

# ADVANCING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN UKRAINIAN HIGHER EDUCATION: IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

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**Abstract.** This article explores the challenges and prospects of implementing international standards of inclusive education in Ukrainian higher education institutions. As Ukraine aligns with global educational values and European frameworks, the importance of inclusive education has grown significantly. The research is timely, given the evolving legal, social, and institutional landscape that demands a shift from declarative policy to meaningful practice. The aim of the study is to assess how effectively inclusive principles are being integrated into the strategic, pedagogical, and cultural dimensions of university life. A qualitative methodology was applied, combining the analysis of legislation, institutional documents, and semi-structured interviews with university leaders, educators, and student representatives across various Ukrainian universities. A comparative framework was used to contrast Ukraine's progress with inclusive models in advanced countries. The study found that while inclusive education is formally recognized in Ukrainian legislation, implementation remains inconsistent. Key barriers include limited accessibility infrastructure, a lack of systematic training for faculty, insufficient financial support, and persistent cultural resistance. However, the study also highlights emerging opportunities, such as university-level pilot programs, donor-supported accessibility initiatives, and increasing awareness among leadership. The findings suggest that for international standards to be fully realized, Ukraine must invest in regulatory enforcement, professional development, and inclusive institutional culture. Creating equitable academic spaces will require long-term strategic commitment, not only from government bodies but also from higher education institutions themselves.

**Keywords:** inclusive education; higher education; Ukraine; accessibility; international standards; universal design; faculty training; student rights; policy implementation; educational reform.

**JEL Classification:** A21, I14, I24, I28

**Formulas:** 0; **fig. 0;** **tabl. 3;** **bibl. 7**

**Introduction.** Inclusive education, recognized globally through frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and the Salamanca Statement, promotes the right of every individual to quality education without discrimination. In the context of higher education, inclusion extends beyond disability to encompass gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and other dimensions of diversity. Ukraine's alignment with international educational standards has intensified following its association with the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and ratification of key human rights treaties.

Despite normative progress, the practical implementation of inclusive education in Ukrainian HEIs remains uneven. This article examines how international standards are interpreted, adapted, and operationalized within the Ukrainian higher education system, identifies persistent barriers, and suggests pathways for enhancing inclusive practices.

**Literature review.** The concept of inclusive education has evolved significantly over the past decades, shifting from a focus on special needs education to a broader commitment to diversity, equity, and participation for all learners. International frameworks such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), and the Incheon Declaration (UNESCO, 2015) establish the principle that educational institutions at all levels must ensure access, participation, and success for students regardless of their abilities or backgrounds. Within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), inclusivity is further reinforced through the Bologna Process, emphasizing quality assurance, equity, and lifelong learning opportunities.

Research indicates that successful inclusive higher education institutions share common features: the integration of universal design for learning (UDL) principles, inclusive curricula, accessible physical environments, participatory governance, and strong leadership commitment (Sharma & Deppeler, 2016). Studies from Western Europe highlight that achieving inclusion requires both structural adjustments—such as infrastructure and resource provision—and cultural change, including attitudinal shifts among faculty and students (Hockings, 2010).

Institutional commitment is often measured by the extent to which inclusion is embedded in strategic plans, funding allocations, staff training, and student support services. Moreover, countries with strong regulatory frameworks and incentive-based funding models demonstrate higher success rates in implementing inclusive practices across higher education institutions.

Ukraine has formally committed to inclusive education by ratifying the CRPD and harmonizing national legislation with international standards. Laws such as the Law on Education (2017) and the Law on Higher Education (2014) introduce non-discrimination principles and encourage the development of accessible learning environments. However, as noted by Ukrainian scholars (Kudryavtsev, 2020; Sysoieva & Dolynska, 2021), the translation of these legal norms into practical institutional changes remains inconsistent.

Challenges identified in Ukrainian HEIs include insufficient infrastructure adaptations, a lack of systematic staff training on inclusive practices, limited financial

resources, and the persistence of exclusionary attitudes within academic communities. Despite growing political will, practical implementation lags due to bureaucratic inertia, fragmented policy enforcement, and an underdeveloped support system for students with disabilities and other marginalized groups.

Comparative studies show that while Ukraine has made progress at the level of primary and secondary education (notably in inclusive classrooms), higher education reforms have been slower. One of the key barriers is the traditional academic culture, which emphasizes standardized achievement and often lacks mechanisms for accommodating diverse learning needs (Pavlenko & Berezhna, 2022).

Recent pilot initiatives in Ukrainian universities, often supported by international organizations (e.g., Erasmus+ projects, UNDP programs), demonstrate promising models of inclusive practice. These include the creation of accessibility centers, student advisory councils, and the development of flexible learning pathways. Moreover, academic leadership training programs that integrate inclusive values are gaining traction as a strategy to embed change.

