



Teaching in Higher Education

Critical Perspectives

ISSN: 1356-2517 (Print) 1470-1294 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cthe20

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To cite this article: Katerina Mavrou, Eleni Theodorou, Maria Mouka & Anastasia Liasidou (20 May 2025): Accessibility and universal design in higher education curricula: implications for inclusion/exclusion, Teaching in Higher Education, DOI: [10.1080/13562517.2025.2507244](https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2025.2507244)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2025.2507244>



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Published online: 20 May 2025.



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Accessibility and universal design in higher education curricula: implications for inclusion/exclusion

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ABSTRACT

This article is based on work undertaken in a cross-national European-funded project to explore how Universal Design (UD) and Accessibility are conceptualized in Higher Education (HE) curricula across different disciplines. This paper focuses on the case of Cyprus. The study utilized corpus linguistics and thematic analysis methods to investigate to what extent and in what ways Accessibility and UD feature in HE curricula. Findings suggest that UD and Accessibility – associated concepts are sporadically and inconsistently referred to, indicating low priority in Cyprus's HE curricula. The analysis critically examined the discourses underpinning these conceptualizations, ranging from social and rights-based to medicalized and individualized constructions of disability that reinforce conceptual binaries of normality/abnormality, and power asymmetries. These discursive manifestations' paradoxical coexistence highlight the need to universalize UD and Accessibility's critical intersectional, and rights-based dimensions, addressing ableist discourses, social injustices, and power dynamics hindering inclusive education reforms.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 13 August 2024



Accepted 31 March 2025

KEYWORDS

Accessibility; universal design; higher education; university curricula

Introduction

Inclusion has become a global legal and policy imperative underpinned by social justice and human rights values. It envisions the non-discriminatory and equitable participation of persons with disabilities in all social and educational spheres, with a progressively increasing focus on Higher Education in the United States and the European Union (Goodley 2024; Timuş et al. 2023). Broader conceptualizations of the concept move beyond disability to include different markers of difference and their intersections that create marginal and subjugated social identities constructed as being negatively different and denied access to social and educational domains (Artiles 2020; Hernández-Saca, Kahn, and Cannon 2018). These broader conceptualizations of inclusion, however, run the risk of dissolving 'disability issues in education into a wider more amorphous inclusive education (Norwich 2002, 493). The dilution of disability into the melting pot of diversity is

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manifested in how disability, in contrast to gender, social class and age, has been at the periphery of scholarly work on inclusion in Higher Education (HE) (Kushnir 2020).

Even though disability is a social identity analogous to race/ethnicity and gender, it is distinguished due to the embodied dimensions of disability experience and the role of ‘impairment effects’ (Corker and Sally 1999; Shakespeare and Watson 2001; Thomas 1999). The human rights model of disability takes cognizance of ‘impairment effects’ (Degener 2016) and brings to the fore the imperative of offsetting these effects by introducing universally designed measures that are non-stigmatizing and non-discriminatory. In this respect, ‘designs that produce disability access also have added value or benefit insofar as they are useful to non-disabled people’ considering ‘issues of sex, gender, and intersectionality, ageing, size, race, and environmental justice’ (Hamraie (n.p): cited in Dolmage 2017, 133).

Despite inclusion’s legal and ethical foundations, Higher Education (HE) is not an inclusive space for persons with disabilities due to the prevalence of ableist and elitist discourses, which perpetuate deficit-oriented perspectives on disability and undermine inclusive education reforms (Dolmage 2017; Goodley 2024; Liasidou and Liasidou 2023). When disability and accessibility-relevant issues are somewhat absent or misrepresented (Liasidou and Mavrou 2017), faculty across disciplines do not seem to have a clear understanding and awareness of inclusive policies and practices and of how to implement inclusion and integrate it as a competency in their course curricula (Altes et al. 2024).

In light of the above considerations and given that Universal Design (UD) has only recently been applied in HE and research in the area is limited (Chiwandire 2019; Fovet 2021; Martin et al. 2019), the study focused on what we teach in Higher Education concerning UD and accessibility. Specifically, the paper reports on part of the findings from an Erasmus+ co-funded project consisting of a consortium of four countries (Spain, Czechia, Cyprus and Austria) that sought to examine if and how issues of Accessibility and UD are integrated into HE curricula across various disciplines of studies, in their respective countries (Nuppenau et al. 2024) and how these are linked with constructions and conceptualizations of disability, and in terms of curricula aim (i.e. awareness, practical skills development, professional development, etc).

The results reported in this article focus on the case of Cyprus. A context-specific analytical lens provides a nuanced understanding of national variations in envisaging and implementing an inclusive agenda in HE. Findings of the study hold implications on how curricula can be designed in order to teach issues of accessibility and UD across multiple disciplines and degree levels, in HE. Even though the Bologna Process (BP) aims to harmonize and create comparable higher education structures within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) member states, conceptualizations of inclusion in BP documents are nebulous and elusive. At the same time, the ‘soft governance’ characterizing the EHEA harmonization initiatives gives national policymakers discretionary power in interpreting and implementing the ‘social dimension of inclusion,’ focusing on diversity and its acceptance in HE (see Kushnir 2020).

Accessibility and universal design and higher education

Accessibility is at the epicentre of inclusive reform agendas aimed at ensuring equitable and non-discriminatory access to social and educational domains for all persons,

especially those with disabilities (United Nations – Enable 2007). Achieving full inclusion requires addressing various barriers that hinder access to facilities, products, and services for persons with disabilities. These barriers include physical and symbolic obstacles such as inaccessible stairs and services and unintelligible information formats, which are often an outcome of a lack of awareness and the way disability is constructed. Achieving comprehensive accessibility is a process that necessitates a holistic approach and active participation across all stages with the involvement of stakeholders who need to be informed and educated on relevant issues. As this process involves the broader design framework, accessibility cannot be examined separately from universal design.

