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From Accessibility to Inclusion: The Evolution of Higher Education for Persons with Disabilities in Post-Soviet Georgia

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the evolution and current state of inclusive higher education (HE) for students with special educational needs/disabilities in post-Soviet Georgia. The Bologna Process has advanced the democratization and accessibility of higher education in Georgia, making the inclusion of persons with disabilities a relatively new challenge for the country. Within this context, the purpose of this study is to explore the existing praxis of institutionalisation of inclusion in higher education (HE), based on university staff experiences of interacting with students with special educational needs and disabilities in university educational settings.

The research is based on data collected from 19 HE institutions in Georgia. The study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining a predominantly positivist, hypothesis-driven quantitative analysis with qualitative focus groups to contextualise and deepen the findings. The quantitative component relies on a validated survey administered to academic and administrative staff, while the qualitative component includes focus groups with experts and persons with disabilities from Georgia and Sweden.

The findings reveal a significant gap between progressive legislative frameworks and their practical implementation. Core empirical challenges include limited faculty preparedness, insufficient institutional infrastructure, and weak administrative support systems. Additionally, the study identifies persistent barriers such as outdated methodological approaches, low levels of awareness, and ineffective information dissemination mechanisms across institutions.

The study contributes to both policy and academic discourse by demonstrating that, despite ongoing efforts to align with international standards, including United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), the adaptation of Western models of inclusive education in Georgia remains fragmented and lacks systemic coherence. The findings underscore the need for comprehensive institutional transformation that extends beyond formal policy adoption to include reforms in pedagogy, curriculum design, assessment practices, and governance structures.

Accordingly, the article offers targeted recommendations aimed at strengthening monitoring mechanisms, enhancing faculty professional development, improving resource allocation, and fostering participatory and inclusive institutional cultures.

ხელმისაწვდომობიდან ინკლუზიამდე: შეზღუდული შესაძლებლობების მქონე პირთა უმაღლესი განათლების ევოლუცია პოსტსაბჭოთა საქართველოში

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სტატიის შესახებ	აბსტრაქტი
<p><i>საკვანძო სიტყვები:</i></p> <p>ინკლუზია შეზღუდული შესაძლებლობები მდგრადი განვითარება უმაღლესი განათლება საგანმანათლებლო პოლიტიკა საქართველო</p>	<p>წინამდებარე სტატია იკვლევს ინკლუზიური უმაღლესი განათლების (HE) ევოლუციასა და ამჟამინდელ მდგომარეობას სპეციალური საგანმანათლებლო საჭიროებებისა და შეზღუდული შესაძლებლობების მქონე სტუდენტებისთვის პოსტსაბჭოთა საქართველოში. ბოლონის პროცესი მნიშვნელოვნად უწყობს ხელს საქართველოში უმაღლესი განათლების დემოკრატიზაციასა და ხელმისაწვდომობის გაზრდას, რის შედეგადაც შეზღუდული შესაძლებლობების მქონე პირთა ჩართულობა შედარებით ახალი გამოწვევაა ქვეყნისთვის. ამ კონტექსტში, კვლევის მიზანია შეისწავლოს ინკლუზიის ინსტიტუციონალიზაციის არსებული პრაქტიკა უმაღლეს განათლებაში, უნივერსიტეტის პერსონალის გამოცდილების საფუძველზე, რომლებიც ურთიერთქმედებენ სპეციალური საგანმანათლებლო საჭიროებებისა და შეზღუდული შესაძლებლობების მქონე სტუდენტებთან საგანმანათლებლო გარემოში.</p>

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კვლევა ეფუძნება საქართველოში 19 უმაღლესი საგანმანათლებლო დაწესებულებიდან შეგროვებულ მონაცემებს. გამოყენებულია შერეული მეთოდოლოგიური მიდგომა, რომელიც აერთიანებს უპირატესად პოზიტივისტურ, ჰიპოთეზაზე დაფუძნებულ რაოდენობრივ ანალიზსა და ხარისხობრივ ფოკუს ჯგუფებს, რათა მოხდეს შედეგების კონტექსტუალიზაცია და სიღრმისეული გაანალიზება. რაოდენობრივი კომპონენტი ეფუძნება ვალიდირებულ კითხვარს, რომელიც ჩატარდა აკადემიურ და ადმინისტრაციულ პერსონალთან, ხოლო ხარისხობრივი კომპონენტი მოიცავს ფოკუს ჯგუფებს ექსპერტებთან და შეზღუდული შესაძლებლობების მქონე პირებთან საქართველოდან და შვედეთიდან.

კვლევის შედეგები აჩვენებს მნიშვნელოვან სხვაობას პროგრესულ საკანონმდებლო ჩარჩოებსა და მათ პრაქტიკულ განხორციელებას შორის. ძირითადი ემპირიული გამოწვევებია აკადემიური პერსონალის არასაკმარისი მზაობა, ინსტიტუციური ინფრასტრუქტურის არასაკმარისი განვითარება და ადმინისტრაციული მხარდაჭერის სუსტი სისტემები. გარდა ამისა, კვლევა აჩვენებს მუდმივ ბარიერებს, როგორცაა მოძველებული მეთოდოლოგიური მიდგომები, ცნობიერების დაბალი დონე და ინფორმაციის გავრცელების არაეფექტური მექანიზმები დაწესებულებებს შორის.

კვლევა ხელს უწყობს როგორც პოლიტიკურ, ისე აკადემიურ დისკურსს იმ თვალსაზრისით, რომ აჩვენებს: მიუხედავად საერთაშორისო სტანდარტებთან, მათ შორის გაეროს მდგრადი განვითარების მიზანთან (SDG 4) დაახლოების მცდელობებისა, ინკლუზიური განათლების დასავლური მოდელების ადაპტაცია საქართველოში რჩება ფრაგმენტულ პროცესად და მოკლებულია სისტემურ თანმიმდევრულობას. შედეგები ხაზს უსვამს ყოვლისმომცველი ინსტიტუციური ტრანსფორმაციის აუცილებლობას, რომელიც არ შემოიფარგლება მხოლოდ ფორმალური პოლიტიკის მიღებით და მოიცავს პედაგოგიკის, კურიკულუმის დიზაინის, შეფასების პრაქტიკებისა და მმართველობითი სტრუქტურების რეფორმას.

შესაბამისად, სტატია გვთავაზობს მიზნობრივ რეკომენდაციებს, რომლებიც მიმართულია მონიტორინგის მექანიზმების გაძლიერებაზე, აკადემიური პერსონალის პროფესიული განვითარების ხელშეწყობაზე, რესურსების განაწილების გაუმჯობესებასა და მონაწილეობითი და ინკლუზიური ინსტიტუციური კულტურის ჩამოყალიბებაზე.

1. Introduction

This article was developed within the project "Inclusive Higher Education in the Context of Sustainable Development: Key Theoretical Concepts Based on International Cross-Case Analysis (Georgia and Sweden)." Our interest lies in studying the involvement of people with disabilities in HE institutions in Georgia from 1991 to 2024.

The right to education is one of the most important sociocultural human rights. This right is implemented based on the principle of recognising and protecting the equality of all people. Generally, in countries where inclusive education is ensured, it is recognised that every person (UNESCO, 2016) should have the opportunity to receive education throughout their life (UNESCO, 1994; UN, 1989).

The international community recognises education as a fundamental human right and a cornerstone of sustainable development. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) particularly emphasises the importance of "ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all"(UN, 2015). This global imperative requires comprehensive strategies to remove barriers to the entry and successful participation of disadvantaged groups, such as people with disabilities, in HE.

Georgia's policy agenda to achieve the fourth Sustainable Development Goal in its HE institutions is being developed during a challenging period in political and socio-economic life; however, Georgia and the world face monumental challenges in achieving this goal. Nevertheless, the steadily growing importance of education as a fundamental requirement for democracy is visible. In Georgia's HE policy, we can observe the emergence of a relatively new area: the inclusion of people with special educational needs/disabilities, which expands the educational policy agenda in this field. In this regard, the path traversed by people with special educational needs/disabilities throughout the period of complex educational reforms and systemic transformation since 1991 to the present has been duly demonstrated (Kalinnikova-Magnusson, Chanturia, Khatiashvili, & Kordzaia, 2025).

In the West, the issue of higher education (HE) accessibility for people with special educational needs became relevant in the aftermath of World War II (Riddell, 2016). From this time onward, social/relational aspects of the learning environment were increasingly conceptualised and discussed more intensively. Since the 1980s, support policies aimed at integrating people with special educational needs into the HE system have been continuously refined in these countries. Over time, especially at the end of the 1990s, within the Bologna movement in HE, common visions of 'equity in education' developed new paradigms for its implementation, targeting educational practice's response to students' educational needs and challenging social policy. The joint education emphasised 'lifelong learning', diversified educational settings, and the necessity of building genuinely inclusive educational systems for all throughout life (Harvey, 2018).

Research Questions

It became necessary to further refine the analytical framework of the study by formulating research questions derived from the research objectives. Accordingly, the following research questions were developed:

- Do higher education (HE) institutions in Georgia meet the requirements of persons with special educational needs/disabilities?
- How is the readiness/engagement of faculty members manifested in the context of sustainable development?
- What priorities have been established regarding students with special educational needs/disabilities in universities?

These research questions are designed to guide the empirical component of the study, focusing on the gap between legislation and practice, faculty readiness and institutional capacity. They also situate the Georgian case within the broader international discourse on inclusive higher education (HE) in the context of sustainable development.

