



Article

Attitudes Toward Disability and Inclusive Environments in Georgian Universities: A Cross-Sectional Study of Administrative Staff

Shorena Sadzaglishvili ^{1,*}, Ketevan Makashvili ¹, Ketevan Gigineishvili ¹, Ruizan Mekvabidze ² and Zurab Zurabashvili ²

¹ Faculty of Arts and Science, Ilia State University, Tbilisi 0179, Georgia; ketevan_makashvili@iliauni.edu.ge (K.M.); ketevan.gigineishvili.1@iliauni.edu.ge (K.G.)

² Business and Law, Faculty of Social Sciences, Gori State University, Gori 1400, Georgia; gsu.icic@gmail.com (R.M.); zurabashvili.z@gmail.com (Z.Z.)

* Correspondence: shorena_sadzaglishvili@iliauni.edu.ge; Tel.: +995-577-50-15-77

Abstract

This study explores the attitudes of university administrative staff toward disability and their perceptions of the potential for inclusive environments in higher education institutions across Georgia. Using the Attitudes to Disability Scale (ADS), a cross-sectional survey was conducted with 63 staff members from a Tbilisi-based and a regional university. The findings reveal generally positive attitudes, especially among younger and female staff, but expose persistent hierarchies in disability perception—particularly skepticism toward intellectual and psychosocial impairments. While the participants expressed support for inclusion, their recommendations for occupational roles reflected narrow and often custodial views of employability. Urban–rural and tenure-based divides further underscored structural and cultural barriers to full inclusion. This study concludes with actionable recommendations for inclusive training, policy reform, and participatory approaches to shift Georgian universities toward genuine inclusion.

Keywords: inclusive environment; disability; attitudes; Georgian universities; administrative staff; higher education; ADS

Academic Editor: Geert Van Hove

Received: 20 April 2025

Revised: 3 June 2025

Accepted: 27 June 2025

Published: 30 June 2025

Citation: Sadzaglishvili, S.;

Makashvili, K.; Gigineishvili, K.;

Mekvabidze, R.; Zurabashvili, Z.

Attitudes Toward Disability and Inclusive Environments in Georgian Universities: A Cross-Sectional Study of Administrative Staff.

Disabilities **2025**, *5*, 61.

[https://doi.org/10.3390/](https://doi.org/10.3390/disabilities5030061)

[disabilities5030061](https://doi.org/10.3390/disabilities5030061)

Copyright: © 2025 by the authors.

Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland.

This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

Inclusion within higher education has become a global imperative aligned with equity, accessibility, and social justice. Inclusion and an inclusive environment refer to the proactive removal of social and institutional barriers that prevent full participation of persons with disabilities in academic work areas. This definition aligns with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and the biopsychosocial model of disability [1]. In this study, the term ‘persons with disabilities’ refers to individuals identified under Georgian legislation (Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities), which adopts a rights-based definition consistent with the UNCRPD [2].

However, for persons with disabilities, universities remain contested spaces. Attitudinal barriers, structural inaccessibility, and occupational stereotyping persist despite formal commitments to inclusion. In Georgia, a country transitioning from a Soviet legacy

and seeking alignment with international human rights' frameworks, the experience of persons with disabilities in academia remains under-researched [3–5].

This study investigates the attitudes of university administrative staff toward disability and inclusion in Georgian higher education institutions. It specifically examines how demographic and institutional factors shape staff perceptions and how these attitudes influence views on the employability of persons with disabilities.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Conceptualizing Disability and Inclusion in Higher Education

Despite increasing commitments to workplace inclusion, the employment rate of persons with disabilities remains persistently low. As of 2019, data from 32 OECD countries show that only about 25% of individuals with high support needs and approximately 50% of those with moderate support needs were employed. Overall, persons with disabilities had an employment rate that lagged 27 percentage points behind their non-disabled peers—a disparity that has remained largely unchanged for over a decade. Compounding this issue is the rise in job-seeking among people with disabilities, which has not been matched by job availability [6].

Higher education institutions are increasingly expected to serve as inclusive environments for all students and staff, including persons with disabilities. The shift from medical to social and biopsychosocial models of disability—endorsed by the WHO and the UNCRPD—has prompted a rethinking of institutional responsibilities [7,8]. Inclusion is now framed as a process of removing social and institutional barriers rather than adapting individuals to fit within exclusionary systems [6,9,10].

2.2. Measuring Attitudes Toward Disability

Attitudes are a critical factor in determining the success or failure of inclusion initiatives. In this study, we used a set of adapted items based on preliminary instruments piloted in the WHOQOL-DIS development process [7]. While often referred to as the Attitudes to Disability Scale (ADS), this 16-item tool has not been formally validated as a standalone scale. It includes four conceptual domains—Inclusion, Discrimination, Prospects, and Gains—that were designed to reflect attitudes toward persons with disabilities across diverse life domains. Importantly, the Gains subscale was not retained in the final WHOQOL-DIS instrument but is included in the present study for its interpretive relevance to perceived societal benefit. Our adaptation of the ADS aims to capture both explicit and subtle patterns of attitudinal differentiation, acknowledging its exploratory nature.

In addition, Grześkowiak and colleagues explored how employers and co-workers perceive and accept individuals with disabilities in the workplace. The study used data from two large-scale surveys conducted in Poland and Finland—CATI (2019) and CAWI (2021)—to examine differences in perceptions and attitudes across national and demographic lines measured by the Attitudes to Disability Scale (ADS) test developed by the WHOQOL Group. The study concluded that the ADS shows robust psychometric properties and is resistant to demographic and professional variation, confirming its suitability for use beyond clinical or disability-experienced populations [11].

