

Legislative Frameworks and Infrastructure Accessibility for Students with Physical Disabilities in Higher Education: A Comparative Study of Kosovo, Albania, and North Macedonia

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Abstract

Physical accessibility for students with disabilities remains a largely overlooked issue in the Balkans. This is particularly true in Kosovo, Albania, and North Macedonia, where barriers such as ramps, thresholds, stairs, potholes, narrow passages, and other obstacles hinder daily movement. This research aims to assess the state of physical access in higher education institutions in these three countries. It focuses on the specific needs of students with physical disabilities. The study uses a descriptive research methodology. It explores key concepts of human rights and the right to education while reviewing relevant legal frameworks, institutional policies, and documents. Semi-structured interviews with 34 higher education representatives were conducted. Observational methods were also used to evaluate the practical implementation of educational policies on university campuses. The findings reveal significant gaps in infrastructure and support systems for students with disabilities. Higher education institutions in Kosovo, Albania, and North Macedonia lack essential facilities. These include inadequate physical access to campus buildings, a shortage of specialized staff, limited academic resources like Braille publications, and insufficient accommodations such as accessible transport and reserved parking spaces. The research highlights the urgent need for comprehensive reforms. These reforms should ensure physical and educational accessibility for students with disabilities at these institutions.

Keywords: Balkans, physical accessibility, disability rights, higher education, inclusive education.

Introduction

In higher education institutions, which claim to offer knowledge and promote equal rights, not everything works as it should (Bourke, 2000). This is especially true when it comes to the rights of students in higher education who have disabilities and need special treatment. Both rights are not respected at the appropriate level and leave much room for discrimination and injury to many students or employees who find it extremely difficult to engage in this institution (Bouillet, 2013). When a student with a disability intends to start his studies at the faculty, but upon entering the faculty, he/she encounters inequality (Spratt et al, 2013). The facility, built with most students in mind who can walk stairs, is the first barrier for the graduate who moves with a wheelchair. Such a visible barrier speaks volumes for the entire

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institutional approach to disabled people (Wolf et al., 2009). Providing the same standard of services to all students, regardless of their needs, means discrimination against people with disabilities (Rama, 2023). The faculty stairs are impassable for students who use wheelchairs to move around. These stairs were built with most students in mind, who have no problem walking. But, when society advances by giving priority to the majority, the most vulnerable parts of the population, which do not have the power of the majority, are harmed the most. In many cases, students with disabilities are not allowed to move with the elevator to the upper floors or use the toilets (Scott et al., 2003). In other words, if we leave aside the differences in functions, they are denied free and independent movement within the university. According to various international parameters for evaluating the number of people with disabilities (not excluding students), nearly 100,000 people in Kosovo – about 8% of the total population – live with some form of disability. Persons with disabilities continue to face deep-rooted systemic inequalities and barriers, making them one of the most vulnerable and socially excluded groups in Kosovo (Smajic et al., 2023). They are at higher risk of poverty, poorer health and education outcomes, and have fewer employment opportunities than persons without disabilities. An estimated 38,000 school-age children with disabilities are not in school, and only 15% of people with disabilities aged 15-64 are employed. According to the 2021 census, almost five percent of the population of North Macedonia live with a disability, lower than the global average (15 percent) (UNFPA, 2023). According to official Government of Albania statistics, there are over 143,000 officially registered people with disabilities in Albania. Disabled Albanians experience high levels of unemployment, often lack access to basic medical and education opportunities, and suffer stigmatization and isolation from society. Albanian legislation provides for the protection of human rights, but this has done little to integrate people with disabilities into Albanian society (USAID, 2021).

People with disabilities in the respective municipalities are largely excluded from the labor market, social, political, economic, and cultural life, as well as from part of the development processes in the municipality. From this, the social inclusion and participation of people with disabilities in different areas of life remains a great challenge for our society (Barret et al., 2006). The lack of accessibility in public spaces and facilities denies the free and independent movement of people with disabilities, which is a prerequisite for their full and equal participation in society (Spahiu et al., 2018). The inadequacy of public facilities, roads, and transport excludes disabled people from public services and goods. This denies them the right to access education, health services, and other public services. It also leads to involuntary isolation (Florian et al., 2010). The reasons for such a state of people with disabilities are also the non-implementation of the legal framework by the institutions of the country and the low awareness of society. In the selected countries (WB) there are very few initiatives that work in the promotion of human rights (UNFPA, 2023).

