A SYSTEMS APPROACH TO INCLUSIVE EDUCATION FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A DOCUMENTARY STUDY IN THE VIETNAMESE CONTEXT

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Abstract: *Inclusive education is central to educational equity and disability rights, yet implementing it in higher education requires attention to institutional arrangements and individual support. This qualitative documentary study examines Vietnamese legislation, international frameworks, and selected scholarship through five interrelated components: systems, support, cultural change, partnerships, and monitoring. The reviewed sources establish a legal basis for access while providing limited evidence to assess how consistently universities implement inclusive teaching, support, and accountability. The five-component framework therefore serves as an interpretive tool and a guide for institutional inquiry, rather than a nationwide diagnosis. The paper proposes policy implications for strengthening inclusive higher education in Vietnam, with broader relevance for countries seeking to move from fragmented disability support toward institution-wide inclusion.*

Keywords: *inclusive education, students with disabilities, higher education, systems approach, Vietnam*

I. Introduction

Inclusive education has become one of the most influential paradigms in contemporary educational thought and policy. It is closely associated with the principles of non-discrimination, equal opportunity, social justice, and the recognition of human diversity. Globally, adopting the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (CRPD) marked a significant shift in how public policy understands disability, emphasizing that disability rights are inseparable from broader human rights commitments (United Nations, 2006). In education, this rights-based orientation is reinforced by the global commitment to Sustainable Development Goal 4, which calls for inclusive, equitable, quality education for all (UNESCO, 2020).

Within higher education, however, inclusion remains a more complex and less consolidated agenda than in compulsory education. Universities are distinguished by academic autonomy, decentralized governance, disciplinary diversity, flexible curricula, competitive assessment systems, and strong expectations for

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learner independence. These institutional features can create opportunities for innovation, but they can also produce new forms of exclusion if institutions do not address diversity systematically. For students with disabilities, access to higher education is only the first step; meaningful inclusion also depends on whether the institution can create accessible learning environments, inclusive pedagogy, supportive cultures, and fair mechanisms for participation and success (Hockings, 2010; Thomas, 2017).

A major insight from disability studies and inclusive education research is that the barriers faced by students with disabilities are not simply the result of individual impairments. Instead, environments, institutional assumptions, assessment practices, teaching methods, and social attitudes often produce them by privileging a narrow model of the "normal" student (Shakespeare, 2013). This perspective shifts the analytical focus from student deficit to systemic barriers. Nevertheless, much of the literature on disability in higher education still addresses single dimensions of inclusion in isolation, such as physical accessibility, assistive technology, financial aid, or reasonable accommodations. While important, such fragmented analyses often fail to capture how these dimensions interact within broader institutional systems.

Vietnam has established a legal basis for disability rights and educational access through the Law on Persons with Disabilities (National Assembly of Vietnam, 2010), the Education Law (National Assembly of Vietnam, 2019), its 2025 amending law, and the 2025 Higher Education Law (National Assembly of Vietnam, 2025a, 2025b). However, the reviewed sources do not show how consistently individual universities translate these provisions into inclusive teaching and support. This distinction between legal entitlement and documented institutional practice motivates the present analysis.

The gap, therefore, is not merely a policy gap but an analytical one. Insufficient research still conceptualizes inclusive higher education in Vietnam as a systemic issue involving legal frameworks, institutional arrangements, pedagogical practices, social attitudes, stakeholder relations, and accountability mechanisms. This paper addresses that gap by applying a systems approach to analyze inclusive education for students with disabilities in Vietnamese higher education.

The study has three objectives: to explain the relevance of a systems approach; to interpret selected Vietnamese legal and scholarly sources using five interconnected components; and to develop policy implications and questions for subsequent institutional research. It does not estimate the prevalence or effectiveness of inclusive practices across Vietnamese universities.

II. Theoretical framework

2.1. Inclusive education in higher education

Inclusive education is commonly defined as a process of responding to learner diversity by increasing participation and reducing exclusion within and from education (Ainscow, 2005). Rather than referring only to placing particular groups in mainstream settings, inclusion focuses on transforming educational environments so all learners can participate meaningfully. This interpretation moves

beyond integration, which often assumes learners must adapt to the existing system, toward a stronger conception in which the system itself must change.