2. Literature analysis

2.1. Sustaining inclusive HE: European perspective

Starting with a short historical overview, it is evident that the central shift, leading societies around the world to the contemporary conceptualisation of sustainable development in education, is tied to comparatively not-so-distant recognition of the rights of people with disabilities on a global scale, with the right to education at the centre. For example, France passed a 1909 law that improved education for children with mental disabilities (Nicolas, Andrieu, Croizet, Sanitioso, & Burman, 2013). Germany followed this trajectory by legalising the "Law on Assistance to the Disabled" in 1920 (Kharebava, Biseishvili, Gogichadze, Lodia, & Meparishvili, 2014). Sweden was very early in the 'Folkskolan reform för alla' since 1848. Learners with mental, intellectual, and physical disabilities were included in the reform, but mostly institutionalized beyond the boundaries of mainstream society, as a dominant feature until the 1960s (<https://fortunafastigheter.se/historien-om-lss-lagen-om-stod-och-service-till-vissa-funktionshindrade/>). These reforms laid the groundwork for major international milestones like the Salamanca Declaration (1994), Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), etc., widely adopted nationally.

European HE is experiencing an evolutionary turn toward equitable quality education and the promotion of lifelong learning opportunities for all (UN, 2015). Praxis of HE towards inclusion has naturally expanded within a Disability Rights perspective in member countries, identifying itself through widening participation for underrepresented groups as a nexus/continuation of education across a life. Reforms in European HE in its formal starting point belong to the Bologna Plan/Declaration (EHEA, 1999). This Plan was directed to the removal of barriers to educational opportunities, implementing curriculum plans with credit equivalences, establishing support services for students with SEN, mobilising educational resources to advance sustainable development in education (UNESCO, 2016), and making these actions mandatory in member countries. Implementation of the Bologna Plan made requests for assistance,

training from faculty members in providing individual support, etc. These reforms, coordinated by the European Higher Education Agency (EHEA), were expected to be implemented in 2010 at both European and national levels, further captured by the European Universities Initiative (EC, 2020) and the European 'Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030' (EC, 2021). Across Europe, HE is steadily integrating sustainability issues at all levels.

Despite insufficient systemic data on the dynamics of changes in the participation of students with disabilities in HE, it can still be argued that there is a worldwide trend toward increased participation (Tuomi & Jauhojärvi-Koskelo, 2015; Brewer, Urwin, & Witham, 2023). There are variations in national institutional policy contexts regarding how they handle student diversity. As one critical example, changes occur when educational programs are reduced without altering their content (Chagas Lopes & Leao Fernandes, 2011). In general, approaches to improve entry and support of students from non-traditional HE groups remain similar internationally. The concept of "student retention" is gaining ground and has become of particular interest (Cotton, Nash, & Kneale, 2017).

In the context of the EHEA, it is reasonable to refer to the recently published systematic review by Solís-García et al. on the inclusion of students with disabilities in European HE. This review revealed six thematic areas summarised from the meta-analysis of peer-reviewed literature, addressing the aspects of inclusion, barriers, and strategies enhancing student inclusion by EHEA: *perceptions and opinions of students with disabilities; attitudes and perceptions towards disability; professional development and teacher training; accessibility and technology in HE; barriers and adjustments in the university environment* (Solís-García, Barreiro-Collazo, Rodríguez-Correa, Delgado-Rico, & Real-Castelao, 2025). Although most of the analysed studies were conducted in Spain and may raise doubts about their generalizability to other university contexts, the thematic issues of this study are not alien and are highly relevant to any HE agency targeting inclusion, particularly for students with disabilities. This review, in line with its objectives, highlighted architectural and institutional, methodological, technological, attitudinal, and social barriers in the university environment. Dissolving these barriers requires disability training for university staff and a collaborative approach among societal-level agencies. Evidence-based research has revealed a deficient approach to ensuring educational rights for this group of students, as well as a lack of accessible infrastructure and administrative responses to this problem. The study emphasised an urgent need to develop an institutionalised and consistent policy/program across the entire European Higher Education Area.

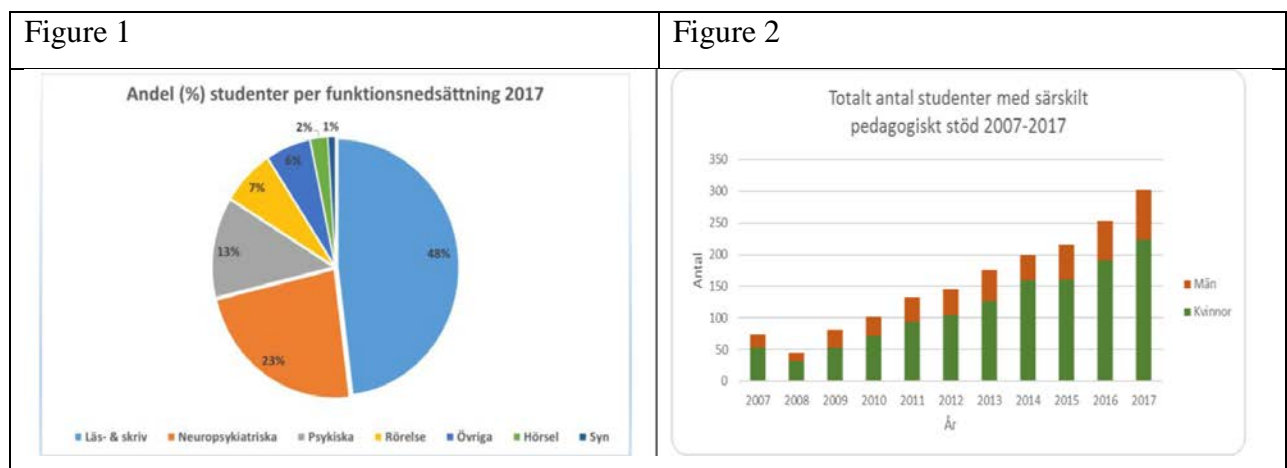
Being a subject of considerable change, European HE, in its response to students' diverse educational needs towards equal opportunities, could be exemplified from a Swedish perspective by the Nais networking program (UHR, 2015-2022). Sweden signed the Bologna Plan in 1999 and has had experiences similar to those of other signatories in implementing it. The Swedish HE system is based, among other documents, on the Against Discrimination Act in education (Diskrimineringslag, 2008:567). The Nais program initially responds to the provision of inclusion in HE as a Swedish national program and management system. Nais was formed by the UHR (Universitet och Högskolerådet/Swedish Council for Higher Education) in 2015 to administer HE institutions in their direct pedagogical support of students with SEN, in collaboration with Stockholm University. Nais connects disability to diversity, broadening perspectives on both. Nais is a UHR administrative system - a voluntary resource for members of its network, a rather powerful structure to regulate, discuss, and develop the HE response to the learning

needs of students with SEN. The system is built as a processing system for coordinators of students with disabilities at each HE institution to document students' educational support needs and, for example, enhance Nais features for supporting mentors of students with neuropsychiatric disabilities (NPF). Structurally, the work of Nais is implemented through regular management groups (Stockholm University and UHR), reference groups (coordinators from some universities on a national level), and specialists representing special education support resources (Kalinnikova-Magnusson, 2019). In 2022, the Nais national network included 36 HE sites. Since 2020, UHR reports that the number of student applications for educational support in Nais has increased (Table 13, UHR, 2015-2022).

Tabell 13. Kostnad för Nais samt antal ansökningar

	2020	2019	2018
Kostnader (tkr)	2 962	3 122	2 933
Kostnad per ansökan (kr)	225	302	309
Totalt antal sökande	13 140	10 324	9 488
antal kvinnor	9 110	7 094	6 493
antal män	4 030	3 230	2 995
åldersintervall 19 år och under	1 244	872	819
åldersintervall 20–24 år	5 314	4 371	4 139
åldersintervall över 25 år	6 582	5 081	4 530

The cost per application has decreased, mainly due to the increase in the number of applicants. The most common category of students requiring support from the Nais is students with dyslexia/specific reading and writing difficulties. The last few years have seen a stable increase in the number of students with various neuropsychiatric conditions (UHR, 2015-2022). Table 13 shows the development of application costs to Nais (UHR, 2015-2022). Figures 1 and 2 provide some ideas, supporting the data in Table 13 as a quantitative representation of students with SEN at one of the Swedish University Colleges (Kalinnikova-Magnusson, 2019).



With respect to Nais, each student with SEN has the right to apply for support through the central application system (based on ethical principles). Each HE institution takes responsibility for creating

appropriate conditions to support the achievement of educational goals, and for monitoring and providing the necessary special educational resources locally.

Initially, Nais represents the administrative element of the praxis, supporting students with SEN at HE on a national level. Universities operationalise the achievement of the goal by different volumes of material and human resources locally. Despite the limited number of studies, international evidence confirms that limited competencies of teaching staff are associated with low confidentiality in supporting student learning, and this keeps ongoing research open to further explore how learners and learning are conceptualised for inclusion (Holmqvist, Anderson, & Hellström, 2019).

2.2.Sustaining inclusive HE: Georgian perspective

In recent years, both in Georgia and worldwide, there has been a noticeable increase in the number of students with special educational needs or disabilities (UNESCO, 2020; MOES, 2021). Inclusive education generally implies the openness and accessibility of education at all levels, regardless of individuals' abilities and needs. Therefore, one indicator of educational sustainability is the development of an inclusive education environment in a country (Shutaleva et al., 2023). Inclusive education involves the equal participation of all students in educational processes.

A comprehensive analysis of the evolution of higher education (HE) for persons with disabilities in post-Soviet Georgia requires careful examination of the national legislative and policy framework governing inclusion and accessibility in education. Over the past decade, Georgia has developed a set of legal and strategic instruments intended to align national education policy with international standards of equality, non-discrimination, and inclusive development.

