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Accessibility of Higher Education Institutions for Students with Visual Impairments – Reality and Proposed Directions for Change

Abstract

The aim of the study was to explore the experiences of students with visual impairments regarding the accessibility of higher education institutions (HEIs) in Poland. The research addressed the problem of structural and digital barriers that affect students' ability to participate fully in academic life. A qualitative method was applied, using a survey with open-ended questions to gather detailed narratives from students with low vision and blindness. The thematic analysis of the responses revealed five key areas: architectural accessibility, digital and ICT inclusion, adaptation of teaching materials, systemic barriers, and student recommendations for improvement. The findings show that despite some progress, significant challenges persist, especially in terms of teaching material accessibility, university website usability, and staff preparedness. The study highlights the urgent need for inclusive policies, targeted academic support, and training for university staff to meet the complex needs of this low-incidence but high-support group.

Keywords: accessibility, higher education, visual impairment, educational inclusion.

Introduction

In countries where the culture of including students with disabilities has a long tradition, increasing rates of students with disabilities enrolling in higher

education have been observed for years. This is because universities have found strategies to make learning environments that are accessible, beneficial, and supportive for all students. For instance, between 2008 and 2017, universities in Australia recorded a 123% increase in the number of domestic undergraduate students with disabilities. (Universities Australia, 2019, p. 15). Similar trends are observed in the USA, where the number of undergraduate students with disabilities increased from 11.1% in the 2011–2012 enrolment period to 19.4% during the 2015-2016 academic year (Snyder, de Brey, & Dillow, 2019, p. 453).

In England, in the 2019-2020 academic year, 17.3% of all home students had a disability of some kind. The number has increased by 47% since 2014-15 (Hubble & Bolton, 2021, p. 5). More current statistics indicate that 11% of university students in Germany have disabilities (Kauffman, 2023, p. 4). Unfortunately, in Poland, we observe the opposite trend. The demographic changes over the last few years also affected the number of young people entering higher education institutions (HEIs). According to Statistics Poland (GUS), in recent years, the number of students with disabilities has been systematically decreasing—from 27,730 in 2014/2015 to 22,451 in 2023/2024—while the overall student population remained relatively stable. Data indicate that students with a disability statement represent between 1.7% and 1.9% of the total student population across this period (Tab. 1). However, the figures presented in the annual GUS reports do not reflect the real number of students with disabilities in Polish HEIs as they include only persons who have declared to the university that they have a disability statement. Presumably, there are many more students with biological disabilities (e.g., chronically ill, and with short-term disabilities due to accidents) who are not formally classified as students with a disability at Polish universities. Accurate records are also hampered by the provisions of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the fact that a significant number of students conceal their disabilities (Gorczycka & Kanasz, 2014).

Table 1
Students of higher education institutions in Poland (*2014–2024*)

Academic Year	Total (in absolute values)	Students with disability (in absolute values)	Percentage of students with disability to non-disabled
2014/2015	1,469,86	27,730	1.9
2015/2016	1,405,133	26,341	1.9
2016/2017	1,348,822	25,121	1.9
2017/2018	1,291,870	23,828	1.8
2018/2019	1,230,254	22,046	1.8
2019/2020	1,215,307	21,240	1.7
2020/2021	1,218,000	20,248	1.7

Table 1 (cont.)

Academic Year	Total (in absolute values)	Students with disability (in absolute values)	Percentage of students with disability to non-disabled
2021/2022	1,218,200	20,513	1.7
2022/2023	1,223,600	20,800	1.7
2023/2024	1,245,153	22,451	1.8

Source: Author's research based on the Statistics Poland (GUS) – "Higher education and its finances" for years 2014-2024

Referring to the general population in Poland, it is estimated that approximately 12.2% of individuals live with legal and/or biological disabilities https://www.gov.pl/web/rodzina/osoby-niepelnosprawne, accessed 05.08.2025). While this figure—much like the participation rates of students with disabilities in higher education—remains imprecise, it highlights the persistent underrepresentation of this group within the university-age population. Notably, students with disabilities constitute only 1.8% of all students enrolled in Polish higher education institutions, pointing to a significant participation gap. The representation of students with visual impairments is even more limited: according to recent national data, students with low vision and blind students account for merely 0.13% of the total student population. This suggests a critical need for targeted accessibility strategies and inclusive policies to address systemic barriers affecting this group.

