

Psychological and Educational Support for University Students with Special Needs

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1. Introduction

According to Higher Education Act 1998, higher education institutions (universities) are obliged to provide students with information and counseling services and accept measures to make opportunities equal for all applicants and students. However, no specific regulations were introduced until 2012, when the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports granted the public universities increased financial aid to support students with special educational needs (SEN) (Rules for providing contributions and subsidies to public universities by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports 351/2021-2).

Issuing this instrument contributed to the official acknowledgement of inclusion at the tertiary education level and established minimal standards of service and organizational support for students with SEN. It also had an impact on embedding the system of support of students with SEN in the regulations of individual universities.

At Charles University, Rector's Provision No. 23/2017 defines the standards of support measures. In order to enable equal access to study and comparable study conditions for all students, the support system includes

measures such as modifications of the admission procedure for applicants with SEN, modifications of study conditions and examination, equipping lecture halls and classrooms with necessary technical and teaching aids. Moreover, support centers should also raise the awareness of universities' staff about the issue of special educational needs and inclusion, including methodological support for teaching, and more. Another important part of the support system is the support of lifelong learning to develop students' personalities, talent and partial skills (creative, intellectual and physical).

A	Students with visual disabilities
A1	Slightly visually impaired / user vision
A2	Severely visually impaired / user / touch / voice
B	Students with hearing impairment
B1	Hard of hearing / user verbal language
B2	Deaf / sign language users
C	Students with physical disabilities
C1	Disability of the lower limbs (paraplegia)
C2	Disabilities of the upper extremities (fine motor skills)
D	Students with learning disabilities
E	Students with autism spectrum disorders
F	Students with mental disorders or chronic somatic diseases

Table 1. Categorization of SEN university students

2. Aim of the study

The aim of the study is to capture the development of an approach to students with SEN at Charles University (CU). We examine it from the perspective of the Academic Counseling Center of the Faculty of Education, which has long been involved in diagnostics and support of these students. Our first goal is to point out the overall transformation of students with SEN at CU since 2012, when the implementation of support measures for registered students with SEN began. The analysis is based on official records as provided by the Carolina Center (the main office responsible for the support of persons with SEN at CU).

In the second part, we deal with the analysis of supporting measures proposed in functional diagnostics, the procedure through which necessary study support for students with SEN is identified. We included in our analysis data from 2015-2020 for students with specific

learning difficulties (category D), autism spectrum disorders (category E), and mental health problems/disabilities (category F), i.e. for the most numerous groups of students with SEN. The analysis presents the most frequently recommended modifications, which are implemented for the benefit of the study, but also for the outcomes of the study (examination). An important part of the functional diagnostics report can be, in agreement with the student, recommendations for university teachers regarding approach to students, communication with them, and specific procedures and measures to compensate for students' disabilities or disadvantages. Thus, to a certain extent, they also have an educational character and can contribute to the change of the university climate for the benefit of vulnerable groups of students. We want to show the specifics of the above-mentioned groups of students, which are evident from the applied modifications.

degree (73%, N = 142), 26% (N = 50) studied for a master's degree (two-year and five-year). There were also two Ph.D. students.

As can be seen from the table, the staff of the Academic Counseling Center provides functional diagnostics assessments for the entire university. Most students were from the Faculty of Education and the Faculty of Mathematics and Physics (both 28%). We also worked with the students of the Faculty of Law (10%), medical faculties (8%), theological faculties (7%), the Faculty of Social Sciences (6%) and the Faculty of Science (5%). The remaining 8 percent include students from the Faculty of Humanities, the Faculty of Physical Education and Sports, the Faculty of Humanities and the Faculty of Pharmacy.

According to the university's guidelines, students should undergo functional diagnostics right at the beginning of their studies in order for the help to be effective; this is also confirmed by our data. We issued a functional diagnostics report for 80% of students (N = 154) in their first year; 10% of students applied for support during their studies, and 10% of students preferred to manage their studies on their own, i.e. without the status of a student with special educational needs, however, they needed modification to be applied before graduating (in the last year of study or during the state exam).