Universal Design, originating from Architecture and the design of universally accessible spaces, is predicated on seven principles for designing accessible products and services in the environment, namely, equitable use, flexibility in use, simple and intuitive use, perceptible information, tolerance for error, low physical effort, size and space for approach and use (Burgstahler and Cory 2010; Centre for Excellence in Universal Design 2024). Designing products, services, spaces and learning for all (and not just people with disabilities) has been recognized as a cost-effective, non-stigmatizing, non-discriminatory and sustainable approach to enhancing and diversifying opportunities for engagement, participation and inclusion across varied domains and spaces regardless of ability, race/ethnicity and other markers of difference (Burgstahler 2020; Burgstahler and Cory 2008; Dell, Dell, and Blackwell 2015; Rose and Meyer 2002; Thousand, Villa, and Nevin 2007).

Rooted in UD, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) a curriculum and instructional design framework used in primary and secondary education and, more recently, Higher Education (Fovet 2021; Martin et al. 2019) and other formal and informal educational environments to create inclusive (learning) spaces for all based on three basic principles: providing multiple means of representation, multiple means of action and expression and multiple means of engagement. Thus, UDL provides a conceptual and practical platform for educational differentiation (Burgstahler and Cory 2008; Dell, Dell, and Blackwell 2015; Rose 2001) for developing relevant competences for any stakeholder who maybe be involved in designing and delivering learning experiences.

The idea of UD, UDL and Accessibility has two applications in higher education. The first reflects the way (how) we teach in HE and create universally accessible physical and symbolic spaces to accommodate the needs of learner diversity. The second, which is also the focus of this study, reflects what we teach in HE in terms of empowering faculty and students to understand and embrace the values and practices of UD and to generalize and transfer their applications across different disciplines and professional contexts with a view to ‘engag[e] in social justice and positive global change, in line with United Nations Sustainable Development Goals’ (Timuş et al. 2023).

Given the social justice and human rights approach to disability and the legal obligations that ensue (e.g. United Nations 2006), it is imperative to devise a cross-disciplinary and universal delivery of UD and accessibility as a precursor to improving and expanding existing or designing and developing new UD and accessibility informed courses across different disciplines. In HE these concepts are currently promoted in fragmented ways across different disciplinary fields of study (Fovet 2021).

Universalizing the applicability of UD and accessibility presupposes moving beyond the technical aspects to enhance understanding of its critical dimensions and how it is

firmly embedded in and informed by a social justice, diversity and equity perspective (e.g. Knoll 2009). Hills and colleagues (2022, 12) suggest that foregrounding this critical perspective may also ‘better communicate its [UDL’s] importance to faculty.’ For instance, concerns about how accessibility and UD courses should be enshrined in education policies and curricula need to concomitantly consider the role of language and its ramifications for creating universally accessible domains (Mole 2013).

The discursive manifestations of language in HE curricula are an integral dimension of ‘biopolitics’ that capture the power differentials shaping our understandings of disability and accessibility, and the paraphernalia of ‘psychological and psychiatric discourses [that] speak with authority about the vital character of human beings’ (Runswick-Cole and Goodley 2022, 221). Foucauldian theorizations of biopolitics unravel the inconspicuous yet pervasive vectors of power and processes of constructing, managing, controlling, disciplining, normalizing and surveilling bodies and, as a corollary, the educational identities, lives and trajectories of these bodies (Bourassa 2018; Risso et al. 2023). As such, it is essential to decipher the ‘biopolitics of the curriculum’ (Bourassa 2011) and how ‘discourses in a curriculum text can communicate powerful meanings’ (Dahl et al. 2013, 32) about how disability, UD and accessibility are conceptualized and dealt with in educational and social domains.

Language and its discursive enunciations are instrumental in exposing the oppressive and emancipatory dimensions of ‘biopolitics.’ The latter dimension and its liberatory and transformative orientation are embodied in the concept of ‘biopolitical production’ and its potency to foster ‘democratic social relations’ (Bourassa 2018, 7) by creating universally designed and accessible spaces for all. In this respect, ‘educational biopolitics’ is not only ‘an incisive theoretical tool’ to delineate ‘the increasingly complex mechanisms of power through which the prevailing practices and logics are channelled’ but also an emancipatory tool ‘in subverting them’ (ibid:2).

To better situate the study in its broader policy landscape, the following section briefly discusses accessibility and UD in the context of Cyprus policy before describing the methodology applied.

Framing the study: accessibility and UD in the Cyprus policy context

Despite efforts to precipitate education policy changes aligned with the tenets of inclusion, the Cypriot legislative and education policy landscape is characterized by ambiguity and fixation on special education imperatives that create barriers to fostering accessible and universally designed environments (Liasidou and Mavrou 2023). The notions of accessibility and UD and their implications were recently introduced in policy documents through Cyprus’ obligation to harmonize its policy and legislation with the requirements of the EU Accessibility Act (see Liasidou and Mavrou [forthcoming](#)). Hence, the EU Directive on accessibility of products and services and the Web Accessibility Directive have been transposed to national policies respectively under the N.57(I)/2024 The Accessibility of Products and Services Law of 2024, and the N.50(I)/2019 The Accessibility of the Public Sector Websites and Mobile Applications Law of 2019. Before this harmonization, any accessibility-relevant discussion in policy documents was very scarce, especially concerning digital and information accessibility, even in rhetorical terms. In more technical terms, accessibility of the built environment was

