

Bullying Awareness and Prevention in a Multicultural University

Context: Student Adaptation in Cluj-Napoca

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Abstract

This paper examines bullying awareness and prevention in a multicultural university context, focusing on students' adaptation to a new cultural environment in Cluj-Napoca, Romania. Although bullying has been widely documented in schools, less attention has been paid to how it is perceived and addressed in higher education, where mobility and diversity are strongly present. Babeș-Bolyai University (UBB), as a large academic centre attracting students from different regions of Romania and from abroad, provides a relevant context for exploring how everyday interactions, communication practices and institutional messages shape students' understanding of bullying.

The study aims to investigate how students define and recognize bullying, how they experience or witness it in academic and social settings, and how they evaluate existing prevention and awareness efforts. Particular attention is paid to differences between local students and those who relocate to Cluj-Napoca, often encountering a new cultural, linguistic and social environment. The research also explores how factors such as perceived belonging, openness to diversity and trust in university structures relate to students' willingness to seek help or report bullying situations.

Methodologically, the paper is based on a questionnaire survey conducted among undergraduate and postgraduate students enrolled in several faculties at UBB in Cluj-Napoca. The instrument includes items on perceptions of bullying prevalence, personal or observed experiences, bystander reactions, attitudes towards diversity and inclusion, and perceived accessibility of support services

and reporting mechanisms. Descriptive and comparative analyses are used to identify patterns and differences among student groups.

Preliminary insights highlight the role of communication in facilitating or hindering adaptation and in shaping bullying awareness. Students who report a lower sense of belonging and limited social networks appear more vulnerable to subtle forms of exclusion and more hesitant to report negative experiences. At the same time, many respondents indicate a preference for clear, student-centred communication strategies, peer-led initiatives and online campaigns that address bullying and discrimination in relatable language. The paper discusses implications for designing more inclusive, culturally sensitive prevention and awareness programmes in higher education, with a focus on strengthening institutional communication, student engagement and support structures at UBB.

Keywords: Bullying prevention, Student adaptation, Multicultural university context, Communication strategies, Higher education.

1. Introduction

Bullying represents an increasingly discussed issue within educational environments, particularly in relation to students' well-being, academic integration and social inclusion. While the phenomenon has been extensively examined in primary and secondary education, research focusing on bullying in higher education remains comparatively limited. Recent studies indicate that university students may also experience various forms of exclusion, discrimination and hostile behaviors, especially within multicultural academic contexts characterized by increased mobility and social diversity.

Contemporary universities are increasingly shaped by internationalization, cultural diversity and student mobility, factors that significantly influence interpersonal interactions and adaptation processes. Students who relocate to a new academic environment frequently face challenges associated with communication, integration and the development of social support networks. In such contexts, subtle forms of bullying and exclusion may affect students' ability to adapt successfully to university life and may reduce their sense of belonging within the academic community.

Recent literature highlights that bullying in higher education often differs from traditional school bullying through its indirect and relational nature. Instead of overt physical aggression, university students more commonly encounter behaviors such as social exclusion, repeated mockery, online harassment or marginalization based on cultural, social or regional differences. These forms of behavior may negatively influence students' emotional well-being, academic participation and trust in institutional support mechanisms.

Within multicultural university environments, adaptation and belonging become essential dimensions of the student experience. Research suggests that students who experience lower levels of social integration and acceptance are more vulnerable to isolation and less willing to report bullying or discrimination situations. At the same time, perceptions regarding institutional support and inclusivity significantly influence students' confidence in university structures and their willingness to seek help.

Cluj-Napoca represents a relevant context for investigating these issues due to its status as one of the most important academic centers in Romania and its highly diverse student population. Babeş-Bolyai University attracts students from different regions of the country as well as international students, creating a multicultural academic environment where processes of adaptation, integration and social interaction become particularly significant.

The main objective of this study is to explore how university students in Cluj-Napoca perceive bullying and exclusion within a multicultural academic environment and how adaptation and sense of belonging influence their willingness to report bullying situations.

The research is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How do students in Cluj-Napoca perceive and recognize bullying and exclusion behaviors in the university environment?

RQ2: How does adaptation to a new academic and cultural environment influence students' sense of belonging and their willingness to report bullying situations?

