













Inclusive Education in Higher Education Institutions in Georgia—Main Barriers and Facilitators

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Abstract

Students with special education needs and disabilities (SEND) often experience challenges in higher education institutions (HEIs). During the last decade, the number of students with SEND in Georgian mainstream schools and vocational colleges has increased. However, HEIs remain less accessible to students with SEND and the topic of inclusive education less explored. This study explored Georgian universities' approaches and inclusive measures; four universities in Georgia were compared. This quantitative study developed and used a survey with a validated self-report research tool, based on the "Index for Inclusion". The questionnaire was descriptively analysed to explore the inclusion of students with SEND in the culture, policies, and practises of HEIs. Positive correlations were found between all surveyed sections. No significant differences were found across universities. Participants perceived the development of inclusive education at their institutions positively; however, their attitudes were affected by a lack of contact with students with SEND. They revealed an openness to diversity and inclusivity in the university. This study designed a valid instrument for evaluating the inclusive education process in Georgian HEIs for all stakeholders. Social inclusion seems to be included in the ethical obligations

of HEIs, contributing to the development of a truly democratic society.

Keywords

Students with Special Education Needs, Student with Disabilities, Inclusive Education, Higher Education Institutions, Index for Inclusion, Inclusive Culture

1. Introduction

Inclusive education is a key objective of political agendas and educational reforms worldwide (OECD, 2023; UNESCO, 2020). Ensuring accessible and equitable education for all has become the top priority of international education systems. While it started with schools, it has slowly expanded to higher education institutions (Armstrong & Cairnduff, 2012).

Georgia's political agenda encourages reforms that support the development of more inclusive educational institutions (United Nations, Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2018). This focus was strengthened by the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD) by the Parliament of Georgia in 2014 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, 2014) and the signing of the EU/Georgia Association Agreement in 2014 (European Union, 2014).

After gaining back their independence in 1991 (as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union), Georgia started making efforts to join the Western community; in 2005 Georgia joined the Bologna system. The development of inclusive education started in 2006 in 10 public schools in the capital city; this project was funded and supported by the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research (Human Rights Council, 2013). The project began with the participation of 105 children with disabilities in mainstream classes in the capital city. Currently, 11,976 students with special education needs and disabilities (SEND) are involved in mainstream learning across the country (Education Management Information System of Georgia, personal communication, August, 7, 2023).

In 2013, the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia expanded its emphasis to vocational colleges, and with the support of the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, the implementation of inclusive education commenced in Georgia's Vocational Education and Training system (Human Rights Council, 2013). During the project, approximately 70 students with SEND were registered at 11 VET centres (Human Rights Council, 2013). At present, 265 students with SEND are enrolled in vocational colleges throughout the country (Education Management Information System of Georgia, personal communication, August, 7, 2023).

An increased number of students with SEND in mainstream education classes are considered an indicator of the inclusive education progress in Georgia (Ivane

Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, 2019; Institute of Social Studies and Analysis, 2017; Public Defender of Georgia, 2019); however, these same studies and analytical reports question the quality of the inclusive education provided in Georgia's schools and vocational colleges. The quality challenges regarding inclusive education in Georgia are most frequently related to the low professional competence of subject and special teachers (Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center et al., 2019; Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, 2019), the extreme shortage of supportive services (speech therapists, occupational therapists, psychologists, etc.) (World Vision, 2014; Chanturia et al., 2016; Tchintcharauli & Javakhishvili, 2017), methodological issues (e.g. identification and evaluation of SEN, development of proper individual educational plans, etc.) (Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, 2019; Public Defender of Georgia, 2019), poor cooperation between school personnel and parents/caregivers of children with SEND (Institute of Social Studies and Analysis, 2017; Public Defender of Georgia, 2019), and insufficient support for educational institutions with regard to necessary materials and human resources (Public Defender of Georgia, 2019).

