

BARRIER-FREE ENVIRONMENT POLICY: COMMON INTEREST AND SHARED RESPONSIBILITY OF THE UNIVERSITY, COMMUNITY AND STATE

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The development of a barrier-free environment in contemporary Ukraine has gained particular significance in the context of full-scale war, which has caused profound socio-demographic changes and transformed the structure of population vulnerability. As a result of hostilities and attacks on civilian infrastructure, the number of people with disabilities has increased substantially among both military personnel and civilians. A considerable proportion of contemporary cases of disability is of a traumatic nature and is directly related to injuries, generating new demands in the fields of social protection, healthcare, and rehabilitation.

Statistical data confirm the scale of these challenges. According to the Social Protection Fund for Persons with Disabilities, as of December 2025, approximately 47,000 individuals received around 168,000 different rehabilitation aids, including about 5,000 prosthetic devices. At the same time, state policy demonstrates a commitment to a responsible and systematic response. In particular, the 2025 state budget allocated 4.6 billion UAH for prosthetics, with an additional 1 billion UAH designated for high-tech prosthetic devices. This indicates the gradual formation of a comprehensive state response to emerging social risks and needs.

In a broader context, these developments demonstrate that under conditions of war and forthcoming reconstruction – accompanied by political, economic, and social transformations – the resolution of issues and satisfaction of the needs of persons with disabilities becomes a long-term priority of state social policy. In this regard, barrier-free policy acquires key importance as an integrative instrument for ensuring equal access to societal resources and opportunities.

Conceptually, a barrier-free environment may be defined as a “complex of internal and external conditions of human life that ensures an individual’s inclusion in the social space for the satisfaction of personal needs and interests in the context of the interests of society as a whole” (Otych & Opanasiuk, 2024). This definition emphasizes the systemic nature of barrier-free accessibility, encompassing not only the physical environment but also social institutions, communicative practices, and economic opportunities.

At the same time, barrier-free accessibility should be understood as a value-based paradigm of contemporary social development. Barrier-free accessibility as a philosophy of a society without constraints is grounded in ensuring equal rights and opportunities for all individuals in the areas of self-realization, employment, mobility, access to services, education, leisure, and personal development. The implementation of this philosophy in Ukraine requires its integration into all spheres of public life, which necessitates coordinated efforts of the state, educational institutions, and civil society.

In this context, the experience of implementing the academic course “Barrier-Free Environment Policy: Ukrainian and International Experience” at Sumy State University is particularly noteworthy. This course represents a practical example of applying barrier-free principles in higher education and in the training of future social professionals.

The methodological framework of the course is based on a socially oriented approach, which involves active student engagement in addressing real social challenges through case studies, meetings with practitioners, project-based learning, and volunteering. This approach is complemented by a communicative learning model aimed at developing interaction skills, as well as a research-based approach that fosters analytical thinking and evidence-based decision-making.

The course content covers both international and Ukrainian experiences in implementing barrier-free policies. It takes into account that international institutions such as the United Nations, the World Health Organization, the European Union, and UNESCO establish global accessibility standards, which Ukraine is gradually integrating into its national development strategies and policies.

An important component of the course is the study of different types of barrier-free accessibility, including physical, informational, digital, social and civic, educational, and economic dimensions. This structure enables students to develop a comprehensive understanding of barriers and mechanisms for overcoming them.

In particular, physical accessibility is explored through practical activities. Students conduct assessments of social infrastructure facilities, map the accessibility of public spaces, and develop and implement projects aimed at expanding the barrier-free environment within the community. Educational accessibility is realized through informational and awareness-raising activities in schools, meetings with practitioners, familiarization with multidisciplinary team work, and psychosocial education of young people.

The socially oriented nature of learning also implies active cooperation between the university and non-governmental organizations of persons with disabilities, veteran support centers, and resilience centers, which contributes to the development of civic engagement and the formation of social responsibility among students.

The further development of barrier-free policy is associated with scaling up the accumulated approaches. This includes the integration of barrier-free principles into other academic disciplines, such as applying comprehensive analysis of interactions between public authorities and civil society within the Master's program in Political Science, incorporating barrier-free approaches into veteran policies within courses in Psychology and Social Work and Counseling, as well as expanding students' project activities within the course "Democracy: Values, Principles, Mechanisms".

A key condition for the effectiveness of this policy is the development of cooperation with stakeholders, including non-governmental organizations, local self-government bodies, social service providers, state institutions, and mass media. Such interaction ensures the practical orientation of educational initiatives and promotes a partnership-based model for implementing barrier-free policy.

Thus, barrier-free environment policy as a common interest and shared responsibility of the university, community, and state is a determining factor in shaping an inclusive society in Ukraine. The

implementation of this policy requires the systematic integration of accessibility principles into public administration, educational practice, and civic participation, thereby not only removing existing barriers but also creating a new quality of social interaction based on equal opportunities, respect for human dignity, and social cohesion.

References

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