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Abstract

Russia's 2022 invasion precipitated one of Europe's largest episodes of forced academic mobility, compelling universities to shift from emergency access to durable inclusion. This article investigates how Ukrainian students are integrated into Romanian higher education through a qualitative case study at Ovidius University of Constanta, undertaken within the Erasmus+ EIUS project. We analysed a participatory focus-group workshop ("Building Bridges," May 2024) involving 72 participants (15 Ukrainian students, 31 Romanian students, 26 academic staff). Transcripts were coded via reflexive thematic analysis and interpreted through a SWOT lens to connect lived experience with institutional strategy. Findings indicate that integration generates tangible pedagogical and social value—diversity enriches coursework, empathy strengthens peer collaboration, and exposure to multilingual classrooms catalyses instructional innovation. Yet systemic fragilities persist: language anxiety ("translation silence"), fragmented support pathways, and limited access to counselling shift emotional labour onto faculty and peers. Opportunities cluster around Erasmus+ infrastructures, bilingual materials, and co-created projects that transform access into participation; threats include latent prejudice, social isolation, compassion fatigue, and policy discontinuity as crisis attention wanes. We advance the concept of institutionalised solidarity—a multi-level inclusion model that couples emotional infrastructures (mentoring, trauma-informed pedagogy, counselling) with organizational infrastructures (integration offices, linguistic scaffolding, adaptive assessment). The study contributes an empirically grounded framework for moving from humanitarian reaction to sustainable academic inclusion and offers actionable guidance for European universities seeking resilience under protracted disruption.

Keywords: inclusion; Ukrainian students; higher education; intercultural communication; cross-cultural integration; Romania; Erasmus+; qualitative study; academic integration



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1. Introduction

The war in Ukraine, which began in February 2022, profoundly transformed the European educational landscape, turning universities into active agents of humanitarian and social intervention. While the first institutional reactions were dominated by emergency measures—opening enrolment channels, recognizing qualifications, and providing accommodation—universities soon realized that genuine integration involves much more than physical access or temporary assistance. It requires sustained academic inclusion, emotional support, and a shared sense of belonging to the European educational community. In this context, the Romanian higher education system faced a dual responsibility: to act

swiftly as a humanitarian actor and to reconfigure its educational practices for inclusivity and resilience.

Ovidius University of Constanta, located on the Black Sea coast and traditionally known for its multicultural environment, became one of the Romanian universities that responded most actively to the influx of Ukrainian students. Between 2022 and 2024, dozens of Ukrainian students joined undergraduate, preparatory, and master's programs, benefiting from tuition-free education, Romanian language courses, and Erasmus+ mobility opportunities. Yet behind these formal measures lay a complex web of interpersonal dynamics, institutional learning, and emotional negotiation that defined the lived experience of inclusion.

The *European Inclusion of Ukrainian Students (EIUS)* project—code 2023-1-SK01-KA220-HED-000157553—was launched under the Erasmus+ programme precisely to explore such dynamics. Its goal was to strengthen the capacity of European universities to host and integrate displaced students through participatory research and evidence-based recommendations. Within this project, Ovidius University organized in May 2024 the workshop *Building Bridges*, which served as both a space for reflection and data collection. Students, professors, and administrators met to discuss integration from personal and institutional perspectives, generating a rich qualitative corpus that forms the empirical foundation of this article.

The importance of such an inquiry extends beyond the local context. The inclusion of Ukrainian students represents a critical test of Europe's commitment to educational solidarity and intercultural dialogue. Romania, situated at the crossroads of East and West, offers a particularly interesting case study: a country that shares cultural proximity with Ukraine but differs linguistically, institutionally, and historically. Analysing how Ukrainian students adapt to this environment—and how Romanian institutions adapt in turn—provides valuable insight into the broader European project of inclusive higher education.

Rather than presenting Ovidius University of Constanta as a best-practice or exemplary model, this study deliberately examines a case of partial, solidarity-driven inclusion unfolding in an Eastern European border-region university under conditions of prolonged crisis. The contribution of this article lies in analysing how inclusion is enacted in the absence of fully consolidated institutional frameworks, and how emotional labour, peer mediation, and faculty commitment temporarily compensate for structural fragmentation.

By focusing on the everyday experiences of Ukrainian students, Romanian peers, and academic staff, the study addresses an under-explored dimension in the literature: the tension between interpersonal solidarity and institutional capacity in contexts where humanitarian responses risk remaining informal and reversible. The case of Ovidius University is therefore analytically distinctive not because it represents a success story, but because it reveals the fragile equilibrium between goodwill and governance that characterises inclusion in many Eastern European higher education institutions.

The study therefore situates itself within the growing body of research on refugee and displaced student inclusion in higher education, contributing an empirical case from the Eastern European border region—a perspective often underrepresented in mainstream academic discourse.

2. Literature Review

This study adopts a relational, process-oriented view of inclusion in higher education. Rather than a binary outcome, inclusion is treated as an ongoing process shaped by interactions between individuals, institutional practices, and the wider socio-political context. We define inclusion as the emotional, social, and organisational conditions that enable—or constrain—meaningful academic participation.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 marked a rupture in the European educational landscape, redefining the scope and meaning of inclusion in higher education. The mass displacement of Ukrainian students and academics—estimated by UNESCO (2023) to have surpassed 300,000 individuals across Europe—transformed universities from institutions of instruction into actors of humanitarian response, policy innovation, and intercultural negotiation. Within this exceptional context, the integration of Ukrainian students into European higher education has evolved from an emergency initiative into a test case for the ethical and institutional maturity of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The literature produced since 2022 reflects this evolution, offering theoretical, policy, and empirical insights into how universities reconfigure themselves in times of crisis, and how displaced students reconstruct their academic identities within foreign systems.

2.1. European Responses to War-Induced Student Displacement

The first wave of studies following the outbreak of war examined the macro-structural responses of European higher education to the sudden influx of Ukrainian students. Morrice (2022) described the crisis as a “decisive moment” for refugee education in Europe, noting that it forced universities to operationalize inclusivity beyond rhetoric. The rapid mobilization of admission exceptions, recognition of Ukrainian diplomas, and provision of emergency scholarships represented, in her view, a paradigmatic shift from “access as privilege” to “access as responsibility.” Similarly, the OECD (2022) and UNHCR (2023) identified higher education as a key domain of social resilience, where symbolic commitments to solidarity translated into material practices such as tuition waivers and targeted mobility schemes.