Respondents

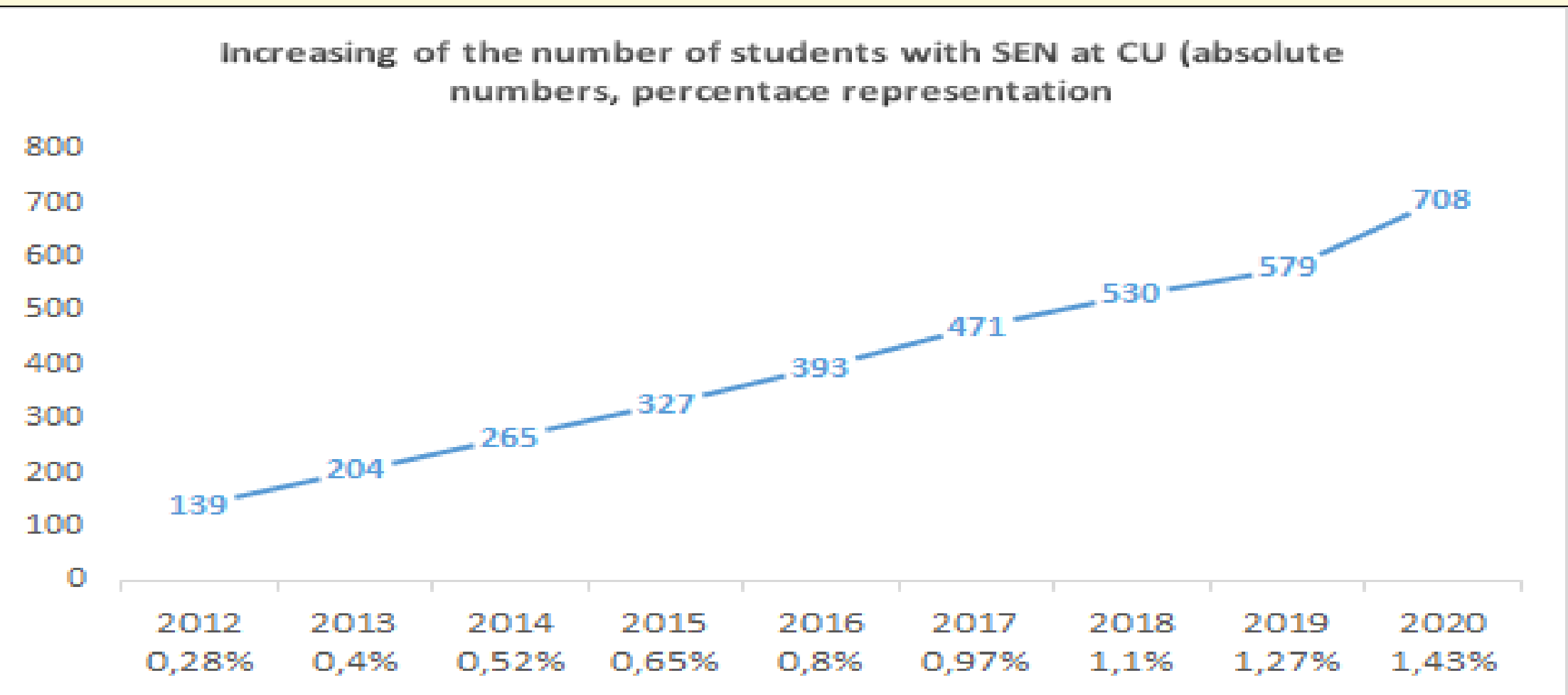
The analysis of functional diagnostics assessments was performed on 193 students of CU, 58% (N = 113) were category D, 31% category F (N = 60) and 11% (N = 20) category E. Of these, most of them studied bachelor's