Paradoxically, however, students with visual impairments in Poland demonstrate higher graduation rates than their non-disabled peers. Over the past five academic years, the graduation rate among blind and low vision students has remained relatively stable at approximately 28–31%, exceeding the average graduation rate for the general student population by 2 to 3 percentage points. This suggests not only a high level of academic commitment among these students but also the possible effectiveness of support mechanisms currently in place. These findings offer a promising signal and highlight the importance of maintaining—and further developing—inclusive educational practices that facilitate academic success. Moreover, the strategies supporting this group could inform broader institutional efforts to improve student outcomes across the board. (Tab. 2).

Both the provisions of international law and national legislation in Poland guarantee there should be no barriers in access to education for persons with disabilities. The rights of students with disabilities to education are protected by international agreements and numerous European Union (EU) documents. The most relevant documents for persons with disabilities are: *the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (CRPD), signed by the Polish Government on March 20, 2007, and ratified on September 6, 2012, *the Charter of Fun-*

damental Rights of the European Union (Official Journal of the EU, 2012a), *the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union* (TFEU) (Official Journal of the EU, 2012b) and *the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030* to raise the standard of living for people with disabilities in Europe and around the world (*Union of Equality*…, 2021).

Table 2
Students and graduates of higher education institutions in Poland including students with low vision and blind students (*2017–2024*)

Academic Year	Students with low vision and blind students		Non-disabled students		Percentage of students with low vision and blind students to non-disabled students
	Students	Graduates	Students	Graduates	%
	Total	Total	Total	Total	
2017/2018	2010	635	1,291,870	387,531	0.15
2018/2019	1886	530	1,230,254	327,714	0.15
2019/2020	1779	515	1,215,307	313,847	0.15
2020/2021	1667	452	1,218,000	293,436	0.14
2021/2022	1597	434	1,218,200	297,368	0.13
2022/2023	1580	410	1,223,600	292,605	0.13
2023/2024	1614	393	1,245,153	292,120	0.13

Source: Author's research based on the Statistics Poland (GUS) – "Higher education and its finances" published between 2017-2024

Polish law also upholds the right to education as a crucial component of the list of fundamental human rights. Its guarantees are contained, inter alia, in *the Constitution of the Republic of Poland* of 1997, in Articles 70 (1) and (4). In accordance with the provisions of this basic law, we can speak of the right to education being implemented on the basis of the principle of equality of access and "*equality of opportunities*", meaning discrimination "*for any reason*" is prohibited (Chimicz, 2021, p. 55). Also the provisions introduced in the Act of July 27, 2005, entitled *Law on Higher Education* amended in 2011, gave universities new opportunities to help persons with disability (Official Journal of Laws, 2005).

The framework of the European Higher Education Area requires universities to have a more inclusive character. The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2018) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UN, 2019) recognized inclusive education as an opportunity to empower people with disabilities and to remove obstacles to learning and participation for all students (Ramberg & Watkins, 2020). However, some educational systems still practice educational exclusion and prejudice which operate as real

impediments or roadblocks to advancement (Iacono, Keefe, Kenny, & McKinstry, 2019, p. 267).

Although important progress has been made over the past decade, research suggests that the inclusion of students with disabilities in Polish higher education still falls short of full academic integration. Earlier studies by Gajdzica (2015) and Sztobryn-Giercuszkiewicz (2018) highlighted that inclusion often took the form of symbolic participation rather than substantive transformation of the academic environment. While many physical barriers have since been addressed, more recent developments point to persistent psychosocial, communicative, and organisational challenges—such as implicit bias, inconsistent academic accommodations, and the insufficient adoption of universal instructional design—as key obstacles to meaningful participation and equitable learning experiences.