Within this emergent field, Ukraine itself has remained both a subject and a site of study. Londar and Pron (2022) analysed the country’s accelerated integration into the European educational and innovation space, arguing that the war paradoxically intensified Ukraine’s alignment with EHEA norms, particularly regarding transparency, quality assurance, and international mobility. Lagvilava (2023) further documented how the destruction of infrastructure and displacement of faculty led to an adaptive hybrid model, where Ukrainian universities sustained teaching online while maintaining affiliations with European partners. This hybridization—combining physical exile and virtual continuity—became a distinctive feature of Ukraine’s educational resilience.

Meanwhile, Oleksiyenko and Shchepetylnykova (2024) offered a groundbreaking analysis of international student mobility (ISM) in a war-torn context. Contrary to expectations, Ukraine continued to attract a considerable number of international students even after 2022. Their case study challenges the conventional hierarchy of ISM rationales—economic, geopolitical, cultural—by showing how, in precarious societies, these motives converge rather than compete. The authors conceptualize “solidarity-based mobility,” where foreign students’ decisions to study in Ukraine embody both resistance and alliance, transforming the host country into a moral and educational partner rather than a mere service provider.

Across Europe, the institutional responses to Ukrainian displacement varied by national capacity and policy culture. Herbst and Sitek (2023) analysed the Polish schooling and university systems, describing a dual dynamic: strong moral engagement at the societal level coupled with bureaucratic fragmentation at the institutional level. Poland’s universities, while enrolling tens of thousands of Ukrainian students, often lacked sustainable financial mechanisms for long-term integration. Velicico (2025) reached a similar conclusion in the Romanian context, where access and equity measures were praised for their openness but criticized for their uneven implementation. Both studies reveal a tension between humanitarian enthusiasm and institutional fatigue—a theme recurrent throughout post-2022 scholarship.

2.2. Institutional Models of Academic Inclusion Across Europe

Beyond immediate responses, scholars have sought to conceptualize inclusion models that balance emergency relief with systemic sustainability. Viczko and Matsumoto (2022) problematized the notion of “access” itself, arguing that refugee students’ inclusion must be understood not only as entry into universities but as participation in epistemic communities. Their critical framework distinguishes between procedural inclusion—focused on admissions and credits—and relational inclusion—focused on belonging, recognition, and agency. Applying this distinction to the Ukrainian case, subsequent studies demonstrated that universities achieving durable integration were those combining bureaucratic flexibility with affective infrastructure, including mentoring and psychosocial support.

Several empirical studies elaborated this principle. Chaichenko et al. (2024) conducted a comparative analysis of university students’ integration in Ukraine and the Czech Republic, showing that displaced students’ adaptation depends on three interrelated factors: linguistic accessibility, social connectedness, and perceived institutional empathy. Their findings highlight the centrality of communication—not merely language proficiency but the perception of being heard. Similarly, Chala et al. (2024), analysing student mobility during the war, demonstrated that Ukrainian universities’ participation in Erasmus+ networks provided a structural bridge for continuity of education and transnational collaboration. By maintaining these networks, higher education institutions functioned as transnational communities rather than isolated national entities.

The Slovak case, analysed by Urbaníková et al. (2025), further illustrates the Europeanization of inclusion through Erasmus+ frameworks. Their study—rooted in mixed-methods research within the project *Innovation of the structure and content of education in the field of economics and management with an emphasis on digitization, sustainability, and the inclusion of migrants*—identifies both opportunities and constraints. While Slovak universities successfully expanded their intake of Ukrainian students (from 5493 in 2021 to 13,061 in 2024), challenges such as language barriers, financial limitations, and social isolation persisted. The authors emphasize that adaptation mechanisms must integrate digital learning tools, bilingual materials, and targeted psychosocial assistance to bridge the gap between symbolic inclusion and lived experience.

These institutional variations demonstrate that inclusion is not a uniform European practice but a mosaic of adaptive strategies. Bocharova and Melnik (2023), in their pan-European survey, underline this heterogeneity by documenting the coexistence of “solidarity-driven” and “compliance-driven” models. In Western Europe, inclusion initiatives often align with pre-existing diversity frameworks, whereas in Eastern Europe they are framed as moral obligations emerging from geographical proximity and shared history. Nonetheless, both models converge in recognizing the strategic importance of higher education as a stabilizing and legitimizing space during crises.

2.3. Pedagogical and Psychosocial Dimensions of Adaptation

While institutional frameworks provide necessary structure, the success of integration ultimately depends on the pedagogical and psychosocial dimensions of everyday academic life. The literature highlights that displacement is not only a logistical problem but also a profound emotional and cognitive experience.

Pentón Herrera and Byndas (2023) capture this dimension poignantly through their qualitative study in Poland, which documents the “interrupted education” of Ukrainian students as both trauma and transformation. Their metaphor—“you sway on the waves like a boat in the ocean”—summarizes the instability of displaced learning, where continuity becomes a form of psychological resistance. The authors argue that educational institutions play a therapeutic role by providing routines that restore a sense of normality. This resonates

with findings from [Missler et al. \(2025\)](#), who identified both risk and protective factors for the mental health of displaced Ukrainian families in the Netherlands. Social connectedness, linguistic support, and compassionate communication emerged as protective factors, while bureaucratic uncertainty and cultural isolation increased vulnerability.

The Australian and New Zealand contexts offer a contrasting yet complementary perspective. [Gorokhova et al. \(2025\)](#) examined Ukrainian students' adaptation in Australia, revealing that resilience and academic success were strongly mediated by host institutions' capacity to recognize trauma-sensitive pedagogies. Their respondents emphasized that "war took my home, but not my future," framing education as a site of self-reconstruction. Such narratives illustrate the dialectic between vulnerability and agency that defines the refugee student experience.