the first aspect of accessibility included in the Cypriot legislation, under the Regulation 61H of the Roads and Buildings Law, which sets accessibility standards for newly built buildings (after 1999). In media and communications, The Radio and Television Organisations Laws (N.7(I)/1998) and the Electronic Communications and Postal Services Law of 2004 (N.112(I)/2004) have been harmonized with the corresponding EU Directives 2007/65/EC and 2002/21/EC, since 2006. However, accessibility is vaguely included in provisions and practice, translating into a priority in connection services and discounted fees for persons with disabilities (Mavrou et al. 2021). The Special and Inclusive Education White Paper of 2019 (Ministry of Education n.d.) in Cyprus states that implementing UDL and differentiation addresses inadequacies in providing learning support without providing concrete information on how universally designed approaches can be conceptualized and enacted. Another problem with the White Paper is the framing of a UD approach influenced by a special education paradigm despite the presumed rhetorical turn of the document to a more inclusive discourse. In any case, the White Paper was highly criticized and failed to be transformed into a Law. Other disability-related accessibility measures in education in Cyprus have been similarly vague and not supported by a clear and coherent policy framework and accountability regimes (Liasidou and Symeou 2018) to warrant physical and digital accessibility across different domains. ‘UDL promotion’ is, therefore, quoting Fovet (2021, 30), ‘impossible in such a landscape.’ It is also important to highlight that according to the information by the European Disability Expertise – DOTCOM (2023), awareness and professional training on disability and accessibility issues in Cyprus is limited. Teachers’ pre-service education and in-service professional development seem to include, to some extent, disability and accessibility-relevant content. However, other professionals, such as lawyers, architects, medical staff, engineers, and ICT professionals, seem to receive no or very limited UD and accessibility-focused education and training.

Methodology

To maintain data collection and analysis consistency, the project utilized a largely uniform methodology across countries with minor local adaptations. The main methods included a quantitative approach to identifying the sample material, including publicly available HE curricula and syllabi from different HE domains and subjects, followed by a qualitative thematic analysis of the selected material. The list of HE domains was identified through analysis and expert consultation by deploying the Delphi method, and was based on the ISCED Fields of Education and Training 2013 (ISCED-F 2013) classification system. Experts from each of the project’s partner countries were involved in the Delphi study, leading to a consensus selection of domains with available study programs in all involved countries and a potential for high economic, political, and social impact. The final list of domains included disciplines related to IT and Digitalization, Engineering, Design and Arts, Architecture, Civil Engineering, Audiovisual, Electronic Communications, Teacher Education (both mainstream and inclusive), Care and Social Sciences, and Politics, with a pronounced emphasis on Administration, Business, Economics, and Management (see Table 1 with the complete list of domains along with subjects).

Table 1. Domains and subjects.

Domain	Subject
Education	BEd Primary Education BA Pre-Primary Education BSc Physical Education and Sports Science MA Special and Inclusive Education MA Technologies of Learning and Communication and STEAM
Arts and Humanities	BA Multimedia and Graphic Arts BSc Media Production MSc Interaction Design BSc Web Design and Development BA Interior Design BA English Language and Literature
Social Sciences, Journalism and Information	BA Journalism BA Communication and Internet Studies
Business, Administration and Law	BBA Business Administration, Entrepreneurship and Innovation
Information and Communication Technologies	BSc Computer Information Systems
Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction	MSc Artificial Intelligence MArch Architecture
Health and Welfare	BDS Dental Surgery BSc Occupational Therapy BSc Speech and Language Therapy
Services	BBA Hospitality Management

Following the identification of domains, specific programmes were selected. More specifically, corpus linguistics (CL) was deployed using appropriate software (Sketch Engine) to identify keywords associated with Accessibility and Universal Design in 21 out of 175 selected curricula across various HE subject areas that met predefined criteria and which were retrieved from the websites of nine Universities in Cyprus, both public and private.¹ CL is a discursive analytic approach using concordance software to analyze large and authentic linguistic data sets (Mautner 2016, 157). CL software offers qualitative and quantitative textual data. It also presents statistically significant frequencies, measures, and linguistic extracts that can be critically examined against their context, identifying linguistic patterns, lexical choices, and absences.

The following criteria guided the selection of the theoretical sample of our study: (1) coverage of the areas of domains identified, as aligned with ISCED-F 2013 [ISC13 – International Standard Classification of Education Fields of Education and Training 2013.] definition; (2) cross-national availability of chosen syllabi and HE curricula; (3) publicly available curricula; and (4) application of accessibility and UD in the curriculum. The selection process was limited to undergraduate and master's programs because of the considerable divergence of doctoral programs in their design and structure and their research-focused rather than content-based curriculum approach.

Corpus linguistics was deployed in a two-pronged process: first, through the selection phase of the corpora, identifying the texts to be analyzed. This process was not linear. Text corpora were incorporated into the text analysis software to test if there were results regarding specific keywords in selected curricula and syllabi. After this stage, the 21 programs that included the most results were selected through a comprehensive keyword analysis with a corpus manager and text analysis software (Sketch Engine), following a quantitative approach. Keyword search also involved a country-specific detailed exploration of keyword rankings and frequencies (see Table 2 presenting the keywords).

In addition to corpus linguistics, we utilized a qualitative content analysis assisted by Atlas.ti, a qualitative analysis software, to locate, code/tag, and annotate features that

Table 2. Keywords used (in English).