Nonetheless, promising practices are emerging. Recent research conducted at the Maria Grzegorzewska University demonstrates that systematic training of academic and administrative staff significantly enhances their competencies in inclusive teaching and student support (Lejzerowicz, 2024). These efforts reflect a growing institutional awareness of the need for inclusive policies and tailored pedagogical strategies. Furthermore, participatory and action-based studies, such as those by Lejzerowicz and Podstawka (2021), emphasise the importance of fostering self-authorship, autonomy, and social agency among students with disabilities—shifting the discourse from compensatory support to empowerment and co-creation of inclusive academic communities.

Symbolic forms of participation, combined with persistent psychosocial and institutional barriers, continue to limit the realisation of equal educational opportunities for students with disabilities. These concerns are particularly relevant in the case of students with visual impairments—a group that remains markedly underrepresented in both educational statistics and academic discourse. In this context, there is a pressing need to explore not only general inclusion policies but also the concrete lived experiences of students who encounter daily challenges related to architectural, digital, and communicative accessibility.

This study aims to address this gap by focusing on students with visual impairments and their perceptions of accessibility in higher education.

Research Aim and Questions

This paper presents a preliminary qualitative pilot study aimed at exploring the lived experiences of students with visual impairments in the context of accessibility within higher education institutions (HEIs). Rather than measuring accessibility through predefined indicators, the study seeks to understand how students themselves perceive, interpret, and navigate the accessibility of their academic environments.

In the context of this research, the term *structural barriers* refers to obstacles embedded in the physical and organizational infrastructure of universities, which hinder students' ability to participate fully and independently in academic life. These include architectural inaccessibility (e.g., lack of tactile signage, unmarked hazards, absence of accessible lifts), spatial disorientation, inflexible institutional procedures, and insufficient systemic adjustments. Such barriers are distinguished from digital or communicative barriers but often overlap with them in practice, forming a complex system of exclusion. This conceptualization aligns with the World Health Organization's (2011) definition of environmental barriers as external factors that, by their presence or absence, restrict functioning and participation. In the context of higher education, structural barriers are often accompanied by digital and communicative barriers, forming a multilayered system of exclusion (Carrillo-Sierra et al., 2025; Hewett et al., 2017).

The aim is to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how institutional structures, support systems, and physical and digital infrastructures are experienced by students with low vision or blindness. The study was guided by the following research questions:

(a) How do students with visual impairments perceive and evaluate the accessibility of their HEIs in terms of architectural, digital, and ICT-related aspects?
(b) What kinds of difficulties and barriers do these students identify in relation to institutional accessibility?
(c) What are their expressed needs and expectations concerning support services offered by HEIs?

Although students with disabilities have increasingly been the subject of scholarly attention, the specific perspectives of students with visual impairments remain notably underrepresented. This study seeks to centre their voices by foregrounding their subjective accounts of accessibility in higher education. In doing so, it interrogates how the right to equal education—as stipulated by legal and policy frameworks—is realised or constrained in the everyday experiences of these students.

Research Method and Sample Characteristics

This study employed a qualitative research design rooted in the interpretive paradigm, aiming to gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of students with visual impairments in Polish higher education institutions (HEIs). The recruitment strategy followed a purposive sampling approach, consistent with Denscombe's (2010, p. 35) suggestion that qualitative research seeks "the best information through focusing on a relatively small number of instances selected on the basis of their known attributes." The primary criterion for inclusion

in the study was the participant's identification as a student with visual impairments (i.e., either low vision or blindness) enrolled in an HEI in Poland.

To reflect the inclusive and participant-centred orientation of the study, the category "visual impairment" is used here as an umbrella term encompassing both students with low vision and those who are blind. Participants were initially identified through professional and academic networks known to the researcher and further recruited via snowball sampling, a strategy particularly suitable for accessing individuals from underrepresented or hard-to-reach populations (Vogt, 1999).