Compared with schools and vocational institutions, the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia has made no systemic efforts towards strengthening higher education institutions with inclusive education (Public Defender of Georgia, 2024; European Union, 2014). Furthermore, there is a lack of studies exploring the individualities of inclusive education in HEIs. As most universities do not practise a systematic approach towards identifying students' educational needs, these data have not been analysed by the Education Management Information System of Georgia (Education Management Information System of Georgia, personal communication, August 7, 2023). According to the National Assessment and Examination Center of Georgia, during the last five years, the number of applicants with SEND passing the national entry exams at higher education institutions has varied from 0.61% to 0.82% of all the applicants (National Assessment and Examination Center of Georgia, personal communication, November 9, 2023). Georgian universities must adapt to the needs of students with SEND, as required by the authorisation standards for higher education institutions developed by the National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement of Georgia (2018). However, information on how the universities ensure that students' educational needs are met has remained unavailable thus far.

This study aimed to explore various approaches and inclusive measures practised at some target universities in Georgia. We used the theoretical framework proposed by Booth and Ainscow (2016) to evaluate the development of inclusive education in schools by assessing three important dimensions: culture, policy, and practise. These dimensions are crucial for navigating educational institutions towards inclusion (Booth & Ainscow, 2016). The approach proposed by Booth, Ainscow and Kingston (2006) is reflected in the Index for Inclusion, a self-evaluation tool designed by Booth and Ainscow to evaluate inclusive education progress in schools and analyse the obstacles and barriers in its path (Sanchez et al., 2019). The key component for building inclusive teaching is creating a school culture

that supports the removal of barriers to learning and encourages the participation of all learners (Braunsteiner & Mariano-Lapidus, 2018).

In the present study, we relied on the Index for Inclusion, which comprises three dimensions (creating an inclusive culture [Dimension A], producing inclusive policies for all [Dimension B], and creating inclusive practises [Dimension C]), and six sections (building community, establishing inclusive values, developing educational institutions for all, organising support for diversity, constructing curricula for all, and orchestrating learning (Booth & Ainscow, 2016). However, numerous studies have shown that this instrument can also be used effectively for developing scales for analysing the measures, approaches, and practises implemented for the development of inclusive education in higher education institutions (Puente et al., 2022; Solis-Grant et al., 2022). It can also be adapted to the local context and the needs of specific organisations (Sanchez et al., 2019). Accordingly, by using the Index for Inclusion, it is possible to develop a self-evaluating instrument to assess the degree of inclusiveness in education in Georgian higher education institutions, and analyse the obstacles they face. By exploring the individualities of inclusive education in higher education institutions, this study fills a gap in the knowledge related to whether Georgian universities are focusing on social inclusion; it also provides a tool to bring the concept of equality and social justice for all groups in the universities' policy and practice.

2. Material and Methods

2.1. The Utilised Methodological Approach and Methods

This study employed a quantitative design, using a survey that explored the approaches and measures used for developing inclusive education in Georgian universities. The data were collected from four state universities, located in the capital city (Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, TSU), the eastern (Iakob Gogebashvili Telavi State University, TeSaU) and the western (Akaki Tsereteli State University, ATSU, and Shota Rustaveli Batumi State University, BSU) parts of the country.

The research instrument (a questionnaire) was developed based on the Index for Inclusion and its main dimensions and sections. The first part of the study was devoted to validating the research instrument, and the second part focused on collecting information from target universities, using the validated instrument. The developed tool can be used as a valid instrument for evaluating the process of developing inclusive education in Georgian HEIs.

The questionnaire was distributed to students from the target universities as a face-to-face self-administered survey.

2.2. Survey Instrument Validation

Face and content validity were assessed to determine how in-depth the instrument can measure the content it has been developed to measure (Elangovan & Sundaravel, 2021). Face validity was the first step in the survey validation process, and whether the tool captured the content was assessed. To understand the degree to

which the full dimension of the given concept could be captured, its content validity was assessed (Allen, 2017). The members of the research team (12 persons) reviewed the content to ensure that the survey content met the formulated research goal (Allen, 2017), and (2) expert reviewers (17 persons)—people with knowledge in inclusive education validated the significance of each item, accuracy in measuring the concept and how the items were suitable for the students.