The study is based on a quantitative exploratory approach using a questionnaire survey administered to undergraduate, master's and doctoral students studying in Cluj-Napoca. By examining students' perceptions regarding bullying, exclusion, adaptation and reporting behavior, the research aims to contribute to the growing literature addressing inclusion and student well-being in multicultural higher education environments.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Bullying and Exclusion in Higher Education

Recent literature increasingly examines bullying within higher education contexts, not only in pre-university educational environments. Current studies indicate that the university environment may facilitate subtle forms of aggression and social exclusion, particularly in contexts characterized by cultural diversity, academic competition and complex processes of social adaptation. Although bullying is often associated with school-age students, recent research demonstrates that the phenomenon continues to affect university students as well, influencing social integration, academic performance and overall well-being.

In higher education, bullying manifests differently compared to traditional forms commonly identified in school settings. The literature highlights that direct aggression is less frequent, being replaced by indirect behaviors such as social isolation, exclusion from groups, repeated mockery, marginalization or discrimination based on cultural and social differences. Tight (2023) argues that bullying in higher education remains an insufficiently explored issue, despite the fact that a significant number of students report experiences associated with victimization and social exclusion. At the same time, Edward (2025) emphasizes that university bullying includes various forms, ranging from verbal harassment and cyberbullying to relational exclusion and identity-based discrimination.

Furthermore, the development of digital communication and the expansion of online interactions have contributed to the emergence of new forms of cyberbullying within academic environments. These manifestations include hostile comments in digital spaces, exclusion from online groups or ridiculing behaviors on platforms used for academic activities. Recent studies suggest that such forms of aggression may have an impact similar to or even stronger than direct negative interactions, as they affect both the academic and social dimensions of students' lives.

Specialized literature also underlines that multicultural university environments may generate additional vulnerabilities for certain categories of students. Cultural, regional and linguistic differences may influence the way students are integrated into social and academic groups. In this context, exclusion and marginalization frequently occur through microaggressions, stereotypes or

difficulties in integrating into university social networks. Rodríguez-Hidalgo et al. (2025) highlight that bullying based on cultural and identity differences becomes more frequent in communities characterized by high levels of diversity.

The consequences of such behaviors extend beyond social relationships and directly influence students' academic experiences. Recent studies associate bullying and exclusion with adaptation difficulties, reduced academic participation, lower levels of belonging and increased social isolation. Tay & Zamore (2024) demonstrate that negative perceptions of the university environment are associated with more frequent experiences of victimization and hostile behaviors. Similarly, research on student adaptation indicates that experiences of marginalization and exclusion reduce students' ability to integrate effectively into a new academic environment.

These aspects are particularly relevant in universities characterized by high mobility and cultural diversity, where social and academic adaptation becomes essential for student integration. In this regard, multicultural universities such as Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca represent relevant contexts for investigating the relationship between bullying, adaptation and sense of belonging.

2.2. Multicultural Adaptation, Sense of Belonging and Reporting Behavior

The process of adapting to the university environment represents one of the most important stages in the experiences of students who relocate to a new city for their studies. Adaptation involves not only academic integration, but also social and cultural integration into a new environment. Recent literature indicates that students who leave their family environment and previous social networks may experience difficulties related to communication, integration and the development of a new sense of belonging.

Eryilmaz et al. (2023) highlight that the university adaptation process is influenced by factors such as the social environment, peer support, university activities and the degree of familiarity with the new city. At the same time, research shows that lack of social integration, communication difficulties and negative experiences within the university environment may reduce students' ability to adapt effectively.

In multicultural universities, adaptation is also influenced by the cultural and regional diversity of the academic community. Interactions between students coming from different backgrounds may

facilitate inclusion and tolerance, but may also generate difficulties associated with stereotypes, cultural differences or feelings of isolation. Recent studies regarding intercultural sensitivity and inclusion in higher education suggest that academic environments encouraging integration and open communication contribute to reducing social vulnerability and increasing students' sense of safety and acceptance.

A central concept in recent literature is the sense of belonging, defined through students' perceptions that they are accepted, integrated and valued within the university community. Recent studies demonstrate that sense of belonging influences both academic participation and emotional well-being, as well as students' willingness to engage socially. In highly diverse university environments, belonging becomes an important factor in reducing isolation and social vulnerability.

At the same time, literature emphasizes that students who fail to develop a sufficient sense of belonging tend to display higher levels of social anxiety, withdrawal and distrust toward institutional structures. Lack of social integration may contribute to the normalization of negative experiences and to the avoidance of reporting bullying or discrimination situations.

