

Inclusive Excellence: A new University Model in the 21st Century Based on Universal Design for Learning

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Affordable high-quality university education is a moral and legal imperative today. At the same time, there are still numerous barriers to get this university education. The orientation of higher education towards world rankings and economic efficiency indicators contradicts with inclusive values and goals. Inclusive politics needs radical revision and updating. The aim of this research is to design an inclusive university model based on universal educational design. The research method is a review and theoretical analysis of scientific publications devoted to inclusive higher education and published on the platforms SpringerLink, PubMed, Frontiers and Taylor & Francis Group. The paper examines the concepts of inclusive excellence and universal design for learning and provides a theoretical analysis of the possibility of using these approaches to transform a modern university. The authors propose a model that takes into account: organizational culture, indicators of inclusive excellence, principles of transformation of the educational environment, external factors, global and national context and the process of transformation (involvement, representation, action through a plurality of means and environments based on agency). The expected result is of high importance for Russian and world science and is in the trend of key scientific research of education and its transformation, focused on the values of social justice, accessibility and equal opportunities, and also responds to the crisis situation in the humanities.

Keywords: inclusive excellence; academic excellence; higher education; university; universal design for learning.

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Инклюзивное совершенство: новая модель университета в XXI веке на основе универсального дизайна обучения

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Доступное и качественное высшее образование является сегодня нравственным и правовым императивом. При этом сохраняются многочисленные барьеры для получения высшего образования. Ориентация высшего образования на мировые рейтинги и показатели экономической эффективности вступает в противоречие с инклюзивными ценностями. Инклюзивная политика, опирающаяся на медицинскую модель инвалидности, нуждается в пересмотре и обновлении, как и механизмы адаптации изначально недоступных сервисов и программ. Целью исследования является проектирование модели инклюзивного университета на основе универсального дизайна. Метод исследования — обзор и теоретический анализ научных публикаций, посвященных инклюзивному высшему образованию и размещенных на платформах SpringerLink, PubMed, Frontiers и Taylor & Francis Group. В работе рассматриваются концепции инклюзивного совершенства и универсального дизайна для обучения, проводится теоретический анализ возможности применения этих подходов для трансформации современного университета. Авторами предложена модель, которая учитывает: организационную культуру, показатели инклюзивного совершенства, принципы трансформации образовательной среды, внешние факторы, глобальный и национальный контекст и процесс трансформации (вовлеченность, представление, действие через множественность средств и сред с опорой на агентность). Ожидаемый результат имеет высокую значимость для отечественной мировой науки и находится в тренде ключевых научных исследований образования и его трансформации, ориентированной на ценности социальной справедливости, доступности и равных возможностей, а также отвечает на ситуацию кризиса в сфере гуманитарных наук.

Ключевые слова: инклюзивное совершенство; академическое совершенство; высшее образование; университет; универсальный дизайн обучения.

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Introduction

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [6] and the Incheon Declaration on Education 2030 recognize universal inclusive quality education as a goal for sustainable human development [4]. However, higher education faces numerous challenges and barriers [5].

Increasing heterogeneity within the student cohort presents both opportunities and challenges for higher education. Adapting an educational program to a specific nosological subgroup is problematic, which leads to the search for universally-personalized solutions [1; 17]. "There is no 'average student' and no single curriculum or approach that fit all disciplines or cultures," as was stated by L. Goodman [17].

The dilemma of the goals of academic and inclusive excellence contains an internal contradiction: achieving high educational and scientific results [20] against the principles of equity, accessibility and equality of opportunity. This contradiction is especially intensely realized by research universities in Russia (Russian Academic Excellence Project 5/100, Academic Leadership Program Priority-2030). The answer may lie in understanding and adopting the concept of inclusive excellence, which has been internalized by most leading research universities worldwide [2].

The focus of universities on physical and architectural accessibility strategies and the underestimation of the human, pedagogical and psychological aspects of inclusive education (psychological well-being, autonomy and agency) is another pitfall. The work of the Network of Resource Training and Methodological Centers for the Education of Persons with Disabilities the need for new learning tools. Russian universities should move to the next frontier of inclusion — design for education [2].

This study aims to design a model of the inclusive university based on the review of theoretical analyses of scientific publications on inclusive higher education published

in SpringerLink, PubMed, Frontiers, Taylor & Francis Group. The concepts of inclusive excellence and universal design for learning form the methodological basis of the model.

To achieve the aim, three research questions need to be addressed:

1. What is inclusive excellence in higher education?
2. How can inclusive excellence be measured?
3. What practices or strategies create inclusive excellence in higher education?

1. Inclusive Excellence for Higher Education

Changes in the fundamental paradigms of the perception of the world have led to the crystallization of a new model of the university, the mission of which goes beyond the development of education and science and assumes responsibility for serving justice for sustainable development [2].

Thirty years ago, the leading strategy of world universities was academic excellence. Educators who have embraced the spirit of academic excellence focus on achievement thus promoting exclusion, though perhaps unintentionally [21]. Modern education cannot succeed if it is accessible to only a select few.