Keywords used (in English)
accessib*
accessible design
assistive
barrier-free design
design-for-all
inclusive design
people-centred people-centered person-centred person-centered
universal design
people with disabilities
person* with disabilit*
alternative text alt-text
assistive technolog*
audio description
Braille
captioning
easy-to-read easy-read easy-language easy-reading
easy-to-understand language
plain communication plain language
screenreader
sign language
speech recognition
speech-to-text
subtitl*
text-to-speech
WAI
WCAG
wheelchair
white cane
differentiated instruction
reasonable accommodation
reasonable adjustment
universal design for learning
accessib*

appear in the corpus texts, such as in syllabus topics, competencies, learning objectives, disability models applied, etc. Seven final categories of codes and subcodes were finalized through inter-coder reliability. In brief, the analysis focused on identifying the sectors in which accessibility is applied (Employment Sector or Housing/Living sector) and accessibility area/type germane to types of accessibility within sectors (e.g. Communication applied in education). The analysis also focused on exploring how accessibility is perceived,, which population it refers to, how it is included as a national policy, and in which higher curricula element accessibility is met.

Some methodological challenges explicitly related to the Cypriot context concerned the limited number of programs from which the corpora were sampled and the difficulties associated with finding curricula and syllabi containing the relevant predefined keywords, especially in disciplines such as Business and Law. Another challenge was that some curricula and related material were very brief while others were very long and detailed, making comparisons difficult.

Findings and discussion: Identifying accessibility and UD in the Cypriot HE curricula: scarcity and disciplinary diversity

Overall, the findings of this study indicate that accessibility and UD are not frequently met in the Cyprus HE curricula across disciplines. These notions are primarily included

in the educational sciences curricula, often connected to differentiation and the education of children with disabilities. Additionally, UD is present in multimedia and graphics-related design courses. The theoretical conceptualization of accessibility seems to vary depending on the discipline. The following findings are presented in terms of (a) the curricula in which UD and accessibility were identified and (b) the conceptualizations therein across the various disciplines.

Which curricula? Locating accessibility and UD in HE curricula

Even though a high frequency of terms related to disabilities and accessibility was prevalent in the 21 curricula analyzed across the four countries, their presence varied in absolute and relative frequency. This discrepancy can be attributed to the policy framework of each country, especially when this is not adequately informed by an inclusive orientation and a subsequently mandated expectation to foster accessible and universally designed products and services in educational and other domains (Martin et al. 2019). The legislative framework of nation-states can significantly, albeit not determinately, affect the ideological underpinnings and implications of academic processes, policies, curricula and educational practices, as in the case of Cyprus.

Table 3 summarizes the frequency of mandatory and elective courses in graduate and undergraduate programs across domains where codes for accessibility and design for all appeared in the Cypriot curricula, whereas Tables 4 and 5 summarize the keyword frequency in overall curricula corpus, subcorpus and syllabi in both Greek and English programs in Cyprus.

There is variation in the occurrence of disability and accessibility keywords in the Cypriot curricula and syllabi, with some programs containing more specific information on universal design and accessibility only because their broader aims were aligned with the field of disability. As appositely suggested by Barton (2008, 10): ‘While legislation is not sufficient in itself to produce inclusion, it is a necessary factor in the process of change.’ The analysis revealed that Education, and Health and Welfare most frequently included keywords related to accessibility and inclusive education. Unsurprisingly, the prevalence of keywords was manifested in courses explicitly linked to accessibility and

Table 3. Frequency of mandatory and elective courses in graduate and undergraduate programs across domains where codes for accessibility and design for all appeared.

Domain	Programs	Courses	Mandatory courses	In BA	In MA	Elective courses	In BA	In MA
Education	5	24	19	13	6	5	1	4
Arts and Humanities	6	8	6	5	1	2	2	0
Social sciences, Journalism and Information	2	7	3	3	0	4	4	0
Business Administration and Law	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	0
Information and Communication Technologies	1	2	2	2	0	0	0	0
Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction	2	2	0	0	0	2	1	1
Health and Welfare	3	7	7	7	0	0	0	0
Services	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0
SUM	21	52	38	31	7	14	9	5

Table 4. Keyword absolute frequency (English Keywords).

English keyword	Overall Cypriot (EN) corpus	Curricula Cypriot subcorpus (EN)	Syllabi Cypriot subcorpus (EN)
accessib*	45	0	45
accessible design	0	0	0
assistive	2	0	2
barrier-free design	0	0	0
design-for-all	0	0	0
inclusive design	1	0	1
people-centred people-centered person-centred person-centered	0	0	0
universal design	15	0	15
people with disabilities	2	0	2
person* with disabilit*	0	0	0
alternative text alt-text	0	0	0
assistive technolog*	1	0	1
audio description	0	0	0
Braille	0	0	0
captioning	0	0	0
easy-to-read easy-read easy-language easy-reading	0	0	0
easy-to-understand language	0	0	0
plain communication plain language	3	0	3
screenreader	0	0	0
sign language	1	0	1
speech recognition	1	0	1
speech-to-text	0	0	0
subtitl*	2	0	2
text-to-speech	0	0	0
WAI	0	0	0
WCAG	4	0	4
wheelchair	0	0	0
white cane	0	0	0
differentiated instruction	0	0	0
reasonable accommodation	0	0	0
reasonable adjustment	0	0	0
universal design for learning	0	0	0

special/inclusive education. The keyword *accessible** appeared 45 times, 25 of which were identified in the postgraduate program Interaction Design (course on Universal Design, Interaction Design MSc, Cyprus University of Technology). The keyword also appeared sporadically in some programs that explicitly focused on accessibility issues as well as rarely in others (e.g. once in Hospitality Management BBA, University of Nicosia). ‘Universal Design’ was referenced 15 times, often alongside *accessib**, underscoring their interconnectedness. However, these keywords were largely absent in programs unrelated to accessibility, suggesting a limited focus on UD and accessibility in disciplines other than the ones considered directly content-related. Curricula taught in Greek featured relevant terms only twice: i.e. *νοηματική* γλώσσα** (sign language) in Speech Therapy BSc programs (e.g. European University Cyprus, Cyprus) and *σχεδιασμ* για όλους* (design for all) in the Multimedia and Graphic Arts BA (Cyprus University of Technology). The term *υποστηρικτικ*/assistive* appeared in the Occupational Therapy BSc and Special and Inclusive Education MA syllabi (a total of 71 times) (programs of European University Cyprus).