A central legal instrument in this framework is the Law of Georgia on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Parliament of Georgia, 2020), which establishes the normative foundations for disability rights across multiple sectors, including education. The law introduces key principles such as equal access, reasonable accommodation, and the obligation of public institutions to remove barriers that restrict participation for persons with disabilities. Within the HE context, these provisions place formal responsibility on universities and other educational institutions to ensure accessible learning environments and equal participation in academic life.

Strategic policy planning for inclusive education is further articulated in the Unified National Strategy of Education and Science of Georgia 2022–2030 and its associated action plan (Government of Georgia, 2022). Within this strategy, the second sectoral priority - particularly points 2.4.1 and 2.4.2 - emphasizes the development of inclusive educational environments, improvement of accessibility standards, and expansion of institutional support services for students with special educational needs. These strategic priorities reflect a policy-level commitment to addressing systemic gaps within the HE system. Progress reports linked to the strategy provide an additional layer of policy monitoring by documenting the extent to which these objectives are translated into concrete institutional measures within the Georgian education system.

Finally, regulatory standards addressing physical accessibility are defined by the Technical Regulation – National Accessibility Standards (Government of Georgia, 2020). This regulation establishes mandatory requirements for the accessibility of buildings and public spaces, which are directly relevant to HE

infrastructure such as campuses, classrooms, libraries, and student services facilities. The implementation of these standards is a critical precondition for ensuring that students with disabilities can fully participate in academic activities.

Beyond the legislative and policy framework, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms play a critical role in assessing the practical implementation of inclusive policies. In this regard, the work of the Public Defender of Georgia provides important empirical insight into the functioning of the HE system (Ombudsman, 2024). Monitoring reports published by this institution examine the extent to which universities comply with national authorization standards and accessibility requirements. As highlighted in recent analyses (Makharadze, 2024), these reports identify persistent institutional challenges, including infrastructural limitations, insufficient disability-related support services, and weak institutional mechanisms for ensuring inclusive participation.

Complementing these policy documents, analytical assessments also contribute to understanding the current state of inclusive higher education (HE). The report *Inclusive Education in Higher Education Institutions (2024)*, published by the Public Defender's Office, provides a systematic overview of the opportunities and challenges associated with disability inclusion in Georgian universities. While acknowledging certain improvements in legislative alignment and policy commitments, the report underscores continuing structural constraints related to accessibility, institutional preparedness, and the uneven implementation of inclusive policies across institutions.

Taken together, these legislative acts, policy strategies, monitoring reports, and regulatory standards constitute the core national framework governing inclusive higher education in Georgia. Their analysis provides an important foundation for evaluating the extent to which international principles of inclusive education have been institutionalized within the Georgian HE system and how effectively they are translated into everyday academic practices.

The development of inclusive higher education in Georgia has increasingly attracted scholarly attention in recent years, particularly in relation to broader processes of educational reform, European integration, and institutional modernization. In order to construct a coherent analytical framework for the empirical analysis of this study, it is necessary to examine and analyze Georgian literature addressing disability and inclusive practices in Georgian HE institutions, and also studies exploring the internationalization and Europeanization of the Georgian HE system.

Research on inclusive education in Georgia highlights both the progress achieved and the persistent structural barriers affecting the participation of persons with disabilities in higher education. They identify key institutional and social factors influencing inclusive practices in Georgian universities. Several studies emphasize that despite the existence of formal policy commitments, students with disabilities often encounter obstacles related to physical accessibility, limited support services, and insufficient institutional awareness (Makharadze et al., 2025). Similarly, other studies provide an important overview of the development of inclusive education policies in Georgia and identify ongoing challenges related to implementation, teacher preparation, and institutional capacity (Tchintcharauli & Javakhishvili, 2017). Recent empirical research further expands this perspective by examining the attitudes and perceptions of university stakeholders toward disability and inclusive environments, demonstrates that administrative staff attitudes and institutional culture play a significant role in shaping

inclusive environments. The findings suggest that inclusive policies require not only regulatory frameworks but also supportive institutional practices and awareness among university personnel (Sadzaglishvili, Makashvili, Gigineishvili, Mekvabidze, & Zurabashvili, 2025). Alongside these studies focusing on disability and inclusion, another important body of literature analyzes the transformation of Georgian higher education within the context of internationalization and European integration, highlighting how participation in the Bologna Process has influenced HE reforms in Eastern Partnership countries, including Georgia. These reforms have encouraged the adoption of European standards related to quality assurance, mobility, and equal access to education (SIKORSKA, 2023). Research focusing specifically on the Georgian case also emphasizes the role of institutional modernization and quality assurance mechanisms. For example, several studies argue that quality assurance frameworks have become a key driver of institutional transformation and internationalization in Georgian higher education (Pipia, Margishvili, & Parjanadze, 2024). The Case Study of Social Sciences at Tbilisi State University demonstrates how universities in Georgia are adapting to new academic and socio-economic demands within a changing HE landscape (Tabatadze & Dundua, 2022). Other works examine issues of equity and access within the Georgian HE system, analyse the importance of democratizing educational opportunities and strengthening inclusive institutional policies (Tchkadua & Khositashvili, 2022).

Finally, we can say that research on disability and inclusive practices highlights the structural, cultural, and institutional barriers affecting students with disabilities in Georgian universities. On the other hand, studies on internationalization and Europeanization demonstrate how broader HE reforms and policy convergence with European standards shape institutional transformation. By integrating these perspectives, the present research conceptualizes inclusive higher education as a multidimensional process influenced simultaneously by national policy frameworks, institutional practices, and international educational reforms.

3. Research Methodology

This study is based on a mixed-methods approach grounded primarily in a positivist research tradition, employing a deductive logic and measurable variables for the quantitative component of the research. The quantitative strand constitutes the core of the study and is designed to test a pre-developed hypothesis using a large, representative sample (Vanishvili & Mosiashvili, 2019). Quantitative data were systematically analysed, generalised, and presented through statistical procedures. At the beginning of the research, we had a pre-developed hypothesis and attempted to confirm or reject it. The hypothesis is articulated as follows: Inclusive education within HE institutions is deemed unfeasible due to the prevalent lack of preparedness among these institutions for such an initiative. Furthermore, faculty members and administration often exhibit unfamiliarity with contemporary pedagogical approaches and learning design. After formulating the hypothesis, we developed a questionnaire, which we will discuss below, and analysed and generalised the results obtained.

To answer the research questions, we outlined the following methodology: The first stage was devoted to studying scientific literature, defining goals and objectives, formulating the hypothesis, and developing the research design.

In the second stage, we compared information between foreign countries and Georgia regarding legal documents and scientific literature.

The third stage consisted of administering a quantitative survey and subsequently using qualitative, interpretative tools (focus groups) to contextualise and deepen understanding of the quantitative findings. In the fourth stage, we categorised the results we obtained, formulated them as recommendations, and drew conclusions.

The paper discusses the hypothesis that people with special educational needs/disabilities may face difficulties accessing adequate higher education due to limited information and accessibility, and explores the preparedness of HE institutions.

3.1. Ethical considerations

In line with the mixed-methods research design, the study combined quantitative mass surveys with qualitative, interpretative focus groups, which served a complementary and explanatory function rather than constituting an independent qualitative paradigm. Surveys were distributed via email to academic and administrative staff, while focus groups were conducted with field experts, specialists, professors, and individuals with special educational needs or disabilities.

The qualitative component was employed to enrich and contextualise the quantitative results by capturing participants' perspectives and experiences related to inclusive education. This interpretative dimension draws conceptually on Blumer's Symbolic Interactionism (1969), acknowledging that meanings are socially constructed through interaction, while remaining methodologically subordinate to the primary quantitative framework. The questionnaire contained four thematic blocks: demographic information; support policies and practices for students with special educational needs or disabilities; attitudes toward inclusive education; and general perceptions and recommendations.

Respondents were selected through clustered random sampling. The population was divided into groups, and clusters were randomly selected from each group. Three key stakeholder groups were identified as essential to understanding inclusive higher education: (1) academic staff directly involved in teaching and assessment; (2) administrative staff responsible for policy implementation and institutional management; and (3) persons with disabilities, who are directly affected by inclusive or non-inclusive environments.

Research was conducted in 19 HE institutions selected to reflect the diversity of the Georgian HE system. The sample included regional universities (Akaki Tsereteli State University, Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University), large public institutions in the capital (Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, Georgian Technical University), and well-established private universities (University of Georgia, Caucasus University). The selection process aimed to ensure variation in institutional size, geographical location, governance type, historical background, and experience with disability-related issues, thereby enhancing the representativeness of the findings and supporting the generalisability of the results to the national context. A preliminary screening identified institutions with experience working with students with disabilities, and questionnaires were sent accordingly. The number of respondents per institution ranged from 1 to 20 among academic staff and 1 to 2 among administrators. In total, 349 academic staff members and 37 administrative representatives completed the surveys.

To deepen the analysis, focus groups were conducted after the survey phase. Twenty participants took part: fifteen field experts and five individuals with special educational needs or disabilities.

Strict ethical standards guided the entire research process. All participants gave informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity were ensured, and individuals could withdraw at any stage. Special attention was given to accessibility for participants with disabilities. All instruments and procedures underwent ethical review prior to implementation.

Two questionnaires were designed: one for academic staff, focusing on teaching practice, methodological needs, accessibility of infrastructure, and awareness of disability rights; and another for administrative staff, addressing institutional policy, support services, infrastructure, resource allocation, and compliance with legal frameworks.