Within Europe, the psychosocial dimension is also intertwined with language acquisition. As [Velicico \(2025\)](#) and [Chaichenko et al. \(2024\)](#) demonstrate, the linguistic barrier operates simultaneously as a cognitive challenge and a symbolic marker of belonging. Students' reluctance to speak—despite comprehension—signals not ignorance but anxiety about misrecognition. This insight echoes the findings of the current study at Ovidius University, where Romanian participants described this phenomenon as "the silence of translation." The broader literature thus converges in framing language as a site of epistemic justice, where universities must go beyond grammar instruction to cultivate safe spaces for dialogue and expression.

At the pedagogical level, inclusion stimulates innovation. [Riapolov \(2025\)](#) identifies how the presence of war-displaced international students generates new didactic strategies centered on collaboration, reflexivity, and emotional intelligence. Educators confronted with multilingual, multicultural classrooms are compelled to rethink assessment, participation, and feedback mechanisms. Similarly, [Samoliuk et al. \(2024\)](#) position Ukrainian students within the "global map of academic migration," emphasizing that their mobility, though forced, contributes to the diversification and internationalization of European curricula. The interplay between trauma and creativity thus becomes a generative paradox: displacement disrupts but also expands the epistemic horizons of higher education.

2.4. Comparative Lessons and Research Gaps

Synthesizing findings across these diverse contexts reveals several cross-cutting patterns. First, European universities have functioned as "microcosms of resilience," translating geopolitical crises into pedagogical challenges. The transition from emergency hospitality to institutionalized inclusion remains uneven but tangible. Poland, Romania, and Slovakia exemplify the Eastern European frontline of educational solidarity, while Western and Nordic universities increasingly integrate Ukrainian displacement into broader discourses of migration and diversity ([Morrice, 2022](#); [Bocharova & Melnik, 2023](#)).

Second, the literature identifies the interdependence of structural and relational dimensions of inclusion. Procedural mechanisms—such as scholarships, recognition of prior learning, and language courses—are necessary but insufficient without affective infrastructures of belonging ([Viczo & Matsumoto, 2022](#)). Studies across Poland ([Herbst & Sitek, 2023](#)), Romania ([Velicico, 2025](#)), and Slovakia ([Urbaníková et al., 2025](#)) concur that peer mentorship, faculty empathy, and cultural mediation constitute the hidden curriculum of successful integration.

Third, the psychosocial well-being of students emerges as both an ethical and strategic priority. [Missler et al. \(2025\)](#) and [Pentón Herrera and Byndas \(2023\)](#) demonstrate that universities cannot delegate emotional care to external agencies; instead, psychological support must be embedded within academic structures. The integration of counselling,

mentoring, and trauma-informed pedagogy appears as a defining trend of post-2022 higher education reform.

Finally, significant research gaps persist. Most studies focus on host institutions' responses, while longitudinal data on Ukrainian students' trajectories remain scarce. There is limited comparative analysis of how integration policies evolve once emergency funding subsidies, or how displaced students transition from temporary protection to full citizenship within the EHEA. Furthermore, the literature rarely addresses the reciprocal dimension of inclusion—how host communities transform through contact with displaced students. Early evidence from qualitative projects such as the EIUS Erasmus+ initiative and Oleksiyenko and Shchepetylnykova's (2024) work on precarious mobility suggests that integration functions as a bidirectional process, producing new forms of solidarity-based knowledge.

The need for reflexive, participatory methodologies is increasingly acknowledged. Riapolov (2025) and Chala et al. (2024) advocate for co-creative research designs that regard refugee students not as mere research participants, but as active partners in redefining the future of education. This epistemological shift mirrors the moral reorientation of European academia itself – from institutions of prestige to institutions of care, empathy, and solidarity.

2.5. Positioning the Present Study

Rather than advancing a comprehensive theory of refugee or displaced student inclusion, this study adopts a focused analytical lens centred on the relationship between solidarity-driven practices and institutional capacity. While existing scholarship has extensively documented access mechanisms, policy responses, and emergency measures, less attention has been paid to how inclusion is sustained—or fails to be sustained—once initial humanitarian momentum wanes. This study therefore positions itself at the inter—section of relational inclusion, emotional labour, and organisational fragility, using empirical material to interrogate the limits of informal solidarity in higher education.

Building on this context, the present study contributes to the expanding body of research on academic inclusion by examining the everyday processes of integration within a specific institutional environment—Ovidius University of Constanta. While most previous studies have focused on macro-level trends or national policy frameworks, few have explored how inclusion actually unfolds in daily academic life—how students, peers, and educators build connections, mutual understanding, and a shared sense of belonging through interaction, empathy, and collaboration. Using focus group methodology within the EIUS Erasmus+ project, this research moves the discussion from policy frameworks to lived realities, offering insight into how inclusion is experienced and negotiated within the university setting.

Furthermore, by applying a SWOT analytical framework, the study bridges two often separate methodological traditions: sociological inquiry and strategic institutional analysis. This combined approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of inclusion as both a human experience and an organizational challenge. In doing so, the study supports and extends existing scholarship, demonstrating how emotional intelligence, peer collaboration, and institutional adaptability intersect to shape the everyday realities of displaced students in higher education.

Conceptually, this study is positioned at the intersection of qualitative case study research and formative programme evaluation. While it does not seek to evaluate outcomes against predefined indicators, it examines how an institutional initiative—the “Building Bridges” workshop—functions as a site where inclusion practices, constraints, and institutional responses become visible. The analytical focus is therefore not on measuring effectiveness, but on interpreting how participants experience, negotiate, and assess integration within a specific institutional context.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design and Objectives

This study adopts a qualitative case study design focused on a single institutional setting—Ovidius University of Constanta—and a specific participatory initiative conducted within the EIUS Erasmus+ project. The case study approach allows for an in-depth examination of integration as a situated and context-dependent process, shaped by institutional structures, interpersonal dynamics, and participant interpretations.

Within this case study design, a SWOT analytical framework is employed as an evaluative and interpretive lens rather than as a standalone methodology. SWOT is used *ex post* to organise and interpret qualitative themes derived from participant accounts, enabling a structured assessment of perceived strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats associated with student inclusion. This approach aligns with qualitative programme evaluation practices that seek to interpret stakeholder perspectives rather than to quantify outcomes.

