

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AS AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH TO 21ST-CENTURY UNIVERSITY LEARNING

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Problem statement. Modern universities play a key role in preparing highly qualified specialists to face the challenges of a globalised world. However, educational systems often struggle to create an accessible and supportive environment for all students, regardless of their characteristics, physical abilities, cultural background, or socio-economic status.

Traditional teaching approaches frequently overlook the diversity of student populations, creating barriers for certain groups, such as people with disabilities, minorities, or individuals with unique educational needs. As a result, many young people cannot fully realize their potential, limiting their access to high-quality education and reducing social integration. This issue is especially pressing in the 21st century, as societies increasingly value inclusion and equal opportunities. As centres of innovation and knowledge, universities must lead in developing educational models that ensure accessibility, adaptability, and effectiveness for all students. Inclusive education is crucial in developing educational systems worldwide, including in Ukraine. It aims to provide equal access to quality education for all individuals, regardless of their special educational needs.

Universal Design for Learning: A Promising Solution

One of the most promising approaches to addressing this issue is the implementation of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). This concept promotes the development of flexible educational programs that meet the needs of a wide range of students. UDL allows educators to create teaching methods that simultaneously support diversity and enhance the academic success of every student.

However, implementing these approaches presents various challenges, from rethinking traditional pedagogical practices to adapting infrastructure and learning materials. This raises a fundamental question: how can universities integrate UDL principles into their educational activities to ensure inclusivity and excellence?

Research Objectives and Methodology

This article explores the concept of inclusive education as an innovative approach to university learning in the 21st century. The study examines the core principles of inclusion, particularly the implementation of Universal Design for Learning, and its role in ensuring equal access to quality education for all students. Special attention is given to the challenges and prospects of incorporating inclusive practices in higher education, analysing international experiences, and developing recommendations for adapting these approaches within the Ukrainian context.

Universal Design for Learning: A Framework for Inclusion

UDL is one of the most effective models of inclusive pedagogy aimed at reducing educational barriers for diverse student groups. This approach involves proactively designing the learning process to account for students' needs and characteristics, improving teaching methods and ensuring educational accessibility for all [3; 26].

The foundation of this research is the UDL framework, which includes guidelines for various forms of interaction, expression, and information presentation. It focuses on developing student qualities such as motivation, creativity, awareness, strategic thinking, and organisation [6]. The concept is supported by over 800 peer-reviewed scientific articles, highlighting its evidence-based effectiveness [9].

As societies continue to embrace inclusivity, universities must actively integrate inclusive education principles into their curricula. Universal Design for Learning presents a transformative model for making higher education more accessible, effective, and inclusive, ensuring that every student has the opportunity to succeed regardless of their background or abilities. By adapting these approaches to national educational contexts, institutions can foster a more equitable and innovative learning environment for future generations.

There is a notable lack of research on applying Universal Design principles in higher education, highlighting the need to develop methodologies, models, and implementation strategies [24].

Universal Design, based on the idea of universal benefit («good design for people with disabilities, such as ramps, benefits everyone») [15; 23] and the belief in successful and effective learning for all, is attracting increasing interest as a theoretical foundation for inclusive pedagogy.

Studies have identified links between universal learning environments and the development of student autonomy, conscientiousness in learning, and openness to experience [23]. Research also emphasizes the importance of engaging all stakeholders in the educational process, considering the perspectives of the entire academic community in decision-making [13].

The effectiveness of the proposed Universal Design model in higher education is confirmed by studies demonstrating the systematic application of its principles [5] across different educational levels [1]. The scientific literature describes successful university and college transformation case studies through Universal Design principles [5; 13; 24]. However, researchers note methodological challenges, including issues of data reliability due to sampling inaccuracies [19], difficulties in accounting for demographic variables, challenges in research design [21], and a lack of evidence-based experimental studies [19].

Defining Universal Design in Higher Education

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities defines Universal Design as «the design of products, environments, programs, and services to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialised design» [27]. In higher education, Universal Design is primarily a proactive approach to preventing barriers before they arise. «This approach aligns with social models of disability, where instead of reactively providing accommodations, a product or environment is designed to be accessible from the start» notes S. Burgstahler [4, p. 239].