In higher education, inclusive education extends far beyond campus access or disability services. It encompasses curriculum design, teaching and learning processes, assessment systems, academic support structures, institutional governance, social participation, and campus culture (Hockings, 2010). An inclusive university therefore does not merely admit students with disabilities; it actively reorganizes its pedagogical and institutional practices to accommodate human diversity as a normal and legitimate feature of the student population.

This understanding is consistent with a shift from a medical model of disability to a social and rights-based model. Under the medical model, disability is interpreted primarily as an individual deficit or functional limitation. Under the social model, disability emerges through the interaction between impairment and disabling environments, norms, and structures (Shakespeare, 2013). In higher education, this means that inaccessible course materials, rigid teaching methods, narrowly designed assessments, and stigmatizing attitudes may be as disabling as physical barriers.

Scholars of inclusive higher education have emphasized that access without participation is not inclusion, and participation without achievement is not educational justice (Hockings, 2010; Thomas, 2017).

Recent scholarship increasingly links inclusive higher education to universal design for learning (UDL), accessible pedagogy, and curriculum flexibility. UDL argues that educational design should proactively offer multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression, thereby reducing the need for individualized retrofitting (Espada-Chavarría et al., 2023; Fornauf & Erickson, 2020; Timuș et al., 2024). This perspective is especially relevant to universities, where rigid disciplinary traditions can otherwise make inclusion appear exceptional rather than ordinary.

2.2. A systems approach to inclusive education

A systems approach offers a more comprehensive lens for understanding inclusion because it conceptualizes education as a set of interdependent components operating across multiple levels. The ecological perspective is particularly useful because it emphasizes that nested environments shape individual development and experience, and that these environments are interconnected. Applied to higher education, this means a student's inclusion is shaped not only by classroom experience or individual support, but also by law, institutional policy, resource allocation, social attitudes, partnerships, and governance.

International policy discourse has increasingly moved in this direction. UNESCO's inclusive education agenda emphasizes that the challenge is not simply fitting certain groups into existing arrangements, but transforming the education system itself to reduce exclusionary structures and expand participation (UNESCO, 2020). A systems approach therefore focuses on coherence: coherence between rights and implementation, between policy and practice, between inclusion rhetoric and institutional culture, and between support measures and accountability systems.

The five components synthesize the reviewed sources: rights and governance inform systems (United Nations, 2006; UNESCO, 2020); inclusive pedagogy and universal design inform support (Hockings, 2010; Espada-Chavarría et al., 2023); participation and social barriers inform cultural change (Ainscow, 2005; Shakespeare, 2013); relationships across institutional contexts inform partnerships; and implementation and accountability inform monitoring (UNESCO, 2020). These are sensitizing analytical categories, not independently validated measures. Figure 1 depicts their reciprocal relationships and places student participation at the center.



Figure 1. Five interconnected components of inclusive higher education

Systems refers to laws, policies, institutional regulations, governance structures, and resource allocation mechanisms.

Support includes academic, technological, psychosocial, and administrative mechanisms that enable students with disabilities to access and participate in higher education.

Cultural change concerns values, beliefs, attitudes, and everyday practices related to disability, diversity, and belonging.

Partnerships refer to collaboration among universities, families, disability organizations, policymakers, employers, and communities.

Monitoring includes data collection, evaluation, reporting, and accountability processes that make inclusion visible and improvable.

Read the arrows in Figure 1 as reciprocal dependencies, not causal effects established by this study. Legal duties require resources and institutional procedures; accessible teaching depends on faculty capability and acceptance; partnerships can bring lived experience into design; and monitoring can inform adjustments across all four other components. The framework organizes documentary interpretation in Section IV; empirical testing of these relationships remains necessary.

III. Methodology

This article uses qualitative documentary analysis to interpret the relationship between normative

commitments and institutional inclusion (Bowen, 2009). It is a purposive, illustrative synthesis of the sources cited in the manuscript, not a systematic review or a census of Vietnamese institutions. We did not retain a search log, screening counts, or institutional field data; therefore, we cannot report these retrospectively as reproducible study results.

