

The University Administrative Staff Perception of Inclusion in Higher Education

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Abstract. This study investigates university administrative staff perception of inclusion in higher education at the university level. The study uses the University of Latvia as a case to answer the following research questions: What constitutes inclusion in university education, how accessibility is provided? What are the support systems provided for diverse students? What support and training are provided to administrative and academic staff to ensure that the educational needs of diverse student bodies are met? The methodology employed is exploratory and descriptive, and uses the interview method and semi-structured questionnaire. The sample is made of seven administrative staff members representing all levels of administration in the University. Findings suggest that administrative staff members perceive inclusion as a new principle for HE, where diversity is perceived in its broader sense. Findings indicate that support is provided to all students, but that the support is not designed specifically for students with diverse needs. Findings suggested that none of the administrative staff or academics had received training on how to address student diversity.

Keywords: inclusion, perception, higher education, University of Latvia

Kaip universiteto administracijos darbuotojai supranta inkluziją aukštajame moksle

Santrauka. Straipsnyje tiriamas universiteto administracijos darbuotojų inkluzijos aukštajame moksle suvokimas. Aprašomame tyrime pasitelkiamas Latvijos universitetas kaip atvejis siekiant atsakyti į šiuos tyrimo klausimus: kas yra inkluzija aukštajame moksle, kaip užtikrinamas prieinamumas? Kokios paramos sistemos teikiamos studentams, turintiems specialiųjų poreikių? Kokia parama ir mokymai teikiami administracijos ir akademiniam personalui siekiant užtikrinti, kad būtų patenkinti įvairių studentų ugdymosi poreikiai? Tyrime taikoma tiriamoji ir aprašomoji metodologija, naudojamas interviu metodas ir pusiau struktūruota anketa. Imtį sudaro septyni visiems

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universiteto administrāciju līmenī atstāvojamie administrācijas darbinieki. Rezultāti atklāja, ka administrācijas darbinieki iekļaujuma kā augstākajā izglītībā jaunai piemērojamai principam, kā arī iekļaujuma kā plašā nozīmē. Palīdzība tiek sniegta visiem studentiem, tā ir vērsta ne tikai uz turētājiem īpašu vajadzību. Rezultāti arī patstāvīgi rāda, ka neviens administrācijas darbinieks vai darbiniece nebija apmācīts spēt noteikt studentu īpašu vajadzību jautājumus.

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: iekļaujuma, iekļaujuma, augstākā izglītība, Latvijas universitāte.

Introduction

In the last 30 years, there has been a considerable paradigm shift in education regarding inclusive education policy and practice around the globe. Inclusive education is viewed as a cornerstone of a transformative education agenda that enhances changes at all educational levels (UNESCO, 2016). The politically defined movement towards Education for All (UNESCO, 1994), by promoting accessibility, equity, and quality of education, has gradually increased the educational opportunities for the number of those children and youth who previously were excluded or segregated and could not attend school. Although initially inclusive education was viewed as a philosophical idea (Göransson & Nilholm, 2014), later developed as an inclusive approach to pedagogy, known as inclusive pedagogy (Florian & BlackHawkins, 2011), it was implemented in general education (preschool, primary school, secondary school) in particular and was seen in higher education, too. In this article, inclusion in higher education is broadly perceived as a phenomenon whereby higher education institutions become more accessible to everyone, especially to disadvantaged and previously excluded or marginalised groups of people, thus providing opportunities to study and participate meaningfully in the same learning and social activities as others and to have a qualitative education. The term diversity is used to describe 'a population where people within the protected classes are represented' (Scott, 2020).

