

**THE EXPERIENCES AND CHALLENGES OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS WITH
DISABILITIES IN GEORGIA**

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Abstract

This study is part of a research project aimed at exploring the challenges of students with disabilities at Georgian universities. The present paper focuses on the perspectives of students with disabilities. Qualitative research was conducted at four Georgian universities, involving 13 students with disabilities from the target universities. Data collection utilized semi-structured face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions. Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Triangulation of the primary data, relevant university documentation, and local and international publications were applied. The research reveals that despite a strong legislative framework, students with disabilities face significant physical and social barriers globally; these challenges are more pronounced in countries like Georgia, where higher education systems are underfunded, disability-related services are limited, societal awareness of disability issues is low, and educators lack competencies in inclusive education. The study underlines that Georgian Higher Education Institutions experience systemic barriers to inclusion, underrepresentation and invisibility of students with disabilities, and a lack of institutional support systems. To enhance the accessibility and inclusivity of higher education institutions in Georgia, it is essential to address the interrelated factors of university, educational, and social policy, which currently hinder the realization of inclusive education.

Keywords: Students with disabilities, higher education institutions, qualitative research

Introduction

Ensuring persons with disabilities have equal access to education is on the agenda of many countries and the international community (Górak-Sosnowska & Markowska-Manista, 2022; Smyth, 2014). The availability of schools, vocational colleges, and universities to people with disabilities is envisaged in many international acts and documents. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (article 24) recognizes the rights of persons with disabilities to education without any discrimination (United Nations, 2006). United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (Goal 4) ensure an inclusive and equitable quality education for all persons with disabilities (United Nations, 2015). One of the aims of the European Union's Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030 is to improve accessibility and education for persons with disabilities (European Union, 2021).

Many countries have made significant efforts toward inclusive education. However, several studies indicate that implementing inclusive education in higher education institutions is more challenging than at lower education levels among younger students (Smith et al., 2018; Johnson & Williams, 2020). Accessibility of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) for persons with disabilities is influenced by several factors: a market-oriented environment that does not always support the concept of inclusion (Nunan et al., 2000; Collins et al. 2019), entrance exams to universities that do not meet the needs of persons with disabilities (Tai et al., 2022), and both physical and social barriers at universities (Griful-Freixenet et al., 2017; Kendall, 2016; Toutain, 2019). At the same time, researchers have noted that implementing inclusivity in higher education becomes increasingly demanding as more students with disabilities successfully complete their early schooling (Puente, 2022).

Inclusive education in Georgia started with public schools in 2006—the project was led by the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia and funded and supported by the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research (Human Rights Council, 2013). Initially, 105 children with disabilities began their education in mainstream classes in the capital city. Currently, 14,080 students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) are participating in mainstream learning across the country (National Statistics Office of Georgia, 2025). In 2013, the project was expanded to vocational colleges (Human Rights Council, 2013), and young people with disabilities were included in mainstream classes at these colleges—initially, about 70 students with disabilities were registered at VET centers (Human Rights Council, 2013). Presently, 265 students with SEND are enrolled in vocational colleges throughout the country (Education Management Information System of Georgia, personal communication, August 7, 2024).

Similar to other countries, HEIs in Georgia are less accessible to individuals with disabilities compared to schools and vocational institutions (Public Defender of Georgia, 2024). The authorization standards for higher education institutions (HEIs) developed by the National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement of Georgia (2018) require Georgian universities to adapt to the needs of students with disabilities - HEIs must meet the educational needs of these students by organizing the physical environment, learning process and overall university environment appropriately (National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement of Georgia, 2018). However, no systematic efforts have been made so far to improve the inclusivity of the universities. Institutions typically take reactive measures only when a student with disabilities is enrolled and requires individual support (Public Defender of Georgia, 2024). There is no data regarding the number of students with disabilities in higher education institutions; neither the Ministry of Education, Science and Youth of Georgia nor the universities maintain such statistics.

In general, very few individuals with disabilities apply for the national entry exams to universities. According to the National Assessment and Examination Center of Georgia, over the past five years, the number of applicants with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) who pass the national entry exams at HEIs has fluctuated between 0.61% and 0.82% of all applicants (National Assessment and Examination Center of Georgia, personal communication, November 9, 2023).

Inclusive education in HEIs is less studied in Georgia compared to schools and vocational institutions, with a notable lack of research addressing the needs and challenges faced by university students with disabilities. A recent monitoring report (2024) conducted by the Public Defender of Georgia examined the inclusivity of universities in the country. The report indicates that students with disabilities do not have equal access to the learning process, and their right to quality education is thus violated (Public Defender of Georgia, 2024). The same issues were highlighted in the Eurostudent seventh wave national research (2019–2021), which was conducted in Georgia (Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia, 2021). A study conducted by a group of researchers at four Georgian universities in 2024 revealed the challenges that students with disabilities face in universities. It highlighted considerable discrepancies in the perspectives of students with and without disabilities regarding the inclusivity of these institutions (Makharadze et al., 2024). This study was conducted with a group of researchers from four Georgian universities and was funded by Shota Rustaveli National Scientific Foundation of Georgia. The research aimed to explore the inclusivity of the target universities from the perspective of students with and without disabilities and academic and administrative staff. In the above-mentioned publication, Makharadze et al. (2024) highlighted the attitudes of students. In the present paper, we look at the perspectives of students with disabilities, exploring how they perceive the main reasons for the

barriers they encounter and identifying ways to enhance the inclusivity of universities. The research questions (RQs) were formed as follows:

- **RQ (1)** What do students with disabilities perceive as the primary barriers they face within university organizational culture, policy, and practice?
- **RQ (2)** From the perspective of students with disabilities, what strategies would most effectively enhance university inclusivity for persons with disabilities?