The identifiable corpus comprises the 12 sources in the original reference list plus two additional Vietnamese laws verified against official government records for this revision (14 sources in total). It includes two international normative or policy sources (United Nations, 2006; UNESCO, 2020), four Vietnamese legal texts (2010, 2019, and two 2025 laws), and eight scholarly or methodological sources (Ainscow, 2005; Bowen, 2009; Espada-Chavarría et al., 2023; Fornauf & Erickson, 2020; Hockings, 2010; Shakespeare, 2013; Thomas, 2017; Timuș et al., 2024). This is a descriptive inventory of cited works, not a screened sample. Original search dates, databases, and exclusion decisions were not recorded; selection cannot be claimed exhaustive.

Analysis proceeded in three interpretive steps. First, we distinguished legal and normative statements from research-based claims and proposed practices. Second, passages were grouped under systems, support, cultural change, partnerships, and monitoring, allowing overlap where a passage concerned multiple components. Third, the categories were compared to identify conceptual relationships and gaps in the available documentation. Interpretations were checked against the source type: a law establishes a duty, whereas a conceptual article cannot establish the national prevalence of a practice. This retrospective description should not be read as a claim of independent coding or inter-rater reliability.

The documentary design supports a conceptual account of what the selected sources imply for inclusive higher education. It cannot establish the extent of implementation, compare institutions, or rank the five components by observed performance. Accordingly, the findings below are presented as interpretations and questions for institutional verification.

IV. Results and discussion

4.1. Inclusive higher education in Vietnam through a systems lens

4.1.1. Systems: From legal commitments to institutional implementation

Legal texts lay the foundation for educational access and disability rights. The Law on Persons with Disabilities specifies rights and responsibilities (National Assembly of Vietnam, 2010); the Education Law is Law No. 43/2019/QH14, subsequently amended by Law No. 123/2025/QH15; and the Higher Education Law is Law No. 125/2025/QH15 (National Assembly of Vietnam, 2019, 2025a, 2025b). These instruments must be distinguished, not conflated. The analysis focuses on the need to examine their institutional implementation; the reviewed texts alone do not establish the extent of that implementation.

The reviewed legal framework invites closer examination of how universities translate general rights into accessible curricula, assessment, support procedures, and assigned responsibilities. This documentary study did not audit institutional rules or implementation, so any claim that guidance or institutional compliance is uniformly inadequate would exceed its evidence.

The proposed macro-to-institutional link is therefore a research question: which governance routines, staff-development provisions, and budgets give effect to legal duties in particular universities? Institutional documents and stakeholder evidence are needed to answer it.

4.1.2. Support: From individual accommodations to inclusive design

The literature distinguishes individualized accommodations from anticipatory accessible design (Hockings, 2010; Espada-Chavarría et al., 2023). The reviewed Vietnamese laws recognize educational rights, but this corpus contains no comparable institution-level data on the availability of accessible materials, assistive technology, assessment adjustments, or advisory services. Their distribution across universities cannot be inferred here.

A useful analytical question is whether accommodations are integrated with course design or handled only after a student requests assistance. University-level evidence would be required to identify which arrangements students actually receive and how effective they are.

A stronger model would treat support not as a separate subsystem serving a minority, but as a bridge between policy and learning experience. In this sense, support should include accessible course design, flexible teaching strategies, anticipatory planning, digital accessibility, and faculty capability development. Recent work on universal design in higher education argues precisely for this shift from reactive accommodation to proactive design (Espada-Chavarría et al., 2023; Fornauf & Erickson, 2020; Timuș et al., 2024).

The role of faculty is especially critical here. Even when legal frameworks exist, inclusion may remain superficial if lecturers are not prepared to teach diverse learners. Faculty members often shape how course materials are presented, how they structure classroom participation, how they interpret deadlines, and how they assess learning. Without training in inclusive pedagogy, disability awareness, and accessible design, support remains peripheral rather than embedded.

4.1.3. Cultural change: Examining attitudes and belonging

Disability studies cautions that medicalized or charitable understandings can obscure structural barriers (Shakespeare, 2013). The present corpus contains no interviews or observations that establish the prevalence of such attitudes within Vietnamese universities. Cultural change is included because its potential effects on expectations, participation, and belonging merit direct investigation.

This matters because culture determines what is considered normal, legitimate, and academically worthy. A university may have a ramp, a scholarship, or a support office, yet remain exclusionary if students with disabilities are subtly perceived as less capable, less independent, or less suitable for demanding academic pathways.