2.3. Socio-Demographic Predictors of Inclusive Attitudes

Age, gender, and educational background significantly predict attitudes toward people with disabilities. Multiple studies [12,13] indicate that younger and female respondents report more inclusive and empathetic views. These differences are often attributed to exposure to human rights discourse, progressive education, and increased social contact with diverse populations [14].

2.4. Organizational Culture and Disability

The concept of the “inclusive university” has evolved over recent decades, yet administrative and structural barriers remain prevalent. Gibson (2015) [15] calls for a post-rights pedagogy that challenges hegemonic institutional norms, arguing that surface-level compliance is insufficient for profound structural change. Similarly, Ahmed (2012) [16] discusses the phenomenon of the “diversity smile,” whereby universities promote inclusion in rhetoric but fail to enact transformative practice. Burke (2012) [17] emphasizes that without addressing systemic privilege and exclusion, diversity policies risk becoming symbolic rather than substantive.

2.5. Geopolitical and Regional Factors

In post-socialist and transitional countries, efforts toward inclusion are often complicated by outdated legislation, stigmatizing public attitudes, and limited training infrastructure [18,19]. Regional disparities—especially between urban and rural institutions—further compound these challenges [20]. Studies in Eastern Europe, including that of Karger and Stoesz (2013) [21], note the persistence of Soviet-era deficit models of disability that hinder inclusive reform.

Regional and National Policy Frameworks in Georgia

In Georgia, the legal framework for inclusion has strengthened in recent years, notably through the adoption of the Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [2] and national strategies for inclusive education [3]. However, implementation remains uneven, particularly across urban and rural contexts. A 2016 report by the Public Defender’s Office highlighted widespread accessibility issues and a lack of institutional readiness to accommodate disabled staff and students [3,5].

2.6. Inclusion in the Workplace and Higher Education Employment

Employment remains a key area where discrimination against persons with disabilities manifests. Research by Roggero et al. (2006) [22], Ali et al. (2012) [23], and recent OECD (2022) [6] assessments emphasize that while legislative protections exist, employers often lack clear guidance or incentives to create accessible work environments. Piggott and Houghton (2007) [24] and Madriaga (2010) [25] have shown that disabled students and graduates face systemic barriers during the transition from education to employment, with institutions often failing to support inclusive pathways.

2.7. Toward Inclusive Institutional Practices

To close the gap between policy and practice, researchers call for inclusive hiring strategies, structural redesign of roles, and integration of people with disabilities into leadership and decision-making processes [26,27]. Universal Design for Learning (UDL), participatory governance, and continuous disability awareness training are key elements for fostering genuinely inclusive environments [28,29].

Despite global advancements in disability rights and educational policy, many institutions remain constrained by ableist assumptions and insufficient implementation strategies. The literature clarifies that attitudinal change—while necessary—is not enough. True inclusion requires a systemic transformation that engages with intersectionality, power dynamics, and institutional culture.

Attitudes toward disability significantly determine whether environments become inclusive or perpetuate marginalization [14].

Cross-cultural studies such as study (2016) [30] in China, research (2004) [29] in the United States, and research [18] in Europe have identified consistent global patterns in

disability hierarchies. These typically show more favorable attitudes toward people with physical disabilities compared to those with intellectual, cognitive, or psychosocial disabilities. Scior (2011) [31] highlights that such hierarchies reflect deeper structural stigma that persists across cultures.

Research has consistently shown that younger individuals and women report more favorable attitudes toward persons with disabilities [12,13]. Exposure to rights-based discourses and inclusive pedagogy is believed to influence these perspectives. However, even among supportive populations, implicit biases can manifest in occupational stereotyping, with people with disabilities often viewed as suitable only for low-responsibility roles [31].

Institutional culture also shapes inclusion. Gibson (2015) [15] argues for a “post-rights” pedagogy that moves beyond compliance toward epistemological transformation. Despite inclusive policies and accessibility laws in many countries, including post-socialist states, administrative inertia and tokenistic approaches often limit substantive change [17,26]. Urban–rural divides in resources, training access, and exposure to diversity have further deepened inequities in educational inclusion [19].

The recent literature also emphasizes the importance of engaging disabled voices in shaping inclusive environments. Studies by Bruyère et al. (2004) [29] and Roggero et al. (2006) [22] highlight that meaningful inclusion requires institutional will and participatory approaches that challenge hierarchical assumptions and reframe people with disabilities as rights-bearing citizens rather than passive recipients of support.

Despite the growing number of frameworks and tools promoting inclusion in higher education, implementation gaps remain. The literature calls for sustained professional development, inclusive hiring practices, and organizational cultures that recognize the full spectrum of disability—including invisible and cognitive forms—as essential components of institutional equity [8,23].

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Aim of This Study

This study aims to explore the attitudes of university administrative staff in Georgia toward persons with disabilities and their perceptions of inclusive environments in higher education institutions. Specifically, this research examines how demographic variables such as age, gender, institutional location (urban vs. regional), and duration of employment influence attitudes toward disability. Additionally, this study investigates which occupational roles university staff consider suitable for people with disabilities, revealing underlying assumptions about employability and inclusivity.