4. Results

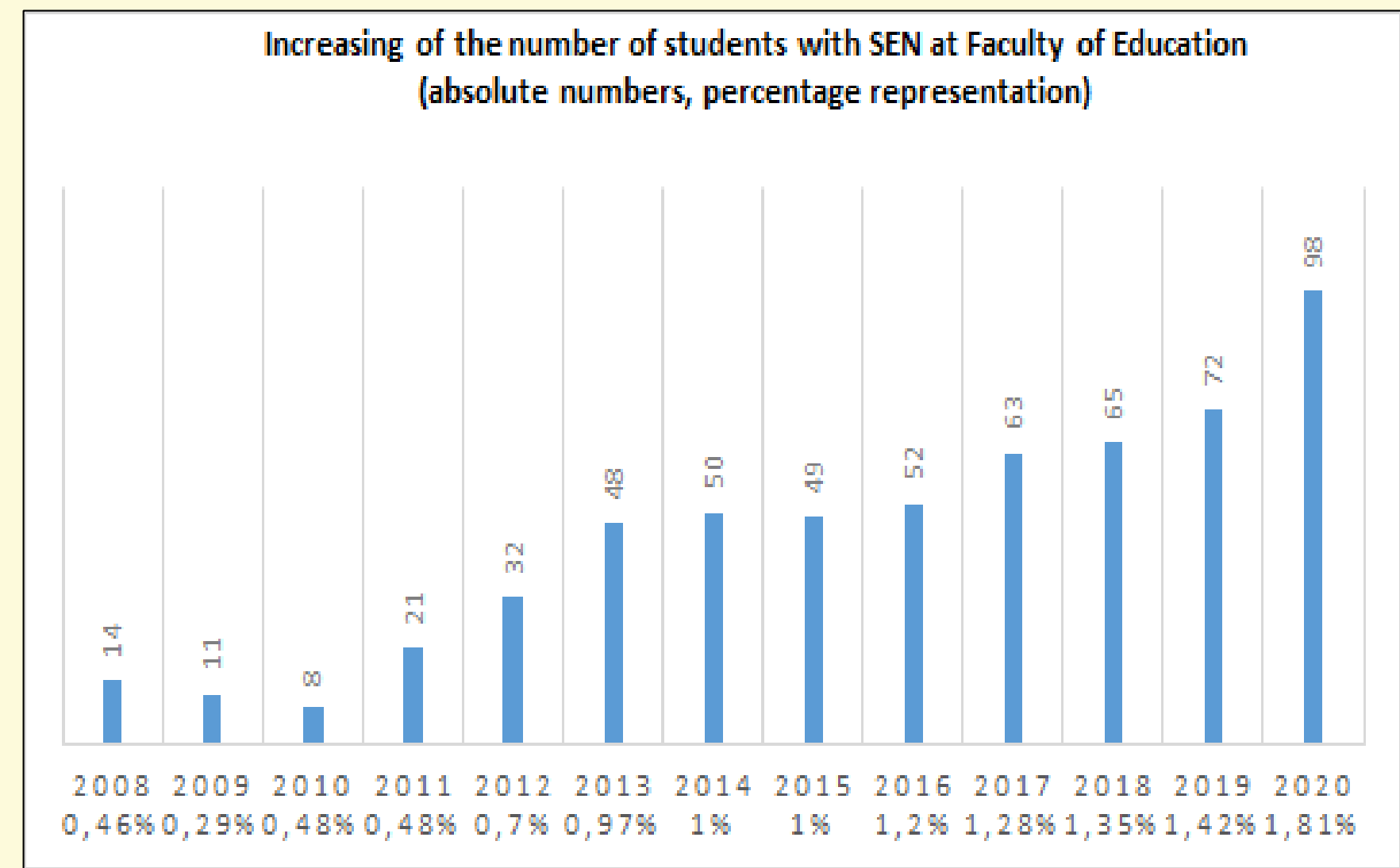
1. Number of students with special educational needs at Charles University

Development of the number of students with SEN at Charles University (2012-2020)

The number of students with SEN at CU is increasing both absolutely (in real numbers of registered students) and relatively (percentage of students with SEN relative to the total number of students). It is questionable whether this trend can really be seen as positive. The proportion of students with SEN is still much lower than the proportion of people with special educational needs in the Czech population. Experience shows that there are many more students with SEN at the CU, but they do not ask for support. This fact and its reasons should be investigated in further research (fears of stigmatization, e.g. Shiffer, 2013; the effort to manage the study with their own strength, etc.).