From a systems perspective, culture is not a "soft" dimension secondary to policy. It is a constitutive part of how the institution works. Cultural assumptions influence whether policies are implemented seriously, whether accommodations are seen as legitimate, whether lecturers adjust their teaching, and whether students feel that they belong. This is why cultural change is both central and difficult. It is less visible than legal reform, harder to quantify than infrastructure

provision, and slower than procedural adjustment. Yet without it, inclusion remains fragile.

The analysis therefore suggests that moving toward inclusive higher education in Vietnam requires not only technical reform but also a discursive shift: from disability as deficiency to disability as part of human diversity; from support as charity to support as entitlement; and from adaptation for a few to accessible design for all. This aligns with broader inclusive education scholarship, which emphasizes that sustainable change requires transformation in values as well as structures (Ainscow, 2005; Hockings, 2010).

4.1.4. Partnerships: Institutionalizing stakeholder participation

The fourth finding concerns partnerships. Universities cannot achieve inclusive higher education alone. It depends on collaboration with disability organizations, families, policymakers, technology providers, employers, and wider communities. Such partnerships perform several important functions: they bring lived experience into policy formation, improve transition pathways, expand support networks, strengthen advocacy, and increase institutional responsiveness.

The documents reviewed do not establish how frequently Vietnamese universities maintain formal partnerships with organizations of persons with disabilities or employers. This is a proposed area of institutional inquiry: examine documented roles, joint decisions, and continuity before judging the strength or impact of partnerships.

This is particularly consequential in the transition from university to employment. For students with disabilities, inclusive higher education should not end with graduation; it should prepare them to participate in economic and civic life. If universities do not work closely with employers and community organizations, then students may encounter a sharp discontinuity between educational inclusion and labor market exclusion. In this sense, partnerships are not peripheral to inclusion but essential to its life-course relevance.

4.1.5. Monitoring: A necessary but insufficiently documented component

The cited corpus lacks comparable national indicators of enrollment, progression, completion, or student experience for students with disabilities in higher education. This absence within the selected documents should not be interpreted as proof that no institution collects such data. However, it limits what this study can conclude about outcomes or the strength of monitoring.

Institutional evaluation would benefit from clearly defined, voluntary and confidential data practices. Alongside participation figures, student accounts and information about accessibility and support use could help assess whether identified barriers are addressed.

Monitoring should not be reduced to bureaucratic counting. Within a systems framework, it serves as a mechanism for learning, accountability, and continuous improvement. Effective monitoring should include not only numerical data but also indicators of accessibility, teaching practices, satisfaction, support use, progression patterns, and transition outcomes. It would also require clear definitions, confidentiality protections, and defined institutional responsibilities.

Monitoring connects the other components conceptually by supplying feedback on access, support, culture, and partnerships. Its actual operation and relative effectiveness require empirical assessment.

4.2. Discussion: From fragmented intervention to systemic transformation

The selected documents distinguish between legal recognition and demonstrated institutional implementation. They do not establish a single pattern that characterizes all Vietnamese universities. The five-component framework indicates where future institutional evidence could reveal coherence or gaps.

The framework invites examination of how legal provisions, student support, accessible pedagogy, culture, partnerships, and evaluation interact within a particular university. Claims about symbolic progress or structural change require institutional observations and outcome evidence beyond this documentary synthesis.

Research on disability inclusion warns against relying exclusively on reactive exceptions to existing teaching and assessment arrangements (Hockings, 2010; Espada-Chavarría et al., 2023). Policy review, student perspectives, and course-level evidence should test whether this pattern occurs in a given Vietnamese university.

This study proposes systemic transformation as an alternative. This means shifting the unit of analysis and reform from the student with a disability to the institution and the system that shape educational participation. It also means moving from fragmented disability services toward an inclusive university model grounded in universal design, staff capability, inter-sectoral coordination, and evidence-informed governance.

Cultural change may be difficult to observe through formal policy texts alone. Interviews and student-experience data would clarify how expectations and belonging interact with leadership decisions and accessible teaching.

The framework may inform comparative work beyond Vietnam, but transferability depends on legal and institutional context and requires empirical testing.