Reporting behavior represents another important dimension in recent studies concerning bullying in higher education. Several studies indicate that many students avoid reporting negative experiences because they fear that the situations will not be treated appropriately or that their reactions will be minimized. Edward (2025) underlines that university bullying is frequently underreported due to stigmatization, lack of trust and the perception that institutional mechanisms are not sufficiently accessible or effective.

Moreover, recent research on university environments indicates that perceptions regarding institutional support significantly influence students' willingness to seek help or report negative behaviors. Universities that promote inclusive climates, clear support mechanisms and accessible communication tend to encourage higher levels of trust and engagement among students.

Although recent literature increasingly addresses bullying in higher education, there is still a limited number of studies investigating the relationship between multicultural adaptation, sense of belonging and reporting behavior within multicultural universities. In this context, the present research aims to explore how students in Cluj-Napoca perceive bullying and social exclusion and how adaptation and integration influence their willingness to report such situations.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The present study is based on a quantitative exploratory research design aimed at investigating university students' perceptions regarding bullying, exclusion, adaptation and reporting behavior within a multicultural academic environment. A questionnaire survey was selected as the primary research method due to its suitability for collecting perceptions, attitudes and experiences from a relatively large number of participants within a limited time frame.

The exploratory nature of the study is justified by the limited number of recent studies focusing on the relationship between bullying, multicultural adaptation and sense of belonging within Romanian higher education environments. In this context, the research seeks to identify patterns related to students' perceptions of bullying and social exclusion, as well as the influence of adaptation and belonging on reporting behavior.

The study focuses on students enrolled in universities located in Cluj-Napoca, a major academic center characterized by cultural diversity and high levels of student mobility. The multicultural characteristics of the city and its academic environment provide a relevant context for examining issues related to inclusion, adaptation and vulnerability among university students.

3.2. Participants and Sampling

The research sample consists of 120 students enrolled in undergraduate, master's and doctoral programs within the university environment of Cluj-Napoca. Participants include both students originally from Cluj-Napoca and students who relocated to the city for their studies.

The study employs a convenience sampling approach, as participants were selected based on accessibility and voluntary participation. Although this sampling method does not allow for broad generalization, it is appropriate for exploratory research focused on identifying perceptions and tendencies within a specific academic context.

The inclusion of students from different study cycles and backgrounds contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how bullying, exclusion and adaptation are perceived within multicultural university environments.

3.3. Research Instrument

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire consisting of 10 closed-ended questions organized into four main sections: respondent profile, perceptions of bullying and exclusion, adaptation and belonging, and reporting behavior.

The questionnaire was designed to address the two research questions of the study by examining students' perceptions regarding the frequency and forms of bullying in the university environment, as well as the relationship between adaptation difficulties, sense of belonging and willingness to report bullying situations.

The instrument included questions regarding students' perceptions of exclusion behaviors, experiences related to adaptation difficulties, feelings of integration within the university environment and levels of comfort associated with reporting bullying situations to university structures.

Closed-ended questions were selected in order to facilitate the comparative analysis of responses and the identification of patterns across participants. The structure of the questionnaire also allowed for a clear and concise quantitative interpretation of the collected data.

3.4. Data Collection and Ethical Considerations

The questionnaire was distributed online through Google Forms between April 22, 2026 and April 30, 2026. Participation in the study was voluntary, and respondents were informed about the academic purpose of the research before completing the questionnaire.

The study respected principles related to confidentiality, anonymity and informed consent. No personally identifiable information was collected, and participants had the possibility to withdraw from the questionnaire at any point.

The collected data were used exclusively for academic and research purposes. Responses were analyzed descriptively in order to identify tendencies and relationships regarding bullying perceptions, adaptation experiences and reporting behavior among students in Cluj-Napoca.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Perceptions of Bullying and Exclusion in the University Environment

The findings indicate that bullying and exclusion are perceived as present but not dominant phenomena within the university environment in Cluj-Napoca. Most respondents reported that

such behaviors occur *occasionally* or *rarely*, while a smaller yet significant proportion identified them as *frequent* or *very frequent*.

This distribution suggests a pattern of moderate normalization, where bullying is neither perceived as an exceptional occurrence nor as a pervasive structural issue. Rather, it appears embedded in everyday social interactions, aligning with recent literature that conceptualizes bullying in higher education as diffuse and context-dependent rather than overtly aggressive (Tight, 2023; Tay & Zamore, 2024).