2. Number of students with special educational needs at Faculty of Education



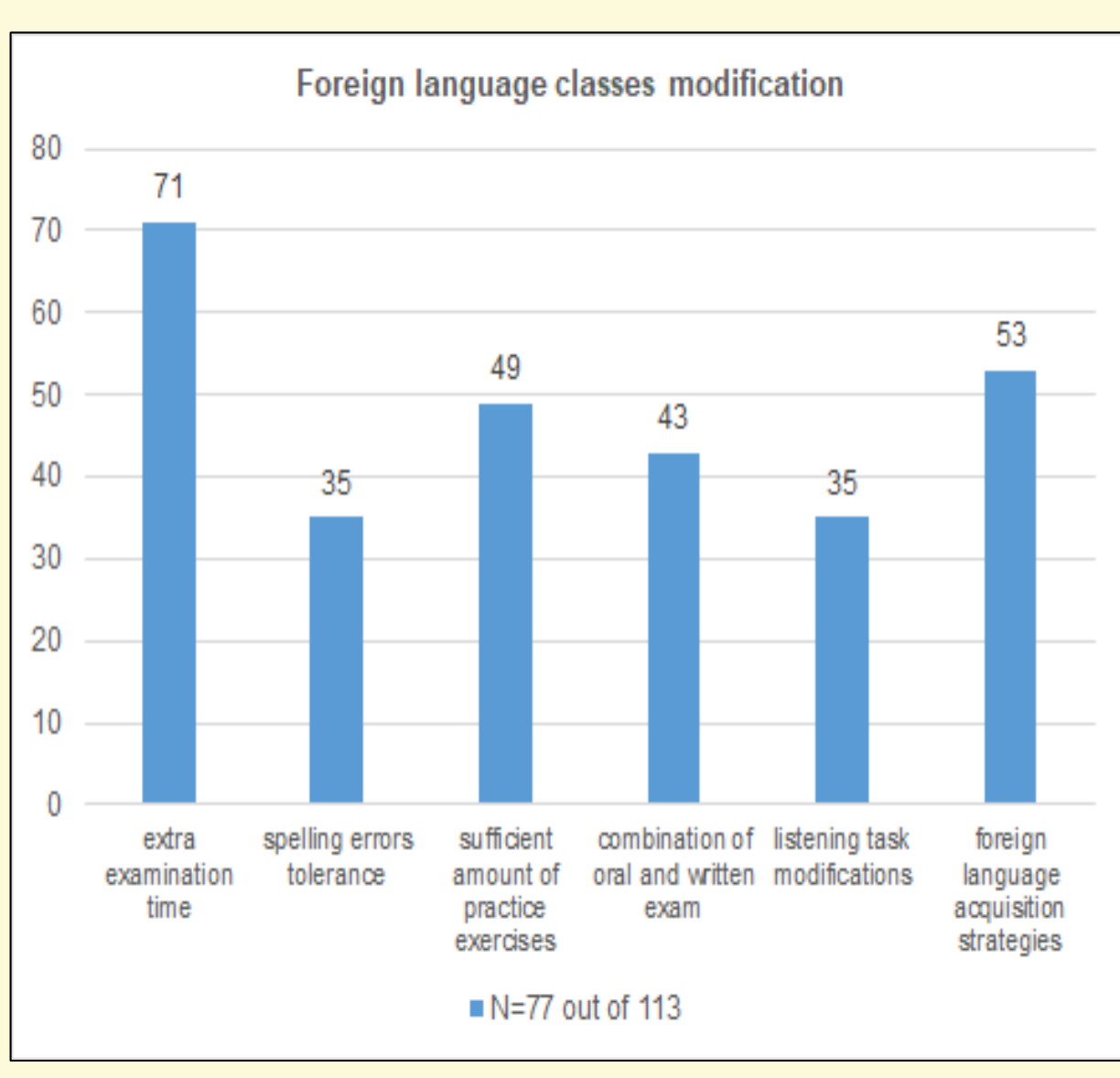
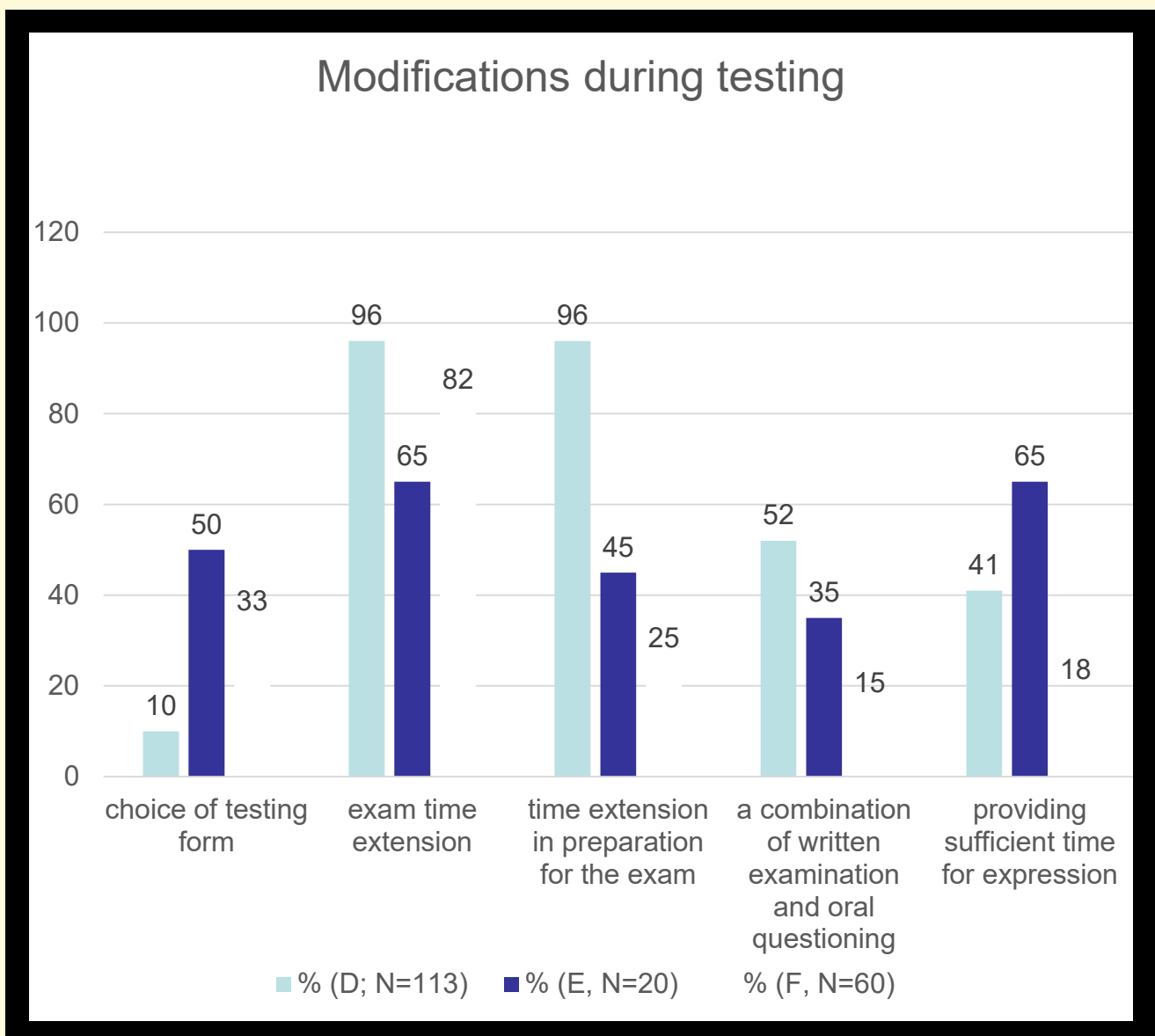