The inclusive education model can be described as a dynamic system centred on the unique individual, prioritising their development. Universal Design in higher education serves as a tool to achieve this goal.

Strategies for Transforming Inclusive Education

D.A. Williams and co-authors identify «vision and engagement» as key strategies for transforming inclusive education. This involves staff members understanding and embracing inclusive values, recognising the need for organisational change, and actively participating in the design of such changes [25, p. 27]. It is essential to consider the voices and experiences of students from socially vulnerable groups, encouraging them to become architects of their own education and career paths.

Noting an increasing reluctance among students—especially those with minority perspectives—to express their views, Jacqueline Leighton argues that Universal Design in higher education is a resource-driven approach to building their confidence and autonomy [16]. Student involvement in shaping their learning trajectories and managing their education is crucial for satisfaction with learning outcomes [8; 21]. Students act as powerful catalysts for change, and their role as allies is integral to the transformation process [13].

A study by Ju S. et al., analysing 20 empirical studies published between 1972 and 2016, demonstrated that different forms of student agency—including self-advocacy, self-awareness, goal-setting, and achievement—encourage students to actively seek support to ensure academic success [11].

Challenges and Future Directions for Inclusive Education Research

Research on inclusive education is still in its early stages, with limited studies on:

- The application of Universal Design frameworks [14],
- The teaching process in higher education [10],
- The prospects of inclusive education [22],
- The motivations for implementing inclusion in universities [20].

These studies aim to provide higher education stakeholders with a deeper understanding of Universal Design from the perspectives of educators and curriculum developers. The findings may contribute to developing policies and procedures that expand the use of Universal Design in higher education, ultimately positively impacting student academic performance.

The State of Inclusive Higher Education in Ukraine

In the last decade, inclusive education in Ukraine has made significant progress. Implementing inclusive learning has become a priority of education policy, ensuring equal access for students with special educational needs. However, this remains a challenge requiring further improvement.

According to research by the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, only about 5% of children with disabilities participate in inclusive learning, while the rest either attend specialised institutions or do not receive education at all. The Ministry regularly monitors the number of students with special educational needs and the quality of inclusive education.

A 2023 study with the Institute of Educational Analytics found that 67% of preschool directors reported having students with special educational needs enrolled in their institutions.

Inclusive higher education in Ukraine is still developing, and statistical data on the number of students with special educational needs in universities remain limited. Below is a table reflecting the overall number of students in Ukrainian universities and aspects of inclusive education in other countries:

Table 1.

Statistical data on the number of students with special educational needs in higher education institutions (2023/2024 academic year)

Indicator	Ukraine	Germany	USA	Italy
Total number of students in HEIs	1,047 million	~2,9 million	~19,6 million	~1,7 million
Inclusive education policy	Enshrined in law, being implemented gradually	It is actively being implemented, and there are special support programs	A developed system of support for students with special educational needs, federal laws are in force	High level of integration of students with special educational needs in higher education institutions
Infrastructure accessibility	Many HEIs require adaptation for students with special educational needs	Most universities are adapted for students with special educational needs.	Universities are obliged to ensure accessibility for all students	A significant proportion of HEIs provide accessibility for students with special educational needs
Support for students with special educational needs	A limited number of support programs, needs development	There are developed support and adaptation programs	A wide range of support services, including technological tools	Implemented programs to support and integrate students with special educational needs

It is important to note that implementing inclusive higher education in Ukraine is still ongoing. Still, there are challenges related to infrastructure adaptation and the development of support programs for students with special educational needs. Compared to developed countries such as Germany, the United States, and Italy, Ukraine has significant potential to improve its inclusive education system in higher education institutions (HEIs).

Thirty years ago, the leading strategy for universities worldwide was academic excellence. Educators who embraced the spirit of academic superiority focused primarily on achievements, unintentionally contributing to exclusion [18]. However, modern education cannot be considered successful if it remains accessible only to a select few.