Interestingly, the search through Sketch Engine yielded no results for 14 keywords associated with accessibility and assistive technology (e.g. Braille, audio description,

Table 5. Keyword absolute frequency (English Keywords).

Keyword	English translation	Overall corpus (GR)	Curricula subcorpus (GR)	Syllabi subcorpus (GR)
προσβάσιμ* προσβασιμ*	accessib*	17	0	18
προσβάσιμ* σχεδιασμ*	accessible design	0	0	0
υποστηρικτική*	assistive	71	0	82
σχεδιασμ* χωρίς εμπόδια	barrier-free design	0	0	0
σχεδιασμ* για όλους	design-for-all	9	2	7
σχεδιασμ* χωρίς αποκλεισμούς	inclusive design	0	0	0
ανθρωποκεντρικ* ανθρωποκεντρικ* σχεδιασμ*	people-centred people-centered person-centred person-centered	59	0	59
καθολικ* σχεδιασμ*	universal design	8	0	8
άτομα με αναπηρίες ατόμων με αναπηρίες	people with disabilities	16	0	19
άτομα με αναπηρία ατόμων με αναπηρία	person* with disability*	25	0	33
εναλλακτικ* κείμεν* εναλλακτικ* κείμεν* alt-text	alternative text alt-text	0	0	0
υποστηρικτικ* τεχνολογ*	assistive technolog*	50	0	50
ακουστικ* περιγραφ*	audio description	0	0	0
Braille μπράιγ	Braille	0	0	0
υποτιτλισμ* μεταγραφ*	captioning	5	0	13
εύκολη* ανάγνωση easy-to-read easy-read easy-language easy-reading	easy-to-read easy-read easy-language easy-reading	0	0	0
εύκολη* κατανόηση* easy-to-understand language	easy-to-understand language	0	0	0
απλή* επικοινωνία* απλή* γλώσσα*	plain communication plain language	0	0	0
αναγνώστη* οθόνης εκφώνηση* οθόνης	screenreader	0	0	0
νοηματική* γλώσσα*	sign language	2	1	1
αναγνώριση* φωνή*	speech recognition	0	0	0
αναγνώριση* φωνή* ομιλία* σε κείμενο	speech-to-text	0	0	0
υποτιτλισμ*	subtitl*	0	0	0
αναγνώστη* κείμεν*	text-to-speech	0	0	0
WAI	WAI	0	0	0
WCAG	WCAG	0	0	0
τροχόκαθ* τροχοκαθ*	wheelchair	0	0	0
λευκ* μπαστ*	white cane	0	0	0
διαφοροποιημέν* διδασκαλ* διαφοροποίηση*	differentiated instruction	63	2	61
εύλογ* προσαρμογ*	reasonable accommodation	0	0	0
εύλογ* προσαρμογ*	reasonable adjustment	0	0	0
καθολικ* σχεδιασμ* μάθησης σχεδιασμ* μάθησης για όλους	universal design for learning	4	0	5

speech-to-text, etc.), indicating that although accessibility is included as a concept in some curricula, it seems that it is not associated or elaborated further into specific approaches, techniques and more practical aspects of implementing accessibility.

Conceptualizations of UD and accessibility in HE curricula

The analysis of how UD and Accessibility were conceptualized in HE curricula is organized against the seven domains, each presented below. Overall, the study revealed that accessibility and UD were scarcely featured in the curricula under consideration. Their conceptualizations were also framed against the paradoxical coexistence of deficit-

oriented, human rights and social model perspectives on disability. The uncritical merging of polarized perspectives on disability reflects and is concomitantly the result of a profoundly entrenched preoccupation with special education discourses of disability (Haug 2017), exacerbated by the contradictory and non-binding nature of national and Bologna Process policy documents around inclusion and diversity in HE (Liasidou and Mavrou 2023; Kashnir 2020).

Education

Education was identified as being the primary accessibility sector. The findings emphasize the need to create inclusive learning environments and materials for learners of diverse backgrounds, including students with visual impairments and minoritized cultural backgrounds. This is achieved using assistive technology, alternative and augmentative communication techniques, and inclusive teaching approaches aligned with the principles of inclusive education.

The following extract exemplifies how accessibility issues were highlighted in the Education domain:

[Program curriculum:] The program equips teachers with innovative teaching methods and skills, necessary for quality and effective teaching of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities. The program aims to train students regarding educational topics for children with disabilities and special educational needs, in the design of educational approaches that lead to differentiation in the context of inclusive education, as teachers of general and inclusive education, in educational research processes, as well as the development of pedagogical competence qualifications through pedagogy science courses and teaching methodology. (Special and Inclusive Education MA, European University Cyprus, Cyprus)

The targeted ‘accessibility population’ was students with disabilities and special educational needs. Still, some sporadic references to other markers of difference were made without acknowledging how these markers of difference may intersect and impact pedagogical decision-making (Hernández-Saca, Kahn, and Cannon 2018). An intersectional lens can enable us to understand how written assessment, for example, can create ‘barriers for learning not only from the viewpoint of ableism but also racism’ to ‘offer affordances for meeting the needs of first-generation students in written assessment with the required linguistic resources’ (Nieminen 2022, 7).