All recruitment and data collection procedures adhered to established ethical research standards. Participants were provided with clear and accessible information about the purpose and scope of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the right to withdraw at any point. Written informed consent was obtained from all respondents. Anonymity was assured through the use of pseudonyms, and data were processed and stored in accordance with data protection regulations. The research followed the guiding principle of "nothing about us without us", reflecting a strong ethical commitment to centring the voices and safeguarding the rights of participants with disabilities.

The final sample consisted of ten female students, aged between 21 and 35, all of whom held official disability certifications confirming their visual impairment. The participants were geographically dispersed across various HEIs in Poland and represented a range of study levels and academic fields. The detailed demographic characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 3.

Table 3
Demographics of the respondents

Pseudo Name	Level of studies	Vision status	Degree of disability	Major
R1	Master's degree	Light perception	severe	Clinical Psychology
R2	Master's degree	Light perception	severe	Psychology
R3	Bachelor's degree	Blind	severe	Occupational Therapy
R4	Master's degree	"Very" Low Vision	severe	Physiotherapy
R5	Master's degree	Low Vision	moderate	Pedagogy
R6	Master's degree	Blind	severe	Special Education
R7	Master's degree	Light perception	severe	Clinical Psychology
R8	Master's degree	Low Vision	moderate	Clinical Psychology with Psychotherapy
R9	Bachelor's degree	Blind	severe	English Philology
R10	Bachelor's degree	Light perception	severe	Spanish Philology

Source: Authors' research.

Data Collection

Data were gathered through a semi-structured questionnaire, designed in two accessible formats: a Microsoft Word document and an online Google Forms survey, enabling participants to select the format most compatible with their assistive technologies and personal preferences. The data collection took place between May and December 2024.

Although the study employed a survey tool, the emphasis was on qualitative, open-ended responses that allowed participants to articulate their perceptions, challenges, and expectations in their own words. The data were subsequently analysed thematically, with a focus on identifying patterns, meanings, and individual nuances that emerged across the narratives.

Results

The respondents shared their experiences of accessibility at the higher education institution they attended. Data analysis revealed the following themes: (1) accessibility of university buildings for persons with visual impairments, (2) digital and ICT accessibility, (3) adaptation of teaching materials to the needs of students with low vision and blind students, (4) barriers to taking full advantage of higher education, and (5) students' proposals for change to improve the study conditions for persons with visual impairments.

Accessibility of university buildings for persons with visual impairments

Inclusive higher education institutions (HEIs) are expected to ensure that students with disabilities can participate fully in academic and campus life. Many institutions have begun to address architectural accessibility through renovations and the installation of assistive infrastructure. However, the narratives of participants in this study indicate that these efforts are often insufficient or inconsistently implemented.

Students described various challenges in navigating university buildings. A recurring concern was the absence of proper tactile or audible signage, which made locating classrooms, administrative offices, or restrooms difficult without assistance. Several respondents emphasised the anxiety and dependence this creates, particularly when trying to orient themselves in unfamiliar buildings. One participant explained:

> *There are no markings or labels I can read; I usually have to ask someone every time I change buildings* (Respondent 2).

Concerns were also raised about the lack of visual contrast on stairs or obstacles such as pillars and low-hanging signage, which posed physical risks. As one respondent remarked:

> *I tripped more than once on unmarked steps or barriers. There's nothing that warns you—no colour, no texture, nothing* (Respondent 6).

While a few students acknowledged the presence of accessible lifts with Braille and voice systems, these were more often described as exceptions rather than the rule. Audible signage and QR-code based room labelling, which could facilitate greater independence, were reportedly absent. A student with blindness summarised the situation bluntly:

> *Absolutely nothing helps me navigate independently. Everything I need, I have to fight for* (Respondent 9).

