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Modifying Curricula to Support Students with Special Needs – Step Toward Inclusion in Higher Education

Yuliia Ribtsun¹, Vira Kupras², Kateryna Miliutina³, Svitlana Nahorniak⁴, Tetiana Shlapko⁵

Abstract

Relevance: Inclusion in higher education is a key area of transformation of modern educational systems aimed at creating equal opportunities for students with special needs. Therefore, the study of the adaptation of curricula for students with special needs in the education system is a relevant area for further scientific explorations. Objective: The purpose of the preset academic paper is to evaluate the effectiveness of inclusive education in Ukraine, to identify problems and challenges related to the adaptation of curricula for students with special needs. Methods: Several methods were used in the course of the qualitative research: synthesis of literature sources, comparative legal method as well as methods of systematization and generalization. In addition, statistical analysis was applied to assess the dynamics of accessibility of educational services as well as quantitative analysis methods to calculate the overall inclusiveness index based on weighting coefficients and normalized indicators. Results: According to the results of the research, it should be noted that the support of teachers (X2) has a statistically significant positive impact on the overall satisfaction with educational services of students with SEN ($r = 0.142$, $p = 0.007$), while the availability of resources (X1) does not demonstrate such an impact ($r = 0.264$, $r = 0.037$). Conclusions: The results of the research confirm the need to develop inclusive education in Ukraine, in particular, through the adaptation of the educational environment and curricula to the individual needs of students with special educational needs. The novelty of the conclusions lies in the detailed justification of the need for flexible adaptation of educational programs and integration of digital technologies (in particular, the expansion of inclusive infrastructure through the introduction of specially equipped spaces for students) to support students with special needs in martial law, as well as the development of recommendations for improving inclusive practices in Ukrainian educational institutions based on European experience.

Keywords: People With Special Educational Needs, Children With Visual Impairments, Psychological Support For People With Visual Impairments, Preschool Institutions, General Education Institutions, Special schools.

Introduction

Inclusion in higher education is a key area of transformation of modern educational systems aimed at creating equal opportunities for students with special needs. According to international educational standards, in particular, the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED), an inclusive approach is implemented at different levels of education, which is confirmed by statistics on education coverage in European countries (Eurostat, 2011). In particular, a study conducted by EASNIE (2024) during the 2021–2022 academic year on inclusive education coverage in the European Union (EU) member states shows a high level of adaptation of educational systems. For example, in countries such as Luxembourg, Malta, and

¹ Mykola Yarmachenko Institute of Special Pedagogy and Psychology, National Academy of Pedagogical Sciences of Ukraine, Kyiv, Ukraine, Email: z.burik@ukr.net

² KZO Special School 12 DOR, Dnipro, Ukraine.

³ Academy of Labour, Social Relations and Tourism, Kyiv, Ukraine.

⁴ Mykhailo Kotsiubynskyi Vinnytsia State Pedagogical University, Vinnytsia, Ukraine.

⁵ Sumy State University, Sumy, Ukraine.



Spain, the level of inclusion in primary and secondary education reaches 99–100%, which indicates the effective integration of students with special needs into the general education space. At the same time, there are certain differences in access to inclusive education for different regions of the Union at the level of preschool and higher education, which necessitates additional studies and improvement of approaches to the adaptation of curricula. Despite significant progress in ensuring inclusiveness in general secondary education, higher education institutions face numerous challenges related to the individualization of learning processes, accessibility of learning materials, and creation of an inclusive educational environment (Masruroh et al., 2024; Saputra et al., 2024; Vargas, 2024). Increasing the efficiency of higher education institutions to prevent the above challenges emphasizes the relevance of adaptation processes in the context of European integration processes in Ukraine and the growing demands on the quality of its education in the context of Russian aggression and related socio-economic problems.

Therefore, the study of the adaptation of curricula for students with special needs in the education system is relevant both in theoretical and practical aspects, which necessitates further scientific studies in this direction.

The purpose of the academic paper is to assess the effectiveness of inclusive education in Ukraine, identify problems and challenges related to the adaptation of curricula for students with special needs, and develop recommendations for improving inclusive practices in educational institutions to ensure equal access to education for all participants in the educational process.