A critical dimension of this perception emerges from the types of behaviors identified by respondents. The most frequently selected forms include:

- social exclusion,
- irony or mocking behavior,
- online harassment.

In contrast, direct forms of aggression (e.g., explicit verbal hostility) appear less dominant.

These results reinforce the idea that bullying in higher education operates primarily through relational and symbolic mechanisms, rather than through direct confrontation. This supports existing research emphasizing the role of microaggressions, social marginalization and informal exclusion practices in shaping negative student experiences (Rodríguez-Hidalgo et al., 2025).

Importantly, a considerable proportion of respondents reported having witnessed bullying or exclusion behaviors, even when not directly experiencing them. This distinction between perception and observation suggests that bullying is socially visible and collectively recognized, even when not individually internalized. Such visibility contributes to the normalization of these behaviors, potentially reducing their perceived severity and discouraging intervention.

4.2. Adaptation and Perceived Vulnerability in a Multicultural Context

The data reveal a strong consensus among respondents regarding the vulnerability of students who relocate to Cluj-Napoca for their studies. Most participants agreed that these students are more exposed to exclusion and adaptation difficulties.

This perception reflects a shared understanding of relocation as a critical transition, involving not only academic adjustment but also social and cultural negotiation. It aligns with recent studies highlighting that students entering new academic environments face challenges related to communication, identity positioning and integration into pre-existing social networks (Eryilmaz et al., 2023).

However, when examining self-reported adaptation difficulties linked to bullying, the results become more nuanced. While a majority of respondents indicated that they had *rarely* or *never* experienced such difficulties, a non-negligible proportion reported experiencing them *occasionally* or even *frequently*.

This discrepancy between collective perception (high vulnerability) and individual experience (moderate direct impact) suggests the presence of a perceived vulnerability gap. In other words, students recognize structural or contextual risks affecting others - particularly relocated peers - even when they do not personally identify as victims.

This finding is particularly valuable, as it points to the role of social awareness and collective narratives in shaping perceptions of exclusion. It also suggests that vulnerability in multicultural environments may operate at a symbolic and anticipatory level, not only through direct experience.

4.3. Sense of Belonging and Patterns of Social Integration

The majority of respondents reported feeling **mostly or very much accepted and integrated** within the university environment. This indicates that, at a general level, the academic context in Cluj-Napoca supports a relatively positive integration experience.

However, the data also reveal a smaller but significant segment of students who reported only *moderate*, *low* or *very low* levels of integration. This subgroup represents a zone of latent vulnerability, which is particularly relevant in multicultural settings.

When interpreted alongside responses regarding marginalization, a consistent pattern emerges. While most students reported that they had *never* felt excluded based on cultural, social or regional background, a noticeable proportion indicated experiencing such situations *occasionally* or *rarely*, and in some cases even *frequently*.

These findings suggest that exclusion is not structurally dominant, but selectively experienced, affecting specific individuals or groups rather than the student population as a whole. This aligns

with contemporary research on belonging in higher education, which emphasizes that integration is unevenly distributed, often depending on social positioning, cultural proximity and access to peer networks.

From an analytical perspective, the coexistence of high overall belonging with localized experiences of marginalization indicates a dual-layer integration model:

- a general perception of inclusion at the macro level;
- pockets of exclusion at the micro-social level.

This duality is particularly relevant in multicultural academic environments, where diversity can simultaneously foster inclusion and generate fragmentation.

4.4. Reporting Behavior and Institutional Trust

One of the most significant findings of the study concerns students' willingness to report bullying situations. The data show that a substantial proportion of respondents feel either *neutral* or *uncomfortable* when considering reporting such incidents, while fewer participants expressed high levels of comfort.

This pattern indicates a limited level of reporting confidence, suggesting that institutional mechanisms for addressing bullying may not be perceived as fully accessible, effective or trustworthy.

This reluctance to report aligns with recent literature emphasizing that bullying in higher education is often underreported, not necessarily due to its absence, but due to:

- fear of not being taken seriously,
- normalization of exclusion behaviors,
- lack of trust in institutional responses (Edward, 2025).

When considered in relation to the previous findings, reporting behavior appears closely linked to both sense of belonging and perceived vulnerability. Students who feel less integrated or who perceive higher levels of exclusion may also exhibit greater hesitation in engaging with formal support structures.

This suggests that reporting behavior should not be understood solely as an individual decision, but rather as a relational and context-dependent process, influenced by:

- social integration,
- perceived legitimacy of institutional structures,
- and the broader communicational climate within the university.