Overall, this methodological framework enabled the systematic examination of public perceptions, institutional readiness, and the challenges and opportunities associated with developing inclusive teaching practices within Georgia’s unified HE system.

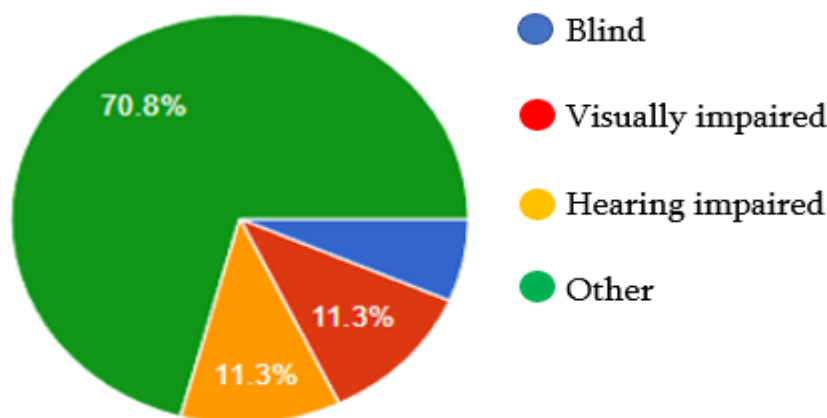
3.2. Analysis of Professor-Teacher Questionnaire

Participants in the questionnaire ranged in age. Among the respondents, there were more females (69.4%) than males (30.6%). Regarding the number of students with special educational needs or disabilities, only 14.6% reported currently teaching them, while the remaining 85.4% indicated they do not.

The characteristics that distinguish or previously distinguished their students are as follows: blind (7.65%), visually impaired (11.3%), hearing impaired (11.3%), and the rest (70.8%) with various disabilities.

List the characteristics that your students with disabilities/special educational needs had (if you answered "no" to the previous questions, skip this question):

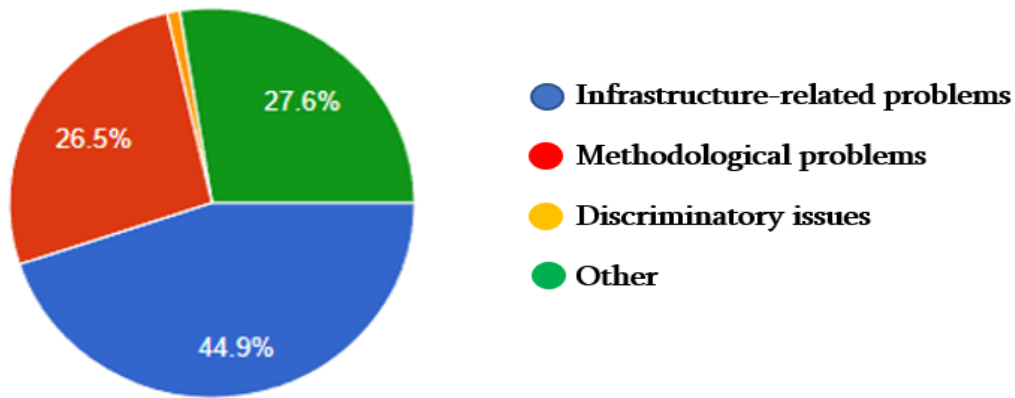
168 responses



A large portion of respondents (47.95%) indicated that the university infrastructure is well-organised, while a small portion (30.6%) stated that it is not well-organised, and 21.5% are unaware of this. However, among the main problems, 44.9% noted infrastructure-related issues, 26.5% identified methodological problems, 1% indicated discriminatory issues, and 27.6% focused on other problems.

Indicate the problems you encounter at the university in relation to teaching students with disabilities/special educational needs:

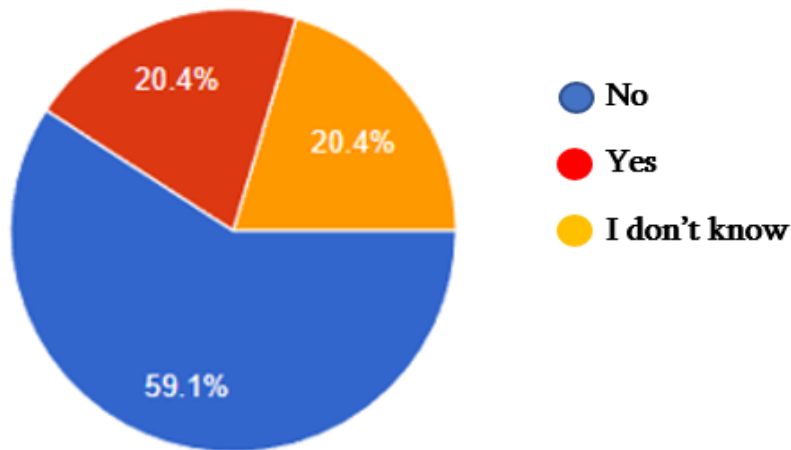
196 responses



It was also noted that many respondents have not undergone any training in teaching people with special educational needs/disabilities. Regarding the desire to participate in relevant professional training, only 11.3% of respondents have participated in specialised training, while 88.8% have not. Professors noted that participation in relevant training will help them communicate with students with special educational needs/disabilities and learn methods that will make teaching easier for them, as well as developing IEPs (Individual Educational Plans), programs and syllabi, how to solve problems they face, how to develop modern teaching methodology and methods, how to engage people with special educational needs/disabilities in the learning process and maintain their concentration, how to interact with students with behavioral disorders, their discipline, differentiation of teaching, creating inclusive educational space, counseling, orientation of the blind in buildings, resources for the blind, differentiated approach, universal design for learning, creating an adaptive environment for them, and more. 59.1% believe they need relevant experience in teaching people with special educational needs/disabilities, 20.4% believe they do not need it, and 20.4% do not know.

Do you think you need to gain relevant experience in teaching students with disabilities/special educational needs?

235 responses



42.7% of respondents believe that the rights of people with special educational needs or disabilities are considered at university. In comparison, 18.35% believe their rights are not considered, and 39% are unaware of these rights. Additionally, 59.2% think that infrastructural needs are considered, 28.1% feel that methodological needs are acknowledged, and 12.8% believe that other needs, including individual and technical needs (such as the individual selection of examination methods), should also be considered. Some respondents feel that the university establishes individual learning plans to support the learning process and that the infrastructure is suitable. It is important to consider methodological approaches and the option of distance learning. Some teachers argue that a supportive methodological and infrastructural environment, along with adaptation to time and schedules, is necessary. Furthermore, it was noted that some universities have Academic Council resolutions that help regulate examination processes for people with special educational needs or disabilities, while others are completely unaware of this issue.

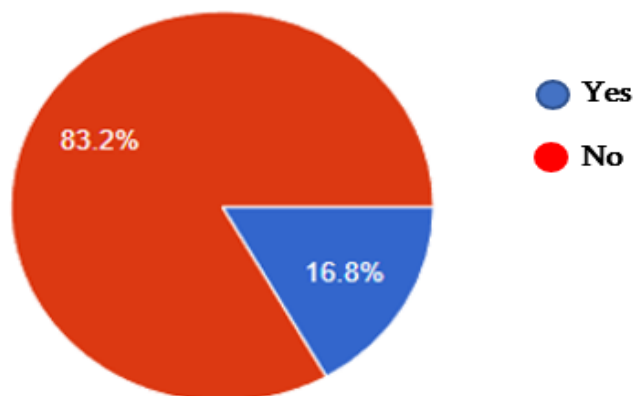
The main problem that emerged from the questionnaire is that a significant proportion of respondents know very little about teaching individuals with special educational needs/disabilities, including their specific needs and requirements. Regarding whether the university has Braille books, 72% said they are unaware, 23.8% believe there are none, and 4.2% think there are. Furthermore, 56.1% do not know whether teachers have special auxiliary tools and support for understanding sign language, 39.7% stated that such tools do not exist, and 4.2% claimed they do.

The research revealed a low level of awareness of modern teaching methodologies among people with special educational needs or disabilities. 83.2% were not familiar with the relevant methodology and methods, while only 16.8% had information about this.

83.2% are unsure whether they are familiar with assistive technologies for people with disabilities or special educational needs in teaching, while 16.8% are knowledgeable.

Are you familiar with modern methodologies for teaching students with disabilities/special educational needs?

232 responses



Most respondents (54.2%) are unable to counsel individuals with special educational needs or disabilities on educational matters. Only 45.8% possess this experience and ability. Additionally, 16.7% believe that administration exists to support their counselling efforts, while 6.8% feel it is not their responsibility, and 76.5% do not know how to approach this issue.

80.3% of respondents are unfamiliar with legal documents regulating the rights of people with special educational needs/disabilities, while 19.7% are familiar. Some believe that education laws regulate this, the Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities, the European Union guide, the Human Rights Convention, various Georgian laws, the university's internal documents and rules regulating the educational process, and the Constitution of Georgia. 85.4% believe they should be familiar with these regulatory documents, 10.8% do not know, and 3.8% believe they do not need to be familiar with them.

From a discrimination perspective, most respondents (99.6%) have not witnessed discriminatory attitudes toward people with disabilities or special educational needs, while 0.4% have observed some form of discrimination. For example, one professor shared that he had a doctoral student with disabilities from Poland who required a hearing aid. Not all professors were willing to work with him because of this issue, but those who did teach him succeeded. The student was motivated and exceptional, and he successfully defended his doctoral dissertation on Dagestani languages at one of Poland's universities. As his opponent, the professor notes that this was one of the most exceptional defences in his forty-year career.