Literature Review

The key to the accessibility of educational content for people with special educational needs (SEN) and, as a result, further promotion of the inclusiveness of the educational environment is the qualitative adaptation of educational programs (Lopatina et al., 2024). The adaptation process primarily involves special training of teaching staff, which will increase the effectiveness of the implementation of inclusive education strategies and methodologies, which are a driver of social integration and a guarantee of the quality of education for students with SEN in the long term (Vargas, 2024). Considering this, the most effective strategies are differentiated learning, individualized education plans (IEPs), and the integration of assistive technologies. For example, Damyanov (2024) states that differentiated learning is an adaptive learning method that adapts individuals with SEN to different learning opportunities, in particular, to changing content, processes, and products based on their individual needs. At the same time, Claire (2025) also notes the possibility of directing inclusion through the use of non-traditional means of physical activity and non-standard forms of organizing adaptive physical education classes, which provides the opportunity for simultaneous training of all students regardless of health status. Studies aimed at exploring the possibilities of individualized curricula, in particular, Damyanov (2024), Saputra et al. (2024), Lambrecht et al. (2022), show the prospect of providing individualized intervention and tracking the progress of students with SEN over time and can serve as personalized roadmaps for teachers, parents and specialists. In turn, the use of assistive technologies such as adaptive keyboards, screen readers, and speech-to-text software helps students overcome traditional learning barriers by developing independence (Damyanov, 2024), improving the quality of education by providing personalized learning experiences (Masruroh et al., 2024), and improve key skills related to writing, text evaluation, and student experience (Matre et al., 2024). In addition, Veglianti and Varriale (2024) analyze in detail the impact of digital innovations, in particular ICT and AI, on creating a more accessible and equitable learning environment that supports inclusivity and promotes the

integration of students with different needs, while reducing the digital divide through specialized technological solutions. In turn, Castellano-Beltran et al. (2025) note that resources and strategies such as virtual and augmented reality, gamification, virtual intelligence, social media, and MOOCs (Massive Open Online Course) are becoming increasingly common in university teaching. Burke et al. (2022) noted that mobile learning (M-Learning) refers to the use of mobile devices for learning (smartphones, computers, tablets, e-readers, and smartwatches) that facilitate accessibility and immediacy. However, for the quality implementation of these tools, problems such as imperfect legislation (Shevchuk, 2021), insufficient infrastructure accessibility (Troinina et al, 2023), the disproportion between educational institutions in different regions (Vigevano & Mattei, 2023), the limited adaptation of educational materials (Kirishko, 2022; Poroshenko, 2019), insufficient training of teachers to work in an inclusive environment (Kramar et al, 2022; Lopatina et al., 2024; Nikolaesku et al., 2021), as well as social stereotypes (Oliinyk et al., 2023; Prokhorenko, 2024) can hinder their implementation. In this context, social stereotypes are a multifaceted category that is still relevant due to a number of complicating factors, including the social marginalization of people with disabilities, the lack of resources and equipment to ensure inclusion (Byrne, 2014), the inaccessibility of premises and materials for low-mobility groups of students (Filippou et al., 2025), and the lack of commitment of teaching staff to inclusive teaching and learning methods (Lintangsari & Emaliana, 2020). In addition, other difficulties in the adaptation of people with disabilities to the educational environment are widely discussed in the current scientific discourse, namely: the complexity of bureaucratic processes (Toutain, 2019), the lack of access to physical space (Soares & Suzane, 2022), and the lack of adaptation and flexibility of methodologies and curricula (García et al., 2020).

Methods

The following methods were used in the research process:

- literature synthesis was used to identify key tools for adapting educational programs for students with special needs;
- the comparative legal method was used to analyze the main international and national legal acts of Ukraine as part of the study of the legal framework for inclusion in education;
- analysis of statistical data was used to determine the dynamics of changes in the volume of educational provision for students with special educational needs and the overall level of accessibility of general secondary education institutions for people with limited mobility;
- empirical research methods included a survey method that allowed collecting primary data on the level of accessibility of educational resources, teacher support, and overall satisfaction of students with special educational needs based on the collected scores (from 0 to 10) among 298 Ukrainian students with SEN; descriptive statistics methods, including calculating mean values, standard deviation, minimum and maximum values, to assess the overall level of accessibility of educational services and the variability of respondents' answers; and correlation;
- the systematization method was used to characterize higher educational institutions of Ukraine to identify complicating factors for ensuring and further implementing an inclusive educational environment;

- the generalization method was used to determine the optimal ways to adapt educational programs for students of Ukrainian universities with special needs in wartime conditions.