The American Association of Colleges and Universities proposed the model of inclusive excellence (hereinafter — IE) in 2005. In the model, diversity, equity, and inclusion determine academic excellence [26, p. 9] as a system of transformational changes related to: 1) the environment; 2) organizational behavior; 3) organizational culture (mission, vision, values, traditions, norms); 4) the IE indicator system; 5) the IE change strategy. The peculiarity of the IE model is that it "works from the external level inward, bringing the external environment into play with behavioral aspects" to transform academic excellence into inclusive excellence [26, p. 29].

The IE principles are stated as follows: "1) We do not only see differences, we em-

brace differences; 2) We believe in diversity and have a responsibility to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to fully participate, succeed, and lead at the university; 3) We also believe that our university succeeds only when everyone succeeds; 4) We believe that we must act in ways that honor everyone's experience" [10].

The search for the different philosophical and anthropological foundations for describing excellence can be based on the approach in which human development in a complex world is considered as an open integrity [8]. In complex systems, there is no incompatibility between determinism and unpredictability. A.G. Asmolov identifies two types of redundancy: specialized, which involves copies of specialized structures, based on the principle "there is no irreplaceable" and universal, which is based on the principle of "the uniqueness of everyone" [8, p. 33]. Creating conditions for the development of a diverse range of unique personalities today can become a key reference point for education. This approach assumes that the integration of academic excellence and inclusive excellence is the driving force of university development.

1.1. Approaches and Tools for Inclusive Excellence Assessment

Global ranking indicators shape the assessment of higher education quality through the lens of academic excellence. This narrow approach can lead university leaders to prioritize short-term goals instead of investing in long-term strategies such as promoting inclusiveness. Moreover, taking into account for institutional diversity and regional context can be challenging. "These difficulties can result in unfair comparisons in assessments of academic value, perpetuating inequalities in higher education," as M. Kayyali argues [16].

IE assessment criteria is a complex issue that requires a comprehensive discussion. It is worth noting that it is a process rather than an outcome, with the potential to foster transformation across all university structures [13, P. 27].

The IE model articulates the following framework for these goals: 1) access and equity, 2) diversity in the formal and informal curriculum, 3) campus climate, and 4) student learning and development [26].

In recent years, empirical studies have advanced the validation and discussion of assessment tools. Curriculum has been assessed for its effectiveness, accessibility, flexibility, learning outcomes, course materials and teaching strategies [14], as well as web-based classroom management systems [21]. To assess student learning and development, researchers have examined such measures as confidence, autonomy and learning integrity, and openness to experience [24].

In the IE model, equity in higher education is characterized not only through the equality of conditions, but also through the equality of outcomes: 1) equal access to all levels of higher education, 2) equal conditions, supplemented by resources tailored to individual needs, 4) the equal success of all students, 3) equal access to a variety of forms of engaging learning [26, p. 8]. The paradigm of equality in higher education corresponds to the Universal Design for Learning (hereinafter — UDL).

2. Principles of the Universal Design for Learning in Higher Education

Universal design is determined by the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities as "the design of objects, settings, programs and services to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design" [6]. The approach was proposed by the Center for Applied Special Technology (A. Meyer, D. Rose & D. Gordon, 2016). Based on research in cognitive neurobiology, it explains why, what and how people learn.

UD in higher education is primarily a proactive design, which implies anticipatory design. "This approach is consistent with social models of disability, in which, instead of reactively providing adaptations, the product or

environment is immediately 'born accessible', as S. Burgstahler noted [11, p. 239].

In domestic science and practice, the terminology of UD is innovative [1]. The main principles of universal design in learning (hereinafter — UDL) are reflected in several normative documents (the Federal Law "On Education in the Russian Federation", FSES, etc.) and are studied in separate thematic contexts [3].

There is a lack of research on the application of UDL principles in higher education and the need to develop a method, design a model and describe the conditions for its implementation [25]. UDL is attracting increasing interest as a theoretical basis for inclusive pedagogy, with its attitudes of universal benefit ("good design for the disabled, such as ramps, benefits everyone") [18; 23], belief in success, and effective learning for all [1, 5].

Studies have found links between UDL and the manifestation of autonomy, conscientiousness in learning, the openness to experience in students [24], the involvement of all participants in the educational process in its implementation, considering the opinion of the whole community in assessments [17].

The effectiveness of the proposed UDL model is confirmed by studies that have established the systematic application of the principles [12] at different levels of education [9]. Scientific literature describes cases of the successful transformation of universities and colleges [12,17,25]. However, researchers also note methodological difficulties, such as problems with the reliability of the results obtained due to the imprecise sampling [22], the accounting and control of demographic data, difficulties with study design [23]; the evidence base in experimental studies [12,17,25].

2.1. Personal Development as a Goal of UDL in Inclusive Higher Education

The IE model can be described as a dynamic system that focuses on the unique personality and prioritizes his or her development. UDL is used as a means to achieve this goal.

