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INCLUSIVE VOCATIONAL EDUCATION FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES IN UZBEKISTAN: BARRIERS, STATISTICAL CONTEXT AND A SOCIAL WORK SUPPORT MODEL

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Abstract. This review analyzes the conditions for inclusive vocational education and training (VET) of persons with disabilities in Uzbekistan. Using international documents, national legislation and analytical reports, it classifies barriers into four groups (infrastructural, pedagogical, socio-psychological and institutional), presents available official statistics on disability and employment, and proposes a four-step social work support model covering the period from admission to post-graduation follow-up. Three policy proposals for the National Agency for Social Protection are formulated: tutor and assistant services in vocational schools, retention-linked incentives for employers, and a register of accessible occupations with adapted professional standards.

Keywords: inclusive education, vocational education and training, persons with disabilities, social work, case management, employment, Uzbekistan.

Introduction. Inclusive education is a right and a condition for the social participation of persons with disabilities. The Salamanca Statement [1] and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [2], which Uzbekistan ratified in June 2021 [3], require inclusive education systems and protect the right to work. For vocational education and training (VET), inclusion has a double significance: it is an educational process and the main route to employment [4]. In Uzbekistan, the 2020 laws on education and on the rights of persons with disabilities, and the establishment of the National Agency for Social Protection in 2023, created a new institutional context. However, vocational training of persons with disabilities remains less studied than inclusion in general schools. The aim of this review is to classify the barriers to inclusive VET, summarize available statistical context, describe a social work support model and formulate policy proposals for the Agency.

Methods. This is a narrative review based on four groups of sources: (1) international legal and policy documents (UN, UNESCO, UNESCO-UNEVOC, ILO); (2) legislation and official statements of the Republic of Uzbekistan; (3) the analytical report prepared for UNDP and the National Agency for Social Protection [3], which compiles data of the World Bank, ILO and UN agencies; and (4) peer-reviewed publications on inclusive education. The author grouped the barriers into four categories for analysis, consistent with the whole-institution approach to inclusion [5, 6]. Only data traceable to published sources are used.

Results. **Legal and institutional framework.** The Law “On Education” (No. ZRU-637, 23 September 2020) introduced inclusive education into national legislation [7], and Presidential Resolution No. PQ-4860 (13 October 2020) approved the Concept for the Development of Inclusive Education in the Public Education

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System for 2020–2025 [8]. The Law "On the Rights of Persons with Disabilities" (No. ZRU-641, 15 October 2020) incorporates the requirements of the Convention [9]. The National Agency for Social Protection was established by Decree No. UP-82 of 1 June 2023 [10], and specialized vocational schools for persons with disabilities were transferred to its system from the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation [11]. At a meeting on 20 February 2024 the President noted that vocational training of persons with disabilities had not received due attention, announced the creation of a national system for their training and employment, and stated that the practice of "determining work capacity" would be discontinued [12].

Statistical context. According to the data compiled in [3], 845,300 persons (2.3% of the population) had a certified disability in December 2022. About 162,200 persons (around 25%) were recognized as "fit for work", of whom roughly 6% (21,100) were officially employed; other sources give 5–7% employment among persons with disabilities of working age, and persons with disabilities are reported to be four times less likely to be employed than persons without disabilities. The Law requires employers with at least 20 staff to reserve jobs (at least 3% of employees), but the quota is not enforced and no monitoring mechanism exists. For 2022, the government planned employment support for 12,146 persons with disabilities, including 2,993 who were to receive vocational and entrepreneurial skills training.

Barriers. Four groups of barriers are distinguished. (1) Infrastructural and architectural: the President noted that many facilities, roads and bus stops are not adapted and that, owing to the lack of conditions in schools and colleges, families send children to distant specialized boarding schools; accessibility of transport, workshops and dormitories should therefore be audited in each vocational school [5]. (2) Pedagogical and methodological: international literature stresses adapted curricula, qualified teachers and instructors, and assistive technologies, with inclusive pedagogy extending what is available to all learners. (3) Socio-psychological: negative stereotypes and employers' reluctance to hire persons with disabilities affect employment; disability remains legally linked with illness and inability to work, and employed persons fear losing benefits, which pushes them towards informal work [3]. (4) Institutional: social and labour market services are scattered, inter-agency coordination is weak, the public employment service does not yet perform all core functions, and quota monitoring is absent [3].

Social work support model. Case management is recommended internationally and is referred to in Decree No. UP-82 as a method for social workers of INSON Social Service Centers [3, 10]. On this basis, a four-step model is proposed. Step 1, assessment at admission: the social worker, with the student, family and teachers, assesses individual needs and functional abilities and prepares an individual support plan. Step 2, support during training: adaptation of the learning place and workshop, coordination with tutors and teachers, access to assistive technologies, family counselling and regular progress review. Step 3, practical training and employers: agreements with enterprises on adapted internships, advice on workplace adaptation (including job carving, i.e. tailoring tasks to a person's skills, as in Malta) and preparation of the work team. Step 4, post-graduation follow-up: referral to employment services, support at the workplace and monitoring of job retention until case closure.

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Discussion. The reviewed sources show that Uzbekistan has built the legal and institutional basis for inclusion, but the transition from training to employment is the weakest link: employment of persons with disabilities is low, the quota is not monitored and services are fragmented [3]. The inclusion of specialized vocational schools in the Agency's system allows training, rehabilitation and employment assistance to be coordinated within one structure. Three proposals follow for the National Agency for Social Protection. First, introduce tutor and assistant services in vocational schools; "inclusion assistance" and "workplace integration assistance" are among the measures recommended for Uzbekistan in [3]. Second, develop financial and tax preferences linked to retention rather than only to hiring: incentives such as flat tax rates, wage subsidies and adaptation subsidies already exist, yet quotas generally produce small net employment gains and fines are a minor cost compared with workplace adaptation, so support should cover workplace adaptation and be paid for sustained employment, including an inclusion bonus for apprentices. Third, create a unified register of accessible occupations and adapted professional standards, based on functional assessment rather than medical labels, in view of the practice of classifying some impairments as "unemployable" and the announced end of work-capacity determination; the register should be linked to the Unified Register of Social Protection and to employers' vacancies. A limitation of this review is that it does not contain primary data; empirical studies of graduates' outcomes are needed.

Conclusion. Inclusive VET in Uzbekistan requires action on four groups of barriers, reliable data and coordinated support from admission to employment. A case-management-based social work model, tutor and assistant services, retention-linked incentives for employers and a register of accessible occupations can help the National Agency for Social Protection turn the existing legal framework into measurable employment outcomes

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