Most respondents assessed their experience with the built environment negatively, with some reporting that architectural barriers were a frequent, even daily, obstacle to their autonomy.

Digital and ICT accessibility at HEIs

European higher education policies are strongly committed to improving chances for diverse learners. Accessibility is understood among other things, as providing access to information, communication technologies and systems (ICT), as well as other facilities and services, on an equal basis with others (*European Commission*…, 2010). As a result, applicants, students, and other stakeholders form their first impressions of the HEI accessibility policy when they access its website. To prevent architectural barriers and putting students with disabilities at a disadvantage compared to their peers without disabilities, equal participation and digital inclusion should be provided (Fichten et.al., 2020). In the presented research students with visual impairments were asked to assess digital and ICT accessibility at their university. The results show that according to students with low vision, basic accessibility options such as the option to enlarge the font on the website and to increase contrast on the page were provided by their university web pages. Accessibility for blind students using screen readers was more problematic. None of the universities provided their blind students with audio descriptions or alternative forms for media or voice-enabled search on the website.

In relation to their experiences with searching their university websites students reported:

> *The website is very complicated and hard for my screen reader to follow it. Without the help of a sighted assistant, I don't even try to search for anything there* (Respondent 1).

> *Unfortunately, the website is very hard to use with a screen reader* (Respondent 2).

My university's website is full of not appropriately marked links and buttons that are not compatible with the screen reading software, i.e., you can click on them endlessly and nothing happens. When uploading my undergraduate thesis into the system I had to be assisted by a sighted person (Respondent 10).

You can often get lost, too many tables, buttons not marked as buttons. There is no sound (Respondent 3).

The website contains information not aligned with the headings and it is very difficult to find it. Alternative descriptions are missing, documents saved as scans are completely inaccessible to me (Respondent 7).

At my university, the website is absolutely not adapted in any way for people with visual impairments. It is completely cluttered. It should be simplified (Respondent 8).

Several participants described feeling isolated or disadvantaged during online learning activities. Problems included inaccessible virtual platforms, unreadable scanned documents, and audio content without transcripts or captions. These barriers extended beyond formal learning to administrative procedures, such as accessing forms or submitting assignments.

In line with prior research, such as Fichten et al. (2020), these findings underscore that digital accessibility is not merely a technical concern but a matter of equal participation in academic life.

Adaptation of teaching materials to the needs of students with visual impairments

Universities are bound to find appropriate and efficient ways to produce accessible resources that benefit and support all students due to equal access regulations and the enrolment of students with visual impairments in higher education. However, the respondents' experience shows that the area related to the adequate preparation of teaching materials to meet the needs of students with low vision and blind students in particular, is the most neglected one.

The teaching materials used at HEIs are predominantly sight-based. The most problematic are printed materials (especially those containing photographs, drawings, diagrams, or charts not described by alternative text), PowerPoint presentations, and video materials used during the classes. In most cases, they are not accessible to students with visual impairments. Respondent 9, a recent graduate who describes herself as blind, stated:

Lectures and practical classes were typically conducted for sighted people. All videos used by the teachers lacked audio descriptions. All PowerPoint presentations were based on visual images only and their content was not explained. Not being able to use the available materials makes it impossible for me to be an independent student. I was constantly assigned to someone to help me – either an assistant or another student. This was a very difficult and stressful experience.

According to the respondents, by using only printed materials, i.e., articles, books, or reports as a main source of reference to a given subject, academics exclude students with visual impairments from most of the course activities:

> *It is very difficult with the accessibility of learning materials at my university. Sometimes I was required to know a given topic without any materials, to solve tasks, and to do exercises only by listening to what is going on during the classes. Once I was asked during my oral exam evaluating my fluency in spoken English to describe a scene in the presented picture. Unfortunately, I failed this exam* (Respondent 2).

One of the respondents (R7) indicated that the rare opportunity to record lectures using a voice recorder and the adaptation of some materials by the staff in the Office for Students with Disabilities were the only forms of support in accessing didactic materials at their university.