The Legal Landscape of Disability Rights in Kosovo, Albania, and North Macedonia

Physical access to higher education institutions includes the ability to navigate buildings and facilities, such as accessible routes, ramps, parking, elevators, signage, and restrooms. In the Balkans, however, physical accessibility for students with disabilities is often neglected, with barriers such as stairs, narrow passages, and poorly designed entrances remaining common (Rama, 2023). Additionally, necessary supports like Braille signage or auditory announcements are rarely implemented. These challenges are exacerbated by the inconsistent enforcement of disability rights laws and widespread public apathy. While legislation exists in countries like Kosovo, Albania, and North Macedonia, progress is slow, and implementation remains fragmented (Smajic et al., 2023). Higher education institutions often fail to provide adequate accommodations, and societal awareness about the needs of students with disabilities is limited (Barret et al., 2006). This section examines the legislative frameworks in these countries and the gaps in their enforcement, particularly concerning physical access to higher education.

Kosovo - In 2023, the EU Enlargement Policy for Kosovo highlighted significant gaps in the rights and care of persons with disabilities. It noted the lack of institutional care (European Commission, 2021), inadequate medical services, and insufficient physical infrastructure. Access to public buildings, schools, medical facilities, and transportation remains limited, despite relevant administrative efforts. The policy highlights the need to align Kosovo's legislation with international conventions and EU standards on the rights of persons with disabilities. This gap persists due to Kosovo's partial recognition as a state and its non-membership in the United Nations care (European Commission, 2021).

The Criminal Code of Kosovo ensures equal rights for all citizens, including those with disabilities, and sanctions any violations. Article 190 guarantees the equal treatment of individuals, making it a criminal offense to deny or limit rights based on disability or other personal characteristics, with penalties of up to three years in prison (Kosovo Criminal Code, 2019). The Code specifically protects the right to equal education for persons with disabilities. Public officials who hinder their participation, such as by refusing necessary accommodations, face penalties ranging from six months to five years in prison. Educational institutions that discriminate by refusing admission or failing to provide reasonable accommodations may also face financial penalties or imprisonment for responsible individuals. Additionally, the law requires both public and private higher education institutions to create inclusive environments. This includes providing necessary facilities and support, such as accessible physical spaces and tailored educational materials for students with disabilities. These measures ensure full participation in academic life (Kosovo Criminal Code, 2019).

Kosovo's Law on Protection against Discrimination (2015) prohibits discrimination based on disability, along with other characteristics such as

nationality, race, and gender. However, the implementation of disability rights remains fragmented. Article 23, paragraph 1 stipulates a fine of 400 to 600 euros for any individual who commits, invites, or incites discrimination or helps in discriminatory activities. This affects their willingness to seek help when faced with discrimination, leaving many cases unpunished (Law No. 05/L-021, 2015). The overall responsibility for steering the National Disability Plan lies with the Office of the Prime Minister and the Office for Good Governance, Human Rights, and Equal Opportunities (OGG), with support from various government and non-governmental entities. These include the Ministries of Health, Education, Labor, Culture, and others, all of which play vital roles in advancing the rights and inclusion of persons with disabilities. They focus on five key areas: health, social welfare, employment, education, legal protection, and accessibility. Significant strides have been made to improve the quality of life for people with disabilities. Key legislative achievements include the Law on Blind Persons, the Law on the Status and Rights of Persons with Paraplegia and Tetraplegia, and QRK Regulation 15/2014, which provides sign language services in public institutions for deaf individuals. These frameworks aim to improve living conditions and access to services. However, challenges remain in fully realizing the rights of this community, particularly regarding infrastructure and policy alignment with international standards (Rama, 2023).