As noted, achieving full implementation of international standards of inclusive education in Ukrainian higher education institutions will require multi-level interventions: from improving national policies and mobilizing resources to grassroots cultural changes in academic communities. Strategic partnerships with European institutions, investments in infrastructure modernization, and normalizing the discourse of diversity in universities are crucial to sustaining progress.

**Aims.** The purpose of the article is to study the key challenges and opportunities for implementing international standards of inclusive education in higher education institutions of Ukraine.

**Methodology.** The research employs a qualitative methodology, including the analysis of national policy documents, international conventions, and institutional regulations. Semi-structured interviews with university administrators, faculty members, and student representatives from ten Ukrainian HEIs were conducted to assess on-the-ground realities. Comparative analysis with best practices from European universities was utilized to identify gaps and opportunities.

**Results.** Inclusive education has become a defining principle of modern higher education systems around the world, aiming to guarantee equal access, participation, and success for all learners, regardless of their individual characteristics or needs. The international community, through frameworks such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the Bologna Process, and the Sustainable Development Goals (particularly SDG 4), has established inclusion as both a human right and a critical indicator of educational quality. Higher education institutions (HEIs) are thus expected not only to remove physical and systemic barriers, but to foster environments in which diversity is valued and supported.

In Ukraine, the transition toward inclusive higher education has been shaped by the country's political, legal, and socio-economic transformations. Following its ratification of the CRPD and commitment to aligning with European standards, Ukraine has introduced legislative reforms intended to establish inclusive principles within its education system. However, despite the existence of progressive legal

documents, the gap between normative frameworks and their implementation remains substantial. Many institutions lack the operational clarity, resources, and regulatory pressure needed to translate inclusive intentions into practice.

By comparison, countries with more established inclusive education systems - such as the United Kingdom, Sweden, Canada, and Australia—have developed comprehensive legal structures that integrate accessibility, universal design, accountability, and student rights into higher education governance. These systems are often characterized by enforceable compliance mechanisms, institutional autonomy balanced with regulatory oversight, and strong cultural acceptance of inclusion.

The article provides a comparative analysis of similarities and differences in legislative approaches to inclusive education between Ukraine and several developed countries. The main focus is on five key areas: legal frameworks, institutional accountability, infrastructure and universal design, teacher development, and student participation.

**Table 1. Inclusive Education Legislation in Higher Education**

| Dimension                            | Ukraine   | Advanced Countries (e.g., UK, Canada, Sweden, Australia)   |
|--------------------------------------|---|--|
| 1. Legal Foundations                 | Inclusion declared in national laws (e.g., Law “On Education” 2017; Law “On Higher Education” 2014); implementation guidance is vague and advisory. | Inclusion is codified with detailed frameworks (e.g., UK Equality Act 2010, Canadian Charter, Sweden’s Discrimination Act); laws are enforceable and detailed. |
| 2. Institutional Accountability      | HEIs are encouraged to develop inclusive policies but are not held accountable through audits or sanctions.   | Mandatory institutional reporting, audits, and sanctions for non-compliance (e.g., Australia’s Disability Standards for Education, 2005).                      |
| 3. Infrastructure & Universal Design | Accessibility recognized as a right, but no binding UDL standards; infrastructure reform depends on local discretion or donor support.              | Enforced accessibility standards (e.g., ADA in the US); UDL integrated in national policy and HEI requirements (e.g., Finland).                                |
| 4. Faculty Training Requirements     | No legal requirement for inclusive pedagogy training; recommended but not monitored.  | National mandates for regular inclusive education training; integrated into accreditation and quality assurance processes (e.g., Norway, Australia).           |
| 5. Student Participation and Rights  | Rights guaranteed by law, but student participation in policy development or accommodations is weak or informal.                                    | Strong procedural rights; students co-create learning accommodations and can appeal decisions (e.g., ombudsman models in Denmark and the Netherlands).         |

*Sources: developed by authors*

As Ukraine progresses toward deeper integration with European standards and global educational values, the implementation of inclusive education within its higher education institutions (HEIs) has gained increased relevance. However, translating international standards into meaningful institutional practices remains a complex and multidimensional challenge. Ukrainian universities often encounter significant barriers that hinder the full realization of inclusive education. While legal and policy foundations are in place, their operationalization is constrained by a range of systemic, infrastructural, financial, and cultural factors. These challenges are not unique to Ukraine but are particularly pronounced in contexts where educational reforms coincide with broader socio-political and economic transitions.

The table 2 summarizes the five most critical challenges currently faced by Ukrainian HEIs in their efforts to implement inclusive education in line with

international standards. Each challenge reflects a specific area where the gap between principle and practice remains substantial, highlighting the urgent need for targeted policy interventions, capacity building, and institutional innovation.