By exploring the perspectives of students with disabilities, this study addresses a gap in the understanding of how Georgian universities adapt to the educational needs of these students. It also clarifies the differences in perceptions of inclusivity between students with and without disabilities. Additionally, the study provides an opportunity to amplify the voices of students with disabilities, ensuring they are considered in university policy development.

This article is organized into five main sections that systematically explore the experiences of students with disabilities in Georgian higher education institutions. Following this introduction, the Theoretical Background summarizes Booth & Ainscow's approach towards building inclusive educational systems through developing inclusive culture, policy, and practice. The given study is based on this comprehensive approach. The Method section outlines the qualitative research design employed across four Georgian universities, detailing the grounded theory approach, participant selection through purposive sampling, data collection procedures using semi-structured interviews and focus groups, and the thematic analysis framework based on Booth and Ainscow's three dimensions of inclusive education (culture, policy, and practice). The Findings section presents the empirical results organized according to the two research questions, examining participants' perspectives on inclusive culture, policy, and practice, while also exploring their recommendations for improving university inclusivity. The Discussion section contextualizes

these findings within the broader international literature, comparing the challenges faced by Georgian HEIs with global trends in inclusive higher education and analyzing the underlying factors contributing to barriers experienced by students with disabilities. Finally, the Conclusions and Recommendations section synthesizes the key findings and provides concrete, actionable recommendations at both university and governmental levels for enhancing the accessibility and inclusivity of Georgian higher education institutions for students with disabilities.

Theoretical Background

Improving the inclusivity of HEIs worldwide has become an area of interest for both scholars and policymakers. A number of studies underline that universities are less accessible for persons with disabilities compared to schools or vocational colleges (Rodríguez et al. 2021; Moriña, 2017). Scholars have started exploring the main barriers to inclusive education at universities. Among the main factors negatively influencing the availability of HEIs for PWDs were market orientation of universities (Nunan et al., 2000; Collins et al., 2019), Lack of preparedness among persons with disabilities to continue education in HEIs (Husna Husni & Hui Min, 2025), unwillingness of academic staff to have students with disabilities in their classes (Xiao et al., 2025; Punch et al., 2025), stigmatized attitudes of society towards PWDs (Biswal & Mishra, 2025), and so forth.

Booth and Ainscow (2016) used a broader and more comprehensive perspective to evaluate the development of inclusive educational systems – they focused on the importance of building inclusive culture, producing inclusive policies, and evolving inclusive practices. According to the Index for Inclusion (Booth and Ainscow, 2016), (1) creating inclusive culture involves developing values and beliefs supporting inclusion, collaborative relationships among all community members, welcoming attitudes toward diversity, safe and accepting environments for everyone, and a shared vision of inclusive education; (2) For creating inclusive policies, it is important to

ensure admission and enrollment procedures that welcome all students, develop support systems for diverse learners, create assessment and evaluation policies that accommodate diversity, and safeguard anti-discrimination policies and procedures in general; (3) Developing inclusive practices focuses on teaching methods that accommodate diverse learning needs, organizing classrooms and class management strategies that meet diversity, using assessment practices that recognize diverse strengths, and encouraging collaboration between all stakeholders. The Index for Inclusion was developed mainly for schools; however, numerous studies have shown that this approach is fundamental for developing inclusive education in HEIs (Puente et al., 2022; Solis-Grant et al. 2022).

Despite growing international attention to inclusive higher education, significant gaps persist in understanding how inclusion principles translate into practice across diverse national and institutional contexts. The existing research base demonstrates a pronounced Western bias, with most studies originating from well-resourced universities in developed countries, thereby creating substantial knowledge gaps regarding implementation challenges in under-resourced or transitional contexts (Malinovskiy et al., 2023). This geographic and economic bias is compounded by methodological limitations: limited research studies, particularly from post-socialist countries, capture the authentic voices and lived experiences of students with disabilities—a gap that reflects the broader underrepresentation and invisibility of students with disabilities in higher education systems (Chiwandire & Vincent, 2019). Furthermore, existing literature inadequately addresses the practical realities of resource constraints, with little research exploring innovative approaches such as inter-institutional collaboration and resource sharing that could make inclusion more feasible in economically constrained environments.

Georgia exemplifies the type of under-researched context where these knowledge gaps are most pronounced. As a post-socialist country undergoing educational transformation, Georgia presents unique characteristics that make it particularly valuable for understanding inclusion implementation challenges. The country's systematic approach to inclusive education began in primary schools in 2006 and expanded to vocational education in 2013, yet higher education has seen limited systematic implementation (Human Rights Council, 2013; Public Defender of Georgia, 2024). This partial implementation creates an opportunity to examine why inclusion efforts that succeed at lower educational levels encounter different obstacles in higher education. Georgian universities operate under a distinctive funding model that relies exclusively on student fees without state subsidies for higher education institutions (Parliament of Georgia, 2004) - a financial structure that exemplifies the resource constraints facing many universities globally. This funding limitation directly impacts universities' capacity to invest in inclusive infrastructure and specialized support services, creating the tension between inclusion goals and institutional sustainability identified in international literature (Milic Babic & Dowling, 2015). Additionally, the systematic absence of data collection regarding students with disabilities creates evidence-based policy development challenges (Public Defender of Georgia, 2024), while persistent disability-related stigma and low societal awareness of disability rights create cultural barriers that extend beyond formal policies into everyday university interactions and relationships.