The context of the study

The University of Latvia is the leading higher education institution in the country with the highest number of Faculties, academic staff and students. There are more than 15 000 students (18% of all the students in Latvia; 5% are international students) in 13 Faculties at the University of Latvia. In the 2018/2019 academic year 3720 students started basic studies and a total of 3360 students obtained a degree or qualification. There are 1404 academic staff employed at the University of Latvia (Latvijas Universitāte Komunikācijas un inovāciju departaments, 2020). Currently there is no information on how many students with diverse educational needs study at the University of Latvia, no such information is collected either by state nor by the university. The only available data are from the survey of 1st year students organized by the Department of Studies of the University of Latvia. Since 2016, the Department of Studies of the University of Latvia has been conducting a centralized survey of the first-year basic studies students. The survey includes one question related to whether students have special needs and need special support in the study process. The results of the 2020 survey show that

1% of respondents (out of 3160 students, which is 88% of all first year basic grade students) admit that they have some kind of special needs (movement disorders, hearing impairments, visual impairments, learning disabilities and other disabilities), but 5% of them do not want to answer this question. The results coincide with the results of the same survey from four years ago (Studiju departaments, 2021).

Theoretical background

According to the Salamanca Declaration (UNESCO, 1994, 2), inclusive education systems and curricula must be designed to take account of the wide variety of unique characteristics, interests, abilities and learning needs of each person. To remain as important player of society HE institutions need to make important changes to preserve their role as prominent stakeholders that serve and develop society and their graduates for success in a diverse and 'globally interconnected world' (Gleason, 2020). It is important to look at higher education in terms of the opportunities it opens up for everyone, young people, as well as for people of all ages and diverse learning needs. We should see higher education not only as preparing people for a profession but also as a contribution to society and to lifelong learning. International policy documents encourage HE institutions to become more inclusive for all, including persons with disabilities (United Nations, 2006). Moriña (2017) indicates transition strategies for fostering the participation and academic success of all students in HE institutions. First, there should be full accessibility without any physical barriers that could prevent students' participation in the study process. Second, proactive actions, such as special orientation sessions and consultations, should be provided to ensure a sensitive transition for students with disabilities and functional impairments during their first study year, thus helping students to adapt to the academic environment. Finally, the personnel of HE institutions should be provided with training and educational support. Moriña (2017) states that faculty members within higher education should be instructed in how to apply a universal design in the education process and how to implement diverse instructional and methodological strategies to satisfy the learning needs of all the students. As it is admitted by Moriña (2020) inclusive practices help students to remain at university and successfully complete their degrees. There is still a need to continue to reflect on existing practices in the way inclusive pedagogies are performed in HE, as the researchers do not share a common understanding of inclusive pedagogies in HE (Stentiford & Koutsouris, 2020).

Even though the initial discussions on inclusive HE were held in the early 1990s and the topic is not new in educational research, in practice the changes in HE are not so rapid. The HE political, social, and institutional contexts can be very diverse in different countries (Armstrong & Cairnduff, 2011). Many studies elsewhere have been carried out by analysing important issues related to inclusion in higher education in national contexts, such as general challenges related to inclusion in higher education (Moriña, 2017), perception of inclusive education in higher education (Martins, Borges, & Gonçalves, 2018), the inclusion of students with disabilities (Beauchamp-Pryor, 2012; Collins, Azmat, & Rentschler, 2019; Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012; Madriaga et al., 2010; Mutanga, 2018; Parker, 1998; Van Den Heuij, Neijenhuis, & Coene, 2018; Yusof, Chan,

Hillaluddin, Ramli, & Saad, 2020, Zabeli, Kačaniku Koliqi & Li, 2021), the inclusion of socioeconomically disadvantaged students (Armstrong & Cairnduff, 2011; Lesley, 2016; Weedon & Riddell, 2016), the inclusion of students with minority ethnic backgrounds (D'Arcy & Galloway, 2018; Weedon & Riddell, 2016), internalisation challenges related to inclusion (Iñiguez, 2011), and social inclusion (Gale & Hodge, 2014).

Since 2014 there has been a strong political movement towards inclusive education in Latvia (*Izglītības un zinātnes ministrija*, 2013); the most significant changes have been achieved in general education, thus most studies have been done on inclusive education in general education. A rather small number of studies have been carried out exploring inclusion and its practice in higher education. For example, Rubene, Daniela, Nīmante, and Kraģe (2016) explored inclusive education practices in tertiary teacher education institutions; Tubele, Margevica, Bolton, Doan, and McGinley (2017) studied Latvian college students' perspectives on inclusion; Tamtik and Jang (2018) investigated the internationalisation of and openness towards language diversity in universities of the Baltic States, Iliško, Rubene, Oļehnoviča, and Medne (2020) studied HE students competences for embracing differences, but Nīmante and Baranova (2019) investigated master students social inclusion to avoid student dropout.