According to professors and teachers, it would be better if they had more information about people with disabilities/special educational needs. Respondents also noted that they have had many such students if hyperactivity and attention deficit are considered disorders.

Besides adapting and adjusting the environment for people with special educational needs or disabilities in universities, the active involvement of professors and teachers with these individuals is also crucial. Interactions should be filled with encouragement and adapted to needs so that they receive a dignified, complete higher education(Harvey, 2018; Halsey, 1993).

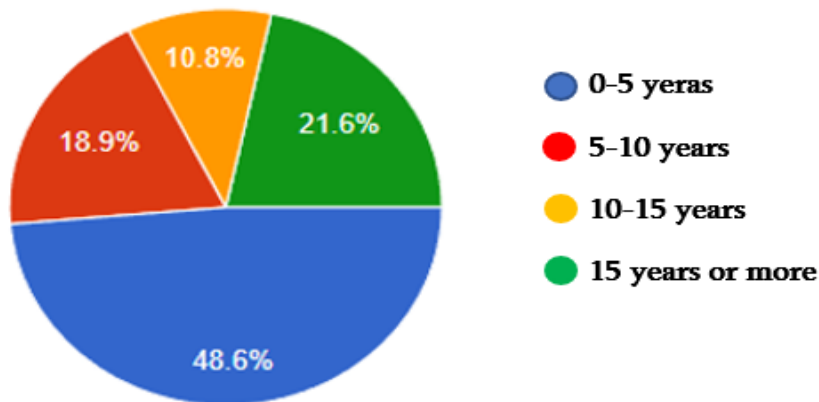
In the final recommendations, various opinions were expressed that are important, interesting, and noteworthy for questionnaire analysis and research completion. Some respondents stated that they would gladly attend training on individuals with special educational needs and disabilities, and that they would familiarise themselves with the normative acts regulating their general rights and integrated teaching methods. It was also noted that additional time needs to be allocated to people with disabilities/special educational needs, as classroom lessons are insufficient.

3.3. Analysis of the Administration Questionnaire

During the administration survey, the following issues emerged: most respondents (94.6%) had information about people with special educational needs or disabilities, while 5.4% did not. Information about the number of people with special educational needs/disabilities appears as follows:

Indicate your work experience at the university:

37 responses



The list of faculties where people with disabilities study is diverse, including Humanities, Psychology and Educational Sciences, Social and Political Sciences, and Medicine. 73% of respondents stated that they have the resources to accept people with disabilities in HE institutions; 16.2% stated they do not know; and 10.8% stated they do not. Survey participants noted that their university needs infrastructural (35.1%), methodological (29.7%), and technical (13.5%) assistance, while 13.5% do not know what kind of assistance they need. Some respondents listed the needs their universities have to eliminate problems in the teaching process of people with special educational needs/disabilities, including human resources, lack of specialists, methodological and professional assistance from academic personnel, infrastructure, technical equipment adapted for people with disabilities, hearing devices, special chairs and desks, audio cues, ramps, reading devices for people with low vision and the blind.

It was also suggested that training would be suitable for administrative representatives and professors to gain more information about these issues. It is also necessary to create convenient ramps for mobility,

create special conditions for hearing-impaired students (if such students exist); universities need to acquire books with Braille font for libraries, conduct awareness-raising training for students on how to treat people with special educational needs/disabilities; professors/teachers should be given the right to deviate from standard learning outcomes and focus on individual learning goals for them.

In their opinion, when they talk about an adapted environment, they should not only consider physical space/infrastructure; it is the right of any student to have full (dignified) access to education, so the university must be ready to adapt to each student's special needs. 45% of respondents stated that professors and teachers at HE institutions are ready to teach people with disabilities, while 43.2% claim they do not know what this readiness entails. Only 10.8% stated that professors and teachers are not ready for this.

From the administration's perspective, professors and teachers need assistance with resources (44.4%) and technical support (27.8%). 27.8% stated that they need other types of assistance, including the following: providing students and academic personnel with appropriate resources, raising awareness, accommodations, existence of a support centre/service, improving infrastructure, possibly financial resources, informational, technical; also equipping classrooms with appropriate resources, planning/implementing public lectures and informational meetings; changing attitudes from professors-teachers, not only towards people with special educational needs/disabilities but also other types of students; staff needs to develop positive communication skills; university websites do not provide information about exceptional support opportunities for students with special educational needs/disabilities. 75.7% of respondents believe that administration should be involved in the relationship between professors and people with special educational needs/disabilities, 21.6% believe this is unnecessary. The remaining respondents have no information on this matter.

A large proportion of respondents (70.3%) have not participated in administration-oriented training on interactions with people with special educational needs/disabilities, while 29.7% have completed various types of training. Consequently, among the latter group, 75% stated that the training they received greatly helped them interact with people with special educational needs or disabilities, while 16.7% found it ineffective. In comparison, 8.3% found it not helpful at all. A large proportion of respondents (97.3%) stated that administration staff must participate in training on interactions with people with special educational needs or disabilities, while the rest believe they do not know how necessary or appropriate these activities are.

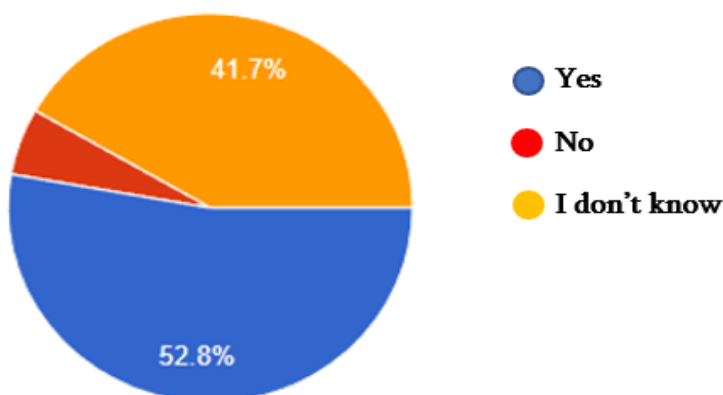
77.8% of administration representatives are unfamiliar with legal documents that would help interact with people with special educational needs/disabilities, while the rest (22.2%) are more or less familiar with such documents. Among the disabilities of people with special educational needs/disabilities who come to HE institutions, it was noted that there are blind (16.2%), visually impaired (8.1%), hearing impaired (2.7%), and others (73%). Half of the respondents (51.4%) possess information about the disabilities of people with special educational needs/disabilities, while the other part (48.6%) cannot understand this issue. Among the legal documents that regulate educational issues of people with special educational needs/disabilities, the following were named: Law on the Rights of People with Disabilities, Law on Higher Education, Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, Law on the Rights of People with Disabilities,

"On Social Protection of Persons with Disabilities", Authorization Standards for Higher Education Institutions, Constitution of Georgia, Human Rights Protection Convention.

Most of the administration (66.7%) has information about ethical norms, while the rest (33.3%) do not. Among the activities that should be conducted at the university to ensure that individuals with special educational needs or disabilities have a typical learning environment, it was noted that professors and teachers need more information (51.4%), and the administration should be better informed (17.1%). Parents should also receive more information (8.6%). 20% of respondents believe that other resources are needed. Half of the respondents (52.8%) believe that the rights of people with special educational needs or disabilities are protected at university, the other half (41.7%) are unaware of this, and only 6.5% believe that their rights are not protected.

Do you think the rights of students with disabilities/special educational needs are protected at the university?

36 responses

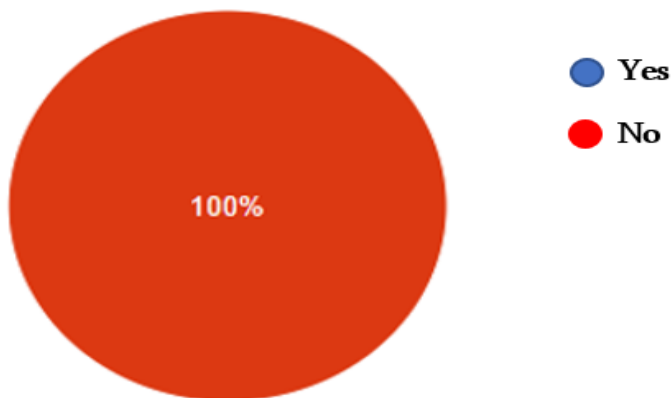


Regarding whether a coordinator or centre at the university regulates interactions with people with special educational needs or disabilities, one part of the respondents (52.8%) stated that they are unaware of this, and 36.1% indicated that no such facilitation exists. In contrast, 11.1% stated that their university has an assistant who handles these issues. Consequently, when asked whether students with special educational needs/disabilities can participate in decisions that affect them, a significant proportion of respondents (41.7%) answered affirmatively. In comparison, a large portion (58.3%) knows nothing about this. Regarding discriminatory attitudes at universities, 100% of respondents reported not having witnessed such attitudes at their universities.

According to the respondents, teaching should proceed with universal design, and the principles of inclusive education should be implemented. It was also noted that awareness-raising on this issue is necessary, and more information should be provided to university personnel.

Have you encountered discriminatory attitudes towards students with disabilities/special educational needs at your university?

35 responses



It should be noted that the research revealed infrastructural limitations: physical accessibility remains insufficient, and resources such as Braille materials and sign language support are not available everywhere. This creates inequity in the learning environment. Additionally, the administration's limited knowledge in this field creates an institutional gap, as they are unable to respond to existing demands and are not responsible for implementing and enforcing appropriate decisions. A significant portion of the administration is unfamiliar with relevant legislation, which creates problems for individuals with special educational needs or disabilities in conducting the educational process properly and correctly. The research results emphasise that, despite the legislative base having been refined and approaching international standards, the current situation requires institutional support, resource redistribution, close cooperation, and the involvement of interested parties.