Albania - In 2021, the EU Enlargement Policy for Albania (European Commission, 2021) noted that the country's legislative framework on the rights of persons with disabilities is only partially aligned with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). Albania has not ratified the Optional Protocol to the CRPD, and the National Action Plan for People with Disabilities (2016-2020) had limited impact. A new National Action Plan for 2021-2025 was adopted in May 2021, addressing disability rights in areas such as education, health, employment, and political participation. The Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, and Equal Opportunities is primarily responsible for implementing disability policies, with support from the Ministry of Education and the Social Insurance Institute. Recent reforms have focused on building institutional capacity, raising awareness of the CRPD, and promoting accessible infrastructure (UNDP). However, concerns persist about insufficient funding for disability-related programs at both national and local levels, limiting effective policy implementation. In 2019, Albania's Parliament passed the Employment Promotion Law, restructuring the National Employment Services into the National Agency for Employment and Skills (NAES) and creating a National Employment Social Fund. This fund aims to support the employment and skills development of people with disabilities and necessary workplace adaptations, though its success depends on adequate financial resources (Jorgoni, 2019).

North Macedonia - In 2022, the EU Enlargement Policy for North Macedonia (European Commission, 2021) highlighted limited progress in improving rights for persons with disabilities. While significant legislative steps have been taken,

challenges remain in the effective implementation and enforcement of laws and policies, particularly regarding access to services, equality, and non-discrimination (European Commission, 2020). The Ombudsman's Office established a monitoring mechanism for the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, but the national coordination body's influence on decision-makers remains weak, undermining the effectiveness of this mechanism (CRPD, 2018). Despite efforts to align national legislation with international standards, including the CRPD and the EU acquis, implementation gaps persist. Although legal provisions have been developed, these often reflect formal equality rather than substantive equality for persons with disabilities. As emphasized by the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, compliance with laws and by-laws is inadequate, and the enforcement of these provisions remains a particularly weak point (Rama, 2023).

North Macedonia's Constitution (Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia, 2001) guarantees the right to equality and non-discrimination under Article 9, but disability is not explicitly listed as a separate ground for discrimination. This omission represents a significant gap in protecting the rights of persons with disabilities. The Law on Prevention and Protection from Discrimination (2020) addresses this issue by including disability as a basis for discrimination. It explicitly recognizes that persons with disabilities face barriers that hinder their full and equal participation in society (Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia, 2001).

The National Strategy for Equality and Non-discrimination 2016-2020 outlined three strategic goals, but progress has been uneven. While the legal framework has improved, capacity-building initiatives and the institutional mechanisms necessary to address discrimination have seen limited progress. The new Social Protection Law (2019) introduced principles of equal treatment and non-discrimination in social protection. It explicitly includes disability as a basis for discrimination, marking a positive step toward ensuring equal access to rights and services (Law on Prevention and Protection from Discrimination, 2020). Penalties in the Law on Construction, which regulates access to and within buildings, as well as the design and construction of facilities for persons with disabilities, are low and classified as misdemeanors. This weakens enforcement and encourages construction companies to ignore legal provisions for profit (Law on Prevention and Protection from Discrimination, 2020).

While the legislation in Kosovo, Albania, and North Macedonia aligns with international standards for the protection of persons with disabilities, its effective implementation faces significant challenges. These obstacles directly impact students with disabilities, limiting their ability to fully exercise their educational rights, as guaranteed by law. One major issue is the limited financial and infrastructural resources. Many educational institutions, including private universities, lack the necessary infrastructure to accommodate students with disabilities, hindering their access to education (Rama, 2023). Additionally, there is insufficient social awareness and institutional knowledge regarding the rights of

people with disabilities. Many higher education institutions are not adequately informed about legal requirements to provide reasonable accommodations, leading to non-compliance with anti-discrimination laws. Furthermore, bodies like the Ombudsman, which are tasked with protecting the rights of persons with disabilities, face significant resource constraints. This limits their ability to monitor and address discrimination in higher education institutions effectively. Finally, students with disabilities often face physical, financial, and informational barriers when seeking legal redress for discrimination. These obstacles reduce their likelihood of pursuing legal action, leaving many cases unresolved (Spahiu et al. 2018).