Several stakeholders are involved in developing inclusive higher education. One of those groups - HE administration, who is responsible both for student – centeredness and support for students and university academics (Morina, 2017). The current study contributes to the gap of knowledge on the perception of inclusion shared by members of university administrative staff. The study uses the University of Latvia as a case. The research questions are led by theoretical analyses (Moriña, 2017), where three major transition strategies for fostering the participation and academic success of all students in HE institutions are stated: accessibility to HE, provided support systems for student diversity during the transition from general education to higher education and during the study process; support for administrative and academic staff to ensure inclusive pedagogy In the study we will address three research questions:

- What constitutes inclusion in university education, how accessibility is provided?
- What are the support systems provided for diverse students to ensure the smooth transition from general education to higher education and later in the study process?
- What support and training is provided to administrative and academic staff to ensure that the educational needs of diverse student bodies are met?

Method

The research was carried out from January 2020 to June 2020. This exploratory and descriptive study follows a qualitative methodology. We choose the qualitative research design because the method is suitable to answer these questions of this research; the topic has not been studied before in Latvia. We used a single case study to explore the phenomena and answer the research questions. We selected the University of Latvia for our case study for several reasons: its size (it is the largest higher education institution in Latvia); its openness to being studied; its accessibility; the fact that all of the researchers

work in the university; and the fact that it was possible to organise interviews with all levels of administrative staff.

Based on theoretical analyses (Moriña, 2017) one set of semi-structured interview questions was developed to interview administrative staff about their perceptions regarding inclusion in university. The questions consisted of two parts. The first part included closed-ended questions about demographic characteristics (years of employment at the institution, education, position). The second and main part was based on research questions. The following are examples of interview questions that we included in our interviews: ‘How would you explain inclusive education in higher education? Could you provide some examples? Do you think inclusive education can open doors so that everyone can study in higher education institutions? How would you describe accessibility? What support is currently provided for inclusive education in your university for students, especially during the transition period from general education to university level education? Could you give some practical examples? Is there any support for students with additional needs? How would you describe the current situation? How are the university teachers insuring inclusive education at the university? How would you describe the support provided for university teachers to ensure inclusive education in HE?’

In order to obtain comprehensive answers to the research questions, the sample was purposefully selected and diversified. Selection criteria for the staff interviewees were as follows: (1) voluntary participation; (2) having a workplace in the HE institution; (3) position; (4) at least three years of experience. One of the most important selection criteria was the position of the administrative staff. Respondents from all levels of University administration, from the Vice-Rector to the Head of the Faculty Study Service Centre, were selected for the study. All participants were professionals, expressing their opinion and sharing their views and they had more than five years of work experience in the HE institution.

Seven individual, face-to-face interviews with university administrative staff were conducted (see Table 1). Before each interview, participants were informed of the main purpose of the study, the researchers confirmed that the participants met the criteria to participate in the study and were assured of confidentiality. The investigation was conducted based on the ethical requirements set out by the University of Latvia.

Table 1. *Characteristics of the participants*

Participants	Scientific degree	Position	Academic staff
P01	Dr.	Vice Rector	Yes
P02	Bc.	Senior Expert of Study process	No
P03	Bc.	Methodologist of Student Services	No
P04	Dr..	Dean	Yes
P05	Dr..	Vice-Dean of the Faculty	Yes
P06	Dr.	Head of Department	Yes
P07	Mg.	Head of the Faculty Study Service Centre	No

Semi structured interviews were carried out by 2 researchers. After the first interview the team of the researchers reassembled to discuss whether the developed semi-structured interviews questions allow respondents to express freely their attitudes and views. Minor changes were made. One question “Do you think inclusive education can open doors so that everyone can study in higher education institutions?” was reformulated: “What changes could bring inclusive education to higher education?”. As a result, all questions in the research were open-ended, so as to prevent the participants from simply agreeing or disagreeing to the questions.