Areas of difficulty and barriers in accessibility of HEIs for students with visual impairments

In many HEIs where the respondents study, barriers that prevent them from functioning on equal terms with non-disabled peers are still present. It turns out that the problems are not only the unadapted university buildings (i.e., lack of proper signage in the building and marking of dangerous places), lack of necessary assistive technologies or unfriendly technical solutions for persons with visual impairments but also the persisting difficulties in accessing the full range of educational resources. Many respondents encountered difficulties in all areas of accessing learning materials, including delayed availability of reference materials, learning materials not being provided in an accessible format, inaccessible virtual learning environments (Moodle, MsTeams, Usos), unhelpful lecturers, and difficulties accessing the facility's and library's resources.

The needs of students with disabilities including blindness and visual impairments are not always met in a way that is expected from HEIs:

> *The most important thing is that we can count on our sighted assistants. Thanks to them, we can study. You should have a lot of willpower and persistence to complete your studies*. (Respondent 1)

> *Even though there were already a few blind people at my university, I feel like I have to blaze new trails. The university makes absolutely no effort to be accessible to blind students. Everything has to be fought for.* (Respondent 7)

> *People from the university tried to solve my problems, but it didn't always work out. I had to adapt materials and print them out for myself instead of learning*. (Respondent 9)

Several respndents of the present research who describes themselves as blind commented that they were not aware that moving from high school to university would be such a "dramatic transition".

Students' proposals for change to improve the study conditions for students with visual impairments

Access to learning materials is an important factor to achieve educational objectives. Many times, in this study, students stressed the fact that these materials need to be adapted and properly prepared to be useful for students with visual impairments. In their view, training academics in this area is one of the key aspects of improving students' study conditions together with promoting the concept of accessibility among the broadly understood university community.

By adhering to established inclusive teaching practises (such as making teaching materials available in digital form and in advance as well as ensuring the institution's virtual learning environment is accessible for screen reader users) and making the necessary adjustments, (e.g., ensuring accessible versions of key texts are available in advance), many difficulties faced by students with visual impairments can be overcome.

Some modifications are necessary in response to particular circumstances, and they may call for human assistance (e.g., readers and note-takers). Respondents express how beneficial it is for them to have access to digital lecture materials, particularly in advance of the lectures. This enables them to engage more independently. In students' opinion, there is evidence that academics do not constantly format electronic files so that they can be accessed using screen reading technology:

> *I have never encountered a situation where the lecturer would have prepared the material so that it can be used with a screen reader*. (Respondent 6).

> *It is very important to make lecturers aware of the importance of good* (*i.e., accessible to us*) *materials.* (Respondent 7)

> *Accessibility of materials is key to our "to be or not to be" at university.* (Respondent 9)

> *It is very important to change the lecturers' attitude: they must be more flexible in meeting our needs and then we will be able to study with pleasure.* (Respondent 1)

Access to information has been acknowledged as a fundamental human right, irrespective of race, religion, or physical limitations (Awais & Ameen, 2015, p. 103). It makes it possible for users to easily access the information they need (Kleynhans & Fourie, 2014). Respondents of the present research facing limitations in equal access to documents and information shared with the university community online also call for greater accessibility of their university websites. Web pages accessibility evaluation is a pending process. Due to its dynamic nature, it should be continuously monitored and tested.

It is not just the digital infrastructure that is a challenge for students with visual impairments, but also inappropriate communication styles and an indifferent attitude of teachers and administrative staff that hamper the educational

development of visually challenged students. According to the respondents, the university community should reflect on how to communicate with persons with disabilities and what language is used, as the way we refer to disability and people with disabilities can be limiting. In particular, academic and administrative staff should adopt communication practices that are respectful, inclusive, and accessibility-oriented when interacting with students with visual impairments. A growing body of research underscores the importance of person-first language, which places the individual before the disability and contributes to reducing stigma and stereotyping (Crocker, 2019; Grech, 2024). For example, it is recommended to refer to a "student with a visual impairment" rather than "a blind student," unless the individual explicitly expresses a preference for identity-first language.