Aim

This research aims to provide a comprehensive assessment of the state of physical access in higher education institutions in these three countries, focusing on the specific needs of students with physical disabilities.

Objectives

The objectives of this study are as follows:

- To evaluate the adequacy of physical accessibility in higher education institutions in Kosovo, Albania, and North Macedonia, specifically for students with physical disabilities.
- To assess the implementation of existing legal frameworks, institutional policies, and accommodations for students with physical disabilities in higher education, based on interviews with higher education representatives and observational analysis.

Methodology

This study utilized a descriptive method to analyze key concepts of human rights and the right to education, reviewing relevant legal frameworks, institutional policies, and documents. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 34 higher education representatives, while observational methods were employed to assess the practical implementation of educational policies on university campuses.

Results

Sampling and geographical coverage

The research covers a geographical area encompassing three countries in the Balkans: Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia, focusing on the physical accessibility of higher education institutions for students with disabilities. The study's sample includes 750 students from 15 municipalities in these three countries, with 50 students selected from each municipality. In addition, 34 representatives from the targeted institutions were interviewed to gather insights on institutional policies and practices regarding accessibility for students with disabilities.

In Albania, the study evaluates five universities: Ismail Qemali University, Aleksander Xhuvani University, Eqrem Çabej University, University of Tirana - Subsidiary in Saranda, and the Faculty of Foreign Languages at the University of Tirana. These institutions were chosen to assess the extent of accessibility and infrastructure for students with physical disabilities, focusing on whether key facilities such as entrances, parking, elevators, and restrooms are adequately designed. In Kosovo, the research spans five universities: University of Applied Sciences, Ferizaj; Fehmi Agani University, Gjakova; Kadri Zeka University; Isa Boletini University, Mitrovica; and Haxhi Zeka University, Peja. Like the Albanian institutions, the study evaluates the accessibility of the physical campus environment, particularly ramps, elevators, restroom facilities, and designated parking spaces. Finally, in North Macedonia, the research includes five universities: the University of Bitola; Faculty of Administration and Business, Kumanovo; International Balkan University, Skopje; Vision International University, Gostivar; and State University of Tetovo. The study assesses how well these institutions meet the accessibility needs of students with disabilities, particularly in terms of infrastructure, academic resources, and overall inclusivity.

In total, the study surveyed 750 students across 15 municipalities in the three countries. Additionally, 34 institutional representatives from the 15 targeted cities were interviewed, providing a comprehensive assessment of physical access and highlighting areas for improvement in meeting the needs of students with physical disabilities in the region.

Table 1. Sampling and geographical coverage

Country	Municipality	Number of Students
Albania	Ismail Qemali University (Vlorë)	50
	Aleksander Xhuvani University (Elbasan)	50
	Eqrem Çabej University (Gjirokastrë)	50
	University of Tirana - Subsidiary in Saranda	50
	Faculty of Foreign Languages, University of Tirana	50
Kosovo	University of Applied Sciences (Ferizaj)	50
	Fehmi Agani University (Gjakova)	50
	Kadri Zeka University (Gjilan)	50
	Isa Boletini University (Mitrovica)	50
	Haxhi Zeka University (Peja)	50
North Macedonia	University of Bitola	50
	Faculty of Administration and Business, Kumanovo	50
	International Balkan University (Skopje)	50
	Vision International University (Gostivar)	50
	State University of Tetovo	50
Total	15	750

Findings on infrastructure accessibility for students with disabilities in Kosovo, Albania and North Macedonia

The study explores the infrastructure accessibility of higher education institutions across Kosovo, Albania, and North Macedonia, focusing on key components such as entrances, parking, libraries, restrooms, and elevators for students with physical disabilities.