Understanding the attitudes of university administrative staff toward disability is crucial for fostering inclusive environments. This study specifically focuses on attitudes—defined as evaluative responses toward people with disabilities—measured through a structured set of survey items. However, we also recognize that perceptions, such as views on the feasibility of workplace inclusion and role suitability, are conceptually related and emerge through qualitative responses. These two dimensions—attitudes and perceptions—are treated as analytically distinct but mutually informative.

This study addresses a significant gap in the Georgian higher education context, where empirical evidence on disability inclusion is limited and where universities are undergoing transitional reforms aligned with broader diversity and equity goals. The findings inform policy development, staff-training programs, and institutional strategies for fostering inclusive educational and workplace environments for people with disabilities.

3.2. Research Design

A cross-sectional, quantitative research design was employed to assess the attitudes of administrative staff toward people with disabilities across two public universities in Georgia: one located in the capital city, Tbilisi, and the other in a regional area. This design enabled a comparative analysis between urban and regional institutional environments and allowed for the capture of a snapshot of current perceptions and practices.

Participants

Sixty-three university administrative staff members (N = 63, Female 80% and Male 20%) participated in this study. The participants were selected using purposive sampling from two public universities in Georgia—one located in the capital city, Tbilisi, and the other in a regional area. The goal was to ensure representation across various administrative departments, including human resources, academic affairs, student services, and general administration. Selection criteria included availability, willingness to participate, and departmental role diversity. Random sampling was not employed; instead, the participants were invited based on institutional accessibility and functional relevance to disability-related administrative processes. As this was a non-probabilistic sample, the findings should be interpreted with caution and cannot be generalized to the entire university administrative population in Georgia. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and the study protocol received ethical approval from the relevant institutional review board.

Demographic data collected included participants' age, gender, duration of employment, and institutional location. These variables were later used to examine their relationship with attitudes toward disability. The mean duration of working was 12 years (M = 12.37, SD = 10.5, Maximum = 41 and Minimum = 1).

3.3. Data Collection Tool

The survey instrument used in this study was adapted from preliminary items piloted during the development of the WHOQOL-DIS module. Although commonly referred to as the Attitudes to Disability Scale (ADS), this tool does not represent a fully validated or standardized scale. Rather, it includes conceptual categories—Inclusion, Discrimination, Gains, and Prospects—intended to capture general attitudes toward disability. The Gains subscale, in particular, is used here in an exploratory capacity to gauge perceptions of the broader benefits of inclusion.

Our instrument comprised 16 items measuring four subscales:

- Inclusion (e.g., belief in people with disabilities' ability to participate in society);
- Discrimination (e.g., negative stereotypes or stigma);
- Prospects (e.g., perceived future opportunities for people with disabilities);
- Gains (e.g., personal or social enrichment through engagement with people with disabilities).

Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree." The ADS has been validated in study [11].

A Georgian-language version was used following rigorous translation and back-translation protocols by the WHO guidelines [11]. That back-translation was used to preserve the integrity of the original scale.

The maximum total score for each domain is 20 (midpoint score of 10). Inclusion and Discrimination were correlated positively (Spearman's $\rho = 0.419$, $p < 0.001$) and Gains and Discrimination was correlated positively (Spearman's $\rho = 0.277$, $p < 0.05$). As shown, the Discrimination and Prospects subscales have good internal consistency (See Table 1). The Inclusion and Gains subscales had reliability coefficients of approximately 0.60, which reflects

moderate internal consistency. This suggests that interpretations based on these subscales should be made cautiously and supported by triangulation with qualitative responses.

Table 1. Staff's age and university location: demographics (%).

University Location	18–34	35–49	50+	Total
Capital	86%	78%	35%	70%
Region	14%	22%	65%	30%

In addition to the ADS, the survey included an open-ended question asking participants to suggest job roles within the university that they believed were appropriate for people with disabilities. This qualitative component provided additional context to the quantitative findings and helped to uncover implicit occupational stereotypes.

3.4. Data Collection Procedure

The survey was distributed in paper and electronic formats, depending on staff preference and accessibility needs. Data collection was conducted over a two-month period in 2024. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and the respondents were assured that their responses would be used solely for academic research purposes.

3.5. Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics software (Version 27). Descriptive statistics were computed to summarize participant demographics and average scores across ADS subscales. Inferential analyses included t-tests and one-way ANOVAs to explore differences in attitudes; one-way ANOVAs were conducted using the four ADS subscales as dependent variables. Independent variables included age group (18–34, 35–49, 50+), gender (male, female), employment duration (<5 years, 5–15 years, >15 years), and institutional location (Tbilisi vs. regional). Assumptions for the ANOVAs were tested and met (Levene's test $p > 0.05$), with Welch's ANOVA applied where assumptions were violated. Post hoc comparisons (Bonferroni) were included for statistically significant effects as the Bonferroni Post hoc test is used for a small number of planned comparisons.

Additionally, Pearson's correlation coefficients and a Spearman's rank-order correlation were used to explore the relationships between variables (e.g., age and ADS scores).

Qualitative data from the open-ended responses were coded thematically. Common categories were identified to interpret the types of occupational roles perceived as appropriate for persons with disabilities and to contextualize these views within broader attitudinal frameworks.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to international ethical standards for research involving human participants. All participants provided informed consent prior to participation. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained throughout this study. The participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. The Ethics Committee of Ilia State University granted ethical approval (R/130-25).