By employing Booth and Ainscow's (2016) comprehensive framework to systematically analyze student perspectives on inclusive culture, policy, and practice, this study directly addresses the identified research gaps while contributing methodological and theoretical advances in the field. The focus on student voices from a post-socialist context provides essential insights into inclusion experiences within resource-constrained environments - knowledge that is increasingly

relevant as universities worldwide face financial pressures while maintaining commitments to educational equity. This research approach not only amplifies previously marginalized voices but also generates practical knowledge about how inclusion can be pursued when ideal conditions are absent, thereby contributing to more realistic and globally applicable inclusion strategies.

Method

Research Design

Qualitative research on students with disabilities was conducted at four Georgian universities: Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University (TSU), Iakob Gogebashvili Telavi State University (TeSaU), Akaki Tsereteli State University (ATSU), and Shota Rustaveli Batumi State University (BSU). This research was part of the "Teachers for Inclusive Education" project, supported by the Shota Rustaveli National Scientific Foundation of Georgia from 2022 to 2024. The study received approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education at the University of Warsaw (reference number 2022/6), as none of the participating Georgian universities had an Academic Research Ethics Committee at the time of the study. Given that a University of Warsaw professor (one of the co-authors) served as a key researcher and consultant on the team, having been involved in the study design from the initial planning stages through implementation and analysis, the research team determined it appropriate to seek ethical approval from the University of Warsaw's committee.

A Grounded Theory approach was employed to explore the perspectives of students with disabilities regarding their university experiences and challenges. This methodological framework allowed for a comprehensive examination without imposing predetermined theoretical constraints (Bryman, 2016).

The study was conducted at four state universities located across different regions of Georgia: the capital city (TSU), the eastern region (TeSaU), and the western regions (ATSU, BSU). These universities were selected as primary participants in the "Teachers for Inclusive Education" research project supported by the Shota Rustaveli National Scientific Foundation of Georgia. As mentioned previously, the present study forms part of this broader research initiative. Detailed information about the participating universities is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Information about the participating universities

	University	Year of foundation	Location	Number of students at the moment	Number of Employee at the moment	Budget for 2025 in GEL
1	Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University	1918	Tbilisi, Georgia	19 711	Academic Staff – 722 Administrative staff – 1717	124 344 590
2	Iakob Gogebashvili Telavi State University	1939	Telavi, Georgia	1 108	Academic Staff – 76 Administrative staff -93	4 789 229

3	Akaki Tsereteli State University	1933	Kutaisi, Georgia ,	12 000	Academic Staff – 474 Administrative staff- 976	30 000 000
4	Shota Rustaveli Batumi State University	1935	Batumi, Georgia	7 186	Academic Staff – 349 Administrative staff - 298	39 917 889

Data were gathered through semi-structured face-to-face interviews and focus groups. Both methods enabled researchers to acquire a rich and contextual understanding of the research topic (Cohen et al., 2017; Bryman, 2016), highlighting students' experiences in the learning process and university life. The combination of semi-structured interviews and focus groups creates powerful complementary effects in qualitative research (Bryman, 2016). Through semi-structured interviews, we intended to capture students' individual perspectives and personal experiences, while focus groups revealed social dynamics and idea development through interaction. Using both methods allowed us to cross-validate findings. Research participants had the opportunity to participate in the study via their preferred method – some preferred to speak one-on-one, while others preferred group discussions. The composition of semi-structured interviews and focus groups was based on the preferences of research participants. In total, six interviews and two focus group discussions were carried out.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling—a nonprobability technique considered optimal for qualitative research (Bryman, 2016). Students with disabilities from all faculties of the target universities were invited to participate, with only those expressing willingness being contacted. Students could choose to participate via individual interviews or focus groups. Research indicates that students with disabilities are often reluctant to disclose their conditions due to perceived stigma (Kendall, 2016; Newman et al., 2021), which influenced the researchers' decision to offer participation options.

To provide context and triangulation for the primary data, relevant university documentation and local and international publications were also examined.

It should be noted that students with non-apparent disabilities were not included in the study, as it was not possible to identify them within the target universities. Research suggests this is a common tendency, as many students with disabilities choose not to disclose their conditions (Nolan et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2019). This represents a limitation of the study, as it primarily focuses on the perspectives of students with certain types of visible disabilities. The participation of only state universities can also be considered a limitation of the study. The research team focused exclusively on state universities, as we anticipated difficulties in identifying students with disabilities at private universities. According to a recent monitoring report by the Public Defender of Georgia, very few students with disabilities have been identified at private universities (Public Defender of Georgia, 2024).

Participants/Study Group

The research involved 13 students with disabilities from three target universities: four from BSU, four from ATSU, and five from TSU. No students with disabilities were identified at TeSaU.