**Table 2. The main challenges in implementing international standards of inclusive education in Ukrainian higher education institutions**

| № | Challenge                                 | Description  |
|---|---|--|
| 1 | Policy-Practice Gap                       | Despite legislative frameworks promoting inclusive education, practical implementation is inconsistent; institutional policies often lack clear guidelines and accountability. |
| 2 | Limited Awareness and Training            | Faculty and staff have limited knowledge of inclusive education principles; professional development on universal design and inclusive pedagogy is irregular.                  |
| 3 | Infrastructure and Accessibility Deficits | Many campuses are not physically accessible, lacking ramps, elevators, adapted facilities, and accessible learning materials for students with disabilities.                   |
| 4 | Resource Constraints                      | Financial difficulties prevent investments in assistive technologies, specialized support services, and the modernization of educational environments for inclusion.           |
| 5 | Cultural and Attitudinal Barriers         | Persistent stereotypes, stigma, and low expectations toward marginalized students hinder the establishment of truly inclusive academic communities.                            |

Sources: developed by authors

Among the most pressing challenges are infrastructural deficiencies that limit physical accessibility, insufficient professional development for academic and administrative staff, lack of specialized services and support systems, and limited financial resources. Moreover, cultural and attitudinal barriers—such as lingering stereotypes and resistance to diversity within academic environments—pose further obstacles to inclusive practice.

Despite these challenges, notable progress has been made. Some universities have begun integrating universal design for learning (UDL) principles, establishing accessibility centers, and initiating inclusive leadership training. Pilot projects, often supported by international organizations, have demonstrated that with strategic planning, institutional commitment, and stakeholder engagement, inclusive models can be successfully implemented even in resource-constrained contexts.

The prospects for advancing inclusive education in Ukrainian higher education institutions hinge on several key factors (Table 3).

**Table 3. The prospects for advancing inclusive education in Ukrainian higher education institutions**

| № | Prospect                                       | Description  |
|---|--|--|
| 1 | Strengthening National Policy Frameworks       | Aligning Ukrainian laws more closely with international standards to ensure enforceable inclusion policies, funding support, and national-level monitoring.        |
| 2 | Capacity Building and Professional Development | Providing regular, mandatory training for university leaders, educators, and support staff on inclusive pedagogical strategies and diversity management.           |
| 3 | Student-Centered Approaches                    | Engaging students, especially those from marginalized groups, in governance and feedback processes to ensure more responsive and equitable institutional policies. |
| 4 | Infrastructure Modernization                   | Improving physical accessibility through national investment and donor-supported projects, including assistive technology and barrier-free learning environments.  |
| 5 | Promoting Inclusive Institutional Cultures     | Cultivating empathy, diversity awareness, and inclusive leadership through awareness campaigns, staff seminars, and values-driven organizational development.      |

Sources: developed by authors

Strengthening national policy enforcement, ensuring consistent funding for inclusion-related initiatives, promoting cultural change within academic communities, and developing partnerships with European and international universities are essential. Leadership at the institutional level must prioritize inclusive values not only in policy but also in everyday practices, curriculum design, infrastructure planning, and student services.

In this context, the successful implementation of international standards is not simply a technical issue but a profound transformation of higher education culture in Ukraine. Building truly inclusive universities requires a long-term, multifaceted approach that integrates legal reforms, capacity-building efforts, infrastructure modernization, and continuous dialogue about diversity and human rights at every level of the academic system.

**Discussion.** The implementation of inclusive education in Ukraine is occurring at a crucial moment of transformation for its higher education sector. While legislative alignment with international conventions demonstrates political will, the practical dimensions of inclusive education remain underdeveloped. The research illustrates that gaps exist not due to the absence of policy, but because of weak institutional enforcement, insufficient capacity-building measures, and fragmented financial and strategic planning. Notably, the comparison with countries such as the UK, Canada, and Sweden reveals that successful models embed inclusion into legal compliance mechanisms, resource allocation, faculty training systems, and participatory student frameworks.

One of the most critical findings is the role of leadership and institutional autonomy. Where university leadership prioritizes inclusivity, tangible progress occurs even in resource-constrained environments. Conversely, without leadership engagement, even well-formulated policies fail to move beyond rhetoric. Another key point is the importance of cultural transformation. Inclusive education must be seen not just as a technical upgrade but as a fundamental shift in how academic institutions perceive diversity, participation, and equity.

As Ukraine seeks deeper integration into the European Higher Education Area, the need for sustainable and scalable inclusive practices becomes more pressing. The study suggests that progress is achievable through national investment in infrastructure, mandatory faculty development on inclusive pedagogy, stronger policy enforcement, and normalization of inclusive discourse within the academic community.

**Conclusion.** The implementation of international standards of inclusive education in Ukrainian higher education institutions represents both a challenge and an opportunity. While systemic barriers persist, the growing awareness among policymakers, academic leaders, and society offers hope for transformative change. Achieving true inclusion requires not only policy reforms but also a profound cultural shift that embraces diversity as a strength rather than a challenge. Through strategic investments in leadership, infrastructure, training, and cultural development, Ukrainian universities can move closer to becoming fully inclusive environments that embody international standards and meet the needs of all students.

**Author contributions.** The authors contributed equally.

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