4.3. Policy Implications

First, Vietnam needs clearer operational guidance for higher education institutions on inclusive education, including institutional responsibilities, accessibility standards, inclusive curriculum design, and resource allocation.

Second, universities should move from a compensatory support model toward proactive inclusive design. This includes faculty development, accessible digital content, flexible assessment, and universal learning design.

Third, inclusive higher education reform must include cultural work. Awareness-raising is not enough; institutions must embed disability inclusion in leadership priorities, academic values, and everyday practice.

Fourth, universities should institutionalize partnerships with organizations of persons with disabilities, employers, and communities to strengthen both educational participation and the transition to employment.

Fifth, robust monitoring systems are essential. Data on participation, retention, progression, completion, and student experience should be collected and used to improve policy and practice while respecting privacy and dignity.

These recommendations are grounded in a conceptual synthesis. Students with disabilities, lecturers, and administrators should assess their priority and feasibility in specific institutional settings.

V. Conclusion and future research

This documentary analysis identifies five interrelated areas for studying inclusive higher education: systems, support, cultural change, partnerships, and monitoring. Vietnamese legislation provides a basis for educational rights, but the selected sources do not show how consistently universities implement those rights. The framework is therefore an organizing proposal rather than an empirical assessment of national performance.

The article's main contribution is both conceptual and practical. Conceptually, it demonstrates the value of a systems approach for analyzing inclusive higher education more integratively. Practically, it highlights the need for reform across five interconnected domains: legal and institutional systems, support mechanisms, cultural change, partnerships, and monitoring.

This purposive documentary synthesis has no documented search or exclusion log and includes no interviews, institutional case studies, or comparable university-level outcome data. Its observations cannot estimate prevalence, demonstrate causal links, or rank the relative weakness of framework components. Subsequent studies should retain a searchable selection protocol and incorporate Vietnamese institutional evidence.

Future research should extend this work in at least three directions. First, empirical studies are needed to examine how students with disabilities experience inclusion and exclusion in specific Vietnamese universities. Second, comparative institutional research could identify different implementation models and the conditions under which inclusive practices become sustainable. Third, future work could develop measurable indicators for monitoring inclusive higher education in ways that are both policy-relevant and ethically grounded.

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TIẾP CẬN HỆ THỐNG TRONG GIÁO DỤC HÒA NHẬP ĐỐI VỚI SINH VIÊN KHUYẾT TẬT Ở BẬC ĐẠI HỌC: NGHIÊN CỨU TÀI LIỆU TRONG BỐI CẢNH VIỆT NAM

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Tóm tắt*: Giáo dục hòa nhập là yếu tố cốt lõi của bình đẳng giáo dục và quyền của người khuyết tật, tuy nhiên việc thực hiện nó trong giáo dục đại học đòi hỏi sự chú ý đến các sắp xếp thể chế cũng như hỗ trợ cá nhân. Nghiên cứu định tính dựa trên tài liệu này xem xét luật pháp Việt Nam, các khuôn khổ quốc tế và một số học thuật được chọn lọc thông qua năm thành phần có liên quan mật thiết: hệ thống, hỗ trợ, thay đổi văn hóa, hợp tác và giám sát. Các nguồn tài liệu được xem xét thiết lập cơ sở pháp lý cho việc tiếp cận, đồng thời cung cấp bằng chứng hạn chế để đánh giá mức độ nhất quán của các trường đại học trong việc thực hiện giảng dạy hòa nhập, hỗ trợ và trách nhiệm giải trình. Do đó, khuôn khổ năm thành phần này đóng vai trò là công cụ diễn giải và hướng dẫn cho việc nghiên cứu ở cấp độ thể chế, chứ không phải là một chẩn đoán trên toàn quốc. Bài báo đề xuất các hàm ý chính sách nhằm tăng cường giáo dục đại học hòa nhập tại Việt Nam, với ý nghĩa rộng hơn đối với các quốc gia đang tìm cách chuyển từ hỗ trợ người khuyết tật rời rạc sang hòa nhập toàn diện trong các cơ sở giáo dục.*

Từ khóa: *giáo dục hòa nhập, sinh viên khuyết tật, giáo dục đại học, tiếp cận hệ thống, Việt Nam*

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