The central research question guiding the study was: How do key stakeholders (Ukrainian students, Romanian students, and academic staff) evaluate and interpret the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats associated with the inclusion of Ukrainian students at Ovidius University of Constanta?

3.2. Research Context and Participants

Data were collected during the *Building Bridges* workshop held on 16 May 2024 in the Google Room of the university's main campus. The event was part of the EIUS Erasmus+ project and was structured as a participatory focus group, combining semi-structured interviews, open discussion, and participant observation. A total of 72 participants took part: 15 Ukrainian students, 31 Romanian students, and 26 members of the teaching staff. Ukrainian students represented various specializations—medicine, engineering, economics, and humanities—and levels of study. Romanian students were selected to ensure heterogeneity of gender and academic profile, while faculty members came from different departments directly involved in international teaching.

To ensure meaningful interaction, the workshop was organised into smaller facilitated discussion groups, each moderated separately, with plenary sessions used primarily for synthesis rather than for primary data generation.

Participants were recruited through purposive and convenience sampling to capture diverse perspectives relevant to inclusion. Ukrainian students were invited via institutional communication channels, including the international relations office and programme coordinators, resulting in a self-selected subgroup of the wider Ukrainian student cohort at the university. Romanian students were recruited through open invitations circulated in relevant courses and student communication channels, while academic staff were invited based on their involvement in international teaching and student support. No incentives were offered for participation, and the workshop took place outside graded coursework; participation or non-participation had no impact on students' academic standing.

3.3. Data Collection and Ethical Considerations

The discussions were moderated by two experienced facilitators and followed a semi-structured protocol addressing themes such as integration challenges, intercultural learning, institutional support, and opportunities for personal and professional growth. Participants expressed themselves freely in English, Romanian, or Ukrainian, assisted by bilingual facilitators who ensured mutual understanding.

The workshop employed a structured set of prompts delivered via an online form that functioned as a discussion guide during the facilitated sessions, rather than as a separate pre- or post-survey. Facilitators introduced each prompt sequentially and encouraged par-

ticipants to elaborate through collective discussion. The primary analytic dataset consisted of audio-recorded group discussions that were transcribed verbatim and anonymised. Field notes were used to support contextual interpretation but were not treated as a separate coded corpus unless explicitly referenced. This hybrid format was adopted as a methodological adaptation to participatory research involving displaced and potentially vulnerable participants. The structured prompts provided emotional and interactional safety, while the facilitated discussions allowed for reflexivity, elaboration, and collective sense-making.

The study received formal ethical approval from the Bioethics Committee of Ovidius University of Constanta (Approval No. UOC 14304/20.11.2025), which reviewed and approved the research protocol within the framework of the EIUS Erasmus+ project. The research was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (ALLEA, 2017). Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all participants, no personal identifiers were collected, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequences. Particular attention was paid to relational and emotional ethics, given the involvement of displaced and potentially vulnerable participants.

3.4. Data Analysis

The dataset was examined using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), with a combined inductive–deductive logic aligned to the study’s aims. Transcripts were anonymized and imported into Microsoft Excel, which we used as a structured coding matrix. Excel was selected for its transparency, auditability, and suitability for collaborative qualitative coding in small to medium-sized datasets. In Phase 1 (familiarization), two researchers independently read all transcripts and logged analytic memos. In Phase 2 (initial coding), we conducted line-by-line open coding directly in Excel rows, assigning concise semantic codes in adjacent columns and capturing illustrative quotations. In Phase 3 (axial coding), codes were clustered into categories via filtered views and pivot tables (grouping by code families), iteratively collapsing overlaps and specifying code properties/relations. In Phase 4 (theme development), categories were integrated through selective coding into higher-order themes mapped to the SWOT frame (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats), linking micro-level narratives to meso-level institutional processes.

The coding process proceeded from concrete meaning units to higher-order themes. For example, excerpts referring to silence during group work, hesitation to speak, or fear of making linguistic mistakes were initially coded as “language-related anxiety” and “participation hesitation.” These codes were subsequently clustered under the category “linguistic barriers,” which was then integrated into the broader theme of Weaknesses within the SWOT framework. Similarly, references to informal peer support, empathy, and collaborative learning were coded as “peer solidarity” and “mutual learning,” later contributing to the Strengths dimension.

While SWOT analysis is not novel per se, its use in this study is methodological rather than managerial. SWOT was not employed as a diagnostic tool *ex ante*, but as a second-order interpretive framework applied after inductive reflexive thematic analysis. This sequential combination allowed us to translate phenomenological data into analytically distinct dimensions that link lived experiences to institutional capacities and constraints. The innovative contribution therefore lies not in the invention of a new method, but in the integration of reflexive thematic analysis with a strategic analytical lens to bridge micro-level narratives and meso-level institutional interpretation.

Rigor was supported through analyst triangulation: two coders compared codebooks after each phase, discussed discrepancies, and reached consensus; a third author acted as auditor of theme coherence and boundary conditions. We maintained an audit trail

in Excel (versioned sheets for codebook, decision log, and theme definitions) and used reflexive memos to document interpretive moves. Thematic sufficiency was judged when no substantively new codes emerged and existing themes exhibited internal coherence and external distinction (Patton, 2015). The final themes were reviewed against the entire corpus, and representative, anonymised extracts were selected to support each claim.

The SWOT framework was applied after inductive theme development to structure findings in a way that connects micro-level experiences with institutional strategy. We acknowledge that SWOT analysis may risk simplifying complex lived experiences by allocating them to discrete categories. To mitigate this, themes were first developed through reflexive thematic analysis, and only subsequently organised within the SWOT dimensions. Where themes overlapped across quadrants, analytic memos were used to document tensions and dominant institutional implications, which were then addressed explicitly in the synthesis.

The use of SWOT within a qualitative case study is supported in the literature as a formative and interpretive evaluation tool, particularly in organisational and educational research. When applied post hoc to qualitative data, SWOT facilitates the systematic translation of participant narratives into analytically comparable dimensions, without reducing interpretive depth (Helms & Nixon, 2010; Pickton & Wright, 1998).