4. Results

This section presents the key findings from the cross-sectional survey conducted with 63 university administrative staff members in Georgia. The results are organized according to the core variables of interest: age, gender, location (urban vs. regional), duration of employment, disability type preferences, and occupational role suggestions.

4.1. General Attitudinal Trends

Descriptive analysis of the Attitudes to Disability Scale (ADS) showed that the Prospects subscale had the highest mean score ($M = 17.22$, $SD = 2.16$), followed by Inclusion ($M = 13.95$, $SD = 2.19$), Gains ($M = 13.73$, $SD = 2.14$), and Discrimination ($M = 13.06$, $SD = 2.98$). Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. The Inclusion and Gains subscales had reliability coefficients of approximately 0.60, which reflects moderate internal consistency. This suggests that interpretations based on these subscales should be made cautiously and supported by triangulation with qualitative responses.

4.2. Differences by Age

A one-way ANOVA revealed a statistically significant difference in the acceptance of persons with disabilities total scores across age groups, $F(2, 60) = 4.48$, $p = 0.015$. Post hoc analysis using the Bonferroni correction indicated that participants aged 18–34 reported significantly higher acceptance ($M = 29.43$, $SD = 8.90$) compared to those aged 35–49 ($M = 22.78$, $SD = 8.06$), $p = 0.025$. No other pairwise comparisons reached statistical significance. These results suggest that younger staff members demonstrate higher perceived acceptance of persons with disabilities than middle-aged staff.

Similarly, a one-way ANOVA showed a significant effect of age on willingness to employ persons with disabilities, $F(2, 60) = 8.16$, $p = 0.001$. Bonferroni post hoc comparisons revealed that the 18–34 age group reported significantly greater willingness to hire persons with disabilities ($M = 12.22$, $SD = 2.32$) than both the 35–49 group ($M = 10.30$, $SD = 2.48$), $p = 0.016$, and the 50+ group ($M = 9.47$, $SD = 1.74$), $p = 0.001$. No significant difference was found between the 35–49 and 50+ groups. These findings indicate that younger staff members exhibit more favorable attitudes toward employing individuals with disabilities compared to their older counterparts.

A Pearson's correlation analysis revealed a strong positive relationship between participants' age and their employment duration ($r = 0.84$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that these variables are closely related in this sample.

4.3. Differences by Gender

An independent sample *t*-test was conducted to examine gender differences in attitudes toward disability, as measured by the Inclusion subscale of the Attitudes to Disability Scale (ADS). The results indicated that female staff members ($M = 14.17$, $SD = 2.20$) scored significantly higher on the Inclusion subscale compared to male staff ($M = 12.67$, $SD = 1.60$), $t(61) = 1.95$, $p = 0.05$. This suggests that women in the sample expressed more inclusive attitudes towards persons with disabilities.

However, no statistically significant gender differences were observed on the other ADS subscales, including Discrimination, Prospects, and Gains.

4.4. Urban vs. Regional Institutional Differences

Institutional affiliation was associated with significant differences in attitudes and willingness toward disability inclusion. An independent sample *t*-test revealed that central university staff ($M = 11.15$, $SD = 2.55$) reported significantly greater willingness to hire persons with disabilities compared to regional university staff ($M = 9.90$, $SD = 2.10$), $t(40.65) = 2.03$, $p = 0.05$. However, no significant differences were observed between the two groups in terms of perceived workplace acceptance of persons with disabilities.

In addition, the participants from the central university ($M = 17.61$, $SD = 2.23$) scored significantly higher on the Prospects subscale of the Attitudes to Disability Scale (ADS) than those from the regional university ($M = 16.31$, $SD = 1.70$), $t(61) = 2.52$, $p = 0.02$. This suggests more optimistic attitudes toward the future of individuals with disabilities

among central university staff. No significant institutional differences were found on the other ADS subscales, including Discrimination, Inclusion, and Gains.

4.5. Duration of Employment

Administrative staff with longer tenure at their institutions tended to express less optimistic attitudes toward the future prospects of persons with disabilities. This was evidenced by a statistically significant negative correlation between duration of employment and scores on the Prospects subscale of the Attitudes to Disability Scale ($\rho(rho) = -0.363, p < 0.01$), suggesting that extended exposure within the same institutional environment may be associated with more conservative or skeptical views regarding disability inclusion.

A Spearman's rank-order correlation was conducted to assess the relationship between length of employment in the university and attitudes toward disability. The analysis revealed a moderate negative correlation between employment duration and both acceptance of persons with disabilities ($\rho(rho) = -0.353, p = 0.005$) and willingness to hire persons with disabilities ($\rho(rho) = -0.336, p = 0.007$). These findings suggest that administrative staff with longer tenure at the university tend to express lower acceptance and reduced willingness to employ individuals with disabilities.

4.6. Disability Type Perceptions

When asked about their willingness and acceptance to work with individuals with different types of disabilities, respondents were more accepting of physical impairments than intellectual or psychosocial disabilities. Intellectual disabilities, in particular, were associated with a significantly lower willingness to employ or collaborate (see Table 2).

Table 2. Georgian version of psychometrics of Attitudes to Disability Scale (ADS).