The accessibility area more frequently evidenced in the curricula was ‘learning adaptation,’ followed by ICT – digital accessibility and accessibility in the built environment. Again, these areas were primarily articulated concerning students with special educational needs and disabilities as indicated in the following course:

[Course content:] Familiarisation and practice with assistive and mainstream technology software and applications for persons with disabilities. (Technology and Disability, Technologies of Learning and Education and STEAM MA, European University Cyprus, Cyprus)

The notion of accessibility was generally conceptualized through a human rights perspective; disability was portrayed as a socially constructed notion inexorably linked with experiences of oppression and social disadvantage while highlighting the need to promote inclusive and democratic communities. In some cases, accessibility, especially regarding assistive technology, was framed against a biomedical model perspective. Rather than diversifying existing arrangements to be universally accessible, assistive

technology is presented as a biopolitical device for the normalization and assimilation of individuals who do not fit into existing arrangements (Risso et al. 2023) and deviate from the ‘autonomous ... and able – self-contained individual’ prescribed by the ‘globalized biopolitical machine’ of neoliberal governance (Goodley 2017, 207),

At the same time, UD and its associated concepts were included in specialist courses such as Special and Inclusive Education or Technologies of Learning and Communication and STEAM. The social model thinking and its impact on conceptualizations and enactments of disability is manifested in the following example:

[Learning objectives:] The aim of the course is to introduce the students with the contemporary trends of technology as a human right for the access of the people with disability to the natural environment, learning and communication. At the same time, an aim of the course is for [the students] to familiarise themselves with assistive technology tools for persons with disabilities and their use as a means of differentiation in teaching and learning for the education of all children in an inclusive classroom. The aim also is to use technology in the pedagogical process in the context of inclusive school in a digital age and the opportunities to bridge the digital divide for persons with disabilities. (Technology and Disability, Special and Inclusive Education MA, European University Cyprus, Cyprus)

Accessibility in Education was also conceptualized as a legal and moral imperative for inclusion and diversity as seen below:

[Learning outcomes:] [students] Identify and analyze policies and practices at the local and international level that affect the effective implementation of technology in the education of children with disabilities. (Technology and Disability, Technologies of Learning and Communication and STEAM MA, European University Cyprus, Cyprus)

Arts and humanities

Programs in the domain of Arts and Humanities focus on sensory accessibility in cultural, educational, and leisure contexts and the accessible services sector. The ‘accessibility population’ targeted in this domain includes people with disabilities in general, with an emphasis on people with sensory impairments, as well as the ageing population. Measures such as audio description and subtitling were introduced to enhance accessibility in arts and culture, as suggested in the following excerpt related to the design of accessible restaurants:

[Course content description]: The subject deals with Interior Design problems within a restaurant environment. Through the analysis of: the functionality of space; layout; spatial perception; accessibility issues; as well as functional workings of both the front and back of house students will acquire the knowledge needed for a fully working design proposal. (Interior Design Studio 4, Interior Design BA, Frederick University, Cyprus)

As already discussed, concerning Education, accessibility/disability was also seen through a social model lens whereby accessibility focuses on removing social barriers in physical, social and virtual environments. There was a parallel focus on “e-inclusion” in alignment with the European Commission’s perspective on the role of e-government, e-health and e-inclusion in sustainable human development’ (Interaction Design MSc, Cyprus University of Technology, Cyprus).

In the Arts and Humanities, the inclusion and prioritization of accessibility in curricula depend on whether accessibility was regarded as an integral dimension of

professional competence envisaged to be developed by future graduates. This notion is explicitly referred to in learning outcomes. Accessibility was also referred to as part of general knowledge and was briefly mentioned in the content. There were also particular curricula in Arts and Humanities where relevance to accessibility was reflected in titles of specific courses such as Universal Design (Interaction Design MSc, Cyprus University of Technology, Cyprus), User Experience Design (Media Production BSc, University of Central Lancashire Cyprus, Cyprus) and Design for All (Multimedia & Graphic Arts BA, Cyprus University of Technology).

Social sciences, journalism and information

UD underpins conceptualizations of varied dimensions of accessibility in this domain, coupled with assistive technologies and accessible websites and documents that consider human diversity based on disability, age, and ethnic background. The centrality of UD was exemplified across physical and virtual contexts, as pointed out in the following example:

[Learning objectives:] The aim of the course is to introduce students to the basic principles, models and methods of Human Computer Interaction (HCI) and enable them to design easy-to-use interactive computing systems and to evaluate the usability of interactive computing systems. (Human-computer Interaction, Communication and Internet Studies BA, Cyprus University of Technology, Cyprus)

Constructions of accessibility are underpinned by medicalizing, pathologizing, and normalizing discourses of disability. These discourses coexist with more sociological and rights-based discourses that emphasize removing social barriers, hierarchical relations of dependency, inclusion and exclusion processes, empowerment, and activism. Educational biopolitics construes accessibility as both a powerful disciplinary, normalizing mechanism and a liberatory mechanism, as discussed earlier, to subvert power inequities that undermine equitable social relations, inclusion and participation. Accessibility is also constructed as a legal, ethical, and political requirement and a technical standards requirement.

Accessibility was more prominently featured in specialist courses in the field and was presented as an integral aspect of professional competence expected by graduates of the respective programs. For example in the Web Design & Development course of the BA in Communication and Internet Studies BA, (Cyprus University of Technology, Cyprus), the course aim includes: ‘[...] topics and parameters that affect web design, such as usability, accessibility, multi-browse [...]’

