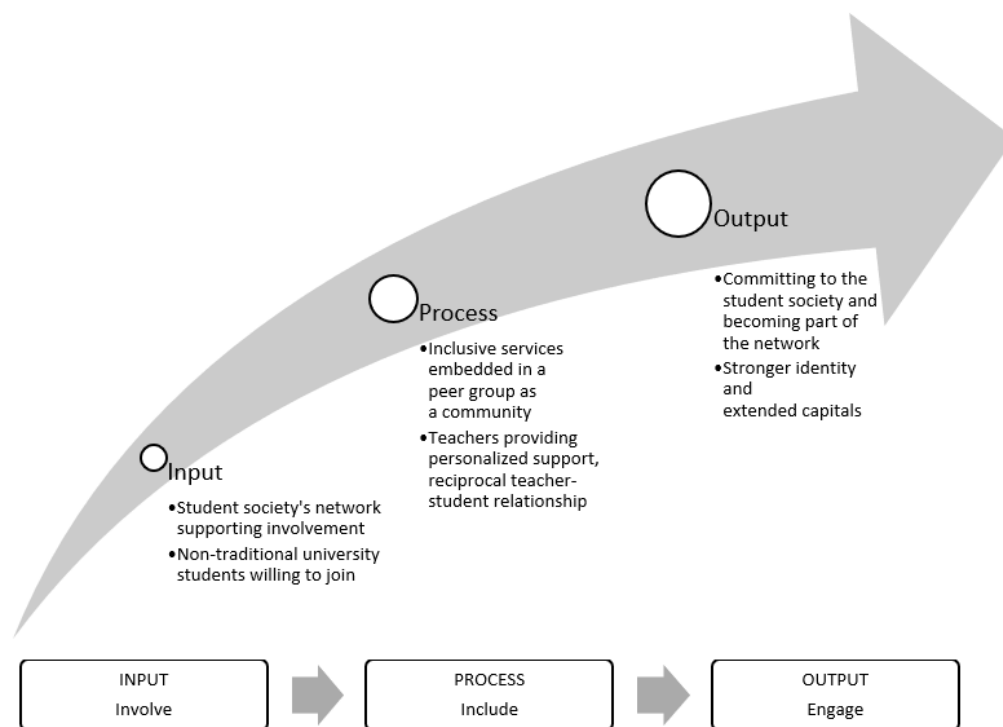
Figure 1. Findings on the power of an inclusive student society: from involvement, through inclusion, to engagement.

5. Discussion

The research sought to answer the questions about the role of an inclusive higher education institution in the lives of disadvantaged and young Roma people, as recalled by those who were no longer members of this community. The novelty of our results is that they present a picture of an organization based only on the views of young people who, in retrospect, gave their opinions without any dependence.

The results of our study confirmed the results of the studies listed above [28,31–34], which argue that the different capitals (aspirational, navigational, social, and Roma cultural) and their interconnectedness available in families and networks are of paramount importance in multi-stage mobility pathways, including higher education, especially for a group in an intersectional situation such as Roma. It is also confirmed that the opening of higher education and the emergence of underrepresented groups does not automatically bring with it a truly inclusive environment [6–8]. The analyzed institution aimed to provide space for all these aspects of inclusion. The research has highlighted that a key issue is the facilitation of access to supportive communities (question 1). This is one of the functions of an inclusive organization, which it achieves through its involved leadership team, who reach out to students through their personal web of contacts and teachers prepared for diversity, activating their informal and formal networks [13]. Social capital played a major role in access, which was the network of family, peer group and educators. The role of the peers in engaging new students is also particularly important, as they are credible transmitters of information and a reflection of their self-directed work in building their

own communities. This is an important result of our research, as no similar findings have been noted in prior research on the progress of Roma youth in higher education.

The narratives of our interviewees also pointed out (question 2) that, regardless of the inclusive nature of higher education, there is a need for smaller communities where first-generation Roma or non-Roma intellectuals can find support or, as many former students put it, a "second family". This result strengthens findings regarding the function of a supportive small community in creating student involvement [14]. This finding is in line with studies that emphasize the retaining power of the social network of Roma student societies [39,40] and identify the capital of such communities as "Roma community capital" [38]. Previous research has described the Roma perspective, and our study aims to draw attention to the scaffolding role and inclusive functions of these small communities for the development of higher education by exploring their characteristics. The organization we studied operated a communal space in the process of inclusion, characterized by an attitude and sense of inclusiveness. Both peers and facilitators (e.g., university teachers) were prominent as community builders in the organization, and their role was exemplary and supportive. The importance of a small community is indicated (question 3) by the fact that the mention of student society services was more often related to some kind of community experience. This result is also novel from an organizational point of view, as the results of the study show that equitable support is better used by linking it to the community. Mentioning Roma identity positively and as a value is an important indicator of inclusion. They also believe that applying and becoming a member of the Roma student society is a sign of having a positive minority identity. Thus, in contrast to invisibility, as in the Spanish example [18], Roma student society members have a positive self-identification that is reinforced through membership.

In addition to the similarities in the interviews, the life stories and the related "responses" of the student society members indicate the personalization of the inclusive environment. This is supported by the fact that although disadvantaged Roma students were in the majority in the student society, there was no difference in the mention of benefits between students from different backgrounds, meaning that the organization was able to create an environment at the individual level in which not only those from the target groups "labelled" by inclusion found a community. This is a similar result to the findings of the Inclusive Excellence movement stated above [9–11].

Given the limitations of the research, we believe it is important to conduct further interviews with other members who were not included in the research, to obtain a more nuanced picture of any gaps or negative experiences of the student society population, including the reasons for the female "overrepresentation" and other inclusive characteristics.

6. Conclusions

The Roma student society under study was reviewed retrospectively, based on the experiences of 50 former members over a period of more than 20 years. For Roma and disadvantaged young people, the importance of the sustaining power of inclusive small communities, whose experiences and connections stay with them beyond their university years, was confirmed. The analysis of the interviews also shows that the organization under study has succeeded in creating, testing, and operating an inclusive environment that most of the interviewees remembered positively. We believe that the student society, as an organization, presented through the perspective of Roma youth, can be defined as an inclusive community in higher education, and that its model can be adapted to other contexts and target groups. In this paper, we would like to draw attention to the need for this type of organization in higher education, which is necessary to complement inclusive institutions. On the other hand, for such small communities, an examination according to the process-based model of inclusion is essential to ensure that they become more inclusive. Nevertheless, the aim is to make the higher education system more inclusive, for which the small community organization presented in this paper can serve as an example and a good practice.

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