Domain	Items (4 Per Domain)	Cronbach's α
Inclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - People with a disability find it harder than others to make friends - People with a disability have problems getting involved in society - People with a disability are a burden on society - People with a disability are a burden on their family - People often make fun of disabilities 	0.60
Discrimination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - People with a disability are easier to take advantage of - People tend to become impatient with those with a disability - People tend to treat those with a disability as if they have no feelings - Having a disability can make someone a stronger person 	0.80
Gains	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Having a disability can make someone a wiser person - Some people achieve more because of their disability - People with a disability are more determined to reach their goals - Sex should not be discussed with people with disabilities 	0.60
Prospects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - People should not expect too much from those with a disability - People with a disability should not be optimistic about their future 	0.80

In particular, this study also examined co-workers' perceived acceptance of individuals with various types of disabilities, including mobility impairments, visual impairments, hearing impairments, and intellectual/mental limitations, within the workplace. The perceived acceptance scale, which consisted of four items representing these disability types, demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.80$).

Similarly, the willingness to employ persons with disabilities scale, assessing willingness to hire individuals with these same disability types, showed acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.70$). A strong positive correlation was found between willingness to hire and perceived acceptance ($\rho(rho) = 0.521, p < 0.001$), indicating that higher

acceptance of disability diversity in the workplace is associated with a greater willingness to employ persons with disabilities. Table 2 shows notable differences in how various types of disabilities are perceived and accepted in the workplace.

Acceptance Scores:

The respondents reported the highest acceptance toward individuals with mobility and manual barriers ($M = 7.78$, $SD = 2.49$), followed by visual barriers ($M = 7.14$, $SD = 3.03$). Acceptance was lowest for individuals with cognitive disabilities, including intellectual and mental health conditions ($M = 4.54$, $SD = 2.91$), indicating a possible disability hierarchy in workplace attitudes.

Willingness to Employ Scores:

Similarly, willingness to employ followed the same pattern, with the highest willingness for persons with mobility impairments ($M = 3.11$, $SD = 0.81$) and visual impairments ($M = 3.02$, $SD = 0.77$). Willingness was lowest for individuals with cognitive disabilities ($M = 2.14$, $SD = 0.90$), reflecting lower readiness to include this group in employment.

Overall, the results suggest that functional type of disability significantly influences both acceptance and willingness to employ, with respondents demonstrating greater openness to physical impairments and more hesitation toward intellectual and mental-health-related disabilities (see Table 3).

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for acceptance and willingness toward people with disabilities across functional domains (N = 63).

Domain	Mean	Median	Mode	SD	Min	Max
Acceptance						
Mobility and manual barriers	7.78	8	10	2.49	1	10
Visual barriers	7.14	8	10	3.03	1	10
Hearing or communication barriers	5.87	6	10	2.99	1	10
Cognitive barriers (including intellectual and mental)	4.54	4	1	2.91	1	10
Willingness						
Mobility and manual barriers	3.11	3	3	0.81	1	4
Visual barriers	3.02	3	3	0.77	1	4
Hearing or communication barriers	2.51	2	2	0.86	1	4
Cognitive barriers (including intellectual and mental)	2.14	2	2	0.90	1	4

This trend reflects findings about the “hierarchy of disability” and points to a critical area for awareness-building.

4.7. Occupational Role Preferences Based on Open-Ended Responses

Thematic analysis of open-ended responses revealed a tendency to assign people with disabilities to roles perceived as low-risk, low-responsibility, or highly routinized. Most frequently suggested positions included:

- Assistant;
- Copy Machine Specialist;
- IT Assistant.

Few participants proposed administrative or academic roles, and even fewer suggested managerial or supervisory positions. The responses often reflected implicit assumptions that people with disabilities require constant support or cannot handle complex tasks, particularly in environments involving public interaction or decision-making authority (see Table 4).

Table 4. Perceived suitable job positions for persons with disabilities (ranked by percentage of agreement).

Job Position	Percentage (%)
Assistant	73.0
Copy Machine Specialist	65.1
IT Specialist	57.1
Consultant	50.8
Assistant Librarian	50.8
Assistant Teacher	47.6
Operator’s Assistant	46.0
Administrator	44.4
Cleaning and maintenance staff	42.9
Technician	38.1
Services at Café	34.9
Dish Washing at Café	30.2
Guard	30.2
Gardening	31.7
Cook at Café	28.6
Postal Office	28.6
Animal Care	23.8

4.8. Policy Awareness vs. Practical Recommendations

While the participants scored highly on the Prospects subscale of the Attitudes to Disability Scale (ADS)—indicating perceived future opportunities for people with disabilities—the open-ended responses painted a more constrained picture. When asked to suggest job roles appropriate for persons with disabilities, the most frequently cited positions were limited to cleaning, clerical support, receptionist roles, and document sorting. Very few respondents mentioned positions involving decision-making, student interaction, or leadership.

This discrepancy highlights a gap between the participants’ conceptual endorsement of inclusion and their practical imagination of how inclusion would manifest within their institutions. It is possible that the respondents support disability rights in principle but maintain limited views of actual workplace capability, likely shaped by infrastructural barriers or lack of institutional exposure to disability-inclusive employment.

This contrast may reflect latent ableist assumptions or a reliance on the status quo, where certain roles are seen as more “realistically” accessible given existing limitations in accommodation. It also suggests that institutional policies promoting inclusion may not yet be deeply internalized as practice-level expectations among staff. Thus, policy awareness does not necessarily translate into a transformative vision of workplace inclusion.

5. Discussion

This discussion interprets this study’s key findings in the context of the existing literature on disability, inclusion, and higher education, with a focus on administrative staff perceptions within Georgian universities. It explores how demographic variables, institutional environments, and cultural attitudes interact to shape understandings of disability and inclusivity.