Synthesis of Findings

Taken together, the results of this study outline a nuanced picture of bullying and adaptation in a multicultural university environment:

1. Bullying is present primarily in subtle, relational forms, rather than through direct aggression.
2. Students perceive relocated peers as more vulnerable, even when personal experiences are less frequent.
3. A generally strong sense of belonging coexists with localized experiences of marginalization.
4. There is a clear hesitation in reporting bullying, indicating potential gaps in institutional trust and communication.

These findings contribute to the growing body of research on higher education by highlighting the importance of examining not only the presence of bullying, but also the interplay between perception, adaptation, belonging and institutional engagement within multicultural academic contexts.

5. Conclusions, Implications and Limitations

5.1. Conclusions

This study set out to examine how university students in Cluj-Napoca perceive bullying and exclusion within a multicultural academic environment, as well as how adaptation and sense of belonging influence their willingness to report such situations.

The findings reveal that bullying in higher education is not perceived as a dominant or structurally pervasive phenomenon. Instead, it is understood as a moderately present and normalized aspect of everyday interaction, primarily manifesting through subtle and relational forms such as social exclusion, irony and online behaviors. This supports the growing body of literature suggesting that bullying in university settings operates through indirect and socially embedded mechanisms, rather than overt aggression.

A key conclusion of the study is the distinction between collective perception and individual experience. While most respondents agree that students who relocate to Cluj-Napoca are more vulnerable to exclusion and adaptation difficulties, fewer report direct personal experiences of such challenges. This indicates the presence of a perceived vulnerability gap, where awareness of risk exists at a social level, even when not strongly internalized individually.

At the same time, the results highlight a generally positive perception of integration, with most students reporting high levels of acceptance within the university environment. However, this overall sense of belonging coexists with localized experiences of marginalization, affecting a smaller but significant segment of respondents. This duality suggests that inclusion in multicultural academic environments is unevenly distributed, rather than uniformly experienced.

Finally, one of the most significant findings concerns students' willingness to report bullying situations. Although a proportion of respondents express comfort in reporting, a substantial number remain neutral or hesitant. This indicates a fragmented level of institutional trust, where reporting behavior is influenced not only by individual attitudes, but also by perceptions of accessibility, effectiveness and legitimacy of university support structures.

5.2. Practical Implications

The findings of this study have several relevant implications for higher education institutions, particularly those operating in multicultural contexts.

First, universities should recognize that bullying in higher education does not typically manifest through explicit forms, but rather through subtle and relational dynamics. As a result, prevention strategies should move beyond traditional anti-bullying frameworks and address issues such as social exclusion, microaggressions and informal group dynamics.

Second, the perceived vulnerability of relocated students suggests the need for more structured and proactive integration mechanisms. Universities should invest in:

- peer mentoring programs,
- orientation activities focused on social inclusion,
- and communication strategies that facilitate early integration into academic and social networks.

Third, the coexistence of high belonging with pockets of marginalization highlights the importance of identifying and supporting at-risk subgroups, rather than relying solely on general indicators of student satisfaction.

Finally, the results related to reporting behavior emphasize the need to strengthen institutional trust and communication clarity. Universities should ensure that:

- reporting mechanisms are visible and accessible,
- procedures are clearly communicated,
- and students perceive responses as effective and supportive.

In this sense, communication plays a central role not only in awareness, but also in shaping students' willingness to engage with institutional structures.

5.3. Limitations and Future Research

Despite its contributions, the study presents several limitations that should be acknowledged.

First, the use of a convenience sample limits the generalizability of the findings. Although the sample includes students from different study levels and backgrounds, it reflects a specific academic context and may not fully represent broader student populations.

Second, the research relies on self-reported data, which may be influenced by subjective perceptions, social desirability or individual interpretation of bullying and exclusion behaviors.

Third, the use of exclusively closed-ended questions, while appropriate for quantitative analysis, does not capture the full complexity of students' experiences and meanings associated with bullying and adaptation.

Future research could address these limitations by:

- incorporating qualitative methods, such as interviews or focus groups;



- expanding the sample to include multiple universities or international contexts;
- and exploring in greater depth the relationship between communication strategies, institutional trust and reporting behavior.

Additionally, further studies could examine how specific categories of students—such as international students or those from minority backgrounds—experience adaptation and exclusion within multicultural academic environments.

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