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# Experiencing Inclusion in Higher Education: A Student Perspective on Nazarbayev University Practices and Lessons Drawn from U.S. Policies

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As the first Nazarbayev University (NU) student with special needs, I am currently researching emerging practices and policies of inclusion at NU. In this editorial I take an opportunity to reflect on my nearly year-long study experience at NU and present some lessons learned from the U.S. policies and practices of inclusion based on an investigation of the disability support system at University of Wisconsin-Madison, one of the NU's strategic partners. I proceed from the premise that based on its model of partnership with top international universities, NU could collaborate with UW-Madison and bring lessons learned to its own practices of inclusion.

Three themes of innovation, integration and inclusion are set forth as guiding principles of NU's academic policy (NU, 2015). These imply a new innovative curriculum, building internationally competitive research capacity, integration of those in NU's learning and teaching policy as well as inclusion of diverse groups. The latter principle, inclusion, primary for this editorial, is based on NU's culture and values of "tolerance, respect to diversity" and "equal access" for all "regardless of race, religion, gender, physical capacity or socio-economic status" (NU, 2013, p. 10). The principle of inclusion is visibly embedded in NU's philosophy, but to bring it to fruition NU ought to practice inclusion across the board—in its community, curriculum, educational programs, and emerging culture. Given its affluent resources and preeminent governmental support, NU could take a lead in the area and, in the long run, become a flagship inclusive university in Kazakhstan. Ultimately, inclusion of persons with diverse abilities in the student body, among faculty, researchers and staff shall promote NU's public service commitment and benefit both the local community and the university itself.

This editorial begins with my story at NU as background. Further, I briefly overview U.S. policies of higher education inclusion and illustrate what ramifications those policies have for inclusionary functioning of University of Wisconsin-Madison. Finally, I draw some policy implications for NU as to how it can fulfill its commitments to inclusion and equal access.

## **Access and Participation at NU: A Descriptive Background**

Nazarbayev University first started exercising inclusive education in 2015 when the Graduate School of Education (NUGSE) offered me a place. As the first student with a vision impairment at NU, I brought about a new and supposedly challenging experience for the university. Expectedly, NU has taken the challenge as a self-propelling opportunity and has shown a desire not only to enable equal access for me individually but to move from implicitly embracing inclusion in its philosophy to empowering it in its policies and practices. Luckily enough for me, NU did have a good will and, was well resourced to facilitate an inclusive academic process as well as full-fledged access outside the classroom.

Upon my admittance to NU in summer 2015, representatives of NUGSE and the NU library assigned to lead the process of institutional preparation approached me to assess and arrange adjustments needed before I arrived to campus.

In the context of the graduate program the most crucial issue to be first solved, as agreed, was ensuring access to educational resources and services at the NU library. To provide access to the library for the blind and vision impaired (BVI), a set of assistive technologies was purchased. Since its opening, the library had a small collection of ICT's for the BVI. However, the equipment needed to be upgraded and expanded with additional software and hardware. The assistive technologies now include among others a Braille display, Braille embosser, Duxbury (Braille translator), JAWS (screen-reader), OpenBook (optical character recognition software) which in aggregate allow me full access to library resources and databases. Beyond the equipment, at the library a task force on accessibility and assistive technologies was formed to facilitate access to the equipment for NUGSE faculty and me.

On its part, NUGSE has informed the inclusion process in practice by setting up mechanisms of accommodation and support provision in learning and teaching on a classroom level and beyond. When I

arrived to the campus, through individual meetings I informed the faculty and staff of my needs, and we negotiated the best ways to interact. Teaching assistants were assigned to assist faculty and me with technical and vision-bound tasks (e.g., visual formatting of documents, converting sources into accessible electronic text). The NUGSE leadership was actively involved in the entire process arranging accommodations needed and facilitating the work of faculty, staff and teaching assistants.

After the arrangements for the academic process were made, I tried to bring NU administration's attention to the poorly designed physical environment of NU campus. As I found out soon after arriving to NU, the environment on campus is designed with little consideration of people's diverse abilities and special needs. Currently, the campus has basic accessibility aids (e.g., ramps in most of the university buildings, Braille signage in elevators, automatic doors at main entrances) but even these elements only appear occasionally, not throughout all the campus. There is only one entrance to the main atrium with multiple doors and changes of direction, and there are no sound systems at entrances and voice devices in elevators. On-campus services (e.g., cafeteria, the printing system, ATMs, water-supplying machines) are completely inaccessible for a person with vision impairments. All in all, these make independent access to the university infrastructure and services almost impossible. To gain access to services and navigate my way around the university buildings I often have to resort to someone's assistance.

To propel the university to address these issues, at the beginning of the academic year I made a request with suggestions how to enhance campus infrastructure -- installing sound systems at the entrances to help people who are blind locate the door, voice devices in elevators to announce the floor, tactile runners to navigate their way in hallways and in-door spaces with multiple directions such as the atrium. However, the action on the request is still being delayed perhaps for austerity reasons. Overall, as the first student at NU with the need for substantial accommodations, within this year I had to take an active role in advocating for the establishment of practices and policies of inclusion and support provision backed by institutionalized procedures and administrative structures. Although many issues still need to be addressed, the university has demonstrated a fair amount of goodwill and resource capacity to promote an inclusive learning environment.