5.1. Positive Attitudes Mask Structural Barriers

This study found generally favorable attitudes toward people with disabilities on the ADS Prospects and Inclusion subscales, particularly among younger and female staff.

These results are consistent with global findings suggesting that younger generations socialized within human rights discourses are more receptive to inclusive values [13]. Female participants' higher empathy scores align with previous research linking gender with prosocial orientations [12].

However, this positivity appears to be superficial in many cases. The dissonance between inclusive attitudes and limited imagination in job suggestions underscores what Gibson (2015) [15] calls a "post-rights paradox": institutions appear to comply with inclusion rhetorically while sustaining exclusionary practices in reality.

In addition, the respondents expressed greater openness to physical impairments and more hesitation toward intellectual and mental-health-related disabilities. This contradiction reflects a persistent hierarchy of disability [31], wherein physical impairments are considered more "acceptable" than intellectual or psychosocial disabilities.

5.2. Urban Advantage and Regional Constraints

Staff in the Tbilisi-based university scored higher on the Prospects subscale, suggesting that urban institutions may have greater access to resources, exposure to inclusive practices, and policy enforcement mechanisms. These findings align with research from other transitional societies where regional disparities hinder the implementation of equitable policies [19].

Nonetheless, even in urban contexts, limitations in role suggestions reveal how deeply entrenched ableist norms remain. Despite institutional policies promoting disability rights, staff often defaulted to suggesting roles of low complexity or limited visibility. This suggests that policy diffusion has not yet transformed internalized perceptions of competence and potential.

5.3. Tenure and Institutional Inertia

This study observed that staff with longer employment durations expressed more cautious or skeptical views toward persons with disabilities. This trend may indicate institutional inertia, where exposure to outdated models of disability during earlier phases of career development continues to shape present-day attitudes [15,32].

This cohort effect also highlights the importance of sustained professional development and training that updates staff perceptions and practices in line with contemporary disability frameworks. However, the observed association between employment duration and attitudes toward disability may partially reflect the influence of age, given the strong positive correlation between age and duration. This suggests that employment duration may act as a proxy for age, and interpretations based on duration alone should be made cautiously.

5.4. Disability Type and the Limits of Inclusion

The respondents' reluctance to employ individuals with intellectual or psychosocial disabilities points to deep-seated stigma. This hierarchy of disability is not unique to Georgia and has been observed in many cultural contexts [30]. However, in Georgia, the influence of Soviet-era medicalized views of disability may further reinforce these biases [4].

While overtly hostile attitudes were rare, the frequent assignment of supportive or custodial roles to persons with disabilities suggests that inclusion is conditional and patronizing rather than empowering. As Piggott and Houghton (2007) [24] discussed, real inclusion must extend beyond integration to encompass agency, autonomy, and parity of esteem.

5.5. Institutional Policy vs. Practical Inclusion

Although the respondents reported awareness of university policies on inclusion, their practical suggestions for integrating persons with disabilities into the workforce were often

narrow and limiting. This gap reflects findings from other contexts where institutional commitments to diversity are undermined by the everyday reproduction of exclusion [16,17].

The notion of a “diversity smile” [16] is apt here: Universities project an image of compliance and openness, yet systemic change remains superficial. Staff may perceive inclusion as a bureaucratic obligation rather than a transformative practice. Without engagement in the epistemological conflict that inclusion entails [26], universities risk reducing diversity to symbolic gestures.

5.6. Implications for Georgian Higher Education

The results of this study suggest that Georgian universities must move beyond declarative commitments to inclusion and instead adopt structural, cultural, and pedagogical reforms. These might include:

- Ongoing training in inclusive education and disability awareness, tailored by role and department.
- Development of inclusive recruitment and promotion pathways for people with disabilities.
- Institutional audits to identify and dismantle ableist assumptions embedded in job design.
- Strengthening the visibility and agency of disability services’ units.

Regional institutions also need to build capacity to reduce geographic disparities in inclusive practices. As the global literature demonstrates, decentralization of support, resource sharing, and leadership engagement are critical for successful implementation [20,29].

5.7. Toward a Post-Rights Pedagogy

In line with Gibson’s (2015) [15] critique, this study reinforces the need for a post-rights pedagogy—an approach that treats inclusion not as a compliance task but as an ethical and epistemic transformation. Such an approach would challenge the normative assumptions of the university as a space designed for nondisabled bodies and minds and instead center the voices, needs, and ambitions of disabled people themselves.

By fostering dialogical, reflexive, and participatory institutional cultures, Georgia universities can close the gap between policy and practice, between attitude and action. Only through such efforts can inclusive environments truly flourish.

5.8. Limitations and Implications

While this study provides valuable insights, it is not without limitations.

The sample size is relatively small and drawn from only two universities, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, self-reported attitudes may be subject to social desirability bias, especially in institutional contexts where inclusivity is politically emphasized. We acknowledge that although back-translation ensured linguistic accuracy, it may not have captured deeper cultural nuances, which cognitive interviewing techniques could address in future studies.

In addition to the limitations associated with sampling and instrument validation, the internal consistency of some ADS subscales was modest. Specifically, Cronbach’s alpha for the Inclusion and Gains subscales was approximately 0.60, which indicates only moderate reliability. As a result, conclusions drawn from these subscales should be regarded as exploratory rather than definitive. The Gains subscale, in particular, was designed to capture broader perceptions of societal benefits associated with inclusion and may not directly reflect interpersonal attitudes.