The interviews used a format that encouraged participants to engage in conversation with the interviewers and to report their perceptions regarding inclusion. At first, general questions were asked, then more specific ones. When the answer was not sufficiently clear, additional clarifications were often requested, without altering the semi-structured nature of the interview. Some questions were asked twice using different wording. Such an approach helped to minimize participants’ social desirability bias. Each interview lasted 25–40 minutes. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. An interview protocol was developed for each of them.

Data collection was followed by thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006) driven by research questions. As is acknowledged by Braun and Clark (2006), thematic analysis involves searching the data and finding repeating patterns of meaning; it identifies, analyses, and reports patterns (themes) within data. After the data was transcribed, the researchers started reading and rereading the data. After that, codes were identified jointly by all the researchers. The coding was done manually, after which codes were arranged in mind maps. Potential themes emerged. Established themes were reviewed several times. Final themes were described and analysed, and some data matches were performed. To avoid pre-existing assumptions, the data was analysed by the researcher who was not directly involved in the data collection. The research team re-examined the analysis and jointly drew conclusions.

Results

The four main themes that emerged partially reflect the research questions: perception of inclusive education in HE, accessibility of HE, support for student diversity, and support for university personnel to work with diversity.

Perception of inclusive education in the university

The main theme that emerged among participants was the perception of inclusive education as a new principle in HE that takes into account the diversity of students (religious affiliation, ethnicity, socio-economic background, disabilities, health conditions), respects that diversity, and adapts to it in many different ways (P02, P06, P01, P05). One participant explained: *‘Inclusive education would be the principle that we take into account the diversity of students, respect this diversity, and I mean diversity*

in a broader sense here—needs, interests, religion, including intellectual development, physical development.’ (P06).

Inclusive education has been seen as a way to provide enhanced study opportunities in HE for more students than before (P04), especially for those who have additional needs in the study process, thus expanding the opportunities for more students to study in higher education and lowering dropout’s rates. Reference was made (P01) to the ‘The Universal Declaration of Human Rights’, which declares that *‘higher education shall be equally accessible to all based on merit’* (The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948, article 26).

Participants (P07, P01, P04) agreed that inclusive education has broadened the understanding of which social groups are entitled to higher education. It was mentioned: students with special needs (terminology used in general education in Latvia) or disabilities, refugees, migrants, asylum seekers, and immigrants. The term ‘disabilities’ was used broadly; it may include specific learning disabilities, attention deficit disorder, visual impairment, hearing impairment, physical disability, speech and language impairment, dyslexia/dysgraphia, and mental health conditions.

Two participants (P01, P07) stated that the main task for inclusive education is to reduce any form of discrimination by providing equal opportunities in higher education for the diverse student population. Participants noted that inclusive education in higher education should become more accessible to all social groups in society and should adapt the university environment to meet students’ needs. Most participants were referring to adaptations for those students with physical disabilities: *‘Notwithstanding the non-discrimination factors set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, this is particularly the case for people with disabilities. The most important thing is not to have a person who is intellectually capable of studying and contributing to the development of society but cannot study simply because the environment is not suitable for his needs’* (P01).

Similarly, another participant explained that universities should provide support for all students with disabilities: *‘If people have special needs to be able to acquire knowledge fully, it is difficult to acquire this knowledge in the generally accepted way, then the institution must provide support’* (P04).

Accessibility in higher education

Participants (P01, P04, P07, P05) agreed that anyone who can meet the requirements set by universities should have the right and equal opportunities to be admitted to a higher education institution. One of the participants in the study explained this: *‘Since everyone can study at school, in general education, everyone can have the right to go to higher education, regardless of their health or developmental disabilities’* (P05).