Participants ranged from 19-24 years of age, with 9 females and 4 males. Their university experience varied from 2 to 8 semesters, with most having visual, hearing, or movement impairments. The participants' characteristics are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Student Participants Characteristics

Cod e	Discipline	Number of semesters at the university	Disability Type
P1	Political Sciences	7	Visual impairment
P2	Psychology	6	Visual impairment
P3	Philology	6	Visual impairment
P4	Philology	5	Hearing impairment
P5	Computer Sciences	3	Movement impairment
P6	German Philology	5	Hearing impairment
P7	Philosophy	4	Movement impairment
P8	Computer Science	5	Movement impairment
P9	Mathematics	2	Movement impairment
P10	Psychology	3	Visual impairment
P11	Computer Sciences	4	Movement impairment

P12	History	5	Hearing impairment
P13	Economics	4	Hearing impairment

Data Collection Process

The primary methods used in data collection were semi-structured face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions—both considered optimal techniques for qualitative research (Cohen et al., 2017; Bryman, 2016). Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted at TSU (five interviews) and BSU (one interview), while focus groups were conducted at BSU (one focus group) and ATSU (one focus group). As mentioned previously, students could choose their preferred participation method. Although online participation was offered, students preferred face-to-face interaction.

Before the interviews/focus groups, selected students who agreed to participate were contacted by researchers from the team via phone/email. The research aim was explained again, and the place, date, and time for the interview/focus group were arranged. All interviews and focus groups were conducted at the students' universities - a setting where participants felt comfortable. Interviews lasted an average of 45 minutes, while focus groups averaged 110 minutes. With participants' permission, all sessions were audio-recorded. All initiated interviews and focus groups were completed.

The interviews and focus groups were conducted by researchers from the research team. Two researchers from each participating university took part in the broader research project "Teachers for Inclusive Education" mentioned above and comprised the research team for this study. They collected research data at their respective universities. All of them participated in the study design from the very early stages, including participating in the formulation of research

questions and working on interview and focus group guides. Accordingly, they have a common understanding of the subject matter that minimizes differences in perceptions and interpretations.

All audio recordings were transcribed into Word files, resulting in approximately 10 pages per interview and 13 pages per focus group. The transcripts were verified by participants to ensure validation and additional input, which also promoted a collaborative process.

Data Collection Tools

The interviews and focus groups were guided by specially developed tools. Guidelines were based on the theoretical framework proposed by Booth and Ainscow (2016), which evaluates inclusive education development through three important dimensions: culture, policy, and practice. Numerous studies have shown that this approach can also be effectively applied to analyze inclusive education in HEIs (Losada Puente et al., 2022; Solis-Grant et al. 2022).

The guidelines for interviews and focus groups addressed the three main dimensions from Booth & Ainscow's theoretical framework: inclusive culture, inclusive policies, and inclusive practices. Participants were asked six main questions related to these dimensions, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. The questions research participants were asked

No	Dimension	Questions
1	Inclusive Culture	Whether you feel a member of the university community
2		In your opinion, how supportive is the environment at your faculty/university to students with disabilities?

3	Inclusive Policy	In your opinion, is ensuring an equal environment for everyone, including persons with disabilities, a top priority at your faculty or university?
4		How do you view the rules regulating the special educational needs of students with disabilities applying to your faculty or university?
5	Inclusive Practice	How would you evaluate the accessibility of lectures, seminars, laboratories, and libraries for students with disabilities
6		How well do academic and administrative staff use inclusive education principles and teaching techniques in practice?

Researcher Role

The team of researchers (authors of this article) played an active role in study design, data collection, and analysis. All researchers had experience interviewing persons with disabilities and encountered no difficulties establishing rapport with participants or creating a comfortable, supportive environment. The researchers transcribed the interviews they conducted. To ensure the reliability and validity of the findings, they verified the transcripts with respondents and applied triangulation techniques during analysis. The researchers strictly adhered to ethical standards, maintaining confidentiality of all information and an unbiased approach throughout the study.

Credibility and Ethics

To ensure credibility, validity, and reliability of findings, both data source method triangulation and data source triangulation were employed (Bryman, 2016). The students' interview results were

compared with quantitative research conducted with students from the target universities within the same research project. Additionally, research findings were cross-referenced with different data sources, comparing findings from student interviews and focus groups with conclusions from the monitoring report developed by the Public Defender of Georgia, which was based on recent monitoring of inclusivity in Georgian HEIs. Data were also cross-checked against information from university documentation and local publications. Triangulation techniques generally ensure well-grounded research conclusions (Cohen et al., 2017; Bryman, 2016).

From an ethical standpoint, the study followed established standards for qualitative research. Only students who responded positively to university representatives' participation invitations were contacted for interviews/focus groups. Before interviews, researchers provided participants with detailed information about the study's purpose. Participants were informed they could withdraw at any time without affecting their university life and were assured of response confidentiality.

During data analysis, participant identifiers were removed and names were replaced with codes (Participant 1=P1, Participant 2=P2, etc.). Researchers used these codes during discussions. All audio files and transcripts are stored on a USB drive in a locked bookcase at the Disability Research Center at TSU, with only the Principal Investigator (PI) having access. The researchers adhered strictly to the research protocol approved by the Ethics Committee.

Data Analysis

The data analysis aimed to interpret findings from both the empirical study (interviews and focus groups) and the literature review. In qualitative research, interpretation begins with transcripts (Bryman, 2016). During data collection, we ensured that transcripts contained all relevant information. The study employed a Grounded Theory approach, beginning with open coding of

transcripts. Researchers identified significant smaller units (codes) and grouped them into broader themes without pre-established theories or categories. This procedure was applied across all three main research topics: inclusive culture, inclusive policy, and inclusive practice.

Research findings revealed that barriers faced by students with disabilities at universities could be grouped into five main themes:

1. Exclusion of students with disabilities from the university community;
2. Reactive rather than proactive approaches to adapting learning processes;
3. Absence of dedicated administrative units to assist students with disabilities;
4. Lack of knowledge about inclusive education teaching strategies among academic staff;
5. Low disability awareness among academic and administrative staff and students.

The literature review involved a thematic analysis of university documentation and related local and international publications. The following institutional documents from participating universities were studied: university missions, statutes, legal acts, program descriptions, annual reports, enrollment and admissions procedures, and examination and assessment policies. The documents were analyzed for whether they envisage disability and diversity issues in general. Analysis of university documentation revealed significant gaps: no specific rules or instructions regulate the adaptation of learning processes to meet the needs of students with disabilities, and disability policy is not integrated into the university's general policy and strategy. Official documents contain only very general statements required by legislation, without specific implementation measures. The review also identified a scarcity of local studies exploring inclusive education in Georgian universities. Analysis of international publications indicates that many challenges faced by Georgian HEIs regarding disability inclusion are common across higher

education institutions internationally (Malinovskiy et al., 2023; Majoko, 2018; Chiwandire & Vincent, 2019; Moriña Díez et al., 2014; Toutain, 2019).

By integrating empirical data with document analysis, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of barriers facing students with disabilities at universities, including causal factors and potential mitigation strategies.

Findings

The results are presented according to two main research questions: (1) What are the main challenges students with disabilities face regarding the university's organizational culture, policy, and practice? and (2) What should be done to improve university inclusivity for persons with disabilities?

Inclusive Culture

Participants consistently described a university environment where individual goodwill exists but systematic inclusion remains absent. The overarching theme emerging from their narratives reveals that while isolated acts of kindness from staff and students occur, students with disabilities are not integrated into routine university life. This exclusion manifests in both physical and social dimensions, creating a pervasive sense of disconnection from the university community - "I tried to avoid any cultural activities or other gatherings at the university as I always fear that I could simply be left outside and unable to enter the space; because nobody thinks about my wheelchair during event planning. I don't want to constantly remind them that not every space at the university is accessible to me. So not attending is the best choice for me—how can I feel like part of the university community?!" (Research Participant P5). The planning and execution of university

activities consistently overlook accessibility needs, forcing students with disabilities to make difficult choices about community participation. Physical barriers compound social exclusion, as students must constantly advocate for their needs rather than experiencing automatic inclusion. This burden of continuous self-advocacy creates emotional fatigue and often results in voluntary withdrawal from university activities - *"Not everyone can be demanding; many young people with disabilities prefer to remain unnoticed, leaving their needs unmet"* (Research Participant P1). The fear of being left outside - both literally and figuratively - shapes daily experiences and limits full participation in university life.

Disclosure of disability emerges as a particularly complex challenge, especially for students with non-apparent disabilities. The decision to reveal one's disability becomes a calculated risk, weighed against the potential for support versus the reality of inadequate services. Many students choose invisibility over the uncertainty of requesting accommodations, leading to unmet needs and further isolation. This reluctance to disclose reflects broader systemic failures in creating truly supportive environments.

The exclusion experienced by students with disabilities reflects broader patterns of marginalization affecting multiple minority groups within the university. International students and others who don't conform to the majority experience similar neglect, suggesting that the issue extends beyond disability to encompass a general failure to embrace diversity - *"This is not only about persons with disabilities; for example, foreign students who don't speak Georgian also often remain excluded—they cannot participate in planned events. Generally, minority group voices are not heard"* (Research Participant P2). This pattern indicates that universities have not developed inclusive cultures that naturally consider and accommodate difference.

Participants identified the root causes of exclusionary practices in broader societal attitudes that permeate university culture. The underrepresentation of students with disabilities contributes to their invisibility, creating a cycle where absence reinforces neglect - *“Students with disabilities remain unnoticed; their needs are unseen and not considered. They aren't part of university life, just as they aren't considered part of society in general”* (Research Participant P8). University culture cannot be separated from the broader social context where persons with disabilities face systemic inequality. The attitudes and assumptions that students, staff, and faculty bring from their families, neighborhoods, and schools inevitably influence the university environment, perpetuating exclusionary practices despite formal commitments to equality - *“We all come from families, neighborhoods, and schools where persons with disabilities often aren't treated as equals, so it's not surprising what we see here—we aren't treated the same way as others”* (Research Participant P8).

Inclusive Policy

The policy landscape regarding disability support reveals a significant gap between stated intentions and practical guidance. Across all participating universities, a pattern emerges of generic policy statements that lack specific implementation protocols. While educational documents universally include broad commitments to meeting students' educational needs, these statements provide no concrete guidance for operationalizing support in lectures, seminars, examinations, or other academic activities - *“I have never found any instructions on how to get accessible learning material or pass exams in a way that's accessible to me. This is just a subject of negotiation between the lecturer and me. There's no service supporting students with disabilities in adapting to the learning process”* (Research Participant P1).

This absence of detailed policy creates a system where accommodation depends entirely on individual negotiation between students and faculty members. The lack of institutional protocols places students with disabilities in vulnerable positions where they must repeatedly educate others about their needs and advocate for basic accessibility. Faculty members, lacking clear guidance, make ad hoc decisions that may inadvertently disadvantage students with disabilities, such as automatically assuming oral examinations are preferable for blind students without considering individual preferences or the nature of the assessment.

The arbitrariness of current accommodation practices extends to examination procedures, where decisions about additional time appear to be made without systematic assessment or clear criteria - *"I think this decision is made at the exam center with no reasonable basis—I imagine it's something like, 'Let's give her an additional 30 minutes'"* (Research Participant P2). This inconsistency creates uncertainty for students who cannot predict what accommodations will be available or how decisions about their needs will be made. The absence of transparent processes undermines both equity and student confidence in the system.

Physical accessibility remains governed by similarly inadequate policies. While some spaces in universities have been made accessible, there are no clear plans or timelines for comprehensive accessibility improvements. Students remain uninformed about current accessibility features and future developments, limiting their ability to plan their academic experiences effectively.

Although universities collect information about disabilities and special educational needs through enrollment questionnaires, this data collection appears disconnected from systematic support provision. The absence of protocols for responding to identified needs renders the

information-gathering process largely meaningless, creating false expectations among students who disclose their disabilities during enrollment.

Inclusive Practice

University practices regarding disability support are characterized by reactive, individualized responses rather than proactive, systematic approaches. This reactive model creates inefficiencies, inconsistencies, and places undue burden on students with disabilities to constantly initiate accommodation requests. The absence of established procedures means that each situation is treated as unique, preventing the development of institutional expertise and sustainable support systems.

For students who are blind, universities have begun developing some specialized responses, including hiring mobility-orientation specialists. However, these developments often occur after lengthy delays and result from persistent advocacy rather than proactive planning - *"Universities started hiring mobility-orientation specialists to help blind students adapt to new environments. In my first semester, sometimes even the Dean helped me reach the required academic buildings. Eventually, the faculty managed to hire a mobility-orientation specialist for me, but it took a long time"* (Research Participant P1). Even when specialized personnel are hired, their lack of training and preparation creates additional challenges, requiring students to educate their supposed support providers. This reversal of roles - where students become trainers rather than recipients of support - highlights the inadequacy of current preparation systems - *"It was good that after a long period, the faculty succeeded in hiring mobility-orientation specialists for me. But another problem is these people's competency—they had no idea how to assist me, so I tried to train them"* (Research Participant P2).

Access to learning materials remains dependent on individual faculty cooperation rather than institutional systems. Students must repeatedly contact lecturers to request accessible formats, with success varying according to individual attitudes and technical knowledge. The absence of centralized support services means that students face this challenge with every course, every semester, creating ongoing uncertainty about their ability to access educational content. Similarly, classroom technologies like PowerPoint presentations often remain inaccessible, requiring constant negotiation and adaptation.

Assessment practices reveal particular inconsistencies in current approaches. While alternative examination formats may be offered to students with visual impairments, these decisions are made without clear rationale or consultation with students about their preferences. More problematically, some faculty members award additional points simply because of a student's disability, fundamentally misunderstanding the goal of accommodation and creating inequality in the opposite direction - *"The only thing I wanted was to have the same conditions as other students, I didn't need gifted marks and refused to take them, but lecturers didn't understand what the problem was"* (Research Participant P10). These well-intentioned but misguided practices highlight the need for systematic education about disability and appropriate support.

Students using wheelchairs face ongoing challenges due to incomplete physical accessibility. While universities attempt reasonable accommodations, such as scheduling classes in accessible locations, the limited number of accessible spaces constrains educational opportunities. Specialized elevators designated for persons with disabilities create additional complications when they malfunction or are turned off, requiring students to seek assistance that may not be readily available. These practical barriers force students to choose between attending class and avoiding discomfort, ultimately limiting their educational participation - *"Regularly, the*

elevator at the university is turned off. I have to contact the security guard to turn it on, but I don't feel comfortable asking every single time, so I prefer just to miss the lecture" (Research Participant P11).

Students with hearing impairments encounter particularly complex challenges due to the complete absence of systematic communication support. The lack of transcript writers or sign language interpreters, forces students to rely on family members or develop individual coping strategies. Even students skilled in lip-reading must negotiate optimal seating arrangements and request speaking modifications from faculty members. These individualized adaptations, while sometimes successful, cannot substitute for comprehensive accessibility planning.

Improving University Inclusivity

Participants envision inclusive universities as environments where accessibility and support are embedded in routine operations rather than treated as special accommodations. Their recommendations emphasize the need for systematic change that addresses both structural barriers and cultural attitudes. The desired transformation involves creating universities where diversity is anticipated and planned for rather than accommodated reactively.

Institutional policy reform emerges as a crucial foundation for improvement, with participants calling for specific, enforceable regulations regarding accessibility and support - *"There should be strict rules regarding accessibility of the university environment for ALL students, and everyone must obey these rules; in this case, no prioritized group of students will exist"* (Research Participant P7). However, they recognize that rules alone cannot create inclusive cultures without corresponding changes in awareness and attitudes among university community members. The most sustainable improvements would combine clear institutional requirements

with education and sensitization initiatives that promote understanding and acceptance of diversity.

Addressing societal attitudes represents a longer-term but essential component of creating inclusive universities. Participants recognize that universities reflect broader social attitudes toward disability and other forms of difference - *"As universities are part of the broader society, it's important to make more efforts working with society, teaching children from very early years to respect everyone's needs, regardless of the groups they belong to"* (Research Participant P9). Meaningful change requires engaging with the wider community to challenge stigma and promote respect for diverse needs from early ages. This broader social transformation would support students with non-apparent disabilities in disclosing their needs and requesting appropriate support without fear of discrimination or misunderstanding.

The establishment of dedicated disability support services emerges as an immediate and practical necessity. Participants envision specialized administrative units that would serve multiple functions: providing direct support to students, developing institutional policies and practices, and offering training and consultation to university staff. Such centers would eliminate the current burden on students to repeatedly explain their needs while ensuring that support provision becomes a professional responsibility rather than an act of individual goodwill - *" Sometimes it is tough to repeatedly ask for assistance, especially when you know it might not be that person's responsibility. You don't want to burden others. It would be perfect to know exactly whom you can approach, and that the assistance they provide is part of their job responsibilities rather than just goodwill. It would be awesome if you could have an online chat with such a person and receive needed consultation"* (Research Participant P10). The ideal support services would combine accessibility with efficiency, offering multiple ways for students to access assistance including online

consultation options. These services would serve as institutional resources for developing inclusive practices, ensuring that individual accommodations contribute to broader institutional learning and improvement. By centralizing expertise and responsibility, such units could transform sporadic, reactive responses into proactive, systematic support that anticipates and addresses diverse needs as a routine part of university operations.

Discussion

The research findings reveal that HEIs in Georgia do not ensure equal conditions for students with disabilities to study and socialize - they face numerous physical and social barriers (Public Defender of Georgia, 2014; Makharadze et al., 2025). Similar challenges exist in universities beyond Georgia - implementation of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) practices that reduce barriers for students with disabilities and diverse educational needs remains challenging even in well-developed countries with long histories of democracy and human rights protection (Saha-Gupta et al., 2019; Coffman & Draper, 2022; Hills et al., 2022). Hills et al. (2022) demonstrate the importance of UDL strategies in educational institutions to address the needs of all students. Multiple studies highlight that despite strong regulatory frameworks, internalization of UDL strategies into regular practices remains challenging across many universities globally (Malinovsky et al., 2023; Saha-Gupta et al., 2019; Collins et al., 2018).

The unequal conditions for students with disabilities in Georgian universities are largely attributed to their underrepresentation and the high expenses associated with implementing UDL principles. According to recent monitoring on the inclusivity of HEIs in Georgia conducted by the Public Defender of Georgia (2024), university representatives, especially in regional areas,

reported rarely having students with disabilities enrolled, which complicates maintaining inclusive approaches. This absence makes addressing their needs seem less urgent, as universities (particularly state institutions) must prioritize other pressing issues. Additionally, meeting the educational needs of students with disabilities often requires substantial additional expenses that are particularly challenging for state universities (Public Defender of Georgia, 2024). State universities in Georgia are funded solely through student fees, with no state subsidies for HEIs in the country (Parliament of Georgia, 2004). Consequently, universities tend to adopt reactive rather than proactive approaches to addressing the needs of students with disabilities. For instance, purchasing expensive assistive technologies for blind students is considered impractical when universities may not enroll such students for many years. University representatives emphasize the importance of resource-sharing between institutions to effectively meet the educational needs of students with disabilities (Public Defender of Georgia, 2024).

Not having specialized administrative units to support students with disabilities is a common practice among Georgian universities; this tendency was revealed in both the research target universities and those monitored by the Public Defender of Georgia (2024). This practice sharply contrasts with international standards described in the literature - many countries have higher education institutions that support students' educational needs through dedicated departments or centers providing necessary services (Kayhan, 2015). Zhang et al. (2018) emphasize the importance of effective university support centers, as teachers typically display low motivation to work with students with disabilities and often lack relevant knowledge, skills, and effective inclusive education strategies. Given the limited financial capacity of Georgian universities, it seems more feasible to combine resources to develop a joint coordinating center for inclusive education across Georgian HEIs rather than establishing separate support centers at each

institution. Such a center could deliver necessary services to students with disabilities while strengthening the university's academic and administrative staff through training and consultations (Public Defender of Georgia, 2024).

In parallel, Georgian researchers question the reported low numbers of university students with disabilities and special educational needs in the country. This discrepancy might be caused by a lack of systematic approaches for identifying students' educational needs at the universities (Makharadze et al., 2025). Additionally, it could be determined by students' unwillingness to disclose their disabilities, particularly non-apparent forms (Public Defender of Georgia, 2024). This finding is supported by numerous studies indicating that due to disability-related stigma, students often avoid disclosing their disabilities or special needs (Kendall, 2016; Newman et al., 2021; Nolan et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2019).