3.4. Focus Groups

After finding the survey results unsatisfactory, we conducted focus groups with field experts and people with special educational needs/disabilities (SEN/PWD). To fill the gaps identified in the research and address remaining questions, we developed a structured discussion guide with key questions for experts and specialists. Due to the limited number of SEN/PWD individuals, we opted for focus groups rather than mass surveys. Two focus groups were identified, each lasting approximately 3 hours. A focus group was also conducted with specialists in Sweden. The project manager and coordinator led the meetings, asking questions and recording answers. While questions were prepared in advance, additional questions emerged during the discussions.

We compared the focus groups conducted in Georgia and Sweden and drew appropriate conclusions. The focus group with individuals with SEN/PWD was also conducted under the leadership of project

participants and lasted 2 hours. The results revealed that Swedish legislation supports inclusive education in the educational space. The situation is different in our case - the legislation is somewhat adapted to an inclusive educational system. However, higher education needs to be refined, including institutional policy, infrastructure, support services, and compliance with the legal framework.

Field specialists and experts emphasised the need for improved methodological approaches, training, and seminars to raise awareness about individuals with SEN/PWD. There was also discussion about barriers and the necessity of accessibility and support mechanisms. It was noted that individualised approaches and accommodations are fundamental when working with individuals with SEN/PWD. Transitioning from a general learning environment to individual learning objectives tailored for SEN/PWD people is also essential. A desire was expressed for all HE institutions to be equipped with appropriate human and technical resources to serve the general needs and requirements of SEN/PWD individuals.

The most notable finding from these interviews was that, despite changes in legislation and adaptation to specific needs, the most critical issue remains the absence of law enforcement mechanisms, which complicates access to information about achievements and problems, and the ability to respond to them.

Response Rate

Questionnaires were distributed to academic staff members and administrative representatives across the selected 19 HE institutions. Participation was voluntary, and the survey was disseminated electronically through institutional communication channels. In total, **386 valid responses** were collected, including **349 academic staff members and 37 administrative representatives**. Although the number of questionnaires distributed varied between institutions depending on institutional size and available staff lists, the achieved sample ensured sufficient representation of both academic and administrative perspectives within the participating universities. The variation in the number of respondents per institution (from 1 to 20 academic staff members and from 1 to 2 administrators) reflects the structural diversity of Georgian HE institutions and their different levels of engagement with disability-related issues.

Questionnaire Design and Validation

The questionnaire was developed on the basis of existing research on inclusive higher education (HE) and disability-related policies. Several thematic blocks were included, addressing perceptions of inclusive education, institutional practices, accessibility, and support mechanisms for students with disabilities. To ensure content validity, the instrument was reviewed by experts in inclusive education and HE policy prior to data collection. A pilot testing phase was conducted with a small group of academic staff members to evaluate the clarity, relevance, and internal consistency of the questions. Based on the feedback received, minor adjustments were made to improve wording and structure. The final questionnaire included both closed-ended questions (Likert-scale items) and open-ended questions, allowing respondents to provide additional qualitative insights.

Statistical Analysis

Quantitative data obtained from the questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, and means) were used to

summarize respondents’ attitudes toward inclusive education and institutional practices related to disability. Comparative analysis was also conducted to identify potential differences between academic staff and administrative respondents. The relevant cross-tabulations and correlation analysis were employed to explore relationships between variables such as institutional experience with disability-related issues and perceptions of institutional readiness for inclusion. These statistical procedures allowed the study to identify general patterns and trends across the participating institutions.

Focus Group Coding and Qualitative Analysis

To complement the quantitative findings, focus groups were conducted after the survey phase. The discussions were transcribed and analyzed using a thematic coding approach. The coding process followed several stages. First, an initial **open coding phase** was conducted in which key concepts and recurring themes emerging from participants’ statements were identified. Second, these codes were grouped into broader analytical categories, such as institutional barriers, support mechanisms, accessibility challenges, and perceptions of inclusive practices. Finally, a selective coding stage was used to identify the most significant patterns and relationships among the themes. The qualitative analysis allowed the researchers to interpret participants’ experiences and perspectives in greater depth and to contextualize the quantitative findings. The results of the focus group discussions were therefore used to triangulate the survey data, strengthening the overall validity and interpretative richness of the study.

Main codes of our research:

1. Policy and Legislative frameworks

References to national laws, reforms, and policy changes affecting disability inclusion

Code	Definition	Example
Policy reforms	Mentions of post-Soviet educational reforms	<i>After the reform Universities have new obligations</i>
Legal guarantees	Rights insured by law	<i>Students have the right to accommodations</i>
Policy gaps	Missing or weak regulations	<i>The law exists, but implementation is unclear</i>
International influence	Reference to global frameworks	<i>Standards follow international conventions</i>

2. Accessibility

Code	Definition	Example
Physical accessibility	Equipped buildings, ramps, elevators	<i>In the universities there are elevators, ramps</i>
Digital accessibility	Online platforms, materials	<i>In several universities platform is not adapted for screen readers</i>
Assistive technologies	Tools supporting learning	<i>We use special software</i>
Infrastructure barriers	Structural obstacles	<i>Old buildings make access difficult</i>

3. Pedagogical practices

Code	Definition	Example
Inclusive teaching	Teaching strategies	<i>Professors don't know how to adjust materials</i>
Lack of adaptation	Absence of pedagogical flexibility	<i>Everyone is assessed the same way</i>
Assessment accomodation	Modified exams/tasks	<i>Extra time is given during the exams</i>
Teacher/professor competence	Skills and training of staff	<i>Teachers are not trained in inclusion</i>

4. Institutional support

University-level Services and Structures

Code	Definition	Example
Support services	Disability offices, counseling	<i>There is no support center in the Universities</i>
Administrative barriers	Bureaucratic obstacles	<i>The process of requesting the support is complicated</i>
Resource availability	Funding, staff, materials	<i>There are not enough specialists</i>

5. Social and Cultural Attitudes

Code	Definition	Example
Awareness	Understanding of inclusion	<i>University academic/administrative personnel is more informed now</i>
Faculty attitudes	Teachers perception	<i>Some professors are supportive</i>
Peer interaction	Students relationships	<i>Group work is sometimes difficult</i>

6. Student Experience Lived

Personal information of students with disabilities

Code	Definition	Example
Inclusion experience	Students fell excluded/included	<i>I feel part of group</i>
Barriers to participation	Obstacles in daily study	<i>I cannot attend all lectures</i>
Coping strategies	Ways students adapt	<i>I rely on classmates help</i>

7. Transition: Accessibility-Inclusion

Code	Definition	Example
Surface inclusion	Formal compliance only	<i>There is access, but not real support</i>
Deep inclusion	Meaningful participation	<i>I can fully engage in learning</i>
Systemic change	Structural transformation	<i>Universities are slowly changing this approach</i>
Remaining gaps	Ongoing challenges	<i>Inclusion is still incomplete, on its way to adapt</i>

8. Post-Soviet Transformation Context

Historical and socio-political context shaping reforms

Code	Definition	Example
Soviet legacy	Past system influence	<i>Old attitudes have existed in the beginning of independence</i>
Reform trajectory	Evolution over time	<i>Changes started after independence</i>
Institutional inertia	Resistance to change	<i>Universities are slow to adapt</i>
Western alignment	European/International integration	<i>Policies align with European standards</i>

Sample Distribution by Respondent Type

Respondent group	Number of respondents	Percentage of total Sample
Academic staff	349	90.4%
Administrative staff	37	9,6%
Total	386	100%

The sample is dominated by academic staff, reflecting the study's focus on teaching practice and institutional readiness for inclusive education.

Institutional Participation in the Study

Indicator	Value
Number of participating HEIs	19
Institutional types	Public and Private Universities
Institutional characteristics considered	Size, geographical location, governance type, historical background, experience with disability-related initiatives
Academic respondents per institution	1-20
Administrative respondents per institution	1-2

The sample design ensured institutional diversity rather than strict proportional representation, enabling analysis of different institutional contexts within Georgian higher education.

Faculty Preparedness for Inclusive Education

Indicator	Percentage	Interpretation
Faculty with specialized training in disability inclusive teaching	11,3%	Very limited institutional training
Faculty lacking knowledge about assistive technologies and inclusive methods	83,2%	Indicates a significant professional development gap
Faculty unfamiliar with disability legislation	80,3%	Demonstrate weak policy awareness

The data suggest that faculty capacity represents one of the main barriers to inclusive education implementation.

Administrative Awareness and Institutional Support

Indicator	Percentage	Interpretation
Administrators lacking knowledge of disability legislation	77,8%	Limited awareness of legal obligations
Institutions with specialized disability support services	11,1%	Institutional support structures remain rare
Institutions without structured disability services	88,9%	Reflect systemic support gaps

Administrative awareness is critical because institutional leadership plays a key role in implementing accessibility policies.

Cross-tabulation: Institutional Capacity vs Stakeholder Awareness

Institutional dimension	Faculty	Administration	Key implication
Knowledge of disability legislation	19,7% aware	22,2% aware	Limited policy awareness across institutional actors
Specialized training availability	11,3% trained	-	Faculty training systems underdeveloped
Institutional support services	-	11,1% reported	Structural support mechanisms limited

This cross-tabulation highlights a systematic institutional gap where both academic and administrative stakeholders lack sufficient knowledge or resources to effectively implement inclusive education policies.