In Kosovo, the research spans five universities, highlighting both strengths and weaknesses. The University of Applied Sciences in Ferizaj has partially accessible infrastructure, with ramps and an elevator, but lacks accessible restrooms and designated parking spaces for disabled students. Fehmi Agani University in Gjakova presents substantial accessibility challenges, with stairs, inaccessible restrooms, and a lack of elevators and designated parking spaces. Kadri Zeka University also faces issues with restroom accessibility and insufficient parking, although the main entrance is ramped, and an elevator is available. On the other hand, Isa Boletini University in Mitrovica provides exemplary accessibility, with fully accessible ramps, elevators, and restrooms. Haxhi Zeka University in Peja offers some accessible infrastructure, but the lack of designated parking and inaccessible restrooms remain barriers.

In Albania, five universities were evaluated, revealing significant disparities in accessibility. At Ismail Qemali University, infrastructural provisions for students with disabilities are inadequate, with limited access beyond the ground floor due to the absence of elevators or ramps. Restrooms are unsuitable, and there are no designated parking spaces. Aleksander Xhuvani University, in contrast, provides comprehensive accessibility, including ramps, elevators, and accessible parking and restrooms. Eqrem Çabej University offers partial accessibility, with a ramp at the entrance but limited movement between floors due to a lack of elevators. The University of Tirana - Subsidiary in Saranda and the Faculty of Foreign Languages at the University of Tirana both face significant barriers, including non-wheelchair accessible entrances, inadequate restroom facilities, and no designated parking spaces. The number of admission spots for students with disabilities at the University of Tirana is also disproportionately low compared to the demand.

In North Macedonia, the study examines five universities, identifying both positive and negative aspects. The University of Bitola has relatively good infrastructure for students with disabilities, including a ramp at the entrance and designated parking. However, limitations exist, such as classrooms being restricted to the ground floor due to the lack of elevators, and the absence of Braille materials in the library. At the Faculty of Administration and Business in Kumanovo, accessibility is hindered by blocked ramps, inadequate parking, and restrooms that do not accommodate students with disabilities. The International Balkan University in Skopje is committed to equality, with accessible academic materials, parking spaces for disabled students, and an accessible main entrance, but restroom facilities remain a significant barrier. Vision International University in Gostivar has a fully accessible entrance and classrooms but lacks designated parking spaces for disabled

students, and the narrow layout of the IT lab restricts access. The State University of Tetovo provides comprehensive accessibility, including ramps and designated parking, but the library's lack of Braille collections remains a limitation. These findings highlight the varying degrees of infrastructure accessibility across the three countries. They underscore the need for ongoing improvements to ensure full inclusion and equal access to higher education for students with physical disabilities.

Qualitative findings from interviews on physical access for students with disabilities in Kosovo, Albania, and North Macedonia

This section presents a qualitative analysis based on interviews with university staff from institutions in Kosovo, Albania, and North Macedonia. It focuses on the physical accessibility of higher education facilities for students with disabilities. The analysis highlights the current state of infrastructure, available support services, and institutional efforts to accommodate students with disabilities, as perceived by university staff.

Access to information and support services - When discussing the accessibility of information for students with disabilities, the majority of respondents indicated that universities make a concerted effort to provide relevant information regarding academic conditions and available services. Staff noted that information is typically disseminated via university websites and displayed prominently on monitors within campus facilities, ensuring that students have easy access to essential details. This proactive approach allows students to make informed decisions about their academic journey and the support services available to them. Several respondents also highlighted the role of Career and Alumni Counseling Offices, which offer tailored services for students with disabilities. These offices assist in areas such as career guidance, scholarship applications, and navigating the process of exemption from study fees. Additionally, many staff members mentioned that these offices facilitate internship opportunities, ensuring that students with disabilities gain practical experience relevant to their academic profiles.

Supportive staff and university infrastructure - In terms of institutional support, several respondents confirmed the presence of dedicated staff and departments to assist students with disabilities. Many universities employ academic staff, administrative personnel, and support teams whose primary role is to help integrate students with disabilities into university life. Respondents emphasized the importance of these staff members in ensuring that students with disabilities are included and fully supported in their academic pursuits. Regarding financial support, many university staff pointed out that national funding systems assist students with disabilities, often covering up to 50% of tuition fees, with some programs offering full-fee exemptions. Scholarships were also mentioned as an

additional resource aimed at supporting students' academic success and reducing financial barriers.