In 2005, the American Association of Colleges and Universities introduced the Inclusive Education Model, which integrates students with special needs into general study groups, provides academic support, ensures physical accessibility, trains faculty to work with diverse students, and monitors the effectiveness of inclusive practices. This model is designed to create conditions for equal access to quality education for all students. It defines diversity, equity, and inclusion as key factors for achieving academic excellence [25, p. 9]. The model is based on a system of transformational changes, which include:

1. The learning environment
2. Organizational behavior
3. Organizational culture (mission, vision, values, traditions, norms)
4. Indicators of inclusive education effectiveness
5. Strategies for changing inclusive education

A key feature of this inclusive education model is that it works “from the external level inward,” engaging the external environment in behavioural aspects to transform academic excellence into inclusivity [25, p. 29].

Ensuring equal opportunities for all students requires:

–Equal access to education – All students, regardless of their characteristics, should have the right to access quality education in an integrated environment.

–Full participation – Inclusive education enables all students to actively engage in learning and social life.

–Individualized learning – The educational process is adapted to each student’s needs through personalised learning plans and differentiated teaching approaches.

–Respect for diversity – Inclusive education promotes recognition and respect for individual, cultural, social, and educational differences.

–Support and resources – Students with special educational needs receive comprehensive support, including access to resource rooms, specialised learning tools, and psychological and pedagogical assistance.

- Partnership with families – Active collaboration with parents ensures their involvement in the learning process and decision-making regarding their children’s education.
- Continuous professional development of educators – Regular training for faculty on inclusive teaching methods enhances the effectiveness of inclusive education.
- Creating a supportive environment – Developing a safe, friendly, and accessible learning space fosters the harmonious development of all students.

Principles of Inclusive Education

The principles of inclusive education are defined as follows:

1. We do not just acknowledge differences; we embrace them.
2. We believe in diversity and are responsible for ensuring that everyone can fully participate, thrive, and lead within the university.
3. We recognise that our university prospers only when every individual prospers.
4. We act in ways that consider the experiences of all individuals [2].

These principles form the foundation for creating an educational environment that accommodates the needs and capabilities of every student. Equal access, individualised learning, respect for diversity, and comprehensive support are essential components for ensuring the effectiveness of the inclusive approach. Collaboration with families, accessible infrastructure, and ongoing teacher training further strengthen the implementation of inclusive practices.

By adhering to these principles, universities not only enhance students’ academic achievements but also foster a tolerant society that recognises the value of every individual. Integrating inclusive education into academic institutions is a crucial step toward building an education system based on equal opportunities and the full development of each learner’s potential.

The Intersection of Academic and Inclusive Excellence

Modern universities face the challenge of creating a learning environment that maintains high academic standards while also upholding the principles of inclusivity. This includes: integrating students with diverse abilities, cultural, and social backgrounds; ensuring equal access to educational resources; adapting curricula to meet individual needs; developing pedagogical approaches that accommodate all students.

Inclusivity is becoming a key factor in shaping accessible and high-quality education. The convergence of academic and inclusive excellence is a crucial driver of university development, ensuring all students can reach their full potential regardless of abilities, social status, or cultural background.

Academic excellence focuses on: advancing scientific research; maintaining high teaching standards; aligning programs with global labour market trends; preparing graduates for international competitiveness.

Meanwhile, inclusive excellence aims to: ensure equal educational opportunities for all students; adapt educational programs to meet diverse needs; implement Universal Design for Learning (UDL); develop inclusive infrastructure; promote a culture of tolerance and accessibility.

The Challenge of Evaluating Inclusive Higher Education

The quality of higher education is often assessed through the lens of academic excellence based on global university rankings. However, this focus can pressure university leaders to prioritise short-term achievements over long-term strategies such as inclusion. Additionally, these rankings do not fully account for institutional diversity and regional contexts.

«These challenges can lead to unfair comparisons in evaluating academic value, thus reinforcing inequalities within higher education» writes M. Kayyali [12].

Integrating inclusive education in universities requires a balanced approach that harmonises academic excellence with inclusive principles. Achieving both goals will enhance the quality of education and foster a more equitable, diverse, and globally competitive higher education system.

It is evident that the issue of criteria for assessing inclusive education is complex and requires broad discussion. It is essential to recognize that inclusion is more of a process than an outcome, and its true power lies in its ability to catalyse the transformation of all university structures [7, p. 27].