Engineering, manufacturing and construction

UD principles in Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction curricula in Cyprus were applied to public transport, buildings, and digital environments to warrant accessibility and personal autonomy. The targeted population focused primarily on people with reduced mobility or motor or mental impairments while referring to the importance of personal autonomy, as exemplified in the following quotes:

Understand the principles for design for people with physical or mental impairments (...) Rethink how physical impairment enables critical and creative approaches to design for the user ... Exploring systems of Assisted living in relation to the context/ Identifying optimised

living environments. (Senior Living Social Aspect of Architecture, Architecture MArch, Nicosia University, Cyprus)

[Course content description:] Exploring Systems of Assisted living in relation to the urban context/ Identifying optimised living environments. (Senior Living Social Aspect of Architecture, Architecture MArch, Nicosia University, Cyprus)

Accessibility in the case at hand was primarily conceptualized through the lens of the social and human rights models of disability, which extend beyond disability issues to include issues around gender and diversity competence and how social barriers can be removed, especially in architecture and assisted living environments. In this respect, the focus is on the critical dimensions of UD that move beyond disability by diversifying the 'social norm' to create universally accessible spaces for all. In this vein, disability and its embodied dimensions are cast at 'a continuum of human interdependencies' (Borg 2018) and perceived as an example of the human species' corporeal fragility and precarious and temporary abled-bodied order (Goodley 2017).

Barriers are not limited to physical barriers but include more critical and socially mediated dimensions of spatial accessibility, as exemplified in the extract below:

[Learning outcomes:] Critically appraise and form considered judgments about the spatial, aesthetic, technical and social qualities of Assisted Living Environments. (Senior Living Social Aspect of Architecture, Architecture MArch, Nicosia University, Cyprus)

Accessibility and UD issues in the particular domain were thus mainly discussed in technical (e.g. accessible railway system), social (e.g. diversity and gender equality), and economic terms (e.g. market access and diversity). The following quote denotes the less frequently noted social and more critical dimension of accessibility concerning Disability Justice:

[Course resources:] Designing for Disability Justice: On the need to take a variety of human bodies into account [...]. Designing for disabled children and children with special educational needs. (Senior Living Social Aspect of Architecture, Architecture MArch, Nicosia University, Cyprus)

Health and welfare

The notion of accessibility in the specific domain was conceptualized against the human rights model of disability and the need to respect the rights of people with disabilities, considering international legal mandates and conventions, and warranting their access to the health and medical sector. As rights-bearing subjects, persons with disabilities are bestowed the whole range of social, economic and cultural rights to experience dignified living and equitable participation commensurate with their non-disabled peers (Degener 2016).

Accessibility featured primarily in rehabilitation studies curricula such as an undergraduate program in Occupational Therapy (e.g. in courses such as Introduction in Occupational Therapy course,, Occupational Therapy in Adults I course, Assistive Technology in Occupational Therapy course in the Occupational Therapy BSc, European University Cyprus).

In the same program of study, reference was also made to health-related accessibility in education with the use of robotics and classroom interventions for educational

purposes (Occupational Therapy in Children I), accessible documents in learning (Occupational Therapy in Children II), and accessibility with easy-to-read (Occupational Therapy in Adults II) (courses of BSc in Occupational Therapy programme, European University Cyprus). For example, the learning outcomes of the Occupational Therapy in Children II course stress the need for students to ‘recognize the application of robotics in children’s education and social interaction skills’ and to ‘describe the use of assistive technology for reading, information processing and comprehension of children with various disabilities’ (Occupational Therapy BSc, European University Cyprus, Cyprus).

The target populations in this domain were the older people and persons with disabilities, with a pronounced emphasis on assistive product technologies and human–computer interaction, health-assisting engineering, assistive robotics, prosthetics etc. Conceptualizations of accessibility and disability in the context of rehabilitation were primarily informed by the medical model, along with a market-oriented approach to viewing people with disabilities as customers. At the same time, a human rights perspective was manifested in the context of using assistive technology to overcome social barriers.

Business, administration and law & information and communication technologies

Interestingly accessibility and UD in programs falling in the domain of Business, Administration and Law, and the domain of Information and Communication Technologies in Cyprus were identified in very few and specific cases of the corpora selected. This notion was more prominent in Justice and Law courses focusing on disability equality law and disability recruitment law. There was also a focus on varied markers of difference and more specific references to people with disabilities concerning disability rights, disability and health privacy, social protection, ethics, crime, social justice, and cybercrime. Finally, an emphasis on different dimensions of accessibility and, more sporadically, UD, ranging from accessibility to the built environment to issues around autonomy and web accessibility, framed against legal and social prerequisites and entitlements was also spotted. With regards to the domain of Information and Communication Technologies, a single occurrence was identified in the content description of a BA (undergraduate) course in Computer information systems, connecting digital accessibility to Human Computer Interaction.

However, despite these trends in cross-national curricula and syllabi examples, the fact that no examples were from the Cypriot context indicates a low priority for these issues in the particular domains.

What is evident from all of the above is that disability and accessibility are generally absent in Cyprus curricula. When they do appear, they are approached differently across disciplines and with diverse frequency throughout the scientific domains. Conceptualizations of accessibility in the domains of education, social sciences, and humanities were framed against concerns around diversity, human rights, and social inclusion. The accessibility and UD couplet are frequently referred to together while also including other markers of difference discussed against relevant legal and social requirements such as gender equality, linguistic rights, sustainability, etc. In contrast, conceptualizing these concepts in Engineering, and Health Sciences is more pragmatic than values-based, emphasizing technology-enabled inclusion. This form of inclusion is contingent on the ‘normalizing’ power of education biopolitics to produce assimilationist ‘technologies of

power responsible for correcting those who are beyond or below normality' (Pagni, 2017, 261 cited in Risso et al. 2023, 349) rather than problematizing and subverting ableist and disablist discourses (Goodley 2024).

Even though curricula focus on diversity and its related dimensions of gender, migration and age, for example, in general terms, the focus is on disability and, in particular, on visual, hearing or motor impairments, while other disabilities receive scant attention. It is worth noting again that unlike other data from partner countries, accessibility and UD were not identified at all in curricula from the domain of Business, Administration and Law and the domain of Information and Communication Technologies in Cyprus which in and of itself indicates only the diversity in their conceptualizations in the various domains, but also how differently they are prioritized across domains, institutions, and contexts.