On the other hand, as participants repeatedly acknowledged, higher education is not compulsory education, so higher education itself imposes many restrictions. First of all, entry to a higher education institution requires a certain level of education, such as a

high school diploma (P04). Secondly, there are certain regulations, requirements, and restrictions for certain professions to enter the profession, professional standards stipulate what knowledge, skills, and competencies job applicants need to have, and at what level they need to perform (P06, P02, P07). One of the participants explains: *'It would be rather dangerous if the person with serious mental health disability work with children, they can harm both children and themselves'* (P02). Another participant of the study calls it the inclusion dilemma of higher education: *'On the one hand, it is good to allow everyone to study in higher education, but on the other hand, professional requirements are strict and not everyone can meet them. I think that probably no one will change these professional standards at the moment, and that would be dangerous in some cases'* (P07). To overcome such a dilemma, it is important to have very realistic career guidance for youths so that they may choose the right profession (P01). The person should have a realistic view of the profession and of what knowledge, skills, and competencies would be required to enter it; this is very important for those who have any disability (P01).

Third, higher education requires a certain personal maturity, and a certain level of intellectual development, to study independently and implement self-directed learning in the higher education study process (P01).

If a student is enrolled in a HE institution, taking into account that he or she has met the requirements, then it is important to make sure that no new barriers are created that would prevent accessibility (P01, P07). One of the participants acknowledges that it can be a problem if physical accessibility becomes an obstacle: *'There must be no situation where a person who is intellectually capable of studying and contributing to the development of society but cannot study only because the environment is not suitable for his needs'* (P01). The problem with physical accessibility was mentioned by several participants (P01, P07, P03), as the University is located in several, mainly old buildings. Some of those buildings are not accessible for students with physical disabilities. At the same time, there are newly constructed buildings on the University campus, and they are fully accessible to students with physical disabilities.

Although higher education is still considered a special privilege (P01), at the same time it should look for ways to make it more accessible to all who want to study in higher education. One of the study participants suggested that HE institutions should become more open, and that there should be some other possible study ways developed how people can access higher education, for example, by studying without acquiring a diploma. She commented: *'There are often cases when a student is studying, but he or she is not able to meet requirements and a diploma cannot be issued for it. I think that those who want to study should be given the opportunity, even if they are unable to obtain a diploma'* (P07).

Support for student's diversity

It is clear from the findings that there is some support provided to all students to overcome any difficulties during the study process, but not specifically for students with additional

needs. Several resources that students can use in the University were mentioned. For example, when entering the University, there are some introductory lectures provided for all students; there is a mentor program at the University to assist all students in the transition process from general education to university (P03); and there are several activities organized by student councils designed to help students understand the support systems in the University (P02). Every student in the University has an opportunity to apply for consultations in the UL Career Center (P03), where a psychologist and career consultants are available free of charge. Although it is intended for all students and students with different diverse needs are not singled out, there is nothing extra or specially provided for students with diverse needs, for example, for students with disabilities. The only support, as two participants mentioned, is that a student who has some kind of disability or who is dealing with some other conditions (low socioeconomic status, re-immigrant status, disability), can apply for reduced study costs (P05, P07). The support provided by the current law (state level) stipulates that students with certain disabilities can have an assistant, students with hearing disability can have interpreter during the study process. As it was admitted by one participant, it has already become a norm in the University, so that administrative staff and academics are used to it (P07). Overall, as participants acknowledged, every case can be different, and it is very important to solve each situation with the right attitude, as a human being who wants to help another human being. Nevertheless, there are some good and bad examples on support provided to students with disabilities. For example, there have been cases where students have assisted students with disabilities to access a classroom by carrying them to the second floor. There are lecturers who allow students to use a Braille machine in the classroom (P01). It is common for administrators to assist students with physical disabilities by arranging appropriate technical aids to ensure their ability to get access to auditoriums (P07). At the same time, there are bad examples too, for example when lecturers forbid students with visual impairment from using the Brail machine during exams considering it as a breach of equality (P01).

Although the majority of administrators provided some examples of support for all students, there were also answers such as: *'It is mostly up to students themselves, how they deal with difficulties due to their diverse educational needs or disabilities'* (P05) and *'I have to admit that there is a lack of such special support in recent years for students with diverse needs'* (P04). Nevertheless, three participants explained that some individual support is provided by both administrative and academic staff (P05, P01, P06), and that every case is individual, so individual solutions are sought. It was stated by participants, that such individual approach can be done as far as there are limited numbers of students with diverse needs in the classroom. If there are more such students, then individualised solutions may not work. Administrators admitted that there are still limited numbers of students with disabilities studying at the University. They have some experience with students with physical disabilities and hearing and visual disabilities, but no experience or less experience with other forms of disabilities, for example, learning and mental disabilities (P02).