Results

Modern educational policy requires the mandatory provision of equal opportunities for all participants in the educational process, regardless of their physical, sensory, or cognitive characteristics, which has an international regulatory and legal basis. Key international instruments that establish the principle of equal access to education are: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Council of Europe, 1950), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (United Nations, 1966), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) and the Convention against Discrimination in Education (UNESCO, 1960). It is also important to note that the legal basis for the development of an inclusive educational environment was formed, first of all, by the adoption of the Salamanca Declaration and the Framework Programme of Action on Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994), which provide for the high-quality implementation of inclusive approaches in educational institutions of different states; as well as the adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006), in particular, Article 24, which provides for accessibility of education and adaptation of the educational process to the individual needs of persons with disabilities. In addition, the Global Program of Action concerning persons with disabilities (United Nations, 1983) and the UN Sustainable Development Goals, in particular SDG 4 (United Nations, 2024), enshrine the need to ensure inclusive and equitable education. The set of these international documents forms the basis for national strategies for the development of inclusive education, promoting the harmonization of educational policies in accordance with the principles of equality and non-discrimination (Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, 2025).

In the revised EU Agenda for Higher Education (European Sources Online, 2017), the European Commission emphasized the importance of higher education as a tool for overcoming societal and democratic challenges in Europe. In this context, it is stated that universities should promote inclusiveness, be open to talented students regardless of their professional background, and form community-oriented learning communities closely integrated into social structures. The key regulatory act that enshrines these principles is the EU European Pillar of Social Rights (2017), the first principle of which proclaims the right of everyone to quality and inclusive education, lifelong learning and skills necessary for active participation in society and adaptation to changes in the labor market. The Europe 2020 Strategy concretizes these principles through two main goals: reducing the proportion of people who prematurely drop out of education to below 10% and increasing the proportion of citizens aged 30-34 with tertiary education to at least 40%. These initiatives are being further developed within the European Education Area (EEA), which emphasizes high-quality inclusive education, starting with preschool, as a fundamental basis for social cohesion, mobility, and equality. One of the priorities of the EEA is to support EU member states in making their education and training systems more inclusive.

The unconditional priority given to the social dimension of education has been achieved thanks to the significant progress in implementing the principles of inclusion and diversity in higher education, as enshrined in the documents of the Bologna Process/European Higher Education Area (EHEA). In addition, in the Rome Ministerial Communiqué (European Higher Education Area, 2020), EU Member States agreed on a definitive set of measures and policy commitments

in the field of inclusion and diversity. These were previously set out in the Principles and Recommendations for Strengthening the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the European Higher Education Area (PAG). The primary objective of this document is to ensure access to quality higher education and create an inclusive learning environment that promotes equity, diversity, and access to quality. A strategic approach to the social dimension is covered by ten key principles: a flexible educational process, lifelong learning, data monitoring, governance, and counselling, funding, professional development of staff, institutional missions, mobility, community engagement, and policy dialogue. Public authorities, higher education institutions and other stakeholders are responsible for implementing these principles in order to achieve common standards across EHEA countries. The current transformations of the EU education policy demonstrate a growing awareness of the need for an inclusive approach at all levels of education. Furthermore, there are significant differences between countries and individual universities when it comes to the degree of integration of these approaches and methods of their implementation. European education strategies that emphasize inclusion and diversity can be a crucial factor in ensuring equal access to educational opportunities and creating a more equitable society.