4. Findings

The thematic analysis based on the SWOT framework revealed four intertwined dimensions—Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats—that together illuminate the complexity of Ukrainian students' inclusion within Ovidius University of Constanta. Rather than functioning as discrete categories, these dimensions represent interdependent facets of a dynamic social process, reflecting the interplay between empathy, structure, and adaptation. Each dimension captures a specific tension within the broader ecosystem of integration, showing how individual experiences, institutional mechanisms, and collective attitudes shape the everyday reality of inclusion.

The themes presented below emerged from repeated patterns across focus group discussions rather than from isolated statements. Quotations are used illustratively to exemplify analytically constructed themes, not as standalone evidence. Each theme therefore reflects convergent meanings expressed by multiple participants across different groups (Ukrainian students, Romanian students, and academic staff), ensuring that findings represent shared experiential structures rather than individual anecdotes.

4.1. *Strengths: Diversity, Empathy, and Pedagogical Renewal*

Across all focus groups, Romanian students emphasized that the arrival of Ukrainian peers had enriched the academic environment of Ovidius University of Constanta. Diversity was perceived not as a challenge but as a transformative advantage that stimulated creativity, empathy, and pedagogical innovation.

Several participants described the presence of Ukrainian students as a source of cultural enrichment and broader perspectives in classroom interaction. As one Romanian student explained, "The presence of Ukrainian students in the academic environment brings cultural diversity and a new perspective to group projects" (Romanian student, FG1). Another participant elaborated that this diversity "enriches academic dialogue and brings new ideas and approaches to group projects, due to the different experiences and cultural backgrounds they contribute" (Romanian student, FG1).

This exchange of perspectives was also associated with intellectual stimulation and critical reflection. As expressed by one student, "They enrich the academic environment by bringing unique cultural perspectives that stimulate more diverse and creative dis-

cussions in group projects” (Romanian student, FG2). Another added, “They stimulate critical and creative thinking in group projects, promoting innovative solutions and better intercultural understanding” (Romanian student, FG3). Similarly, others noted that “their diverse cultural perspectives stimulate creativity and collaborative learning” (Romanian student, FG3).

Beyond intellectual gains, students reported social and emotional benefits emerging from daily collaboration. One participant remarked, “We learn to be human, to be open to communication, and to have different perceptions and concepts of life” (Romanian student, FG2). This sentiment reflected a shared awareness that intercultural interaction nurtured empathy and interpersonal openness—qualities increasingly recognized as essential to European civic and educational values.

Students also acknowledged that working with peers from different national backgrounds improved adaptability and social cohesion. One participant pointed out that such interaction “helps us get used to collaborating with different types of people, even from different nationalities” (Romanian student, FG2), while another emphasized “the importance of knowing new cultures and perspectives, which broaden our cultural and social horizons” (Romanian student, FG3).

From an institutional and pedagogical standpoint, these findings illustrate that cultural diversity operated as a catalyst for reflexive teaching. Exposure to varied learning styles and communicative habits encouraged instructors to contextualize explanations, simplify complex material, and adopt more inclusive classroom strategies. The focus-group evidence thus portrays inclusion not as a unidirectional process of integration, but as a co-learning experience in which both Romanian and Ukrainian students contribute to mutual transformation.

In this sense, the presence of Ukrainian students became both an academic and moral opportunity: it fostered empathy, intellectual curiosity, and solidarity, while also prompting educators and peers to reimagine the purpose of higher education as a shared European space of understanding and resilience.

4.2. Weaknesses: Linguistic Barriers, Fragmented Support, and Emotional Overload

Despite the clear benefits of diversity and collaboration, participants also identified a series of structural and emotional weaknesses that limited the full realization of inclusion. The most frequently mentioned challenges referred to linguistic barriers, uneven institutional coordination, and the psychological fatigue experienced by both students and staff.

Language emerged as the most persistent obstacle to effective collaboration. Several Romanian students pointed out that communication difficulties were a major limitation in group work. As one participant explained, “They don’t contribute because they don’t know English and we cannot communicate” (Romanian student, FG2). Others acknowledged that, even when Ukrainian colleagues understood the content, participation in discussions was hindered by limited language confidence. Students often described moments of silence and hesitation during teamwork, not as disinterest but as a visible sign of linguistic asymmetry.

Teachers confirmed that such barriers affected classroom dynamics. Many adapted spontaneously by simplifying language, offering written summaries, or switching to English during mixed-group activities. However, these practices were individual and inconsistent, rather than institutionally standardized. The result, as one faculty member noted, was a form of partial inclusion: “They are here and we help them, but we still need clearer procedures and coordination” (Faculty member, FG1).

Beyond language, participants emphasized the fragmentation of institutional support. During the first months following the Ukrainian students’ arrival, Ovidius University

provided tuition waivers, accommodation, and introductory Romanian language courses. Yet these measures were temporary and scattered across departments. Several Romanian students observed that while many people were willing to assist, it was often unclear where official help could be sought or who was responsible for ongoing guidance. This lack of centralized coordination placed excessive responsibility on individual goodwill.

Teachers, in particular, reported becoming de facto mediators between administrative units and international students. Many spent additional hours explaining procedures or solving logistical issues informally. As one lecturer explained, “We coordinate as best we can, but without clear structures everything depends on personal initiative” (Faculty member, FG2). Such reliance on informal empathy made inclusion compassionate but unsystematic—effective in the short term, yet fragile as student numbers increased.

Emotional strain also surfaced as a subtle but significant dimension of adaptation. Ukrainian students frequently expressed anxiety about language performance, uncertainty about administrative requirements, and the emotional burden of displacement. Romanian students, in turn, reported feeling unsure how to provide support without overstepping. Teachers described moments when they sensed distress in class but lacked professional tools to respond appropriately. While empathy was abundant, structured psychological counselling for displaced students was largely absent.

This situation revealed an important paradox: although Ovidius University’s ethos was inclusive and empathetic, its mechanisms for sustaining that inclusion remained incomplete. Linguistic limitations, fragmented institutional assistance, and emotional overload combined to make integration heartfelt but precarious—driven by good intentions rather than stable systems.