D.A. Leontiev, together with other researchers, found that the decisive factor determining the trajectory of the development of persons with disabilities is psychological resources (resilience, autonomy, subjectivity, etc.) [7, p. 15-16, p 28]. At the same time, domestic paternalism towards students with disabilities, based on the medical model of disability, entails numerous risks, such as the syndrome of learned helplessness, the formation of an inferiority complex, the dominance of the external locus of control.

Among IE's strategies for change (2005), D.A. Williams with coauthors emphasizes "vision and commitment", when employees understand and share values, understand organizational change and participate in its design [26, p. 27]. It is necessary to take into account the voices and experiences of students from socially disadvantaged groups, encouraging them to be the architects of their careers and education.

Given the increasing reluctance of students to express their views, especially those of minority viewpoints, Jacqueline P. Leighton (2023) assumes that UDL is a resource approach for developing students' confidence and autonomy [19]. Students' engagement in shaping their learning trajectory and managing their education is crucial to their satisfaction with learning outcomes [1, p. 27; 14; 23]. Students are powerful catalysts for change and their role as "allies" is an integral part of change [17].

Ju S. and other researchers (2017) analyzed 20 empirical studies published between 1972 and 2016 and found that various manifestations of agency (such as self-protection, self-awareness, goal setting, and goal attainment) encourage students to actively seek assistance and support to achieve academic success [15].

3. A Model of Inclusive Excellence in Higher Education Using Universal Design

The development of an IE model in higher education using UDL implies a complex and

systematic correlation of all the characteristics of the two concepts studied.

At the heart of the model are key IE foundations that constitute the organizational culture, including mission, vision, values, traditions, norms. They create the platform to launch inclusive transformation and ensure that the core values are upheld. The focus of the change should be on inclusive excellence indicators such as: 1) equity and accessibility, 2) diversity in the formal and informal curriculum, 3) campus climate, and 4) student learning and development. According to the key principles of UDL, the environment for transformation should include diverse environments, methods and formats for learning delivery, and strategies for implementing IE. Designing concrete actions in specific contexts should be based on the analysis and consideration of external factors that facilitate and impede IE. Consider-

ing the impact of global and national contexts is crucial as a key framework for correlating the universality and uniqueness of inclusive transformation processes within the university.

The fundamental feature of the university IE model using UDL is the emphasis on the transformation process starting with a specific agent (a student, a teacher, an administrator). The key stages of learning according to the principles of UDL: engagement, representation, action and expression through multiple means and environments relying on the agency and activation of the subject position.

Discussion and Conclusion

Universal design in higher education can become a methodological basis for making decisions that meet all the challenges that Russian universities face in designing inclusive environments. Discourse on universal

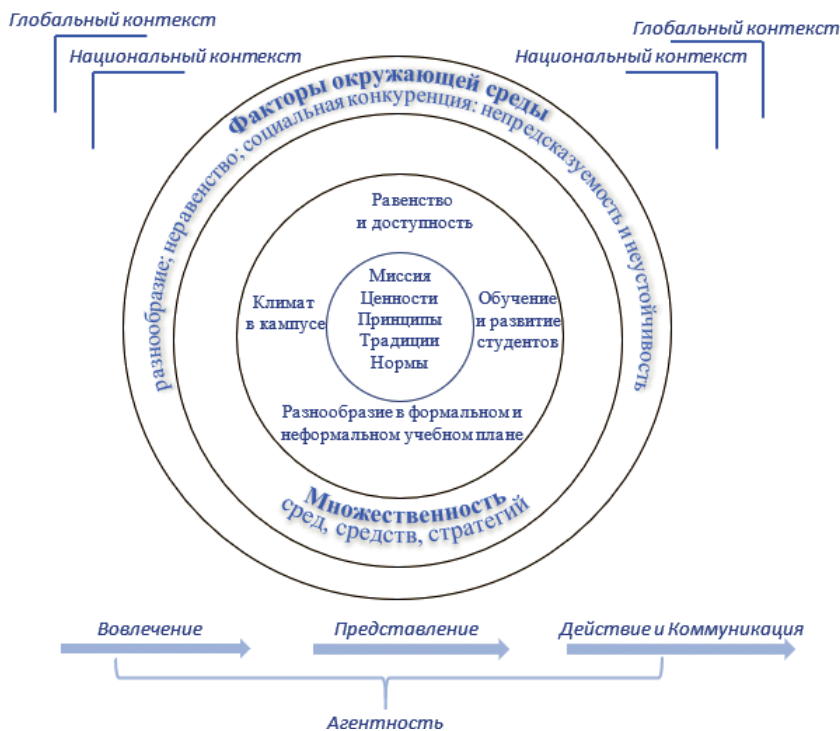


Fig. 1. Model of inclusive excellence using the universal design for learning

design provides vivid national examples of its implementation and the recontextualization of the general principles of UD in the national context. Two possible consequences of UD implementation in higher education can be considered. The first one is the creative assimilation of universal design principles, which can become a driver of the processes of tech-

nological and humanitarian breakthroughs of our country, a strategy for achieving the goals of national projects. The second one is a mechanical transfer of its mechanisms, without the assimilation of its humanistic meanings, sometimes contradicting the essentialist ideas about the person that dominate in our consciousness.

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