ATHENA

Position-Policy Paper

Empirical investigations and Policy implications for integrating Universal Design and Accessibility into Higher Education Curricula

Athena project: Work package 3 – D3.4

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EUROPEAN DISABILITY FORUM

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Empirical investigations and policy implications for integrating Universal Design and Accessibility into Higher Education Curricula

1. Stating the issue: Introduction and Background

Universal Design (UD) and accessibility-related ideas have increasingly gained momentum in Higher Education (HE) debates. They constitute an indispensable dimension of inclusive reform efforts in HE underpinned by legal and policy mandates to promote a rights-based approach to addressing diversity on the grounds of disability (UN 2006). An inclusive education reform agenda should, inter alia, focus on HE curricula and how they enable students across different disciplinary fields of study to advocate for and integrate Accessibility and UD-related ideas and principles into their future professional practice.

Existing studies on integrating accessibility and universal design in HE curricula across diverse disciplines are scant and context-specific. At the same time, these studies exclusively focus on UD and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) practices related to inclusive pedagogies and learning and not on how to embed UD, UDL and accessibility ideas into the content of these curricula to enable students to understand the theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of UD. Higher Education curricula are political apparatuses integral to 'educational biopolitics' that construe and impose ideological orthodoxies constituting social identities, norms and human relations (Bourassa 2018). Their role is pivotal in sustaining or subverting the status quo framed against ontological binaries and social hierarchies of able-bodied/ideal and disabled/non-ideal bodies. These dualisms are engendered by normative and deficit-oriented perspectives on disability, giving rise to relations of dependency by positioning persons with disabilities at the margins of societies and the lowest end of the social hierarchies. By incorporating UD and accessibility-related issues in HE curricula, the oppressive dimensions of biopolitics are eclipsed by its emancipatory dimensions to challenge asymmetrical power relations by promoting the idea that disability is one dimension of human interdependencies, variation, and corporeal fragility (Goodley 2017). Intersectional theories foreground the plurality of social identities and point to how intersections of disability with other minoritised statuses linked to race/ ethnicity and gender should be addressed through UD principles and practices. In this respect, the centerstage positioning of normality in HE, framed

against ableist, racist, ageist, and sexist discourses, is challenged by problematising arbitrary fabrications of the norm and diversifying it to accommodate human diversity through universally designed approaches.

2. The scope of this position paper

This policy position paper discusses the implications of the ATHENA project funded by the European Education and Culture Executive Agency – EACEA Erasmus+, EU Solidarity Corps A.2 – Skills and Innovation, which focuses on integrating accessibility and universal design in HE curricula across diverse disciplines. The policy implications can provide the impetus to establish the ideological foundations and actionable strategies to develop legal frameworks, financial support systems, curriculum design approaches, staff training programs and learning outcomes conducive to creating inclusive social environments. The latter can benefit and unleash the potential of all people irrespective of their biological and biographical characteristics and intersections across a continuum of human variations and interdependencies (Goodley, 2024).

3. Why we need further action: Research Evidence

Accessibility and UD concepts are absent from most HE curricula

ATHENA project's findings (Transnational Report 2023) suggest that accessibility and UD-related concepts were predominantly absent from many HE curricula and conceptualised and portrayed variously. These concepts were only embedded in a few courses designed by some academics who had a personal interest in accessibility and UD or in those HE curricula that belonged to disciplines that were closely relevant to issues of disability and/or assistive technologies. Educational programs were generally more likely to include these concepts in their respective subjects' curricula, reflecting the existence of policy frameworks encouraging the development of study programs aimed at training educators to support students with disabilities effectively. In subjects such as Education, Social Sciences, Humanities, Law and Business, disability, UD and accessibility and their relevant nomenclature were associated with social justice, human rights and social inclusion and clustered with other legal and social requirements such as gender equality and linguistic rights. In contrast, subjects such as Engineering, Information and Communication Technology, and Health Sciences focused on technology-enabled inclusion.