4.3. Opportunities: Intercultural Learning, Collaborative Innovation, and European Solidarity

Despite the evident challenges, participants identified several opportunities emerging from this intercultural coexistence, extending beyond the classroom into broader institutional and societal transformation. The most prominent among these opportunities were the strengthening of intercultural learning, the stimulation of collaborative innovation, and the reaffirmation of European solidarity.

The first major opportunity highlighted by participants concerned intercultural learning as a form of informal curriculum. Romanian students emphasized that interaction with Ukrainian peers enhanced their cultural awareness and broadened their understanding of global perspectives. As one student observed, “Interaction with Ukrainian students can increase cultural sensitivity and lead to a deeper understanding of the international context” (Romanian student, FG1). Another noted that “Ukrainian students can share both their culture and their perceptions, helping us adapt to a more diverse academic and social environment” (Romanian student, FG2).

These exchanges were seen as mutually enriching, fostering empathy and tolerance through everyday collaboration. A Romanian participant expressed that working together “helps us learn to be human, to be open to communication, and to have different perceptions and concepts of life” (Romanian student, FG2). Such experiences developed both cultural literacy and emotional intelligence, which students associated with the broader European values of openness, cooperation, and human dignity.

Ukrainian students also identified intercultural learning as a major benefit of their experience at Ovidius University. Many described how the multicultural environment supported their adaptation and motivated them to learn languages more effectively. One participant explained that “diversity helps us see things from multiple sides and learn from others” (Ukrainian student, FG3). Others pointed out that participation in joint activities

and projects made them feel part of a shared academic community that values dialogue and inclusivity.

Participants also discussed collaborative innovation as an emerging opportunity. Joint group projects often led to creative outcomes by combining different analytical and practical approaches. Romanian students observed that collaboration with Ukrainian colleagues brought “new ideas and approaches to group projects, due to the different experiences and cultural backgrounds they contribute” (Romanian student, FG1). Teachers confirmed that the diversity of academic backgrounds encouraged flexibility, complementarity, and the exploration of interdisciplinary perspectives. Several participants proposed developing comparative research projects or joint study programs between Romanian and Ukrainian universities to consolidate these synergies in a sustainable manner.

Another important opportunity mentioned by faculty was pedagogical renewal. Exposure to students from diverse cultural and linguistic contexts prompted educators to reflect critically on their teaching methods and to adapt materials, assessment, and communication practices accordingly. As one lecturer noted, collaboration with Ukrainian students encouraged them to “develop empathy and adjust teaching methods to better meet students’ needs” (Faculty member, FG1). These adjustments mirrored the evolving standards of the European Higher Education Area, which increasingly values intercultural competence and inclusive pedagogy as core teaching skills.

Finally, both students and teachers identified the strengthening of European solidarity and civic identity as a far-reaching outcome of inclusion. Romanian participants expressed pride in their university’s openness toward displaced students, interpreting this as a concrete expression of European values. For many, the experience transformed abstract notions of European cooperation into tangible relationships of empathy and mutual support. As several focus-group participants concluded, the integration of Ukrainian students represented an academic opportunity and a reaffirmation of shared European belonging and moral responsibility.

In sum, participants viewed inclusion not as a temporary response to crisis but more as a catalyst for long-term institutional modernization and intercultural growth. The experiences of cooperation and mutual learning between Romanian and Ukrainian students at Ovidius University exemplify how higher education can embody the principles of solidarity, adaptability, and innovation that underpin the European project itself.

4.4. Threats: Prejudice, Isolation, and the Risk of Compassion Fatigue

The final dimension of the SWOT analysis highlighted potential threats that could undermine the sustainability of inclusion. Although participants generally described positive experiences of cooperation, they also recognized underlying risks related to subtle prejudice, social isolation, emotional fatigue, and the lack of long-term institutional support.

Subtle prejudice and stereotyping appeared indirectly in faculty reflections. Several professors acknowledged that collaboration with Ukrainian students required self-awareness and cultural sensitivity. As one explained, “Collaboration with Ukrainian students helps us combat stereotypes and prejudices and improve intercultural communication” (Faculty member, FG 2). Another noted that the experience “challenges us to find new ways of understanding and supporting students with a traumatic background” (Faculty member, FG 1). These remarks suggest that while overt discrimination was absent, unconscious bias and uneven expectations remained possible and required continued professional reflection.

A more visible challenge was social isolation, particularly among Ukrainian students with limited language proficiency or social networks. One participant stated that they had “no contact with any Romanian students since arriving in Romania two years ago”

(Ukrainian student, FG 3). This statement constitutes a critical indicator of latent social exclusion rather than an isolated personal experience. It signals the absence of structured mediation spaces and informal interactional infrastructures capable of transforming mere co-presence into meaningful social integration. The persistence of such isolation suggests that inclusion remains uneven and contingent, particularly for students with limited linguistic resources, and that goodwill alone is insufficient to ensure social belonging. Other students mentioned that daily interactions were often limited to the classroom, restricting opportunities for informal friendship and cultural exchange. Romanian students empathized with this difficulty and recognized that communication barriers sometimes delayed integration. Such experiences reveal that genuine inclusion depends on academic participation and on the creation of informal spaces for connection and belonging.

Teachers also pointed to emotional fatigue as a growing concern. While the first stages of integration were marked by enthusiasm and empathy, the continuation of support without clear institutional coordination proved demanding. As one lecturer observed, “Without clear structures, everything depends on individual effort” (Faculty member, FG 1). This reliance on personal goodwill risked transforming solidarity into exhaustion over time. Sustaining inclusion therefore required structured procedures, shared responsibilities, and accessible psychological support for both students and staff.

Finally, participants underlined the importance of policy continuity. The initial emergency measures—tuition waivers, accommodation, and language courses—had been valuable but temporary. Faculty members emphasized the need to transform such ad hoc responses into stable frameworks for international integration. Without consistent resources and long-term planning, the progress achieved during the crisis could easily erode once external attention and funding diminished.