At the end of this step, the authors finalised the survey contents, which comprised six sections and 45 items; the sections were: I. Building community (nine items); II. Establishing inclusive values (eight items); III. Developing an educational institution for all (nine items); IV. Organising support for diversity (seven items); V. Constructing curricula for all (eight items); and VI. Orchestrating learning (four items).

The second step involved piloting the survey questionnaire among 762 students randomly selected from the target universities. Only students who expressed their willingness to participate in the study were recruited. The students were asked to complete the five-point Likert-style questionnaire, where 1 indicated “strongly disagree” and 5 indicated “strongly agree”. Survey completion took approximately 15 - 20 minutes. During the entire period, the researcher was present in the same room, observing the procedure; moreover, she was ready to clarify any question the participants might have; in this way, the research team tried to mitigate limitations associated with the self-administered questionnaire.

Data were analysed using the SPSS 26. First, the corrected homogeneity index (cHI) was calculated to assess the extent to which each item contributed to the overall measure. Its values ranged between 0 and 1; we used the criterion $cHI > 0.15$ for the inclusion of the item. All 45 items were included in the analysis. The cHI offered values greater than 0.15 in all cases, except for items 2.5, 3.4, 3.5, and 3.8.

Second, reliability of a scale was tested using Cronbach’s alpha (α); the relative reliability was assessed using this value based on its internal consistency (Feldt, 1980). The Cronbach’s alpha of the entire questionnaire (45 items) was 0.941. After removing items 2.5, 3.4, 3.5, and 3.8, the Cronbach’s alpha of the remaining 41 items was .945 ($\alpha = 0.946$, based on typed elements). Therefore, items elimination was decided, consistent with the process followed by previous studies (Sanchez et al., 2019). The lowest Cronbach’s alpha calculated for each factor was 0.65, which was considered unacceptable, along with values such as 0.72 and 0.75. Values such as 0.85 and 0.87 were considered as acceptable.

Finally, the validity of the scale was verified through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) as a specific model integrated into structural equation modelling (SEM). Previously, an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was performed using the maximum likelihood method estimation to assess the extent to which the items constituting the instrument could be grouped in a coherent way to explain the common variance in data.

EFA was conducted using a subsample of students ($n = 617$). A very high Kai-

ser-Meyer-Olkin (0.960) and Bartlett's sphericity test results (11894.18; $p < 0.001$) showed that the correlation matrix between the items did not form an identity matrix. The value of the determinant of the correlations ($D = 2.58$) indicated the presence of low interrelations between the variables. Excluding the abovementioned four items, the extraction value for all the variables was above 0.40.

The study also employed orthogonal rotation with varimax, resulting in a factorial structure comprising six factors that accounted for 53.74% of the total variance. A scree plot analysis confirmed the existence of six factors, similar to the original scale.

2.3. Participants and Sampling

The Index for Inclusion uses a participatory approach to self-evaluation and supports dialogue among all stakeholders in the school community: students, teachers, parents, and school administrations (Braunsteiner & Mariano-Lapidus, 2018). In this study, we focused on collecting information from the students. The participants were selected from four target universities—TSU, TeSaU, ATSU, and BSU. The general research population comprised students enrolled in any Bachelor's programmes (all faculties) above the third semester (Given that first-year students primarily focus on adapting to academic life and are less involved in broader university activities, we determined that upper-year students would be better positioned to respond to the survey questions). A total of 1.39 students participated in the data collection. The sample details are presented in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Sample characteristics.