Inclusion's narrow construction to the technicist dimension

Even subject areas more likely to refer to the rights-based and equity-oriented dimensions of inclusion, UD and accessibility-related ideas were predominantly discussed in the context of assistive technologies and inclusive pedagogies to enhance accessibility, denoting a 'technology-enabled' inclusion. This is an example of how inclusion is reduced to its 'technicist' dimensions while silencing its social justice and equity-oriented dimensions (Artiles 2020; Stentiford & Koutsouris 2022.). 'Technicist' understandings of inclusion are premised on a 'minority' rights approach aimed at 'normalising' students with disabilities by providing compensatory mechanisms to approximate abled-bodied functionality through assistive technologies. As such, they perpetuate relations of dependency and power imbalances that undermine the social justice and equity-oriented foundations and orientations of inclusion, accessibility and UD.

ATHENA project's empirical findings reverberate the contested nature of inclusive policy discourses, which are contextually and ideologically grounded and mediated products (Fulcher 2015). The marginal status of UD and accessibility in HE and the ad hoc and sporadic attempts to incorporate them into course material and learning outcomes relate to broader issues regarding attenuated political commitment to promote inclusion and the associated concepts of accessibility and UD at governmental and university policy levels.

4. A call for policy action

The 'ghostly' presence of UD and accessibility-related ideas in a few HE curricula and their reduction to their 'technicist' iterations and enactments are not surprising, considering that the HE policy landscape lacks unequivocal as well as legally binding policy frameworks and accountability regimes mandating inclusion and its incorporation into curricula content and learning outcomes. For example, the 'soft governance' underpinning Bologna HE's efforts to harmonise HE processes and structures within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) member states manifests itself in the nebulous, elusive and conditional articulation of inclusion regarding whether and how it is promoted in HE (Kashmir 2020). As such, inclusive policies are variously understood and implemented by HE leaders, authorities/groups/institutions and the relevant accreditation bodies. At the same time, these policies are negotiated, shaped and actioned against the domination of HE neoliberal orthodoxies and a fixation on assimilationist forms of disability-related support, undermining efforts to promote inclusive education reforms in HE (Goodley

2024). Although official policies are not a panacea to promote inclusion, they set out the 'discursive contours' to enact its egalitarian and rights-based considerations (Barton 2008).

Precipitating inclusive education reforms in HE necessitates creating legal frameworks, policy mandates, accountability measures, ideological undercurrents and cultural milieu to embed accessibility and UD-related concepts into curricula to leverage equity-oriented changes. In doing so, HE students will be empowered to understand both the technical and value-based dimensions of accessibility and UD-related concepts to foster equitable and non-discriminatory social spaces, irrespective of individuals' biological and biographical characteristics and intersections. The latter confer various degrees, configurations and combinations of privilege/underprivilege, creating conditions for inclusion/exclusion.

Higher Education students' capacity development

Considering these perspectives, HE curricula should incorporate teaching material and approaches aimed at equipping students with relevant knowledge, attitudes and skills to:

- Develop an informed understanding of the legal, technical, rights-based and equity-oriented dimensions of accessibility and UD.
- Develop a critical understanding of how accessibility and UD are political and actionable tools for subverting power inequities and relations of dependency, cultivating their agentic capacity to engage in social justice and positive global change. This can be achieved by empowering them to advocate for and develop accessible products, solutions and services in future professional contexts, including healthcare, education, business, law and technology.
- Develop an appreciation of the UD's flexibility, sustainability and creativity to benefit everyone irrespective of their biological characteristics and biographical histories.
- Understand the role of accessibility and UD in creating equitable, diverse and inclusive societies and work environments in the light of legal and policy imperatives promoting inclusion.

General Recommendations to different stakeholder groups

Recommendations for integrating accessibility and UD into HE curricula include the following actionable strategies:

Policymakers and governments

- Accessibility and universal design training should be mandatory in HE curricula, providing fiscal support for their implementation and establishing monitoring and impact evaluation processes and committees to ensure fidelity in implementation and progress.
- Academic excellence should be gauged against accessibility education thresholds while establishing international networks for developing accessibility studies modules across different disciplinary areas of study.