The threats identified by participants demonstrate that inclusion, while widely valued, remains fragile. Addressing prejudice, preventing isolation, supporting emotional resilience, and ensuring policy continuity are essential to safeguard the moral and institutional gains of this intercultural experience. Otherwise, the empathy that initially defined the university’s response risks fading into administrative routine or silent exclusion.

Table 1 provides an analytical synthesis of the thematic structure derived from the coding process, linking illustrative quotations to interpretive insights.

Table 1. Summary of Thematic Findings within the SWOT Analytical Framework.

Dimension	Emergent Themes	Illustrative Quotes	Interpretive Insights
Strengths	Cultural diversity; Empathy and mutual learning; Pedagogical renewal	“The presence of Ukrainian students brings cultural diversity and new perspectives to group projects.” (Romanian student, FG1) “Collaboration with them helps us learn to be human and open to communication.” (Romanian student, FG2)	Diversity functions as a pedagogical catalyst, fostering intercultural learning, empathy, and reflective teaching.
Weaknesses	Language barriers; Fragmented institutional support; Emotional strain	“They don’t contribute because they don’t know English and we cannot communicate.” (Romanian student, FG2) “Without clear structures, everything depends on individual effort.” (Faculty member, FG1)	Inclusion is sincere but under-organized; emotional effort and informal goodwill substitute formal coordination mechanisms.

Table 1. Cont.

Dimension	Emergent Themes	Illustrative Quotes	Interpretive Insights
Opportunities	Intercultural learning; Collaborative innovation; European solidarity	“Interaction with Ukrainian students increases cultural sensitivity and understanding of the international context.” (Romanian student, FG1) “Diversity helps us see things from multiple sides and learn from others.” (Ukrainian student, FG3)	Integration acts as a living laboratory for European citizenship, intercultural competence, and pedagogical modernization.
Threats	Subtle prejudice; Social isolation; Compassion fatigue; Need for policy continuity	“Collaboration with Ukrainian students helps us combat stereotypes and prejudices.” (Faculty member, FG2) “I have had no contact with Romanian students since arriving in Romania.” (Ukrainian student, FG3)	Without sustained institutional frameworks and psychological support, inclusion risks stagnation and the erosion of initial solidarity.

4.5. Synthesis: A Fragile Equilibrium

The SWOT analysis of focus-group data paints a nuanced picture of inclusion as a fragile equilibrium between aspiration and constraint. The strengths—diversity, empathy, and resilience—demonstrate the university’s human and cultural capital; the weaknesses—linguistic barriers and limited support—reveal the need for institutional consolidation; the opportunities—intercultural learning and pedagogical innovation—point toward long-term transformation; and the threats—prejudice and compassion fatigue—remind us that inclusion, once achieved, must be continuously renewed.

Ultimately, the findings affirm that integration is not a static achievement, it is an ongoing process of relational maintenance. It thrives where institutions transform empathy into structure, and where solidarity evolves from reaction to routine. The voices of Ukrainian students, Romanian peers, and professors converge in a shared recognition: that education, at its most profound level, is not only about learning subjects but about learning coexistence.

5. Discussion

The integration of Ukrainian students into European higher education—particularly within Ovidius University of Constanta—reflects both the achievements and tensions of what Morrice (2022) described as Europe’s “pivotal moment for refugee education.” The results show that inclusion functions simultaneously as institutional reform, pedagogical transformation, and moral engagement. The strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats identified through the focus groups reveal a larger process of adaptation and resilience within European academia after 2022.

Institutionalised solidarity refers to a durable inclusion arrangement in which solidarity is not left to episodic goodwill or emergency responses but is translated into repeatable institutional capacities. In this study, institutionalised solidarity is conceptualised as a multi-level inclusion model that couples emotional infrastructures with organisational infrastructures, enabling displaced students to move from formal access to meaningful academic participation.

Emotional infrastructures include peer mentoring, faculty empathy, trauma-informed pedagogical sensitivity, and informal support networks that foster trust, belonging, and psychological safety. Organisational infrastructures, by contrast, refer to formalised institutional mechanisms such as central integration offices, clear administrative procedures, linguistic scaffolding, coordinated counselling services, and adaptive assessment policies.

While existing literature often distinguishes between procedural inclusion and relational inclusion (Viczkó & Matsumoto, 2022) or between access and participation (Morrice, 2022), the concept of institutionalised solidarity highlights the interdependence of these dimensions. Relational inclusion cannot be sustained without organisational anchoring, just as organisational measures remain ineffective without emotional legitimacy.

Institutionalised solidarity is thus not presented as an achieved ideal or normative goal, but as an analytical construct used to diagnose the limits of solidarity-driven inclusion when emotional commitment is not matched by organisational capacity.

The SWOT framework makes this dynamic empirically visible. Emotional infrastructures are reflected primarily in the Strengths and Opportunities dimensions, where peer empathy, intercultural learning, and pedagogical openness enable cooperation despite linguistic and emotional strain. At the same time, the Weaknesses and Threats dimensions expose the limits of relying predominantly on goodwill: language anxiety (“translation silence”), fragmented coordination, emotional overload, and emerging compassion fatigue.

Organisational infrastructures are therefore implicated precisely where participants call for clearer procedures, centralised support, linguistic mediation, and accessible counselling services. The absence of these structures shifts emotional labour onto individual faculty members and students, rendering inclusion sincere but fragile. By explicitly linking lived experience to institutional design, the concept of institutionalised solidarity bridges micro-level narratives and meso-level governance, showing how empathy must be transformed into structure in order to endure.

The findings of this study demonstrate that inclusion at Ovidius University of Constanta has been driven primarily by emotional infrastructures—peer empathy, interpersonal solidarity, and faculty commitment—while organisational infrastructures remain fragmented and uneven. Institutionalised solidarity therefore emerges not as an achieved state, but as a developmental horizon: a shift from compassion-driven practices toward coordinated, resilient, and institutionally embedded inclusion.