### **Overview of U.S. Inclusion Policies in Higher Education**

The movement for the rights of persons with disabilities (PWDs) in the U.S. started in the late 1960s inspired by and along with the move for the rights of racial minorities. In regards to education, the adoption of two acts has been of tremendous importance for the rights of PWDs – the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (RA) and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA). The legislations changed the status of PWDs in the U.S. educational context and the ways in which all U.S. public and private educational entities operate.

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (1973) stipulates that all federally funded colleges and universities provide students with disabilities equal educational opportunities. That is, post-secondary education institutions shall make such modifications and reasonable accommodations which allow students with disabilities to study on a basis of equal opportunity. These include but are not limited to:

- Modification of instructional methods in a way that meets the needs of all students;
- Substitutions for courses when appropriate;
- Extension in the length of time for completing exams and requirements if appropriate;
- Ensuring access to information and communications via alternate media (I.E., Braille, e-text, sign language);
- Provision of study resources (e.g., assistive technologies such as text-to-speech software, accessibility devices);
- Special exam arrangements (a separate room, extended time, a scribe);
- Human assistance (E.G., note-taking, sign language interpretation).

The Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) has come to be a more comprehensive federal regulation holistically addressing all aspects of disability. In education, it reinforced the requirements of the Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and extended them to private universities as well regardless of public funding receipt. In accordance with the ADA, students with disabilities compete with other groups on an equal basis provided reasonable accommodations. Reasonable accommodation means any adjustments and changes which do not fundamentally alter the nature of an educational program or cause an undue burden on an

institution. That is, to accommodate students with disabilities, universities should not lower their academic standards or significantly modify the nature of programs being offered (ADA, 1990).

### **The ADA compliance system at University of Wisconsin-Madison**

The University of Wisconsin-Madison is one of NU's strategic partners. It represents an outstanding example of creating an accessible, accommodating, and supportive community for persons with disabilities (PWDs). In compliance with the ADA provisions and beyond, UW-Madison has developed a comprehensive and collaborative campus-wide system enabling equity, access and full participation of faculty, staff, students and guests with disabilities in its programs, services and activities (University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2016a). The university disability inclusion system consists of three levels of responsibilities and administrative structures dedicated to ensure equity, access and compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act.

At the top of the hierarchy is a UW-Madison's ADA coordinator, a vice-chancellor for legal services, whose responsibility is to oversee and ensure compliance of the university's activities, programs and services with provisions of the Americans with Disabilities Act (University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2016b).

The next level is represented by the Committee on Access and Accommodation in Instruction appointed by a university chancellor who reviews disability and accessibility matters and accommodations in instruction. The committee trains and maintains a network of Access and Accommodation Resource Coordinators (AARCs) who are in charge of academic support and accommodation provision at each institutional unit (e.g., department or division). More than 120 appropriately trained AARCs provide basic accommodations to PWDs and make adjustments possible at the institutional level. The AARCs may refer to campus resources when more complex accommodations are needed.

Finally, campus-level resources include several institutional support structures. First, the McBurney Disability Resource Center is a campus-wide service operating under the Division of Student Life. It serves UW-Madison's students and guests with disabilities delivering most resources and services which include tools to make information and communications accessible via alternate media (i.e., Braille, electronic, sign language, video captioning); study resources and assistive technologies (e.g., special software and hardware); and human assistance (e.g., note-taking services, sign language interpretation). Additionally, the Office of Equity and Diversity functions under the vice-provost/legal services and includes a disability specialist in charge of disability matters of employees and assistance to departments which have personnel with disabilities. It trains a network of Divisional Disability Representatives (DDRs) analogous to AARCs and serves and links disability specialists responsible for employment matters in regards to PWDs at each unit. Besides these, dedicated specialists facilitate physical accessibility of campus environment at the Division of Facilities, Planning and Management, services for snow removal and paratransit transportation (i.e., van service for those with mobility issues).

As the summary of disability resources, policies and procedures above illustrates, UW-Madison embodies an accessible, accommodating, and supportive academic community for persons with disabilities and as such can offer many insights for NU.

### **Conclusions and Implications for NU**

Adhering to the principles of inclusion, innovation and integration (NU, 2015), Nazarbayev University strives to build research expertise in the field of inclusive education and capacity to exercise inclusion in its academic policies based on best international practices. To this end, NU can learn a lot from University of Wisconsin-Madison representing an outstanding example of leadership in the field. As such, UW-Madison can serve as a model for NU in establishing policies of equal access for and inclusion of persons with disabilities. The following are general implications drawn upon the UW-Madison's policies for practicing inclusion at Nazarbayev University:

1. To enable full inclusion, the overall planning of inclusive education at NU needs to shift from an ad hoc to a holistic approach based on system-wide policies;
2. There ought to be developed comprehensive institutional policies consistent with the principles of equal access and inclusion of persons with special needs embedded in NU documents.
3. At least one designated officer should be coordinating compliance of practices with the principle of inclusion at the university to facilitate the work of departments involved and eliminate discrimination;

4. Having a graduate program in inclusive education first in the nation and the experience of inclusion within this year, NU has got a head-start in moving towards the 2020 agenda of 100% inclusivity in higher education (MES, 2016);
5. Based on expertise in inclusive education NUGSE has, and given its vision and pre-eminent governmental support, Nazarbayev University should take the lead in reaching an inclusive community enabling equity, welcoming diversity and accommodating special needs and transfer its experience to other Kazakh universities in the long run.

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