Effective communication also involves clearly identifying oneself during verbal exchanges, particularly in group settings, to assist students who cannot rely on visual cues to track the speaker (ADCET, 2024). Furthermore, it is essential to ask before offering assistance, respecting the autonomy of students. If support is welcomed, the student should be allowed to take the staff member's elbow rather than being physically guided without consent (UTSA Disability Services, 2025). Vague references such as "over there" or "this one" should be avoided; instead, staff should provide specific and descriptive verbal cues (e.g., "the second door on your left, next to the elevator") to facilitate spatial orientation (Harvard University Disability Access Office, 2024). Finally, all interactions should be grounded in professional respect and equality, avoiding overcompensation or expressions of pity, which can undermine the goal of fostering an inclusive and empowering academic environment (World Health Organization, 2011).

Discussion

There have been numerous attempts to develop an educational environment where students, regardless of their traits, interests, skills, or abilities, feel competent, appreciated, and not excluded. In this sense, the right of people with disabilities to access higher education is a well-established legal right (Yssel, Pak & Beilke, 2016). Nevertheless, there are still gaps in its application, which makes the road to inclusion for many institutions longer and results in a number of genuine barriers to accessing education for people with disabilities (Croft, 2020; Fernández-Batanero, Montenegro-Rueda, & Fernández-Cerero, 2022).

Students' with visual impairments experiences in HEIs are underrepresented in literature. Research frequently focuses on disabled students more broadly or on specific occurrences and experiences within the student learning experience. However, available research results show many barriers to accessing higher ed-

ucation for this group of students (Hewett et. al., 2017; Okoye & Adirika, 2019; Szczupał, 2022). To advance further on the inclusion path we need to understand the obstacles that make it impossible for these students to access higher education. The experiences of students with visual impairments presented in this research can be classified into three groups of barriers related to (1) infrastructure/building accessibility, (2) information, digital, and ICT accessibility, and (3) the teaching–learning process.

Responsibilities under *the Act of July 19, 2019, on Providing Accessibility to People with Special Needs* (Journal of Laws of 2019, item 1696) to persons with visual impairments include:

a) with regard to architectural accessibility:
   — ensuring mobility on and between floors,
   — making it possible to reach all rooms (except technical) in the building,
   — making it possible to navigate inside the building,
   — making it possible to enter the building with an assistance dog,
   — ensuring safe evacuation from the building;
b) in terms of digital accessibility: the requirements set out in the law of April 4, 2019, on the digital accessibility of websites and mobile applications of public entities;
c) in terms of information and communication accessibility: the provision on the website of the entity information on the scope of its activities, in the form of an electronic file containing machine-readable text.

The results of the presented study show that in each of the areas indicated in the cited Act, students with visual impairments experienced barriers or limitations. While the possibility of access with a guide dog is fully provided, marking for easy and safe access to all university buildings and rooms or evacuation routes is problematic. Similar problems were found in a study by Omede (2015). Students also reported frequent difficulties in terms of digital accessibility: mainly in accessing the content of the university websites in audio format, the lack of alternative descriptions for posted images and graphics, and the incompatibility of webpages with the screen readers they use.

The most onerous area according to the results of the present research was that related to the teaching–learning process. Particularly, access to learning resources was an issue, since in most cases they are not adapted to students' needs or are limited and teachers neglect these needs. These results are in alignment with other studies (Hougann, 1999; Omede, 2015, Hewett et al., 2017, Szczupał, 2022). Hewett, Douglas & Keil (2017) present the evidence that:

> for students with more severe visual impairments who are reliant on screen reader software or braille, the lecture material which is provided to them is not accessible, unless further adjustments and modifications are made. Several participants of their research

> relied on other staff in the university, for example, library support assistants or transcription teams, to make these adjustments (Hewett et al., 2017, p. 24).