It is important to interpret the staff's recommendations for job roles for people with disabilities with caution, particularly when distinguishing between perceptions of individual capability and assumptions about feasibility within the current institutional environment. While many participants listed administrative, technical, or cleaning roles as "appropriate," their reasoning often appeared rooted in existing infrastructural limitations rather than a belief in inherent inability. For instance, several responses implied that the absence of sign language interpreters or accessible software would hinder the employment of deaf or visually impaired individuals. This suggests that, in some cases, feasibility within the present system—not perceived competence—shaped their suggestions. Future research should explicitly distinguish between attitudinal and environmental constraints to better understand and challenge these assumptions.

Despite these limitations, this study offers a timely and empirically grounded perspective on the inclusivity landscape within Georgian higher education and contributes to the ongoing discourse on disability rights and inclusive academic environments.

6. Conclusions

This study contributes to the growing understanding of the barriers and enablers of disability inclusion within Georgian universities. While many administrative staff expressed generally positive attitudes toward people with disabilities, deeper analysis revealed significant disparities in the perceived employability and roles suitable for persons with disability—particularly those with intellectual or psychosocial disabilities. These findings suggest that while Georgian higher education institutions are formally aligned with inclusive policies, they still reflect structural ableism and cultural biases, especially among longer-serving and regionally based staff.

The observed discrepancy between institutional commitment and practical application is consistent with the broader international literature, which identifies the gap between symbolic policy and transformative practice (Ahmed, 2012; Gibson, 2015) [15,16]. The widespread tendency to suggest only routine or custodial jobs for persons with disabilities reflects an underlying deficit-based model that continues to shape workplace norms. To address this, institutions must go beyond awareness-raising and move toward systemic transformation.

This study also recognizes its limitations, including the modest internal consistency of the Inclusion and Gains subscales on the Attitudes to Disability Scale (ADS), as reflected in Cronbach's alpha values near 0.60. Therefore, while the findings provide insight into broad patterns, they should be interpreted with caution. To offset these constraints, qualitative responses were thematically analyzed to enrich interpretation and contextual understanding.

7. Recommendations

Based on these findings and international best practices, the recommendations below are proposed to strengthen disability inclusion within Georgian higher education.

7.1. *Embed Comprehensive Disability Training in Professional Development*

Training on disability awareness, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and inclusive practices should be mandatory and tailored to administrative roles. Given this study's finding that younger staff held more inclusive views, it is essential to provide upskilling opportunities for long-serving personnel, particularly in regional settings where attitudes were less progressive [7,13].

7.2. Challenge Hierarchies of Disability Through Cultural Change

The persistent bias favoring physical over intellectual or psychosocial disabilities requires targeted interventions. Awareness campaigns, guided by people with lived experience of disability, can confront these assumptions and humanize less visible impairments [8,31].

7.3. Re-Evaluate Job Design and Institutional Roles

The narrow range of roles suggested for people with disabilities in this study signals an urgent need to redesign administrative and academic functions. Institutions should conduct audits of job descriptions and adopt flexible models that accommodate various strengths and support needs [22,29].

7.4. Strengthen and Empower Disability Support Units

These units should be granted expanded authority, funding, and visibility to lead institutional reforms. Their mandate should include data monitoring, staff training, and advising on inclusive recruitment. Their absence or underutilization was noted indirectly in the participants' reliance on vague references to policy rather than specific practices.

7.5. Foster Participation of People with Disabilities in Institutional Governance

Genuine inclusion requires participatory structures. Involving disabled students and staff in decision-making bodies, planning committees, and evaluation processes will ensure institutional change is co-produced rather than imposed from above (Slee, 2011). [26].

7.6. Address Urban–Regional Disparities in Inclusion Capacity

This study identified a clear gap between urban (Tbilisi-based) and regional staff attitudes. Targeted capacity-building initiatives, including peer learning exchanges and regional hubs, should be established to decentralize expertise and foster inclusive communities across all campuses [18].

7.7. Develop Inclusion Benchmarks and Accountability Tools

Universities should adopt explicit inclusion benchmarks tied to national and international standards, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD). Regular self-assessment and reporting mechanisms can help measure progress and keep institutions accountable.

By enacting these recommendations, Georgian universities can move beyond symbolic gestures and toward a transformative model of inclusion that affirms disability as an essential component of human diversity and institutional excellence.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, S.S., K.M., K.G.; methodology, S.S.; data collection R.M. and Z.Z. formal analysis, S.S.; writing—original draft preparation, S.S.; review and editing, S.S. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This project (CIF-2023-04) was funded by the Ministry of Education, Science and Youth of Georgia, “Innovation, Inclusion and Quality Project—Georgia I2Q”.

Institutional Review Board Statement: This study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Ethics Committee of Ilia State University (approval code: R/130-25; approval date: January 2024).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in this study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy considerations.