The Inclusive Education Model establishes the following framework:

1. Access and equity
2. Diversity in formal and informal curricula
3. Campus Climate
4. Student learning and development [25]

Empirical studies have contributed to evaluating and refining assessment tools. Learning programs are assessed using effectiveness, accessibility, flexibility, learning outcomes, course materials, and teaching strategies [8]. Additionally, online classroom management systems are used for evaluation [18]. In assessing student learning and development, researchers have focused on confidence, autonomy, conscientiousness in learning, and openness to experience [23].

Equal Access to Higher Education

In the inclusive education model, equal access to higher education is characterised not only by equality of conditions but also by equality of outcomes:

1. Equal access to all levels of higher education;
2. Equal conditions, supplemented by resources tailored to individual needs;
3. Equal academic success for all students;
4. Equal access to diverse forms of learning [25, p. 8].

The equality paradigm in higher education aligns with the Universal Design for Learning (UDL).

Developing an inclusive higher education model using Universal Design for Learning (UDL) requires a comprehensive and systematic approach that integrates the key features of both concepts.

At the model's core are the foundational principles of inclusive education, which form the organizational culture (mission, vision, values, traditions, norms). These serve as the foundation for initiating inclusive transformation while preserving core values.

The key focus areas for transformation include: equity and accessibility; diversity in formal and informal curricula; campus climate; student learning and development.

According to the principles of Universal Design in higher education, transformation should occur across multiple environments, learning methods, and strategies. The design of actionable steps must be based on analyzing external factors that support or hinder inclusive education. Additionally, considering the global and national context is crucial to balancing universality and uniqueness in the inclusive transformation process within universities.

A key feature of the inclusive university model based on UDL is its focus on the transformation process, which begins with individual stakeholders (students, faculty, and administrators). The core learning phases under Universal Design include engagement, representation, action, and expression, all implemented through diverse tools and environments while fostering student agency and active participation.

Key Challenges in Implementing Inclusive Education

1. Inadequate Legal Framework

There is a need to enhance legislation on inclusive education to align it with international standards. The key areas for improvement include:

- Harmonization with international standards – Aligning policies with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and clearly defining principles of equal access to education and reasonable accommodation.
- Clarifying practical aspects – Establishing Universal Design for Learning (UDL) standards and developing specific mechanisms for adapting curricula and learning environments.
- Financial support – Ensuring transparent and adequate funding for creating inclusive environments, with mandatory budget allocations to support inclusion.
- Support for educators and stakeholders – Defining the rights and responsibilities of teachers, assistants, and specialists, along with training and professional development standards.
- Monitoring and accountability – Implement systems to evaluate the effectiveness of inclusive education and hold institutions accountable for compliance.

These aspects will enhance the accessibility, quality, and effectiveness of inclusive education in Ukraine.

2. Shortage of Trained Specialists

A significant barrier to inclusive education is the lack of trained faculty and assistants with the necessary knowledge and skills to support students with special educational needs.

This issue stems from:

- Gaps in teacher training programs
- Lack of systematic professional development
- Low motivation due to insufficient funding
- High emotional workload for educators

Solutions include:

- Expanding teacher training programs to include inclusive education methodologies
- Providing financial incentives for inclusive educators
- Offering mental health and emotional support for teachers and staff

3. Limited Access to Resources

A lack of specialized educational materials, adapted curricula, and assistive technologies creates barriers for students with special educational needs.

This issue involves: limited access to learning resources; inadequate funding; insufficient integration of innovative approaches.

Solutions include: developing adapted curricula; integrating modern assistive technologies; providing training and support for educators. These measures will help create an accessible and effective inclusive learning environment.

4. *Social Stereotypes and Attitudes*

Misconceptions and prejudices about inclusive education among parents, educators, and society present a significant barrier to its implementation. Issues include: lack of awareness; fear of change; stereotypes about students with special educational needs. To overcome these challenges, it is crucial to: conduct awareness campaigns on the benefits of inclusive education; provide training programs for educators and parents; foster positive interactions between all students. These efforts will contribute to building a more tolerant society and promoting inclusivity in education. Evaluating inclusive education is a complex but essential process that drives institutional transformation. The Inclusive Education Model and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) provide a systematic approach to improving accessibility, diversity, and student development. Addressing legal, resource, and societal barriers is key to enhancing the effectiveness of inclusive education in higher education institutions. Through policy improvements, professional training, and societal awareness, universities can ensure that education is accessible to all, fostering academic success and social inclusion.