	Population size	Margin of error: 5	Men	Women
		Confidence level: 95%		
		Sample size		
Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University	18,351	376	145	231
Akaki Tsereteli State University	5693	360	175	185
Batuni Shota Rustaveli State University	4381	354	131	223
Iakob Gogebashvili Telavi State University	1347	300	179	121
		1390	630	760

2.4. Research Procedures and Ethics

This study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education at the University of Warsaw (reference number 2022/6). None of the Georgian universities involved in the study had an Academic Research Ethics Committee; one of the authors was from the University of Warsaw, thus, we approached the University of Warsaw. The survey was conducted in the same manner as in the validation study. The participants were informed about the research goal, methods of data collection, ways of protecting confidentiality, and procedures for withdrawal. They were informed that their study participation was vol-

untary and had no connection to their academic activities or results. They were also informed that participation in the study would contribute towards building a better understanding of how inclusive the measures and approaches used in their universities actually were and also help to develop recommendations for their improvement. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Appropriate data collection procedures were established within the research team with the assistance of consultants from the University of Marburg and the University of Warsaw. Only the research team members participated in the data collection and analysis.

The completed paper-and-pencil questionnaires were stored in a locked bookcase at the coordinating institution—the Disability Research Centre at TSU. The survey data were analysed using SPSS 26. The SPSS files were saved on the personal computer of the head of the Disability Research Centre, who is a principal investigator in the current study.

3. Results

3.1. General Information

Data from 1390 research participants were collected and analysed; 55.3% of the surveyed respondents were women, and 44.1% were men, with an average age of 20.62 years ($SD=2.0$; range: 17 - 38 years). The surveyed students were distributed almost equally across the target universities (**Table 2**). Research participants' features, such as their affiliation to the Education Department, were also analysed, as this factor might have affected the research data—301 students from the Education Department participated in the study. The questionnaire did not include the questions regarding having some SEND, or having family members with SEND—such data were not collected to avoid some tension within the participants. Because of the social sensitivity of this topic in Georgia, people try to hide the presence of disability within the family (Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, 2019). We did not expect sincere responses from the respondents on such questions. We realised that the lack of such data can be considered a limitation of the study.

Table 2. Distribution of the research participants across the target universities.

University	%
Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University	27.0
Akaki Tsereteli State University	26.0
Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University	25.5
Iakob Gogobashvili Telavi State University	21.5
	100

3.2. Distribution by Sections

Mean scores and standard deviations were calculated using SPSS 26 for each of

the six sections (building community, establishing inclusive values, developing an educational institution for all, organising support for diversity, constructing curricula for all, and orchestrating learning; **Table 3**).

Table 3. Mean scores across the sections.

Sections	Mean
Section I— Building community	3.8
Section II— Establishing inclusive values	3.9
Section III— Developing an educational institution for all	3.6
Section IV— Organising support for diversity	3.6
Section V— Constructing curricula for all	3.8
Section VI— Orchestrating learning	3.8
All sections	3.7

The correlation analysis showed that the correlation between the sections was positive and reliable (see **Table 4**); furthermore, the highest correlation was observed between Sections IV and V (0.758): that is, organising support for diversity positively influences the construction of curricula for all.

Table 4. Correlations between the sections.

	1	2	3	4	5	6
Section I—Building inclusive community	-	0.681**	0.587**	0.682**	0.692**	0.592**
Section II—Establishing inclusive values			0.501**	0.628**	0.636**	0.549**
Section III—Developing an educational institution for all				0.649**	0.623**	0.588**
Section IV—Organising support for diversity					0.758**	0.712**
Section V—Constructing curricula for all						0.707**
Section VI—Orchestrating learning						

**the correlation is significant at a 0.01 level.

As the Department of Education students have more contact with the topics of inclusive education, the data were analysed by faculties: all faculties together, and the Faculty of Education. The data analysis showed that the respondents from the Department of Education are more supportive of building inclusive community—Mean Scores in Section 1 (Building inclusive community) of the students from the Education Department was higher (3.8 than students from all other departments (3.3), $F = 16.086$; $P < 0.05$). No significant differences were observed on the other dimensions, although scores for the education departments were generally higher

than for all other faculties.

Notably, several respondents expressed difficulty in answering many questions. Most of the respondents were unsure about how to answer questions from Section IV (Organising support for diversity); the number of respondents answering “Unsure” varied from 19.8% to 36.8%. Each of the six sections contained one or two questions which many respondents were unable to answer.