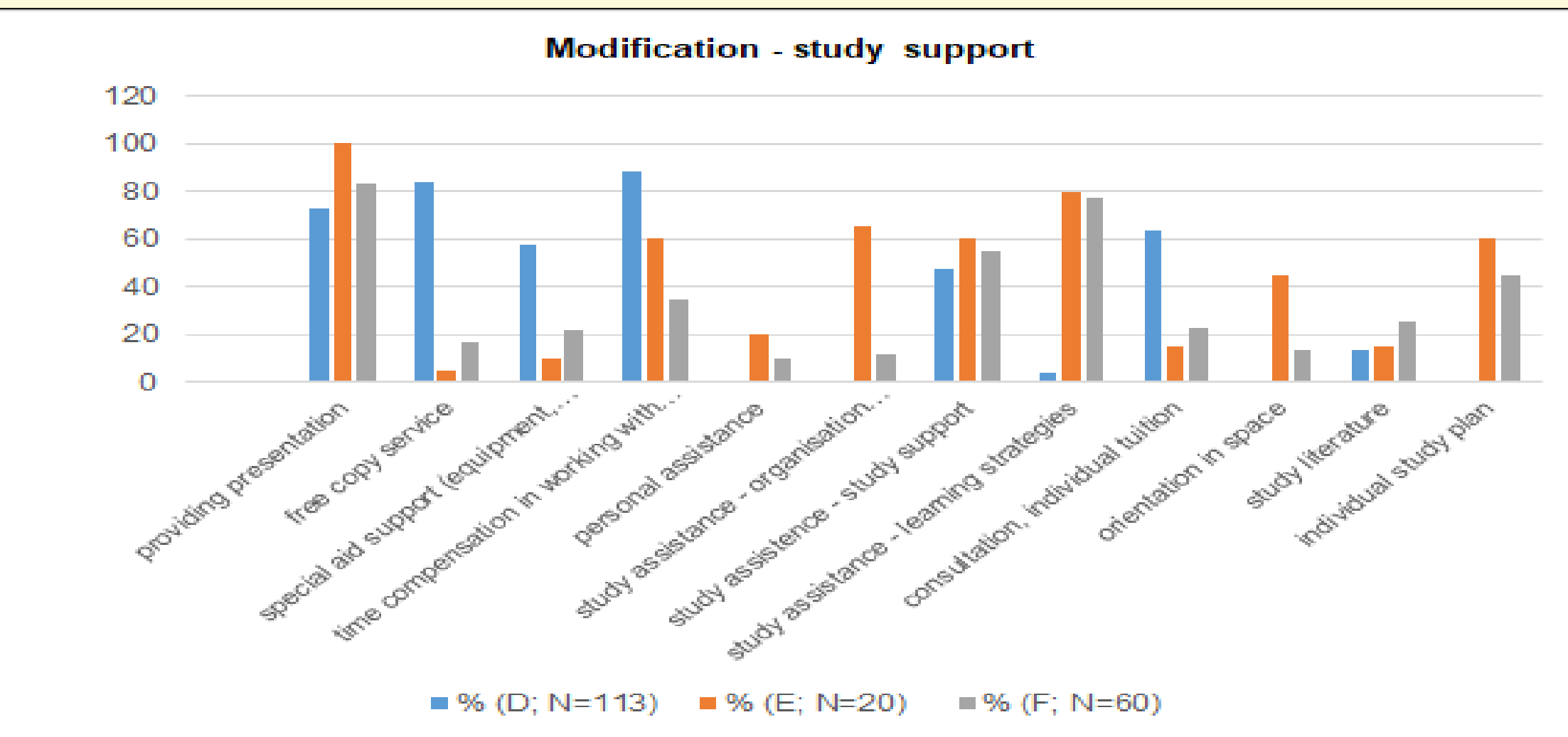
Development of the number of students with SEN at FE (2008-2020)