Higher Education Leaders

- Faculty should be afforded ample professional development opportunities to familiarize themselves with accessibility and UD's legal, theoretical, philosophical, and rights-based dimensions and integrate them into their course content and learning outcomes. These opportunities should be provided systematically through conventional and online courses, peer-led discussions, and professional deliberations focused on UD, accessibility and inclusion.
- Cultivate a HE academic culture that acknowledges not only the legal and philosophical value of UD and accessibility but also its professional value in creating more effective work environments that benefit all.
- Encourage the involvement of various stakeholders to enhance awareness of inclusion and inclusive practices.

Program Creators and Instructors

- Accessibility, UD and Inclusive Practice should inform the content and learning outcomes of HE curricula across all disciplinary areas of study, including specialized and professional courses (e.g law, engineering, medicine)
- Integrate accessibility and UD-related ideas into assessment procedures and work-based activities to enhance their academic status and elicit their centrality in developing students' relevant disciplinary knowledge, skills and future professional practice to create equitable and inclusive societies and workplaces.

Quality assurance and accreditation bodies

- HE quality agencies and accreditation committees should mandate the integration of inclusion, accessibility and UD-related ideas into course

curricula. They should also introduce specialised accreditation routes, accountability regimes, and monitoring mechanisms to incorporate these ideas into course content, learning outcomes, and assessment methods. Audit systems should also be introduced to assess curricula content and engage in impact evaluation.

5. Moving forward

This policy brief aims to synthesise issues and considerations around the integration of accessibility and UD into HE from different perspectives as indicated by the outputs of the ATHENA project, and place these issues at the forefront of policy agendas and the strategic planning for advancing inclusion in Higher Education. The ATHENA project provides concrete evidence of the absence or limited conceptualization of accessibility and UD in HE curricula. At the same time, the project emphasizes the importance of equipping students with the knowledge and skills for practically fostering accessibility and non-discriminatory approaches in their professional and societal roles. In addition, ATHENA project developed specific examples along with practical recommendations for embedding these principles across disciplines in HE, either as independent courses or integrated into the content, learning outcomes and methodologies of various subjects.

However, achieving systemic change requires a collective and intersectoral effort. We invite policymakers, higher education leaders, faculty, accreditation bodies, and all relevant stakeholders to engage in meaningful dialogue and take decisive action. The time to move from recommendations to implementation is now. Let this be the starting point for a coordinated, long-term and unwavering commitment to embedding accessibility and universal design into HE curricula—shaping a more inclusive future for all.

6. Resources

Project Reports

ATHENA Project Report WP1. (2023). State of Art: Mainstream Curricula Analysis. Available at: https://athenaproject.eu/wp1-transnation-report

ATHENA Project Report WP2. (2024). Focus Groups and Co-Design Sessions Report. Available at: https://athenaproject.eu/wp2-focus-groups

ATHENA Project Recommendations WP2. (2024). Recommendations on the integration of accessibility and universal design in higher education curricula, including sample modules. Available at: https://athenaproject.eu/wp2-recommendations

ATHENA Project WP 3. (2025). Report on Consultations and Cooperations of Macro-Level Bodies on the Integration of Accessibility and Design for All in Higher Education Curricula and their Activities. Available at: https://athenaproject.eu/wp3-report

Other Scientific Resources

Artiles, A.J. (2020). "Inclusive Education in the 21st Century Disruptive Interventions." The Educational Forum 84 (4): 289–95. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131725.2020.1831821.

Barton, L. (2008). "Inclusive Education, Teachers and the Politics of Possibility." Paper Presented at the Inclusion Festival, Utrecht,. Holland, 21 January.

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Goodley, D. (2024): Depathologising the university, Pedagogy,Culture & Society, DOI: 10.1080/14681366.2024.2316007.

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Stentiford, L., & Koutsouris, G. (2022). Critically considering the 'inclusive curriculum'in higher education. British Journal of Sociology of Education, 43(8), 1250-1272.