Support for university personnel to work with diversity

Generally, participants stated that administrators and academics do not have any specific support to deal with diversity in an inclusive context, and that there has not been any training or educational opportunities provided by the University so far. One of the participants explained: *'Yes, there should be probably some kind of training or another kind of education provided, but unfortunately, at the moment there is no such thing'* (P02). Other participants added: *'From one side, we can cope, but from the others — it would be rather important to have such kind of information how to help those students, it should be part of our professional knowledge'* (P06). As one participant noted, such knowledge becomes very important, as administrators and academics often face situations in which they lack the knowledge needed to deal with certain cases—both from the legal and the pedagogical viewpoint—for example, when a student is admitted to the University, but his behaviour (possibly due to his disability) is unacceptable for a University student, and can be very strange and sometimes makes University staff feel threatened (P01).

The participants stated that they are aware of inclusive education as a general principle, that there have been some articles about it, and some conferences, most notably in general education, but that specific knowledge on how to deal with specific diversity cases in practice is missing. One participant stated that she has not been in direct contact with such students, so she is not worried about it yet. One of the participants suggested that it would be a good idea to establish some kind of special administrative post in University Student Services, whose responsibility would be to provide consultation and support to administrative staff, and probably training as well: *'It would be nice if I could go to such person and talk about the problems I have with some very specific students'* (P07). The need for training was stated too (P06, P01), as well as the need to develop some kind of general recommendations and guidance (P03). One participant mentioned that other universities in the world provide some kind of specific training for administrative and academic staff, and that some common guidance have been developed (P01). One participant thinks that for now, while the number of students with diverse needs is limited, it is possible to cope case by case, and that there is no need to spend extra money. If there are more diverse students, then the University will have to face those problems by relocating recourses and providing some king of provision (P05).

Conclusions and discussions

The purpose of this study was to investigate University of Latvia staff perception of inclusion in higher education at the university level by analysing the transition strategies for fostering the participation and academic success of all students in HE. Findings indicate that transition strategies for fostering the participation and academic success of all students in UL are ensured only partly.

According to the participants, **access to higher education** for all is currently limited both by the requirements for students entering higher education and by professional standards set out for certain study programs. A person's intellectual abilities are also

considered to be an important prerequisite for starting studies in higher education. Such findings contradict the current tendencies in higher education elsewhere, where people with intellectual disabilities are perceived as the group that can be included in higher education by providing mixed model inclusion programs that promote student with intellectual disability enrolment in the labour market (Herrero, Gasset & Garcia, 2020). HE institutions are encouraged to become more inclusive for all by providing different study opportunities for students who would never before have considered studying in HE institutions (Björnsdóttir, 2017). Certain steps have been taken, and changes promoted, both in legislative acts and in practice. There are more and more such programs around the world (Brewer & Movahedazarhouligh, 2019). The results of such programs are rather positive, as students after graduating from those programs have been entering the labour market; such practices raises awareness as a social value in higher education (Herrero, Gasset, & Garcia, 2020).

The current study participants agreed that if a student is enrolled in an HE institution, assuming that he has met the requirements, then it is important to make sure that no new barriers are created which prevent accessibility. The most common barrier to access mentioned were barriers connected within physical accessibility. This is because the University has a lot of old buildings, so there are limited possibilities for adapting infrastructure for people with physical disabilities by promoting mobility. Similar problems have been identified in other studies in other universities with similar conditions (Martins, Borges, & Gonçalves, 2018).