Ways to Overcome Challenges in Inclusive Education

1. *Improving Legislation*

Adopting and implementing regulatory acts that guarantee the rights of children with special educational needs to education and social integration is a key factor in developing inclusive education. These legal frameworks help regulate the adaptation of educational programs, the creation of accessible infrastructure, and the allocation of resources to support inclusive environments. Legislative reforms aim to:

- Ensure equal access to quality education,
- Promote the integration of students with special needs into society,
- Develop a socially responsible education system.

2. *Teacher Training and Professional Development*

Developing and implementing teacher training and qualification enhancement programs for inclusive education is crucial in ensuring high-quality education for children with special needs. These programs should cover: modern methodologies; principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL); practical skills for working with diverse learners. Continuous professional development contributes to the following: improving teaching quality; creating a tolerant learning environment; ensuring the effective implementation of inclusive practices. This approach guarantees equal educational access and supports each student's learning journey.

3. *Providing Educational Resources*

Creating and distributing adapted learning materials, assistive technologies, and methodological guidelines are key conditions for students with special needs practical education. These resources should: ensure accessibility in the learning process; consider individual student needs; facilitate integration into the learning environment. Developing innovative solutions and educator support programs enhances education quality and fosters the inclusion of students with special needs in mainstream learning. These initiatives are essential for establishing an inclusive and adaptive education system.

Awareness and Public Outreach

Conducting information and awareness campaigns is a crucial tool for: raising public awareness about inclusive education; challenging stereotypes and prejudices; creating a tolerant learning environment. Such initiatives help: change biased attitudes toward students with special needs; promote the acceptance of equality and accessibility in education; encourage engagement among parents, educators, and the community.

Increasing awareness stimulates the development of inclusive education, fosters social integration, and supports creating a harmonious educational system.

Universal Design in Higher Education: A Transformational Approach

Universal Design in higher education can serve as a methodological foundation for addressing universities' challenges when designing inclusive environments. Discussions on Universal Design highlight national examples of its implementation, showing how general principles of inclusive education can be recontextualised within a specific national framework.

There are two possible outcomes of integrating Universal Design into higher education:

1. Creative adaptation of UDL principles can drive technological and humanitarian breakthroughs, contributing to the achievement of national development goals.
2. A purely mechanical application of UDL mechanisms without embracing its humanistic values might contradict deep-seated essentialist views on education and individuals.

Inclusive Education: A Key Element in Educational Transformation

Inclusive education is fundamental in transforming modern educational systems, focusing on equal opportunities for all students. Its core principles—equity, individualised learning, diversity support, and family partnerships—enable high-quality education for all.

Implementing Universal Design for Learning and adapting infrastructure are crucial steps in removing barriers and fostering a supportive educational environment.

The experience of developed countries proves that inclusive education enhances student success and promotes social integration. Beyond benefiting individual students, inclusion fosters a tolerant, integrated society that is ready for cooperation and mutual support.

For successful implementation of inclusive education, universities must: invest in infrastructure development; train faculty in modern, inclusive teaching methodologies; ensure resources for supporting students with special needs.

Most importantly, fostering a positive attitude toward inclusion among all stakeholders is essential.

Conclusion. Inclusive education is not just a challenge but an opportunity for universities to: adapt to societal changes; provide high-quality education for all; create an innovative learning environment that supports personal and professional growth.

This approach aligns with global educational trends, preparing universities to build a future-oriented system that recognises and accommodates the needs of every individual.

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SOCIAL-COMMUNICATION DIMENSION AS PART OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

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Problem statement. The current stage of society's development is characterized by fundamental changes in the perception of social diversity and the search for effective mechanisms to ensure equal opportunities for all citizens. Social inclusion as a principle of organizing social life is gradually transforming from a theoretical concept into a practical paradigm that determines state policies, organizational strategies, and professional approaches of specialists in various fields.

The vector of inclusive education development reflects a fundamental shift in the educational paradigm, emphasizing a humanistic, student-centered approach and the creation of a safe and accessible learning environment for all learners, regardless of their special educational needs. Therefore, higher education institutions