Mixed-methods Research Design Overview

Research component	Method	Sample size	Purpose
Quantitative phase	Survey questionnaire	386 respondents	Identify institutional trends and perceptions
Qualitative phase	Focus group	20 participants	Interpret and contextualise survey findings
Focus group composition	Experts 15 SEN/PWD participants 5	20 total	Provide experiential insights

The design follows a **sequential explanatory mixed-methods approach**, where qualitative data enriches quantitative findings.

3.5. Methodological Limitations of the Research

Several methodological limitations of the research should be noted:

- The research was primarily focused on institutional representatives, as the SEN/PWD individuals themselves were less involved due to their small numbers.
- The study of the Swedish context and, consequently, its analysis proved relatively superficial due to time constraints during the research period.

- The survey of respondents reflected current practices rather than long-term changes over time.
- Data derived from the analysis of respondents' answers may reflect social desirability bias, especially regarding sensitive topics such as discrimination.

However, despite these limitations, the use of mixed methods and the selection strategy still ensured the collection of solid data and the reliability of responses.

4. Research Results and Analysis

The final stage of the research involved a comprehensive interpretation of the empirical findings in light of existing academic literature on inclusive education and HE reform in Georgia. The analysis confirms that, despite substantial policy reforms implemented since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the institutionalization of inclusive higher education remains an ongoing and uneven process. While Georgia has introduced significant legislative and strategic frameworks promoting equality and accessibility, the practical realization of inclusive education within universities continues to face structural and institutional constraints. This finding is consistent with earlier studies on inclusive education in Georgia, which highlight the persistent gap between policy commitments and institutional implementation (Tchintcharauli & Javakhishvili, 2017).

From a policy perspective, the development of inclusive higher education in Georgia can be interpreted within the broader context of post-Soviet educational transformation and Europeanization. Research on HE reforms in Eastern Partnership countries emphasizes that processes associated with the Bologna Process have encouraged the adoption of European standards related to equity, accessibility, and quality assurance in HE systems. As argued by Sikorska (SIKORSKA, 2023), in pursuit of European integration, these reforms have stimulated institutional modernization while simultaneously revealing the challenges of translating policy commitments into effective institutional practices. The Georgian case illustrates a similar dynamic, where progressive policy frameworks coexist with uneven institutional readiness.

Empirical findings from the present study also correspond with recent research focusing specifically on disability inclusion within Georgian universities. Some studies identify a range of structural and cultural barriers that continue to limit the full participation of students with disabilities in academic life. These include insufficient institutional support mechanisms, limited accessibility of infrastructure, and gaps in awareness among academic and administrative staff (Makharadze et al., 2025). Similarly, research examining attitudes toward disability within Georgian universities indicates that institutional culture and stakeholder perceptions play an important role in shaping inclusive environments (Sadzaglishvili, Makashvili, Gigineishvili, Mekvabidze, & Zurabashvili, 2025). The findings of the present research reinforce these observations, demonstrating that awareness, institutional preparedness, and access to resources remain critical factors influencing the effectiveness of inclusive education policies.

At the same time, the study highlights the gradual emergence of mechanisms designed to support students with special educational needs and persons with disabilities (SEN/PWD). Since the mid-2000s, legal and institutional reforms have formally recognized the right of persons with disabilities to participate in higher education. However, the empirical evidence suggests that the transition from formal recognition to effective institutionalization is still incomplete. This observation aligns with policy-oriented analyses

emphasizing the need for stronger mechanisms to ensure equity and democratization within the Georgian HE system (Tchkadua & Khositashvili, 2022).

From a broader theoretical perspective, the evolution of inclusive higher education in Georgia can be understood as part of the country's wider process of democratic consolidation and sustainable development. Ensuring equal access to education, including for persons with disabilities, represents a key component of contemporary educational policy and aligns with international commitments to inclusive and equitable education. Focus group discussions conducted during the research further confirm that the expansion of access to higher education for SEN/PWD individuals has been shaped by gradual policy shifts, institutional adaptation, and the influence of international policy frameworks.

Overall, the findings suggest that the development of inclusive higher education in Georgia should be conceptualized as a **multi-layered transformation** involving legislative reform, institutional change, and evolving socio-cultural attitudes toward disability. While important progress has been achieved in establishing the legal and policy foundations of inclusive education, the consolidation of these reforms within everyday institutional practices remains a central challenge. Continued efforts to strengthen institutional capacity, improve accessibility, and enhance awareness among stakeholders will therefore be essential for advancing inclusive higher education in Georgia and for aligning national educational practices with international standards of equity and inclusion.

In the final stage of the research, we analysed the results obtained and developed the following directions:

- Despite Georgia's significant efforts after the collapse of the Soviet Union, including numerous educational reforms and changes in education policy, substantial and noteworthy deficiencies still exist in the education system. We believe in-depth work is needed, and this issue requires complete elimination. Despite the inclusion of SEN/PWD individuals in the educational system, significant work remains to raise awareness and provide information about SEN/PWD individuals to support the implementation of the fourth Sustainable Development Goal in higher education.
- The research clearly shows that the path travelled by SEN/PWD individuals has not been easy. However, today, specific mechanisms in the country ensure equality, improve a wide range of necessary services, and provide access to appropriate resources. The research emphasised the creation of inclusive educational spaces and adaptive environments for individuals with SEN/PWD. From a cultural perspective, recognising SEN/PWD individuals in Georgian HE institutions is a significant achievement for the educational community.
- The research methodology showed that SEN/PWD individuals have gained their legal right to exist in HE institutions since 2005. However, this is still not sufficiently pronounced from the perspective of HE institutions.

Sustainable development in HE institutions, aiming to ensure equal access at all levels of education, including for people with disabilities, has taken on a historical significance in Georgia by shaping a legal policy response to democratic processes. According to specialists and experts surveyed in focus groups, the openness of higher education and aspiration toward inclusiveness have been noticeable during every administration since Georgia's recognition of independence. Their accounts clearly show that this was a

lengthy, ongoing process. Over the years, it is evident that priorities were unevenly established, and government departments borrowed key ideas from leading authorities.

A comparative perspective between Sweden and Georgia in the field of Inclusive Higher education reveals both structural asymmetries and converging policy orientations, particularly under the influence of the Bologna Process. In Sweden, Inclusive Higher Education is grounded in a robust legal framework, notably the Diskrimineringslag (Diskrimineringslag, 2008:567), which explicitly guarantees equal access and prohibits discrimination. This legal basis is operationalised through national-level coordination mechanisms such as the NAIS (National Administration and Information System), developed by the Universitet och hogskoleradet.

By contrast, Georgia has progressively aligned its HE system with European standards following its accession to the Bologna Process (2005). Legal provisions on inclusive education exist (e.g. Law on Higher Education, Law on Elimination of all forms of discrimination), yet they remain less systematically operationalised in the HE sector. The framework is still normatively strong but institutionally fragmented.

Key differences

Country		
Georgia	Policy commitment	Partial implementation
Sweden	Binding legal	Operational national system

Sweden NAIS represents a centralized yet collaborative national governance model, where a national digital system processes applications, coordinators across 36 HE institutions collaborate, and standardized procedures ensure equity and transparency. Georgia, in contrast, relies primarily on institution-level initiatives - universities independently design support services, no unified national digital platform exists, and coordination across institutions is limited. This results in uneven access to services depending on institutional capacity.

A notable strength of the Swedish model is its conceptual shift. NAIS reframes disability within a broader diversity paradigm. Inclusion is embedded in institutional culture and pedagogy. In Georgia, inclusion is still largely framed through medical or deficit-based approaches, with a focus on individual accommodation rather than systemic transformation. This indicates that Georgia is still in a transitional epistemological phase, moving toward a social model of disability.

Sweden demonstrates a data-driven approach: centralized statistics on applications, cost-efficiency monitoring, and identification of dominant categories (e.g., dyslexia, neuropsychiatric conditions), while Georgia faces significant gaps: lack of systemic national data collection, limited transparency on student support outcomes, and weak evidence base for policymaking.

Research in Sweden (Holmqvist, Anderson, & Hellström, 2019) highlights ongoing challenges in staff competencies, inclusive pedagogy, confidentiality, and support quality. However, these challenges are recognized and researched within a structured system. In Georgia, professional development

opportunities are limited, there is insufficient training in inclusive pedagogy, and support often depends on individual academic initiative.

Sweden has largely moved from accessibility to system inclusion, while Georgia is still navigating from formal accessibility to functional inclusion.

Dimension	Sweden	Georgia
Legal framework	Strong, Enforceable	Present, but less operational
National system	NAIS centralized platform	No unified system
Governance	Coordinated national network	Fragmented institutional level
Conceptual model	Diversity and inclusion	Accommodation-focused
Data systems	Advanced, centralized	Limited, fragmented
Staff training	Developing, but structured	Insufficient, sporadic
Stage	Mature inclusion system	Transitional system

The Swedish case illustrates a mature, system-oriented model of inclusive higher education, where legal, administrative, and pedagogical dimensions are integrated into a coherent national framework. Georgia, while demonstrating strong, normative alignment with European standards, remains in a development phase characterized by fragmented implementation and limited systemic coordination.

From a comparative perspective, the key issue is not merely policy adoption, but policy operationalisation. Sweden exemplifies how inclusion becomes effective when supported by centralized infrastructure, embedded in institutional practice, and informed by continuous data monitoring.

For Georgia, the Swedish model suggests three priority directions:

- Development of a national coordination platform (analogous to NAIS)
- Strengthening data collection and monitoring mechanisms.
- Transition toward a holistic, diversity-based conceptual framework of inclusion.