Infrastructure and accessibility - On the topic of physical accessibility, most respondents indicated that universities have made significant strides in improving infrastructure. For example, many universities have installed ramps at building entrances and elevators in key academic and library buildings, ensuring that students with disabilities have access to all floors. However, despite these efforts, challenges remain, particularly around parking. While reserved parking spaces are available for students with disabilities at many institutions, some respondents noted that these spaces are often not marked with appropriate signage. Another area identified for improvement was library accessibility. Several staff members acknowledged that while physical access to libraries has improved, there is still a lack of Braille collections and materials designed for visually impaired students. This gap in resources highlights the need for further advancements to ensure that all students have equal access to academic materials. Lastly, when asked about transportation services, the majority of respondents confirmed that dedicated transport for students with disabilities is not typically provided. This lack of specialized transport options further underscores the barriers students with disabilities face in accessing higher education institutions, especially in larger or more dispersed campuses.

Discussion

The findings from this study highlight significant variations in the physical accessibility of higher education institutions across Kosovo, Albania, and North Macedonia, underscoring both improvements and persistent challenges in accommodating students with disabilities. While some institutions have made commendable strides, many barriers remain, particularly concerning infrastructure and access to support services. In Kosovo, Albania, and North Macedonia, the availability of basic accessibility features, such as ramps and elevators, has improved in certain universities. However, key gaps persist, notably in restroom accessibility, parking facilities, and library resources. The lack of Braille materials and inadequate parking signage are examples of how physical infrastructure still limits full inclusion. Furthermore, while many universities have implemented some form of infrastructure to support students with disabilities, several institutions, particularly in Albania, still lack essential features such as elevators and accessible restrooms, making it difficult for students to navigate beyond ground-level spaces. The qualitative findings from interviews with university staff offer insights into institutional attitudes toward disability inclusion. Many staff members indicated that information regarding available support services is adequately disseminated, and career counseling offices play a pivotal role in assisting students. However, the absence of dedicated transport services and insufficient staff training in some institutions signal that full accessibility goes beyond physical infrastructure. It

requires a more holistic approach, including tailored support services and specialized staff. These findings suggest that while some universities are committed to improving accessibility, significant work remains to ensure equal opportunities for all students. A more integrated approach is needed, addressing both physical barriers and systemic issues, including staff training and resource availability. Continuing efforts are essential to create an inclusive academic environment for students with disabilities in the region.

Conclusions

This research identified several critical gaps in physical accessibility at higher education institutions in Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia for students with disabilities. Although classrooms, dormitories, libraries, and laboratories are available, they are not properly adapted to meet the needs of students with physical disabilities. Restroom facilities remain largely inaccessible, and libraries lack specialized resources such as Braille publications. Academic support is often informal, with students relying on fellow students or tutors, as many institutions lack trained staff to provide dedicated assistance. Moreover, most faculties do not maintain statistics on students with disabilities, and communications, policies, and academic documents are rarely provided in accessible formats like Braille, audio, or enlarged text. Many campuses also lack elevators, limiting access to multi-floor buildings. Public transportation to most universities is completely inaccessible, and while some universities offer parking for students with disabilities, these spaces are often insufficient or poorly marked. These gaps underscore the significant barriers students with disabilities face in accessing higher education and highlight the need for comprehensive improvements in campus infrastructure and support services.

Recommendations

- Governments and higher education institutions should allocate specific budgets to support the needs of students with disabilities, ensuring sufficient resources for accommodations and services.
- Universities should develop tailored accessibility plans, including dedicated offices or desks to address disability-related issues and support students.
- Building infrastructure must prioritize accessibility, with necessary modifications such as ramps, elevators, and accessible restrooms.
- Ministries of education should identify students with disabilities and ensure appropriate support is provided based on their individual needs.
- Institutions should implement existing policies regarding disability support and raise awareness among university boards to allocate relevant services effectively.
- Governments should invest in training specialized staff to address the diverse needs of students with disabilities at the university level.
- By adopting these measures, higher education institutions can create a more inclusive environment, ensuring equal access and opportunities for students with disabilities.

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