Ibrahim (as cited in Otyola, Kibanja, & Mugagga, 2017) studied the problems of students with visual impairments at the University of Jordan. The obtained results shown that there were similar research problems as the ones identified here, such as limited access to library resources and difficulties related to teachers not understanding these students' needs.

Conclusion

Disability is a university-wide concern. Incorporating students with disabilities in mainstream university education requires HEI initiatives to enhance accessibility, making the call for accessible learning environments a reality. Offering a truly inclusive learning environment is a complex process and developing an inclusive culture that serves all students requires thinking and acting differently on both the personal and institutional levels. Working at all levels—from senior leadership to academics, administrative staff to students—is necessary to create an inclusive culture. Thereby, one of the most crucial elements in reaching the objective of disability diversity and inclusion is shaping the culture of higher education institutions. Such culture should emphasize making coworkers and students with disabilities feel welcome, assuring them of their fair treatment and equal access, and meeting their needs.

Study Limitations

While the findings of this study contribute valuable insights to the limited body of research on the accessibility of higher education institutions (HEIs) for students with visual impairments, several limitations must be acknowledged. Reaching blind individuals who are both willing and able to participate in qualitative research remains challenging. Consequently, the study was based on a small, non-representative sample, and its results should therefore be interpreted with caution and not generalised beyond the immediate context.

Future research could benefit from exploring the specific support services provided to students with visual impairments by institutional units such as the Disability Support Office (Polish: Biuro ds. Osób z Niepełnosprawnościami – BON). Furthermore, while this study included both students with low vision and those who are blind, future research might consider employing a more homogeneous purposive sample to enhance the reliability and depth of the analysis.

It is also important to note that, in the 2023/2024 academic year, only 0.13% of all university students in Poland identified themselves as blind or having a severe visual impairment. This low prevalence highlights the relative rarity of visual impairment in the HEI population. As the findings indicate, this presents challenges for academic staff and disability support officers, many of whom lack prior experience in working with students with significant visual impairments.

Despite the low incidence, visual impairments are classified as "high need" disabilities due to the extensive accommodations and support often required. Institutions must therefore ensure adequate preparedness, training, and systemic responses to meet these needs, regardless of how infrequently such cases occur.

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Dostępność instytucji szkolnictwa wyższego dla studentów z niepełnosprawnością wzroku — rzeczywistość i proponowane kierunki zmian

Streszczenie

Celem badania było poznanie doświadczeń studentów z dysfunkcją wzroku w zakresie dostępności szkół wyższych w Polsce. Artykuł podejmuje problem barier strukturalnych i cyfrowych, które utrudniają pełne uczestnictwo tych studentów w życiu akademickim. Zastosowano metodę jakościową, opartą na ankiecie z pytaniami otwartymi, umożliwiającą zebranie szczegółowych narracji studentów słabowidzących i niewidomych. Analiza tematyczna odpowiedzi pozwoliła wyodrębnić pięć kluczowych obszarów: dostępność architektoniczną, integrację cyfrową i ICT, dostosowanie materiałów dydaktycznych, bariery systemowe oraz rekomendacje studentów dotyczące usprawnień. Wyniki badania pokazują, że mimo pewnych postępów nadal występują istotne trudności – szczególnie w zakresie dostępności materiałów dydaktycznych, funkcjonalności stron internetowych uczelni oraz przygotowania kadry akademickiej. Uzyskane wyniki badań podkreślają pilną potrzebę wdrażania polityk inkluzyjnych, ukierunkowanego wsparcia edukacyjnego oraz szkoleń dla pracowników uczelni, aby skutecznie odpowiadać na złożone potrzeby tej nielicznej, ale wymagającej intensywnego wsparcia grupy studentów.

Słowa kluczowe: dostępność, szkolnictwo wyższe, dysfunkcja wzroku, edukacja włączająca.