

Fostering Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion: Case of Higher Education Institutions in Kazakhstan

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Abstract : Higher education systems of many countries have increased diversity and ensured equal rights and opportunities for inclusive students in the last decades. Issues of diversity-equity-inclusion (DEI) in Kazakhstani higher education began to be considered in legislation in 2021-2023. The adoption of the Road Map of the Ministry of Education and Science for universities' inclusivity indicated strategies for change. The paper traces how this government initiative is being implemented in universities across the country. Content analysis of legislative documents, media publications, surveys of students, staff and interviews with leaders have demonstrated the inconsistency of these strategic decisions. Thus, the Road Map required that by 2023 conditions for promoting and ensuring inclusive education and barrier-free environments should be created in 60% -100% of Kazakhstani universities, including spaces inside academic buildings and dormitories in a short period of time. (March 2023-August 2025). Educational programs and curricula have not been adapted to the needs of students with special education needs (SEN); teachers do not have the skills and methods to work with students with SEN, students from minority groups, and international students. 60% of universities have not created a barrier-free environment on campuses due to the high cost of elevators, tactile tiles and assistive devices. Only 1% of school-disabled graduates enter universities due to the unwillingness of universities to educate people with disabilities. At the same time, universities do not adapt their educational programs and services to the needs of inclusive students; their needs are not identified; they study under the same conditions as regular students. Accordingly, teaching staff does not have the knowledge and skills to teach inclusive students; university lecturers misunderstand or oversimplify the social phenomena of 'inclusion' and 'diversity'. The situation is more acute with the creation of a barrier-free architectural environment on university campuses. Recent reports indicate that these reforms have not been implemented to date, proven controversial in practice due to the inconsistency of national research on inclusion in higher education. Widely announced reforms have not produced the expected results leading to distortions at the local level. Inconsistent policies, contradictory legislative acts without expertise of needs and developing specific implementation criteria, without training specialists and indicators for achieving reforms are doomed to failure and mistrust of society. Based on the results of this research, recommendations have been developed: (1) to overcome inconsistencies in legislation regarding DEI in higher education; (2) to encourage initiatives in universities' inclusive environments; (3) to develop projects that will promote public awareness of DEI.

Keywords : diversity-equity-inclusion, Kazakhstani universities, reforms, legislation, accessibility

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