Acknowledgments: The authors would like to express their gratitude to Mariam Dalakishvili, a senior researcher and quality assurance expert at Ilia State University, for her valuable support in validating the research instrument. Her insights and expertise greatly contributed to the methodological rigor of this study. During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used ChatGPT (OpenAI, GPT-4.0, 2025) for the purposes of generating draft text, refining language, and organizing ideas. The authors have reviewed and edited the output and take full responsibility for the content of this publication.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Disability Language/Terminology Positionality Statement: This article adopts person-first language (e.g., “persons with disabilities”) in line with both the Georgian legal framework—particularly the Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2020)—and international human rights conventions such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which Georgia ratified in 2014. Person-first language is also consistent with the biopsychosocial model of disability adopted in this study and reflects the terminology currently embedded in Georgian policy, academic, and professional discourse. The use of person-first language acknowledges the individuality and humanity of persons with disabilities while avoiding the reduction of identity to a diagnostic category. This choice also aligns with established practice in social work and education disciplines in Georgia, which emphasize dignity, rights, and inclusion. We recognize that in other cultural contexts, including within disability communities globally, identity-first language (e.g., “disabled people”) may be preferred to emphasize disability as an integral and politicized aspect of identity. While this paper respects such perspectives, the decision to use person-first language reflects the dominant legal, institutional, and sociolinguistic norms of the Georgian context in which this study was conducted.

Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

ADS	Attitudes to Disability Scale
UN CRPD	UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
CIF	Competitive Innovation Fund
ANOVA	Analysis of Variance

References

1. United Nations. Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). United Nations General Assembly. 2006. Available online: <https://social.desa.un.org/issues/disability/crpd/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities-crpd> (accessed on 1 April 2025).
2. Parliament of Georgia. Law of Georgia on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. 2020. Legislative Herald of Georgia. Available online: <https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/view/4928064> (accessed on 1 April 2025).
3. Makharadze, T.; Kitiashvili, A.; Markowska-Manista, U.; Abashidze, T.; Zhvania, I.; Gagoshidze, T.; Lauber-Pohle, S.; Makaradze, N.; Gurgenidze, M.; Kobuladze, N.; et al. Inclusive Education in Higher Education Institutions in Georgia—Main Barriers and Facilitators. *Open J. Soc. Sci.* **2025**, *13*, 133–150. <https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2025.133010>.
4. Institute of Social Studies and Analysis. Stigmatization of Children with Disabilities: Analytical Report. 2016. Available online: <https://ssa.gov.ge/> (accessed on 19 April 2025).
5. Public Defender of Georgia. Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Georgia. 2016. Tbilisi: Office of the Public Defender (Ombudsman) of Georgia. Available online: <https://www.ombudsman.ge/res/docs/2020011415500580351.pdf> (accessed on 2 April 2025).
6. OECD. *Disability, Work and Inclusion: Mainstreaming in All Policies and Practices*; OECD Publishing: Paris, France, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1787/1eaa5e9c-en>.
7. Power, M.J.; Green, A.M.; WHOQOL Group. Development of the WHOQOL disabilities module. *Qual. Life Res.* **2010**, *19*, 571–584. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11136-010-9616-6>. PMID: 20217246.

8. WHO. Measuring Health and Disability: Manual for WHO Disability Assessment Schedule (WHODAS 2.0). World Health Organization. 2012. Available online: [https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/measuring-health-and-disability-manual-for-who-disability-assessment-schedule-\(-whodas-2.0\)](https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/measuring-health-and-disability-manual-for-who-disability-assessment-schedule-(-whodas-2.0)) (accessed on 1 April 2025).
9. Sharma, A.; Thakur, K.; Kapoor, D.S.; Singh, K.J. Designing Inclusive Learning Environments: Universal Design for Learning in Practice. In *The Impact and Importance of Instructional Design in the Educational Landscape*; IGI Global: Hershey, PA, USA, 2023; pp. 24–61. <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-6684-8208-7.ch002>.
10. Morina, A. Inclusive education in higher education: Challenges and opportunities. *Eur. J. Spec. Needs Educ.* **2017**, *32*, 3–17.
11. Grześkowiak, A.; Załuska, U.; Kwiatkowska-Ciotucha, D.; Kozyra, C. People with Disabilities in the Workplace: Results of a Survey Conducted among Polish and Finnish Employers. *Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health* **2021**, *18*, 10934. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph182010934>. PMID: 34682681; PMCID: PMC8535350.
12. Siperstein, G.N.; Parker, R.C.; Norins, J.; Widaman, K.F. A national study of Chinese youths' attitudes towards students with intellectual disabilities. *J. Intellect. Disabil. Res.* **2011**, *55*, 370–384. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2788.2011.01382.x>. PMID: 21265902.
13. Lindsay, S.; McPherson, A.C. Experiences of social exclusion and bullying at school among children and youth with cerebral palsy. *Disabil. Rehabil.* **2011**, *34*, 101–109. <https://doi.org/10.3109/09638288.2011.587086>.
14. Antonak, R.F.; Livneh, H. Measurement of attitudes toward persons with disabilities. *Disabil. Rehabil.* **2000**, *22*, 211–224.
15. Gibson, S. When rights are not enough: What is? Moving towards new pedagogy for inclusive education within UK universities. *Int. J. Incl. Educ.* **2015**, *19*, 875–886.
16. Ahmed, S. *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*; Duke University Press: Durham, NC, USA, 2012.
17. Burke, P.J. *The Right to Higher Education: Beyond Widening Participation*; Routledge: Abingdon-on-Thames, UK, 2012.
18. Griful-Freixenet, J.; Struyven, K.; Vantieghem, W.; Gheysens, E. Higher education students with disabilities speaking out: Perceptions of disability and support needs in higher education. *Eur. J. Spec. Needs Educ.* **2017**, *32*, 543–561.
19. Heymann, J.; Stein, M.A.; Moreno, G. *Disability, