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# FROM UNIVERSITY TO WORKFORCE: CHALLENGES AND EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN KAZAKHSTAN

**Abstract.**

***Purpose.*** This study explores the experiences of students with disabilities in Kazakhstan in relation to their academic processes and social inclusion within universities and workplaces. It aims to examine the challenges and opportunities these students face in academic participation, social life, and job placement.

***Design/methodology/approach.*** The research focuses on students and graduates with disabilities and is based on six in-depth interviews. A qualitative approach was adopted to capture their lived experiences and perspectives on inclusive education and transition to employment in Kazakhstan.

***Findings.*** The findings indicate that academic support is the most commonly provided service for students with disabilities, while social inclusion initiatives and career transition programs remain limited. Major challenges include restricted physical access to infrastructure, insufficient specialized assistance, and significant barriers to employment after graduation. Career preparation services were found to offer only superficial guidance, without providing clear direction for navigating diverse workplaces.

***Originality.*** This study contributes to the understanding of inclusive education in Kazakhstan by highlighting the gap between academic support and social or professional inclusion for students with disabilities. It provides new insights into how universities and employers can enhance accessibility, inclusivity, and post-graduation support systems.

**Keywords:** inclusive education: disability, University, students' perceptions, social participation, challenges.

## Introduction

Inclusive education is known to have received wide attention around the world because it is considered one of the key provisions in offering equal opportunities for disabled students. This approach is believed to increase participation and diversity in high schools and is aimed at reducing the barriers for students with disabilities by providing the necessary provisions, which would further benefit the arbitrary learners. The effectiveness of inclusive education could not be more timely in Kazakhstan, as it has recently become evident that the current education system of Kazakhstan could still not be prepared to address the needs of all learners and especially learners with disabilities.

Principles of non-discrimination in the field of education were accepted and supported by many states together with international law. The Republic of Kazakhstan, after gaining its independence, adopted its laws starting from the Constitution of Kazakhstan 1995, and the Labor Code in 1999. All these laws incorporated the main provisions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, specifically the right to education, Article 26, and Article 30 of the Constitution of Kazakhstan, also guaranteeing the right to education. Those are the fundamentals of Inclusivity.

In Kazakhstan, the educational system is now facing some problems with students with disabilities. This paper argues that students with disabilities have not fully been able to exercise full participation in universities through educational activities because they are still being restricted by physical, social and academic challenges.

Another domain that involves many such difficulties is a lack of career guidance matching the individual needs of students of universities such as SDU University, Al-Farabi Kazakh National University.

Therefore, this article gives the experiences of students with disabilities in universities of Kazakhstan, with regard to their academic process and social inclusion. This article makes use of interviews with students and attempts to present a general idea concerning the current status of inclusive education and the barriers that these students face. This article identifies grey areas of support mechanisms and gaps in services that may affect successful integration into higher education.

The results of this article seem to be relevant to extend the knowledge of the community about the challenges of students with disabilities, and also to define further development tendencies at SDU University and other institutions.

Although the objectives are expressed in the integration of the students in academic and recreational activities, the achievement of these goals requires constant and perpetual process of making changes, creating a barrier-free environment for students with disability, and yet making them feel welcome to the environment.

This article discusses the students' experiences with disabilities as a contribution to the broader discussion of necessary changes in higher education and the workplace that will support students with disabilities in making a successful transition to professional life. The sections describe the existing state of inclusive education in Kazakhstan based on the learners' accounts at universities in Kazakhstan, as well as the policy recommendations and further practice of inclusive education.

This article tries to address the given areas and contributes to the growing discussion on the provision of inclusive education and career transition support for students with disabilities in Kazakhstan.

**Literature review**

Inclusive education has always had an importance in facilitating equity and access for all learners and children with disabilities. However, the actual implementation of inclusive education differs from country to country; Kazakhstan is not an exception here. Other studies have described key policies formulated by the Kazakhstan government to enhance inclusion but the realities faced by disabled students on the ground are harsh. For instance, Sazykova et al. (2019) found out that students with disability problems in Kazakhstan struggle to attend higher education academic and social experiences.

These challenges include; physical barriers such as accommodation structures that are categorized as inaccessible throughout the campus, social barriers in terms of lack of services offered to students with disabilities, and the social exclusion of the latter among other students.

In this line, Bolat (2021) continues the argument that while state programs exist to promote employment of persons with disabilities, they are poorly developed in Kazakhstan. In this regard, focused career guidance or other measures that can help a student with a disability to make a shift to the labor market after completing university are not offered to most people with such needs. The absence of such specific assistance means that many students encounter significant challenges in the rather stiff job market and therefore cannot find appropriate and flexible employment. This switch is considered to be of real significance internationally. Lacking effective transition programs, learners with disabilities end up experiencing feelings of frustration and despair once they are discriminated against in the labor market and generally have problems with barriers that are still not addressed when getting jobs.

Another study conducted by Houghton and Sutherland (2020) recommends that they also indicate that work skills which include incorporation of work-integrated learning, internships, mentoring, and customized career services into transition programs improve the employment prospects of students with a disability. This is regarding the fact that all students whether normal or with learning or physical disabilities should receive their education through regular schools and universities. Notwithstanding this, the process of implementing this practice in inclusive education has met a lot of challenges.

Limited and unavailable instruction, technology and physical campus are severe forms of resource challenges in accessing students with disabilities in higher education. Similarly, few classrooms, library or other similar facilities are accessible for students with mobility impaired mainly because, there has been no arrangements made to accommodate students with such physical disability. However, this is

compounded by social exclusion of disability related issues which continue to isolate these students further from the university fraternity. However, Barker (2016) notes that the time at which students with disabilities may drop out of education and seek employment is a difficult phase in a disabled student's life as pointed out by Bolat in 2021.

There are programs at the state level that are designed to assist people with disabilities find jobs, most of these programs provide few services to ensure that students with disabilities transition into the workforce ready for employment. However, Bolat is right in saying that career counselling and employment placement services should be very much specific, holding the concern of student disabilities in mind to enhance the opportunity to successfully connect education and employment.

According to Orynbassarov, D., Maulen, A., & Rollan, K. (2025) the absence of clear pathways to employment reflects the limited availability of vocational training, the absence of structured career guidance programs, and insufficient engagement from employers. These interrelated gaps significantly constrain the capacity of students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) to transition successfully into meaningful and sustainable employment.

Inclusive education therefore holds the belief that every learner needs and has the right for access to quality education irrespective of the physical, intellectual, social, emotional, or communication impairment the child may have (Ainscow, 2005). This approach focuses on how best to minimize obstacles that limit equality during learning. The Salamanca Statement of UNESCO (1994) defined that inclusive education is concerned with endeavoring to make education systems more open and effective in responding to the needs of all learners by providing suitable curricula, buildings and strategies. According to writers like Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011), inclusion is not merely a process of putting children with disabilities in mainstream classrooms but rather it is the act of making the learning environment naturally inclusive.

Governing policies are considered to have relevance in the enhancement of effective delivery of inclusive education. In Mitchell's (2014) opinion, institutional policies also concern architectural barriers and/or supply of assistive technology as well as curriculum access, teacher education, and evaluation techniques. The argument that many universities in particular have egalitarian policies is feasible

because most lack a consistent and monitored policy (Slee, 2011). Sharma et al.'s (2012) study notes that institutions must involve leadership and supportive policies to encourage the participation of all. However, these policies are still noble on the surface without resolving many of the issues related to social and cultural implications students with disability experience every learning day.

Even though there has been a great improvement, students with disability still encounter numerous challenges while pursuing their university education. These are classified into physical, academic, social, and attitudinal barriers (MacArthur et al., 2015). Restriction based on physical barriers consists of limited campuses and the appropriately needed transportation structures. School barriers stem from a lack of educational framework, organizational structure, and paraprofessional servicing. Special barriers are inseparable from the negative attitude toward people with disabilities in society with corresponding negative impacts such as stigmatization, social isolation, and lack of companionship (Norwich, 2008). That is why Forlin (2010) acknowledges that attitudinal barriers are even worse because negative perceptions from faculty members and other students make a person uncomfortable.

Thus, inclusive education is considered not only in terms of school achievements but also in terms of student's social and emotional adjustment. According to Carter et al. (2017), organizational support in peer friendships, mentors as well as counseling for the affected students is crucial based on students with disabilities' mental health issues. It is worth noting that social inclusion, according to Goodley (2016) remains underemphasized in the course of institutionalization even though it is a useful factor in the broad processes of student learning. Four of the most important mood states that may influence learners' academic achievement and enthusiasm are loneliness, low self-esteem, and persecution.

Another significant and valuable part explaining the outcomes of inclusive educational processes is the professors' perceptions and readiness levels. Lancaster and Bain (2007) point out that many instructors have inadequate training in inclusive classroom practices. It is therefore important for training programs that seek to increase awareness and practice of inclusive teaching to fill these gaps. According to Sniatecki et al. (2015), research also shows that faculty who were trained in such areas were more confident and competent when it came to disability–related student support. Further, one fac-

tor that is very crucial for learning and teaching for all includes the ability of the staff to provide sections, and special arrangements for the assessments such as making arrangements for a student to sit for the examinations at a date closer to the completion of such an assessment, to enable provision of specific arrangements to a particular student. The passage of students with disabilities from the education sector to the working environment is one of the hardest exercises. A study by Winn and Hay (2009) revealed that higher education no doubt delivers a poor service in preparing and offering career guidance and internships for students with disabilities. According to Juetal, internships play a favorable role that exposing students to an early work environment making them more useful to employers and more confident. Nevertheless, many students claim that career-related support and development are not well organized and are inadequately offered to prepare students for job markets.

This lack of service puts the graduates with disabilities in very poor standing for the employment job market hence a reason why such groups have high unemployment rates. This can be reinforced at the international level through research undertaken by Houghton and Sutherland (2020) in as much as they have underlined the need to adopt an ecological perspective to this change process and integrate internships, mentorship programs, and professional development initiatives targeted at disabled students. These programs not only provide students the chance to learn and experience the workplace but also boost the confidence and professional ability of the students. It also offers an opportunity for students to meet potential employers in mainstream environments and show they can perform the work required as well as combating the attitudes that may be held towards the disabled in the workforce. According to Garner and Hull (2021), universities have a responsibility to ensure students with disabilities get ready for the workplace because universities have the possibility of creating a climate of inclusion and support. As Garner and Hull (2021) proposed, universities provide enough academic support for students, in like manner, and to the same extent, they have to portray that social integration is not left behind, for these social networks and affiliations are part of how job openings happen. However, this full social participation of students, as was identified in a number of studies (e.g., Bolat, 2021; Houghton & Sutherland, 2020), may be hampered by not-so-inclusive policies of universities, which already influence their further careers.

Internationally, several practices have been recommended to increase inclusiveness in universities. Apart from this call for references there are examples, for instance, flexible assessment systems, there are mentorship programs, there are peer support programs, as described by European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2018). In Canada, universities have a centralized accessibility service for students with disabilities which offers academic adjustment, personal counseling, and assistive technology (Stodden et al., 2003). Same with the UK scheme called Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) which gives money to students so that they can acquire all the essential materials and services they need. Regarding these practices one realizes that the set environment supports the idea of the boy's complete fulfillment where both the academic and non-academic aspects are met. In Kazakhstan, there is increased awareness of inclusive education so there is still much that can be done. The government has stepped up the endeavors of adopting and implementing inclusive policies but still, it is found that the extent of implementation in higher education is rather limited (Zhetpisbayeva & Shelestova, 2015). A significant proportion of universities do not have barrier-free access, professional-staff support, and individualized approaches. Thirdly, cultural prejudices also hamper integration of the disabled persons in the society in question. According to Kozhabekova et al. (2020), some recommendations of the study may suggest systematic education reforms along with enhanced teacher training programs and the increased investment in accessibility infrastructure. With such findings, the paper attempts to investigate students' experience with disability at universities of Kazakhstan, in terms of their integration in academia, social inclusion, and integration towards employment. As a result, this paper aims to explain not only through the list of support service gaps but also through some recommendations for developing better inclusive educational practices through which such students with disabilities may have a smoother university-to-workforce transition.

**Methodology**

This paper explored the level of support provided to people with disabilities in Kazakhstani higher educational settings, to evaluate how this support meets their educational, social and professional requirements, as well as to identify key gaps and offer recommendations for improving the effectiveness of the assistance provided. By answering to the re-

search questions: What level of support is provided to students with disabilities at Kazakhstani universities, and to what extent does this support meet their needs?

The method adopted in this article was a qualitative approach. The mentioned approach was selected to gather detailed data from participants, allowing for the discussion format of the interviews. The principal purpose was to provide insights into participants' experiences in academic, social, and career fields, which contributed to the analysis of the student support services that the students were provided with during their studies. The interview was carried out with graduates and students of two major universities in Kazakhstan, namely Al-Farabi Kazakh National University and SDU University. Initially, it was difficult to get in touch with graduates because most of them did not respond to the authors emails. That's why we could reach only limited number of graduates. It involved participants with various types of disabilities, including motor impairments that require mobility aids, as well as cognitive disabilities. Half of the students sent their answers to the questions online by email. Interviews with the other half were conducted in a face-to-face format with the help of the audio recorder.

Data was collected from September to November,2024. An online survey was administered via google docs. The responses provided by participants overviewed a systematic text condensation analysis, employing a descriptive method for cross-case qualitative analysis. This method prioritizes understanding participants' obvious statements rather than investigating hidden meanings (Malterud, 2012). The authors obtained approval from the Research Ethics Committee of SDU University in June 2024.

The questions of the survey intended to address the primary areas affecting student's life in university: academic support from teachers and staff, social life and provision of assistance for future career transition. The interview was aimed to measure any limitations and obstacles students with special needs may encounter in academic support services. The proposals for the further advancement of those existing problems were collected as well with the purpose of increasing the inclusivity in higher educational settings.

The results were thematically analyzed to identify common patterns and trends in the responses of various students. Emerging topics have been grouped into three main categories as follows: 1) Academic support from teachers and staff. 2) Social life and assistance for a future career. 3) Career transition.

**Results and discussion**

*Academic Support.* The responses of the participants indicated the generally favorable experience with the scholarly support they received at universities. According to them, some teachers permitted the written presentations of oral tasks if students had mobility difficulties or extended deadlines for assignments to meet the students' special needs.

Despite some teacher support, the noticeable differences in accessing educational materials, such as books in libraries were mentioned, revealing the lack of equal availability for everyone. The participant with vision impairment referred to the absence of accessible fonts (Braille font, as an example) in reading resources. Moreover, the online materials did not feature assistive technologies, which enable people with visual disabilities to access the needed materials more independently. Other students with reduced mobility mentioned that the infrastructure of the university does not fully meet the needs of people with physical impairments, making it complicated to get around the campus. It includes the use of special bathroom facilities, the absence of ramps in some areas of the building, and the lack of special seats. It correlates with the challenges described by Sazykova et. al (2019) regarding the same access to the infrastructure and materials in educational institutions in order to ensure the full participation of people with disabilities in social settings.

One participant of this study referred to the obstacles in accessing supplementary materials and resources, despite the university having special systems offering additional help and support to those with disabilities. They mentioned the electronic devices offered as an additional help, which they did not find helpful in their educational journey.

Another individual pointed out the lack of inclusive design and assistive infrastructure in buildings distinct from the university itself, in which some academic courses such as Physical Education took place. This deficiency in accessibility in academic settings was recognized as a major obstacle to the full integration of students with disabilities, making it challenging for them to fully participate and reach support when needed.

*Social Inclusion.* Social inclusion and integration is the primary objective of the education of people with physical developmental disorders (Zholtayeva et al., 2013). Nevertheless, the study revealed the discrepancy in the interview reports of participants due to the different backgrounds and experiences. On one hand, many students had positive experiences: they

were able to participate in social life activities of their universities, develop friendships and make acquaintances, mostly due to the compassion and support displayed by their peers. Nonetheless, other participants also stated that their involvement in extraclassroom events and social life on campus was circumscribed. The United Nations' Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities specify the rights of people with disability to culture life, recreation, leisure, sport, and tourism (Darcy, 2012). Some students pointed out the lack of special events adapted and designed for those with disabilities, which created difficulties in having a sense of belonging to the students community.

These findings correspond to the issue raised by Bolat (2021) that social integration systems and programs for students with disabilities are often poorly developed and unsatisfactory, which negatively impacts people's overall college experience. The students participating in this study voiced a strong wish for the conduct of various inclusive extracurricular activities within the universities that would enable them to engage with a broader range of people and feel as a full part of the society.

*Transition to Employment.* The shift from the university setting to career was found to be one of the most complicated factors for the participants surveyed in this study. Several students shared doubts and concerns regarding the lack of workforce assistance programs specifically designed to meet the special needs of learners with disabilities. While some individuals described receiving job counselling from the university support systems, they felt that the guidance offered did not sufficiently respond to the needs and special difficulties they might encounter in the workplace. For instance, interviewees with physical disabilities were preoccupied with whether future work settings would offer inclusive workspaces, while participants with cognitive disorders raised concerns about how their speech difficulties would affect their future career opportunities.

The shortage of internships, mentorships, and career guidance services that take into consideration the unique needs of students with disabilities was recognized as a significant gap in the support offered. This finding corresponds to the challenges posed by Houghton and Sutherland (2020), who argued that specialized job counsellings and internships are crucial for giving help to students with special needs to transition successfully into the employment market. Furthermore, the stigma that surrounds disability in the job places was also a major barrier described by the participants of this study, who were concerned that employers would not acknowledge their abilities and qualifications due to their conditions.

### Recommendations for Enhancing the Inclusive Education State of Kazakhstan Universities.

Taking into account all of the findings mentioned above, a number of recommendations can be suggested to improve the academic and social life experience of students with special needs at SDU University, specifically about academic experience, social integration, and transition to career path. These recommendations are derived from the difficulties of participants found in the reports and relevant studies, which underlines the necessity for a holistic and more systematic approach to inclusive education and future career guidance.

*Enhancing Academic Support.* One of the foremost suggestions is to advance equal access to educational resources and university amenities. Despite SDU University providing some needed facilities, such as special digital materials in libraries, learners with disabilities also described the insufficiency of some resources and adaptations supplied. To tackle this issue, it is advised for the university to invest in more inclusive facilities, such as equipping the libraries with a larger number of educational resources with accessible formats (e.g., Braille, large prints, audio books, etc.). This improvement would enable the students with visual impairments to have a more equal access to academic materials.

Furthermore, the university should work on advancing the physical accessibility of some of the parts of the campus. Although SDU University provides inclusive accommodations in a campus building such as ramps and elevators, some students reported the inconsistent work of automatic doors and absence of ramps in some halls where only the stairs were available. Learners with physical impairments should have easy and quick access to all zones of the campus, including classrooms at different floors, libraries, cafeterias, and restrooms. This requires making facility adaptations, such as additional ramps, broader doorways, as well as equipping the classroom with suitable seating arrangements.

Some students also reported the challenges in crossing the road outside the university building due to the lack of crosswalk and elevator in the crossing bridge. For the above reasons, additional renovations to make the transportation outside the campus for students with special physical needs to enter the university area would also be convenient and beneficial.

It is also significant to enforce transparent and more efficient structures for accessing academic sup-

port. As some participants revealed, the process for accessing supplementary learning resources or accommodations might be perplexing and lacks organization. A well-organized system where students can seek assistance in both physical and digital formats, as well as track the status of their requests would enhance the quality of their experience.

*Enhancing Social Inclusion.* To enhance social inclusion, SDU University might offer extracurricular activities specifically for students with special needs with the purpose of spreading awareness and celebrating differences that would encourage their active engagement in social events and student clubs. Inclusive activities can foster interactions and communication between students with and without special needs, breaking down the barriers and giving the sense of belonging to those with disabilities.

Moreover, the creation of student clubs focused on rights of people with disabilities and inclusion can function as safe spaces where learners with special needs can share resources and collaborate to enhance the overall inclusivity of their universities. By promoting an inclusive campus culture, SDU University can build a safe environment that would help learners with unique needs feel valued and supported.

*Supporting the Employment.* Transition from college life to career remains one of the most challenging aspects. To enhance the preparation of these students for the job market, SDU University might consider extending its career counseling and professional development services to catering the special needs of learners with disabilities. This could incorporate providing individualized recommendations on resume crafting, future job interviews, as well as dispensing advice on how to tackle possible obstacles related to their condition in the workplace.

In a similar vein, the university might cooperate with local companies and corporations to create special internships and practicum prospects for learners with unique needs. These opportunities would offer students significant practical experience while giving them an opportunity to display their potential and competence in authentic settings. In turn, employees might profit from a more inclusive job environment, attaining different standpoints and insights from job holders with special needs.

Another beneficial feature would include pairing students with disabilities with specialists and professionals in their fields of discipline. The mentors could assist and offer special counselling to those students throughout the job hunting period, helping them boost self-confidence, broaden their career networks,

and guide the corporate environment. In particular, these mentorship projects might consist of not only students with special needs but supervisors and specialists who are devoted to building inclusive and accessible work settings.

**Conclusion**

This article investigated the overall state of social life at universities in Kazakhstan for students with disabilities, such as progression and challenges. Based on the interviews, the common answers included obstacles students face in participating in social life activities, which leads to not being able to fully benefit from club and organizational life due to certain physical conditions.

Secondly, the research found that there was a significant gap in offered career services when graduating. Some students stated that the career preparation services navigated them on a superficial level without providing directions as to where to find information on how to manage diverse workplaces. As it was mentioned, they were often unable to address their needs, and the state of university's support structures was lacking.

The study revealed that these gaps must be overcome to achieve environmental equality for disabled people. Teachers are crucial in shaping the learning outcomes and success of students with special educational needs (SEN). Their guidance, dedication, and understanding have a profound effect on improving educational learnings and advocating an inclusive environment where every student matters. The findings of this paper indicated also challenges in teacher training, and societal attitudes. While these findings inform us about the need to strengthen teachers' support and training in inclusive education and transition, it is crucial to consider its limitations. First, the researches geographic focus on Almaty region limits the generalizability of its findings to other regions of Kazakhstan, where resources and cultural attitudes may vary. Additionally, a key limitation of this paper lies in the low representation of participants with disabilities in the focus group. The small amount of participants limits the depth and diversity of approaches that could have enriched the research. As a result, the findings may not fully capture the wide range of experiences, needs, and challenges faced by people with disabilities across different contexts. Future research should therefore aim to include a larger and more diverse sample to enhance the generalizability and inclusiveness of the results.

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