A central finding concerns the emergence of intercultural empathy as a pedagogical force. Participants emphasized that the presence of Ukrainian students “brings cultural diversity and new perspectives to group projects” (Romanian student, FG1) and that collaboration “increases cultural sensitivity and understanding of the international context” (Romanian student, FG2). Diversity enriched academic exchanges and fostered reflexivity among professors, confirming Riapolov’s (2025) argument that displaced learners stimulate more adaptive and collaborative teaching. Several Ukrainian students noted that they understood the content but found it difficult to express themselves fluently, while peers and teachers responded by adjusting communication, demonstrating a process of mutual adaptation. This interaction supports Chaichenko et al.’s (2024) view that communication in multicultural education is based less on linguistic mastery than on recognition and reciprocity.

At the same time, the findings reveal the limits of what Viczkó and Matsumoto (2022) call procedural inclusion—forms of access that are not yet sustainable. Language barriers, fragmented institutional support, and emotional fatigue persisted despite collective goodwill. Faculty members often acted as informal counsellors and mediators in the absence of integration offices or psychological services. As one professor remarked, “Without clear structures, everything depends on individual effort” (Faculty member, FG1). This situation illustrates a broader paradox: inclusion relies more on personal commitment than on institutional capacity. Empathy thus becomes a form of labour—essential but exhausting if not supported by organizational frameworks.

Participants also highlighted that linguistic limitations sometimes reduced the visibility of Ukrainian students’ contributions, revealing that language operates as both a

cognitive and epistemic barrier. Inclusion, therefore, requires tolerance and epistemic justice—the recognition of diverse ways of expressing and validating knowledge.

Despite these challenges, the coexistence of Romanian and Ukrainian students generated multiple opportunities for innovation. Erasmus+ networks offered continuity mechanisms linking universities across borders, while collaborative projects and bilingual materials became spaces where learning and resilience converged. Exposure to diverse perspectives encouraged teachers to experiment with adaptive assessment, flexible feedback, and multilingual collaboration. What began as an emergency response gradually evolved into a catalyst for pedagogical modernization, transforming diversity into a resource for epistemic renewal.

However, the persistence of subtle prejudice, social isolation, compassion fatigue, and policy discontinuity indicates that inclusion remains fragile. Similarly to trends observed by [Missler et al. \(2025\)](#), the initial enthusiasm that marked the early phases of support tends to fade without institutional reinforcement. As one faculty member warned, “If we treat this as temporary, we lose everything we’ve learned” (FG1). This underscores [Morrice’s \(2022\)](#) call for the institutionalization of solidarity, in which emotional care and intercultural competence are embedded within long-term policy and adequately funded structures.

Taken together, the findings suggest that sustainable inclusion requires both emotional and organizational infrastructures: counselling and mentoring, on one hand; integration offices, multilingual support, and adaptive evaluation, on the other. When these elements operate together, empathy becomes structural rather than spontaneous. Inclusion moves from goodwill to governance, from moral response to policy design.

Practically, universities should adopt integrated measures such as language preparation before enrolment, structured peer mentoring, trauma-informed teaching, and bilingual assessment. These approaches—already piloted within Erasmus+ frameworks—address the weaknesses identified in this study and transform inclusion from a reactive act into a model of academic coexistence. As shown by [Lagvilava \(2023\)](#) and [Londar and Pron \(2022\)](#), hybrid and digital learning can sustain continuity even under crisis; similar strategies can strengthen host institutions by turning humanitarian adaptation into long-term capacity building.

The findings of this study indicate that inclusion at Ovidius University of Constanta remains partial, contingent, and potentially reversible. While interpersonal solidarity and pedagogical goodwill have enabled meaningful forms of participation, the absence of fully consolidated organisational infrastructures renders these gains fragile. Without sustained institutional investment, coordination, and policy continuity, inclusion risks regressing once crisis-driven attention diminishes.

Rather than offering a celebratory account, this case highlights the structural limits of solidarity when it is not embedded in governance. Its broader relevance lies in illustrating how European universities—particularly in border-region contexts—may rely heavily on emotional labour and peer mediation to compensate for institutional gaps. Recognising these limits is a necessary step toward transforming solidarity from an ethical response into a durable academic practice.

6. Limitations

This study has several limitations typical of qualitative case-based research. First, it is based on a single institution and a single participatory workshop, which constrains generalisability and limits claims to contextual transferability. Second, the data are cross-sectional and do not capture how integration experiences may evolve over time. Third, the workshop setting may have introduced social desirability bias, as participants were aware of the university’s supportive role. These limitations do not undermine the value of the

findings, but they delimit the scope of inference and point toward the need for longitudinal and comparative research.

7. Conclusions

The qualitative investigation conducted within the EIUS Erasmus+ project provides an in-depth understanding of how displaced students experience and negotiate inclusion in a host academic environment. Through the triangulated perspectives of Ukrainian students, Romanian peers, and teaching staff, the study reconstructs inclusion as a multidimensional process encompassing linguistic adaptation, emotional resilience, intercultural learning, and institutional responsibility.

Three overarching conclusions can be drawn. First, inclusion succeeds where it is relationally sustained. Friendship, empathy, and everyday cooperation between Romanian and Ukrainian students proved more effective than formal policies in fostering belonging. These interpersonal bonds translate abstract ideals of solidarity into tangible practices of care.

Second, the study reveals the indispensable role of linguistic and psychological support. Language barriers and trauma-related difficulties remain the main impediments to full participation. Universities must therefore view language learning and counselling as structural components of education, not auxiliary services.

Third, institutional learning is reciprocal: integrating displaced students transforms not only the newcomers but the host institution itself. Teachers' reflections show that inclusion redefines pedagogical identity, cultivating humility, patience, and a renewed sense of educational purpose.

To consolidate these insights into practice, higher education institutions should adopt a phased and reflexive inclusion model: preparatory linguistic and cultural training prior to enrolment; structured mentoring and intercultural workshops during studies; accessible psychological and academic support; and continuous evaluation through feedback mechanisms. Such a model transforms inclusion from charity into policy, from temporary reaction into sustainable structure. These insights converge toward a single conclusion: inclusion endures only when solidarity is translated into durable institutional structures.

Ultimately, the experience of integrating Ukrainian students in Romania transcends national borders. It illustrates the potential of European higher education to act as a moral community—one that learns, adapts, and rebuilds in the face of crisis.

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