3.3. Distribution Across the Universities

The target universities were compared based on the mean scores for each of the six sections. The mean score for all six sections was above average, and the data were similar for all the target universities. TSU and TeSaU obtained the lowest and highest scores, respectively, for all six sections. All universities obtained the highest scores in Section II—Establishing inclusive values; most of them (TSU, ATSU, BSU) exhibited the lowest scores for Section IV—Organising support for diversity (Table 5).

Table 5. Mean scores of all universities on each section.

Sections	TSU M	ATSU M	BSU M	TeSaU M	For All M	F	Sig.
1 Section I—Building inclusive community	3.3	3.9	3.8	4.2	3.8	89.19	0.000
2 Section II—Establishing inclusive values	3.6	4.0	3.9	4.2	3.9	24.16	0.000
3 Section III—Developing an educational institution for all	3.3	3.8	3.7	3.8	3.6	42.03	0.000
4 Section IV—Organising support for diversity	3.2	3.7	3.7	4.0	3.6	54.03	0.000
5 Section V—Constructing curricula for all	3.4	3.9	3.8	4.2	3.8	51.44	0.000
6 Section VI—Orchestrating learning	3.3	3.7	3.8	4.1	3.8	40.40	0.000
The mean score for all six sections	3.3	3.8	3.8	4.1	3.8		

Respondents at all four universities exhibited the same tendency to award items with higher and lower scores. This tendency was maintained for items across all six sections. For example, respondents from all the universities assigned the highest scores to item Q.1.1 “*Within my faculty, students and lecturers treat each other with respect*”; the lowest scores were assigned to items Q.2.5 (“*At my faculty, tolerance towards difference is encouraged*”) and Q.2.6 (“*At my faculty, interests of any minority are considered by the majority*”). Notably, the respondents from all the participating universities believed that students with SEND did not have fewer opportunities or were less informed about daily matters (see items Q.3.5 and Q.3.6 in Table 6).

4. Discussion

The findings reveal that, overall, the participants at the target universities perceived

Table 6. Highest and lowest item and section scores across the universities.

Sections and Items	Target Universities				Total	F	Sig.
	TSU	ATSU	BSU	TeSaU			
Section I—Building community	3.3	3.9	3.8	4.2	3.8		
Q.1.1 At my university, students and lecturers treat each other with respect.	4.0	4.3	4.1	4.5	4.2	16.22	0.000
Q.1.2 At my university, administrative and academic staff work together, and their work is coordinated.	3.4	4.0	3.8	4.4	3.9	56.26	0.000
Q.1.3 At my university, a comfortable environment is developed for everyone—in general, the interests and needs of minority groups are considered.	3.3	3.9	3.8	4.4	3.8	54.00	0.005
Q.1.4 At my university, the environment is cooperative rather than competitive.	3.5	4.0	4.0	4.3	3.9	32.44	0.00
Q.1.5 At my university, the administration makes people feel valuable.	3.0	3.9	3.8	4.2	3.7	80.63	0.000
Q.1.6 At my university, important decisions are made based on consensus.	3.0	3.7	3.6	4.1	3.6	89.00	0.008
Q.1.7 My university tries to participate in social projects.	3.6	3.9	4.1	4.2	3.9	24.70	0.000
Q.1.8 At my university, people are not left alone with their problems.	3.1	3.8	3.6	4.1	3.6	39.23	0.000
Q.1.9 At my university, students' cooperation with the students from other universities is encouraged.	3.0	3.8	3.7	3.9	3.6	20.36	0.002
Section II—Establishing inclusive values	3.6	4	3.9	4.2	3.9		
Q.2.1 At my university, lecturers treat students the same way despite their gender, ethnic, religious, social, or other identity.	3.9	4.1	4.0	4.3	4.0	2.5	0.038
Q.2.2 At my university, considerable efforts are made to prevent discrimination and bullying.	3.6	4.1	4.0	4.2	4.0	18.12	0.001
Q.2.3 At my university, considerable efforts are made to implement democratic and inclusive values.	3.5	3.8	3.9	4.2	3.8	10.00	0.000
Q.2.4 At my university, individuality and human rights are respected.	3.8	4.1	4.2	4.4	4.1	6.25	0.000
Q.2.5 At my university, tolerance towards difference is encouraged.	3.5	3.8	3.8	4.1	3.7	17.25	0.000
Q.2.6 At my university, interests of any minority are considered by the majority.	3.4	3.8	3.5	4.1	3.7	29.06	0.000
Section III—Developing an educational institution for all	3.3	3.8	3.7	3.8	3.6		
Q.3.1 My university tries to create an accessible environment for everyone.	3.5	4.2	4.1	4.2	4.0	11.12	0.000