The contradictory and nebulous policy framework of inclusive education is reflected in the limited number of courses to which the two notions and their associated concepts are referred. Critical discursive analytical approaches highlight how the “unsaid” and the “unwritten” can be as significant as what is said’ (Luke 2002, 104). These linguistic absences are meaningful only when they are analysed in tandem with the presence and frequency of linguistic items through a dialogical process of comparison and juxtaposition of ‘the presence, absence or frequency of an item in one data set’ (Mautner 2016, 175). The absent and marginal status of UD and accessibility discourses perpetuates normalizing and assimilationist practices and silences the politics of difference and diversity at the epicentre of an inclusive reform agenda.

The rights-based, ethical, technical and pedagogical dimensions of UD and accessibility must be expanded upon and diversified to adopt a consistent, substantial, unequivocal, universal and sustained approach to embed UD-informed values, principles and practices in HE curricula. This presupposes a robust policy and legal framework to mandate UD-informed reforms in the broader context of inclusive education. Without these policy and legal requirements, accessibility and UD will remain rhetorical and elusive concepts promoted by a handful of programs designed by like-minded individuals interested in conveying and materializing the technical, legal, pedagogical and less frequently critical dimensions of UD and accessibility in HE. Even though the human agency of the selected few is crucial in the change process, it cannot by itself subvert structural and ideological barriers that perpetuate ableist and elitist discourses that undermine HE’s vision for transformative change towards inclusion.

Conclusions

This paper sought to examine whether and in what form accessibility and UD are present in HE curricula through the case of Cyprus. Taking into consideration the totality of the study’s findings cross-nationally, discussed in detail elsewhere (Project Report 2024), and the fact that in Cyprus, the 21 selected curricula are representative of the overall curricula available in the Cypriot HE institutions, we are in a position to argue that accessibility and UD are generally minimally present in the selected curricula, not only in Cyprus, but also in Austria, Spain, and Czechia; and that their meanings and enactments vary in terms of their ideological underpinnings.

As their conceptualizations are framed against different disability discourses, the coexistence of medicalized, human rights, and social model dimensions of disability indicates the contentious and contradictory nature of the concept and its impact on how UD and accessibility issues are conceived and enacted in HE. These conceptualizations and materializations either subsume disability issues into an amorphous, melting pot of vaguely defined and perceived ‘diversity’ (Norwich 2002) or solely focus on persons with disabilities and, to a lesser extent, persons with other minoritized identities without considering issues of intersectionality and social injustice and their impact on accessibility in educational and social domains (Artiles 2020; Hernández-Saca, Kahn, and Cannon 2018). These considerations are at the heart of the inclusive reform orientations of UD with the aim of ‘Foregrounding economic injustices of redistribution, cultural injustices of misrecognition, and political injustices of misrepresentation, this definition establishes an agenda that acknowledges historical justice claims of the inclusive education movement and expands them with notions of intersectionality.’ (Waitoller and King Thorius 2016, 368).

The findings of this study highlight the imperative of mainstreaming and universalizing UD-informed curricula if inclusive education reforms are to be materialized in HE and impact the broader society. As Weeden (2023) highlights, how accessibility can be included in HE curricula largely depends on the pedagogical frameworks, principles and practices. Thus, educational systems that are enlightened by the values of equality, accessibility and social justice, are expected to encourage the development of accessibility and UD knowledge and skills for future professionals and citizens. Given the rhetoric and global perspectives on equality and participation for all, students’ transition to employment greatly benefits from developing accessibility knowledge, skills and attitudes during their studies. As a starting point, one of the main implications of this paper is raising awareness on the absence of UD and accessibility from HE curricula and identifying some examples of how these concepts could be integrated. This is relevant for HE educational curricula design in terms of both the use of inclusive terminology and discourse in the curricula, and the connection of learning objectives and curricula content to notions of accessibility.

Designing accessibility courses or courses including accessibility in the content and objectives, requires a paradigm shift across HE institutions’ development, evaluation and accreditation process that acknowledges the plurality of human identities constituted and framed against intersecting minoritized statuses, social injustices and power inequities that create varied experiences of inclusion/ exclusion in HE and beyond. Ultimately, UD and accessibility issues are integral to ‘biopolitics’ (Runswick-Cole and Goodley 2022) and the dis/abled-bodied underpinning the bilateral expectation to provide ‘reasonable accommodations’ to meet disability-related needs. These ideological presuppositions continue to be enshrined in the dominant conceptualization of accessibility and UD while silencing how disability is a dimension of diversity, power, justice and human rights (e.g. Liasidou and Liasidou 2023; Liasidou and Mavrou 2017; Gabel et al. 2016; Waitoller and King Thorius 2016) that necessitate an equity-oriented and critical approach to conceptualizing UD and accessibility issues in HE.

Note

1. All 9 universities from which programs were sampled operate in the area under the jurisdiction of the Republic of Cyprus. These include European University Cyprus, University of Nicosia, University of Cyprus, Cyprus University of Technology, Frederick University, UCLAN Cyprus, Open University of Cyprus, Neapolis University and Philips University.

Acknowledgements

This study was conducted in the framework of the project ATHENA: Bringing Accessibility and Design for All into Higher Education Curricula [Project number: 101089469], which has been co-funded by the European Union, through the ERASMUS+ Programme. The authors would like to acknowledge that the work and analysis presented in this paper has been informed by the broader collaborative work undertaken by the project consortium which consists of the European Disability Forum (coordinator), the European University Cyprus, the EURASHE, the Johannes Kepler University, Linz, Austria, the Masarykova University, Czechia and the Autonomous University of Barcelona, Spain, and their respective research teams.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by Erasmus+ [grant number 101089469].

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