Taken together, these three dimensions demonstrate that the Swedish model thus serves not as a template for direct transfer, but as an analytical benchmark highlighting systemic gaps within the Georgian context.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the development of inclusive higher education in Georgia within the broader context of post-Soviet educational transformation. Drawing on data from 19 HE institutions, the findings reveal a significant gap between legislative progress and institutional implementation. Although the national policy framework increasingly reflects international commitments to inclusive education and the objectives of sustainable development, the practical realization of these principles within universities remains uneven.

The empirical results highlight several systemic challenges across the participating institutions. First, faculty preparedness for inclusive teaching remains limited, with only a small proportion of academic staff reporting specialized training related to disability-inclusive pedagogies and assistive technologies. Second, physical and educational infrastructure continues to pose barriers, as accessible learning materials and support services such as Braille resources or sign-language assistance are still insufficiently available. Third, the findings reveal institutional governance challenges, including limited administrative knowledge of disability-related legislation and the absence of structured disability support services in many institutions. Finally, a broader information deficit persists among stakeholders, which restricts awareness of legal obligations and available support mechanisms and thus weakens the effective implementation of inclusive education policies.

At the same time, the research identified emerging institutional initiatives that suggest a gradual shift toward greater engagement with disability inclusion. Larger, research-oriented universities with stronger international partnerships appear to demonstrate comparatively higher levels of institutional awareness and organizational readiness. However, such initiatives remain fragmented and have not yet translated into systemic change across the HE sector.

These findings suggest that inclusive higher education in Georgia is currently situated at a transitional stage, characterized by progressive policy frameworks but limited institutional capacity for consistent implementation. Addressing this gap requires coordinated efforts in several areas: strengthening monitoring mechanisms to ensure policy compliance, expanding professional development opportunities for academic staff, investing in accessible infrastructure and learning technologies, and establishing institutional support structures dedicated to disability services. Equally important is the development of participatory mechanisms that actively involve persons with disabilities in institutional decision-making processes.

The study is subject to certain limitations. The participating institutions represent those universities that agreed to take part in the research and therefore reflect indicative trends rather than the entire HE system. Nevertheless, the diversity of institutions included in the sample, public and private universities of different sizes, histories, and levels of engagement with disability-related initiatives, provides valuable insight into the current dynamics of inclusive higher education in Georgia.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that while Georgia has made notable legislative and policy advances since the early post-Soviet period, the effective institutionalization of inclusive practices remains an ongoing challenge. Strengthening the alignment between policy commitments and institutional practice will be crucial for ensuring that higher education becomes genuinely accessible and inclusive. In this respect, the Georgian experience also offers broader insights for other post-Soviet contexts undergoing similar processes of educational reform and democratization.

The study of inclusive higher education in Georgia reveals a complex picture characterised by significant legislative progress, yet persistent implementation gaps. This research, conducted across 19 HE institutions, sheds light on critical findings regarding the inclusion of people with disabilities in Georgia's post-Soviet educational transformation. These participating universities represent a mix of public and private institutions with varying historical backgrounds, sizes, and prior experience with disability-

related initiatives; as such, the findings indicate trends among the sampled institutions rather than the entire HE system.

The research findings indicate that, notwithstanding the state's efforts between 1991 and 2023, significant disparities persist that require rectification, particularly in the formulation of specific recommendations. Initially, the research demonstrated that Georgia's policy agenda for implementing the fourth Sustainable Development Goal in higher education is being developed during an exceptionally challenging period. However, this challenge poses substantial issues not only in Georgia but also globally. Nonetheless, there is a discernible increase in emphasis on democratic education. From Georgia's HE policy perspective, a new domain is emerging: the inclusion of individuals with disabilities (PWD), thereby broadening the educational policy agenda in this field. Throughout this process, the path chosen by individuals with disabilities during the arduous period our country has endured from 1991 to the present has been marked by notable transparency.

While the findings reveal substantial systemic challenges across the sampled institutions, the study also indicates emerging institutional practices that demonstrate greater engagement with disability inclusion. Large, research-oriented universities with established academic traditions and international collaboration frameworks show relatively greater awareness and structural readiness. For example, Ivane Javakishvili Tbilisi State University, through its Disability Research Centre, has initiated targeted research and support initiatives, reflecting early steps toward institutionalising inclusive practices. However, such practices remain fragmented and limited in scope, and their impact on the broader HE system is still constrained.

Critical Implementation Gaps:

- **Faculty Readiness:** Only 11.3% of faculty have received specialised training, while 83.2% lack knowledge about relevant teaching methods and assistive technologies. This deficit in training creates a cycle of educational inequity for students with disabilities. Without proper knowledge in this direction, even well-intentioned faculty members unwittingly create barriers in teaching. Students with disabilities subsequently experience inadequate educational outcomes not because of their abilities, but because of gaps in teaching experience. This shapes a system where academic potential remains untapped, reinforcing social perceptions of disability as inherently limiting rather than environmentally created. Additionally, the burden of adaptation falls disproportionately on students themselves, forcing them to navigate an educational environment not designed for their participation and consuming mental and emotional resources that should be directed toward learning.
- **Infrastructure Limitations:** Physical accessibility remains insufficient, with minimal availability of essential resources such as Braille and sign language support. These infrastructural barriers, along with others, systematically undermine educational equality. When the physical environment remains inaccessible, it creates the impression that SEN/PWD individuals are neither expected nor welcome in academic spaces. These barriers go beyond mere inconvenience and create educational challenges; students who lack access to classrooms, laboratories, or libraries are effectively denied education, despite formal admission policies. The absence of essential learning materials, such as Braille, forces students to depend on others, reducing

autonomy and creating an unsustainable workload. This results in a two-tier educational experience, where students with disabilities receive fundamentally different and inadequate educational opportunities, despite paying the same tuition fees and meeting the exact admission requirements.

- **Administrative Knowledge:** 77.8% of administrators lack knowledge of relevant legal frameworks, and only 11.1% reported having special disability support services. This variation in administrative knowledge creates an institutional failure, as those responsible for implementation and enforcement lack a basic understanding of legal requirements and best practices. Without informed leadership, disability inclusion becomes marginalised as an "optional" consideration rather than a fundamental institutional responsibility. In such cases, allocation of resources, policy implementation, and the resolution of accessibility issues may face certain challenges at the highest decision-making level. This gap in knowledge may also create certain legal vulnerability, as institutions may not always fully align with national legislation. In addition, the limited development of accountability mechanisms can make it more difficult for students to address barriers they encounter, resulting in situations where formally recognised rights are not always fully realised in practice.
- **Information Deficit:** There are critical awareness gaps among stakeholder groups, with 80.3% of faculty unfamiliar with disability legislation. This information deficit undermines the entire framework of disability rights, as stakeholders cannot implement provisions they are unaware of. Without awareness of available resources and support options, opportunities remain unused, while barriers persist. This information gap creates an environment in which violations of the rights of persons with disabilities do not occur out of malicious intent; however, they can limit students' access to resources, participation, and academic success. Most alarming is the fact that this awareness deficit contributes to stigmatised attitudes and misconceptions about disability, as outdated Soviet-era paradigms continue to coexist with the modern understanding of disability as a social construct. This creates an institutional culture that resists change, where inclusion is viewed as a burdensome accommodation rather than the implementation of fundamental human rights.
- **Sustainable Implementation:** Disability inclusion has emerged as a new priority in Georgia's HE policy agenda, but faces uneven implementation due to resource constraints. This implementation failure fundamentally undermines Georgia's commitment to educational equality. Without adequate resource allocation, legislative progress may not fully translate into inclusive outcomes, as certain barriers to participation may remain. This approach treats disability inclusion as a separate, specialised issue; unequal treatment causes educational inequality between institutions, creating geographical and institutional discrimination where a student's access to appropriate accommodations depends on which university they attend. This approach may result in measured concerns among the disability community, since policy statements are not consistently mirrored in changes to educational experiences. In the long term, this could affect confidence in institutions and perceptions of reform progress.

In terms of future development recommendations, several strategic recommendations have emerged:

- Establish strong monitoring mechanisms to eliminate the gap between legislation and implementation.
- Implement comprehensive faculty development programs that address both attitudinal dimensions and practical skills.
- Strategically invest in physical and digital infrastructure to create truly accessible learning environments.
- Create specialised institutional support structures to coordinate disability services and resources, as experience has shown that HE institutions need advisory centres and tutors to address the problems of SEN/PWD individuals during their studies.
- Continuous retraining of teachers and administrative staff should take place so that HE institutions are ready to provide the following support: pedagogical (including psychological), motivational (to enable more SEN/PWD individuals to access higher education), technological, organisational-methodological, and social (including medical support).
- Develop systematic information-sharing initiatives among all stakeholders to eliminate awareness gaps.
- Review curricula to integrate universal design principles into HE programs.
- Establish participatory decision-making mechanisms that ensure people with disabilities are informed in the policy development process.
- Establish relationships with potential employers to give SEN/PWD individuals opportunities for future employment in their field of specialisation.

The 19 participating universities do not constitute the entire HE system of Georgia, but represent institutions that agreed to participate in the study. The sample includes both public and private universities with different institutional histories, sizes, and levels of prior engagement with disability-related initiatives. Participation was voluntary, and therefore the findings should be interpreted as indicative of trends among the participating institutions rather than as exhaustive generalisations for the entire system.

The trajectory toward genuinely inclusive higher education necessitates sustained commitment from all stakeholders. By building upon legislative achievements while simultaneously addressing implementation gaps, Georgia has the potential to progress toward an educational environment that not only accommodates diversity but also regards it as an essential dimension of academic excellence and sustainable development. The "path of limited possibilities" identified in this study offers insights for Georgia and other post-Soviet countries endeavouring to establish more inclusive and equitable HE systems during analogous transitional periods.

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