Continued

Q.3.2 My university tries to spread information in a way that is accessible to everyone.	3.2	3.8	3.9	4.1	3.7	43.34	0.000
Q.3.3 At my university, lectures/seminars/laboratory and practical work are accessible to everyone.	3.6	4.1	4.1	4.3	4.0	15.63	0.000
Q.3.4 At my university, cultural, sporting, and other types of activities are planned in a way that would be accessible for all students and staff.	3.4	4.0	3.7	3.9	3.7	18.26	0.000
Q.3.5 At my facu, information is less accessible for students from minority groups (students with disabilities, ethnical and religious minorities, LGBTQ group representatives, etc.).	3.0	3.2	3.2	3.0	3.1	3.06	0.000
Q.3.6 Minority students (students with disabilities, ethnical and religious minorities, LGBTQ group representatives, etc.) are less likely to be elected for self-governance.	2.8	3.1	3.0	2.9	3.0	3.24	0.012
Section IV—Organising support for diversity	3.2	3.7	3.7	4	3.6		
Q.4.1 My university is guided by the principle of inclusion—the needs and interests of students with SEN (students with disabilities, ethnical and religious minorities, LGBTQ group representatives, etc.) are considered in everything.	3.1	3.6	3.7	3.9	3.6	35.70	0.000
Q.4.2 At my university, if special education is required, this requirement is evaluated and necessary support is provided.	3.1	3.7	3.8	3.9	3.6	15.61	0.000
Q.4.3 At my university, if there is a relevant related need, students are provided with emotional and psychological support.	2.9	3.6	3.5	3.9	3.5	45.84	0.000
Q.4.4 At my university, if there is a relevant need, Georgian language courses are available.	3.5	3.8	3.7	4.0	3.7	10.92	0.002
Q.4.5 At my university, the staff members have the necessary professional competence for responding to diversity adequately.	3.4	3.9	3.7	4.1	3.7	23.40	0.000
Q.4.6 At my university, the conducting of roundtables, discussions, and other activities that aim to increase diversity awareness among students is encouraged.	2.9	3.4	3.5	3.9	3.4	43.81	0.000
Section V—Constructing curricula for all	3.4	3.9	3.8	4.2	3.8		
Q.5.1 At my university, students receive required support in classes (lectures, seminars, practical work, etc.).	3.5	4.0	3.8	4.2	3.9	29.47	0.000
Q.5.2 At my university, the rules and discipline of the classes are guided by respect for each other.	3.9	4.2	4.0	4.3	4.0	10.48	0.002

Continued

Q.5.3 The lecturers take care of all students' participation and involvement in classwork.	3.7	4.2	4.0	4.3	4.0	22.85	0.006
Q.5.4 At my university, there is a cooperative educational environment.	3.7	4.1	3.9	4.5	4.0	10.00	0.001
Q.5.5 At my university, the lecturers make efforts to help all students in realising their potential.	3.5	4.0	3.9	4.2	3.9	30.14	0.000
Q.5.6 At my university, individual educational needs are evaluated, and the provision of required support is planned at the beginning of the semester.	2.9	3.6	3.5	3.9	3.5	38.10	0.000
Q.5.7 At my university, the staff is well informed about the principles of inclusive education.	3.1	3.5	3.6	3.9	3.5	35.12	0.000
Q.5.8 At my university, the work of academic and administrative staff is well coordinated during the organisation of educational settings for students with SEN.	3.1	3.6	3.6	4.0	3.5	44.74	0.000
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Section VI—Orchestrating learning	3.3	3.7	3.8	4.1	3.8		
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Q.6.1 At my university, the lecturers use diversity in the classroom as a resource for development.	3.2	3.7	3.7	4.0	4.0	26.70	0.001
Q.6.2 At my university, lecturers are careful to have all the resources necessary for covering all needs in the class on hand.	3.3	3.8	3.7	4.1	3.7	25.68	0.000
Q.6.3 My university makes efforts to support the development of inclusive education by cooperating with donor organisations.	3.3	3.6	3.8	4.0	3.6	28.10	0.000
Q.6.4 My university makes efforts to support the development of inclusive education by cooperating with the Ministry of Education and Science and other state agencies.	3.4	3.8	3.9	4.1	3.7	29.78	0.000
Mean scores of all items	3.3	3.8	3.8	4.1	3.7		

the development of inclusive education in their institutions positively. Such a positive approach can be strengthened by positive valence—that is, if the questionnaire (and the index itself) is formulated in a positive way (Sanchez et al., 2019). One criticism of the Likert scale concerns the influence of affirmatively-structured sentences on respondents (Swain et al., 2008). The results simultaneously revealed that the students from the Faculty of Education were more supportive of building an inclusive community than those from other faculties; this can be explained by the fact that education students have undergone different pre-service and in-service training and have studied this issue more thoroughly. Furthermore, during their practicum, they learn more about topics promoting an inclusive education environment which may affect their evaluations.

The fact that several questions were answered with “unsure” shows that the students remained uninformed regarding various topics related to university life—especially those concerning diversity and special needs. This lack of information about disability among the students may have been caused by a lack of experience meeting students with disabilities at their university; according to personal communications with the target universities, there were no identified students with disabilities enrolled at TeSaU; 21 students with disabilities at TSU; 16 at BSU; and 11 at ATSU (Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, personal communication, September 12, 2023; Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University, personal communication, August 15, 2023; Akaki Tsereteli State University, personal communication, September 18, 2023; Iakob Gogebshvili Telavi State University, personal communication, September 10, 2023). Despite the fact that most of the respondents had no experience in studying together with students with disabilities, the majority expressed confidence that their needs were met and that their rights were protected at the university (for example, Q.3.3, Q.3.4, Q.3.8, Q.3.9, Q.4.1, Q.4.2). It seems that lack of contact with students with disabilities (Pettigrew et al., 2011) kept students without disabilities unaware of the real needs of students with disabilities; the great influence of the lack of contact on a person’s attitudes, along with stereotype and prejudice formation, has been underlined by the contact theory (Pettigrew et al., 2011; Pettigrew, 2003) and revealed in several studies (Rademakera et al., 2020). The underrepresentation of students with disabilities in the student communities at Georgian higher education institutions seriously affects their perceptions and awareness. Recently, the monitoring of Georgian higher education institutions, which was performed by the Public Defender of Georgia (2018), has shown that many educational needs of students with disabilities have remained unmet, and that they are frequently treated unequally (Public Defender of Georgia, 2024). The same tendency was revealed in the results of the Eurostudent, seventh wave (2019-2021) national research, which was carried out in Georgia: 62.7% of the participants with declared SEN in the aforementioned study indicated that they had experienced limitations while learning at university, and 32.8% stated that the support they received was not sufficient (Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia, 2021). Thus, students with and without disabilities view the existing situation differently, and feel that their lack of contact with each other has greatly contributed to this situation.