The research reveals limited competency among Georgian university academic staff in implementing inclusive education techniques, low disability awareness, and tendencies toward positive discrimination. These findings align with international literature highlighting instructors' inappropriate attitudes toward students with disabilities and limited knowledge of suitable teaching methods. Majoko (2018) identifies lecturers' inclusive education incompetence as a significant barrier to participation for students with disabilities. Diez et al. (2014) further confirm that lecturer attitudes, classroom practices, curricular adaptation challenges, and insufficient faculty training contribute to the low participation of students with disabilities in learning processes. Toutain (2019) notes that negative reactions from peers and faculty members not only reduce the involvement of students with disabilities but also discourage disability disclosure. Kayhan et al. (2015) emphasize that academic staff require better information about disabilities and inclusive

education techniques - this perspective is supported by several studies (Perera-Rodríguez & Moriña Díez, 2017; Hong, 2015; Zhang et al., 2018; Griful-Freixenet et al., 2017).

Unequal treatment and unwelcoming attitudes from peers and university staff cause embarrassment for students with disabilities and negatively impact their identity (Morina, 2015; De Los Santos et al., 2019). This corresponds with our research finding that students with disabilities lack a sense of belonging to the university community and feel disconnected from university life. Newman et al. (2021) highlight that acceptance and support significantly increase students' persistence in two- or four-year college programs and improve retention rates. This finding is supported by studies of Kutscher & Tuckwiller (2019) and Kilpatrick et al. (2016).

The complexity of challenges associated with effective inclusive education in higher education institutions indicates that university accessibility and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) implementation relate not only to the educational system but also to broader social, economic, and contextual factors (Spirina, 2020). According to Babic & Dowling (2015), inadequate transportation, financial barriers to university attendance, lack of educational grants, and absence of personal assistants constitute considerable obstacles to student inclusion. Additionally, Brown and Broido (2019) focus on ableist societal attitudes that produce discriminatory actions.

Conclusions and recommendations

The empirical data goes in line with the local and international publication highlighting that despite strong legislative support, implementing Universal Design for Learning (UDL) at Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) remains challenging. Students with disabilities face significant physical and social barriers globally, with these challenges being more pronounced in countries

like Georgia, where higher education systems are underfunded, disability-related services are limited, societal awareness of disability issues is low, and educators lack competencies in inclusive education.

Perspectives of students with disabilities confirm that:

- Georgian HEIs face systemic barriers to inclusion. These barriers operate at multiple levels—institutional, cultural, and societal—creating a complex web of exclusion that cannot be addressed through isolated interventions alone.
- Students with disabilities remain significantly underrepresented in Georgian universities, creating a cycle where their absence reinforces institutional neglect of inclusive practices. This underrepresentation may be artificially inflated by students' reluctance to disclose disabilities, particularly non-apparent ones, due to stigma and inadequate support systems.
- Georgian HEIs experience resource constraints and apply reactive rather than proactive approaches to disability support. The high costs of implementing Universal Design for Learning principles and assistive technologies create significant barriers to systematic inclusion.
- Georgian HEIs demonstrate inadequate staff preparedness. Academic and administrative staff lack the knowledge, skills, and awareness necessary for effective inclusive education. This competency gap results in inappropriate attitudes, positive discrimination practices, and inability to implement suitable teaching methods for diverse learning needs.
- Georgian HEIs lack institutional support systems. The absence of specialized administrative units for disability support across Georgian universities contrasts sharply with international best practices and leaves students dependent on individual goodwill rather than systematic institutional support.

To enhance the accessibility of HEIs in Georgia, the following factors at the university, educational, and social policy levels should be addressed: At the University Level:

- Integrate UDL principles into university policy and strategy, developing an implementation action plan in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, Science, and Youth of Georgia and donor organizations.
- Establish a systematic approach to identifying students' disabilities and special educational needs while ensuring privacy and confidentiality.
- Develop specific protocols for adapting learning environments to accommodate students with disabilities and special educational needs.
- Create dedicated administrative units to support students with disabilities; institutions with financial constraints or few students with disabilities should collaborate with other universities to share resources.
- Conduct ongoing disability awareness initiatives among university personnel and students.
- Provide academic staff with continuous training on inclusive education teaching techniques.
- Encourage persons with disabilities to apply to HEIs through open-door sessions and informative campaigns.

At the Governmental Level:

- The Government of Georgia should accelerate the development of a new HEI funding model that includes special provisions for students with disabilities.
- The Ministry of Education and Science should foster collaboration between HEIs regarding inclusive education and encourage the establishment of support centers to coordinate resource sharing among universities.

- The Ministry of Education and Science should focus on improving inclusive education quality at mainstream schools and encourage students with disabilities to pursue higher education.
- The Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Health, Labour and Social Affairs should diversify services for persons with disabilities and ensure they have access to necessary resources for full participation in the learning process.

This study highlights the importance of a holistic approach to developing inclusive educational systems and emphasizes the crucial role of persons with disabilities in this process. The inclusivity of HEIs in Georgia results from interrelated factors operating at micro, mezzo, and macro levels. Enhancing inclusive education at Georgian HEIs would benefit from strengthened research and evidence collection on resource-sharing possibilities between universities, potentially through a national coordinating center model. Given the financial constraints facing Georgian HEIs, resource sharing appears essential for improving university inclusivity. This model could prove valuable for other countries facing similar challenges.

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