Considering the ongoing process of European integration in Ukraine, it is critical to improve the system of inclusive education in Ukrainian higher education institutions in order to ensure equal access to education for all categories of students. In the European space, effective inclusion in higher education involves, foremost, ensuring the comprehensiveness of governmental, institutional, and social efforts in achieving total accessibility of education for people with disabilities. This approach includes the adaptation of the educational environment, digital accessibility, special support programs for people with disabilities and vulnerable groups, and the training of teachers to work with a diverse student contingent. EU countries provide financial support programs for inclusive education, as are legislative standards that regulate the need to adapt educational materials and infrastructure to meet the needs of people with disabilities. European countries provide financial support programs for inclusive education, as well as legislative standards that regulate the need to adapt educational materials and infrastructure to meet the needs. However, there are significant challenges, including insufficient physical access to universities, a limited number of educational materials adapted for students with special educational needs, and the lack of comprehensive support mechanisms for such students. The current level of inclusiveness in Ukrainian higher education can be assessed by analysing the current level of inclusiveness in Ukrainian higher education, which allows us to assess the level of implementation of state policy in this area and identify areas for improvement. Therefore, based on the scores from 0 to 10 obtained from our survey among 298 students with SEN studying for a bachelor's degree in Ukrainian higher education institutions, an analysis of inclusion was conducted, including the availability of resources (X1), support from teaching staff (X2) and the overall level of satisfaction (Y) with the provision of educational services. The initial data for further calculations are presented in Appendix A. The results of generating descriptive statistics in the JASP statistical program are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics on the availability of resources, faculty support, and overall satisfaction with the level of inclusion in higher education institutions

Descriptive Statistics			
	Availability	of	Support from teaching
			The overall level of

	resources (X1)	staff (X2)	satisfaction (Y)
Valid	298	298	298
Missing	0	0	0
Mean	6.550	8.557	7.067
Std. Deviation	2.930	2.084	2.790
Minimum	1.000	1.000	1.000
Maximum	10.000	10.000	10.000

Source: compiled by the author

The average level of accessibility of resources (X1) for students with SEN is estimated at 6.55 points, which indicates certain barriers to providing material and technical infrastructure for inclusive education (Troinina et al., 2023; Vigevano, & Mattei, 2023). At the same time, teachers' support (X2) is rated much higher – 8,557 points, which demonstrates a relatively high level of attention from the teaching staff to students with special educational needs. However, there are problems of superficiality in preparing teachers to work in an inclusive environment (Kramar et al., 2022; Lopatina et al., 2024; Nikolaesku et al., 2021) and the impact of widespread social stereotypes on university teaching staff in the performance of their duties (Oliinyk et al., 2023). Overall satisfaction with educational services (Y) has an average value of 7.067, which indicates a medium level of satisfaction, however, the presence of a significant standard deviation (2.79) indicates the heterogeneity of respondents' answers. This is due to different conditions for students, which depend on a particular university or group of universities in a particular region, the level of funding, the availability of inclusive infrastructure, and the preparedness of the teaching staff to work with people with special educational needs. The identified problems can be addressed by applying a comprehensive approach to expanding inclusive infrastructure, introducing specially equipped spaces for students with special needs, such as sensory rooms, and developing administrative policies that will improve access to education for international students and other vulnerable groups. Such an initiative has already been put into practice at the University of Aix-Marseille in France, which has reduced the sensory and cognitive overload of students with SEN and at the same time popularized the institution and attracted more than 12 thousand new foreign students (Le Monde, 2023).

The findings emphasize the need to increase the availability of learning resources for students with special educational needs, which may include expanding funding for inclusive infrastructure, developing special learning materials and digital resources. Therefore, in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the factors that influence the level of overall satisfaction of students with SEN with educational services, it is advisable to conduct an additional analysis of the relationships between the variables (Table 2).

Table 2. Correlation analysis of the impact of availability of resources and teacher support on overall satisfaction with education

Pearson's Correlations		
Variable		The overall satisfaction (Y)
2. Availability of resources (X1)	n	298
	Pearson's r	0.037
	p-value	0.264

	Lower 95% CI	-0.059
	Upper 95% CI	1.000
3. Support from teaching staff (X2)	n	298
	Pearson's r	0.142**
	p-value	0.007
	Lower 95% CI	0.048
	Upper 95% CI	1.000

Note: All tests are one-tailed, for positive correlation. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, one-tailed

Source: compiled by the author

The results of the correlation analysis show that the relationship between the availability of resources (X1) and overall satisfaction with educational services (Y) is statistically insignificant ($r = 0.264$, $r = 0.037$), which may indicate a weak influence of material availability on the overall perception of education quality. In contrast, teacher support (X2) has a more significant positive correlation with overall satisfaction ($r = 0.142$, $p = 0.007$). The pattern found reinforces the importance of pedagogical interaction for students with special needs.

Discussion

Based on the analysis of works of modern scientific discourse in the field of education and inclusion, it was determined that ensuring the accessibility of educational content for people with special educational needs (SEN) is a key condition for effective inclusive education. In particular, Lopatina et al. (2024) found that one of the key tasks of our time is precisely ensuring the high-quality adaptation of curricula to the needs of people with SEN, while Vargas (2024) prefers to improve the work on training teachers for responsibility when working with people with SEN. In the course of our research, we found that, despite the current regulatory framework, the problem of adapting educational materials in higher educational institutions in Ukraine remained relevant, and the psychological stability of teaching staff when working with people with SEN is fundamental for their adaptation in the educational environment. This tendency is also noted in the publications of Kirishko (2022) and Poroshenko (2019), who point to the limited availability of adapted educational resources. In the context of inclusive education, Damyanov (2024) identifies a differentiated approach as the main method that allows taking into account the individual needs of students. Our research has shown the gradual introduction of personalized curricula, but their effectiveness is constrained by the lack of specialists and insufficient technical support. These findings correlate with the findings of Saputra et al. (2024) and Lambrecht et al. (2022), who emphasized the priority of individualized educational programs in the educational process of individuals with SEN in the long term. In addition, modern scientific discourse focuses on the issues of theory and practice of using assistive technologies in the formation of an inclusive educational environment. Therefore, we note that Masrurroh et al. (2024) and Matre et al. (2024) emphasize in their work that such technologies contribute to the personalization of the learning process and the development of key competencies. At the same time, the results of their research revealed that despite the positive perception of these technologies by society, their implementation in educational institutions in practice remains limited due to financial and organizational difficulties. Institutional barriers to the implementation of inclusive technologies were analyzed in detail in the works of Shevchuk (2021) and Troinina et al. (2023). Social factors play a significant role in the implementation of

inclusive education. Oliinyk et al. (2023) and Prokhorenko (2024) note that social stereotypes about people with SEN remain a significant barrier. Our results show that although attitudes toward inclusion are gradually changing, stigmatization is still a problem, especially in regions with lower levels of socioeconomic development, which points to the need for strengthening information and awareness-raising efforts. Thus, the results of our research generally confirm the main points of the scientific literature, while revealing specific problems characteristic of the Ukrainian educational system in the context of war. Further studies should be aimed at developing effective mechanisms for overcoming the identified barriers and optimizing the implementation of inclusive approaches in the educational process.

Conclusions

According to the results of the research, one of the most important components of improving modern educational policy aimed at ensuring equal opportunities for students with special needs is the development, implementation and adaptation of quality inclusive education in educational institutions of different levels. Given that Ukraine is actively implementing the principles of inclusive education amid the war and the accompanying socio-economic and political challenges, the processes of ensuring accessibility and barrier-free learning for all participants, regardless of their physical, sensory or cognitive characteristics, have their limitations. In particular, there is a need to further adapt the educational environment and curricula to the individual needs of students with special educational needs, which is a necessary step to ensure full-fledged learning in the face of modern challenges, including martial law.

The need to increase the effectiveness of adaptive processes of inclusion in educational institutions in Ukraine is currently an urgent issue of both pedagogical theory and practice. This issue is proposed to be considered from the point of view of increasing the flexibility of educational programs and ensuring the possibility of their individualization through differentiated learning. However, it is worth considering the variability of teaching methods and topics because, on the one hand, this contributes to a flexible approach to assessing results, and on the other, it allows considering the individual needs of students with special educational needs. Given the growing trend towards digitalization of education, it is necessary to ensure the integration of digital technologies and specialized educational resources into individual educational programs. With high-quality work with digital tools, it is possible to ensure access to educational materials, in particular for students with visual or hearing impairments. Moreover, by integrating assistive technologies, it is proposed to improve methods of supporting people with visual, hearing, musculoskeletal and neurodevelopmental disabilities. This involves the creation and further modification of a support system, including the use of adapted technologies, the creation of barrier-free conditions in educational institutions, and specialized teaching methods for students with visual, hearing, and neurodevelopmental disabilities. As a result, by addressing current challenges through improving inclusive practices in the educational environment, a positive change in the dynamics of the overall index of education inclusiveness in Ukraine is expected.

The results of the conducted research and the above recommendations for improving inclusive practices in the educational environment of Ukrainian educational institutions are applicable to university administrations, educators, and government agencies in order to develop national standards and strategies, as well as to develop inclusive policies at the local level. Further studies in the field of inclusive education can contribute to a deeper understanding of the processes that ensure equal access to education for students with disabilities.

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