Several studies have shown that challenges in providing a fully inclusive educational setting are experienced not only in Georgian universities (Collins et al., 2019; Lintangari et al., 2020; Mutanga, 2018; Strnadová, et al., 2015; Herrero et al., 2021; Espada-Chavarria et al., 2023). Many authors have emphasised that implementing inclusivity in higher education is challenging, as it is usually meant to be developed at a lower education level among younger students; however, as more students with disabilities successfully complete their early schooling, the demand for inclusive settings in higher education institutions has increased (Moriña, 2017). The development of inclusive education in universities is, however, also

influenced by a market-oriented environment that does not always support the concept of inclusion (Nunan et al., 2000; Collins et al., 2019). It seems that the establishment and development of inclusive universities is not simply a matter of legislation or individual policy and practise; this is related to societal values and inclusive relationships (Armstrong & Cairnduff, 2012; McArthur, 2021).

One of the highest scores indicated by respondents was in Section II (establishing inclusive values: $M = 3.9$; $SD = 0.9$); the lowest were in Section III (developing an educational institution for all: $M = 3.6$; $SD = 0.8$) and Section IV (organising support for diversity: $M = 3.6$, $SD = 0.8$). From these scores, it can be assumed that students were expressing openness to differences and diversity, which are crucial for the development of an inclusive university community (Braunsteiner & Mariano-Lapidus, 2018). Simultaneously, they were less certain in their responses regarding how their universities' policies and practises were responding to the "different" students' needs and interests, as they have had no opportunity of observing and evaluating it at their universities; therefore, it is reasonable that the most of the questions answered "unsure" were in Section IV (Organising support for diversity). Despite the number of "unsure" responses, positive and reliable correlations were found between the various sections. This indicates that the research instrument (the Index for Inclusion) is effective and demonstrates the interconnections between inclusive culture, policy, and practice (Booth & Ainscow, 2016; Booth & Ainscow, 2002; Braunsteiner & Mariano-Lapidus, 2018; Sanchez et al., 2019).

The higher education institutions are viewed as important actors in achieving sustainable education development goals, and inclusive universities are vital in this regard (Diaz-Vega et al., 2023). However, this process can only be successful if it is linked to democratic participation beyond the education system and driven by a truly open and inclusive society (Booth & Ainscow, 2002; Braunsteiner & Mariano-Lapidus, 2018).

The current research findings can be used as evidence for reviewing inclusive cultures, policies, and practises in target universities and for establishing inclusive policies within university policies. This validated instrument can integrate university communities for regular and consistent self-evaluations to develop a barrier-free university environment for all. Quantitative research methods, especially self-administered surveys, cannot capture the entire depth of the problem (Bryman, 2012). The current study explored the challenges of inclusive education in Georgian higher education institutions, based on quantitative methodology and focusing only on the student's perspective, which can be considered a limitation of the study. It is therefore vital to deepen the research by extending the target groups and using qualitative research methods. It is crucial to involve students with SEND in evaluating the progress of inclusive education. Future research could be enriched by exploring the perspectives of academic and administrative staff at higher education institutions through qualitative research methods.

5. Conclusion

The study reveals an underrepresentation of students with Special Educational

Needs and Disabilities (SEND) in Georgian higher education institutions. While these students' needs often remain unmet and they frequently face unequal treatment, participants from target universities generally perceived the development of inclusive education in their institutions positively. Although most respondents had no experience studying alongside students with disabilities, the majority expressed confidence that their needs were met and their rights were protected at the university. This disparity in perception appears to stem from the lack of interaction between students with and without disabilities.

The challenges in providing fully inclusive educational settings are not unique to Georgian universities—implementing inclusivity in higher education proves challenging for many European countries as well. The development of inclusive education in universities is influenced by a market-oriented environment that doesn't always align with inclusion principles. Establishing and developing inclusive universities extends beyond legislation or individual policies and practices; it is fundamentally connected to societal values and inclusive relationships.

The study validated research instruments based on the Index for Inclusion, showing positive and reliable correlations between various sections. These correlations demonstrate the interconnections between inclusive culture, policy, and practice, confirming that the Index can effectively evaluate a higher education institution's progress toward inclusivity.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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