There is a clear trend of rising numbers of students with special educational needs both absolutely (real numbers of students with SEN) and relatively - ratio between all students at Faculty of Education (FE) and registered students with SEN. The reported percentage of registered students with SEN from the total number of all students at the FE is recently higher than the university-wide data (e.g. 2019 1.27 at CU compared to 1.42 at the FE, 2020 1.43 at the CU compared to 1.81 at the FE).

Of the total number of 5,000 students, 1.8% in 2020 are students with special needs. In the last 5 years, the number of students with SEN at FE has almost doubled. Compared to 2008, there are five times as many students with SEN. However, these numbers still do not correspond to the total number of people with a given type of disadvantage in the Czech population (please see discussion).

3. Analysis of proposed support measures through functional diagnostics

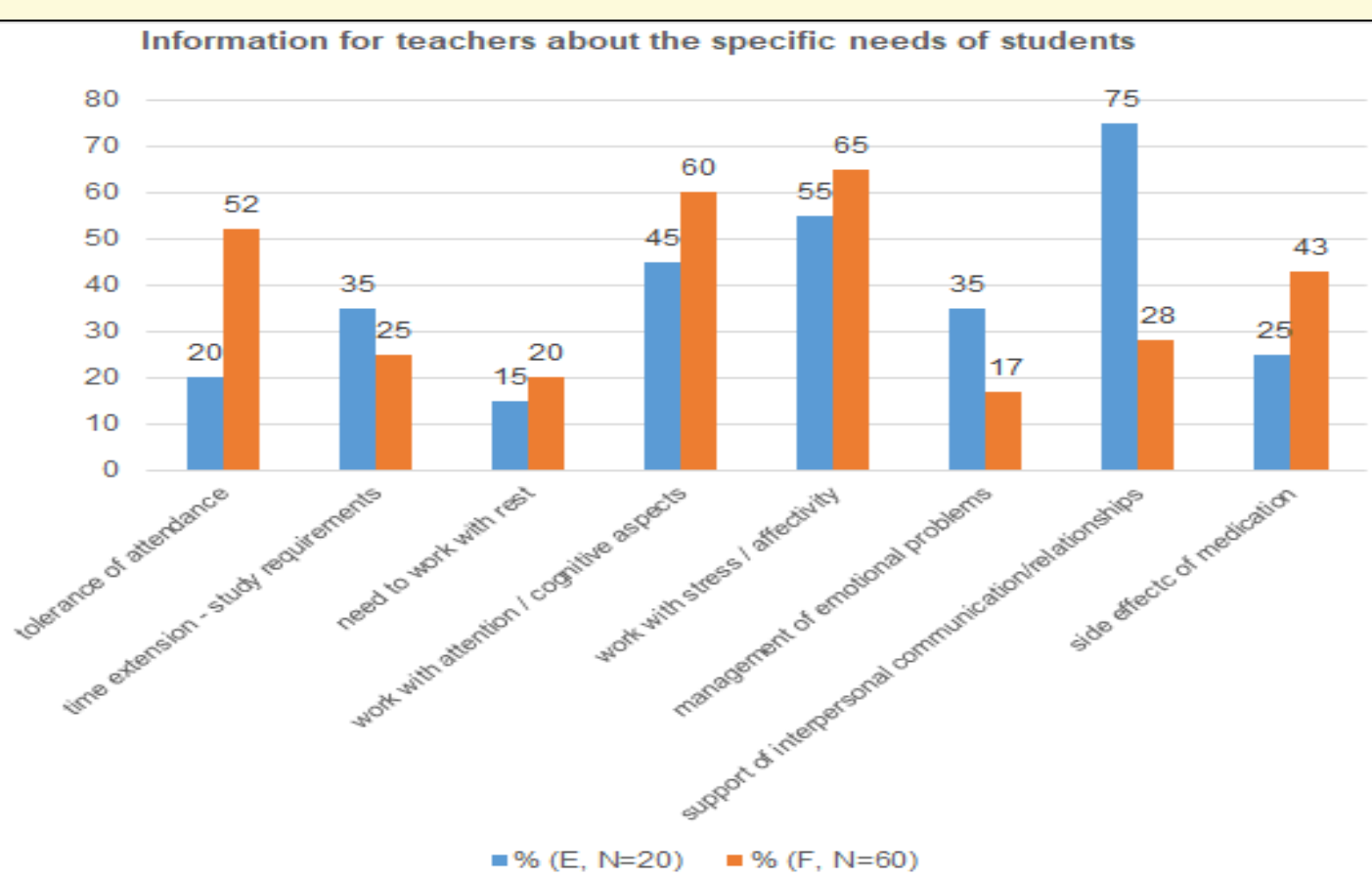
For the purpose of the study, data from functional diagnostics from 2015-2020 for students of categories D, E, F were analyzed. Functional diagnostics, the aim of which is to propose modifications of teaching, different procedures for attestation and specific approaches to students in terms of their disability / disadvantage, is coordinated from the Carolina Center of CU. For functional diagnostics, the student must provide informed consent and a medical report or other document that confirms his/her specific needs. The report contains all support measures and the provision of modified approaches to the student. The document is handled in accordance with the principles of the GDPR and serves exclusively for student registration and support within the faculty, which is carried out in coordination with the contact person at the faculty for students with SEN.