By answering the second research question, participants generally agreed **that support is provided to all students to overcome difficulties during the transition process** from general education to university and during the study process, but that the support is not designed specifically for students with diverse needs. Because the number of students with diverse needs is low, support, for example, for students with disabilities is provided on a case-by-case basis, based more on the individual assistance of administrators, students, and academics than on the systematic and professional support that could be provided at the institutional level. As the research shows, students both with and without disabilities face common difficulties in the study process in HE (Hughes et al., 2016). At the same time, there are some specific barriers that students with disabilities might experience (Fuller, 2004), so there should be some kind of specialised support and guidance provided in HE institution. These results coincide with other research results. It seems that there is a lack of institutionally run special services in higher education institutions elsewhere too to consult and accommodate the diverse needs of students (Yusof, Chan, Hillaluddin, Ramli, & Saad, 2020, Zabeli, Kaçaniku Koliqi & Li, 2021).

Answering the third research question, results show that none of the administrative staff or academics had received **training on how to address student diversity**. Those findings are in line with other studies elsewhere: it seems to be a common problem that universities lack information and specific training (Martins, Borges, & Gonçalves, 2018), that there is not enough training for academics (Bunbury, 2020; Collins, Azmat,

& Rentschler, 2019; Sanahuja, Gil, & Nieto, 2020). It is suggested that training both for administrators and for academics is essential to promote inclusive education in higher education, and that the training should probably even be compulsory (Bunbury, 2020). The more training is provided for inclusive education, the more inclusive academics become (Llorent, Zych, & Varo-Millán, 2020). Only by educating administrative and academic staff would it be possible to develop inclusive practice and promote inclusion across the higher education curriculum. Participants suggested that training courses should be organised for both administrators and academics, specific recommendations or guidelines should be developed for administrators and teachers to work with student diversity, and that a position of a consultant should be established to support administrators and academics dealing with diversity. Those recommendations correspond to the recommendations provided by the Student Union of Latvia (SUL) (On Access to Higher Education for People with Disabilities, 2016) and the Ministry of Welfare's newly developed general guidelines for higher education institutions to make a more inclusive environment in the HE institutions (Labklājības ministrija, 2020).

Finally, the research findings suggest that inclusive education by HE administrators is perceived as a new principle in HE, which takes into account the diversity of students (religious affiliation, ethnicity, socio-economic background, disabilities, health conditions), respects that diversity, and adapts to it. It changes the way we perceive diversity in HE. The new disadvantaged groups, such as students with disabilities, immigrants, refugees, and re-emigrants have emerged in HE in the context of inclusive education. Administrative staff members perceive diversity in its broader sense: in religious affiliation, ethnicity, socio-economic background, disabilities, health conditions, refugee status, immigrants, asylum seekers, re-emigrants. This broad perception of diversity is an important precondition for creating a supportive university setting for all students (Aquino, 2020). Salmi and D'Addio (2020) explains that it is always linked to the perspective national equity assessment. HE reflects changes and challenges by the society as a whole. Nevertheless, there is a clear need for HE to open up for diversity, increase accessibility of higher education, to provide support more targeted for those diverse groups who need additional support both in the transition period from school to university, as well as in the study process. Higher education institutions cannot rely on one-time solutions for diversity, it is necessary to provide both systemic support to students and to provide targeted further education to the university administration and academic staff.

Limitations and future research

Our study makes several contributions to institutional inclusive praxis. First of all, it contributes to the literature of inclusivity in Latvia and provides some inner context of inclusive education in Latvian HE institution, particularly the University. Our findings are important both for other HE institutions in Latvia and for the University of Latvia efforts to reinforce the importance of inclusive education as a principle in higher education.

Although this study contributes to the field, it has some limitations. The study was based on one higher education institution. There were 7 interviews with university different level administrative staff conducted. Thus, there is potential for future studies. First of all, it would be necessary to use a larger sample, involving academic staff and students. There is a need to investigate the political documents at the institutional, national and international level. Secondly, comparative studies would be much needed by involving other HE institutions in Latvia and in the Baltic region. Finally, there is a need to investigate deeper and find out how and what do the academic staff who engage in inclusive pedagogy do to foster the learning of all students, even those with disabilities. Although there is a body of research examining the experiences of students with disabilities elsewhere, there are no such studies in Latvia; therefore, future studies examining the perceptions of academic staff about students with disabilities should triangulate their data by additionally interviewing students with disabilities.

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