Modifications for students in category E, F

The data show that students in categories E and F require an individual approach linked to specific manifestations of the disorder or mental health problem. This often raises the need to work with teachers, their awareness of specific symptoms, but also support in communication with students.

As we can see in the figure 3.1, the emphasis was placed on the support of social communication among students with ASD. Students with mental health problems then need support especially with managing stress and emotions. We can therefore state that commonly used modifications (see Table 3.1) form the basis of the support. However, the individual needs of students seem to be more important.



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5. Discussion and conclusion

Although the absolute numbers of students with SP have been increasing in recent years (both at Charles University and at the Faculty of Education), their share still does not correspond to the total number of university students in the population. Currently the percentage of students with SEN at CU is around 1.5%, but for example, in 2018, 20% of men and 26% of women in the population (aged 25-35) reached higher education (Řezanka, 2020). The number describes successful study completion. We should point out that approximately only 50% of students complete their studies successfully. What could be the reason? Although the financial conditions for the provision of support are now sufficient (legislation of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports and the Charles University), fears of stigmatization may still persist in students when they admit a problem. However, it can also be a positive effort of students to manage their studies on their own. In addition, a little-known fact that they could be entitled to support can play a role.

The increasing share of students with SEN is to some extent confirmed by the incidence of problems in the population. While severe sensory and severe somatic disabilities occur steadily in very similar numbers (or only slightly increase), the number of students with specific learning disabilities (these are about 9% in the population according to the statistics of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports) and students with mental health problems (expert estimate 10-15% in the population) increases. The number of students with ASD is also increasing, moreover until 2015, students with ASD were included in category F.

The most common modifications to support students with SEN across categories include the provision of presentations, study assistance, and individual consultations with teachers. From the point of view of the examination, it is the time extension and the possibility of a different implementation of the exam (form of examination - from written to oral and vice versa). For categories E and F, studies according to the individual study plan are applied to a greater extent than for category D. It is also highly desirable for the teachers to be educated about appropriate approaches in communication and social behavior. For category D, the recommendations for teaching and examination in a foreign language also apply to a large extent, similarly to the tolerance of errors in written texts.

Our data show, there is still a need for awareness among students with SEN about the possibility of study support. The academic counseling center provides direct counseling support (guidance of students with SEN, development of study strategies, study counseling, etc.) and also works with teachers (educational programs, methodological guidance, consultations on specific needs or problem situations solving).

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Modifications for students in category D

When applying for an appointment in our Counseling center, students in category D usually demand exam extension time. Many of them (in our sample, 68%) ask for registration because of failing exams and study requirements in compulsory foreign language classes. It is then very common to give recommendations and suggest modifications specifically for a foreign language class.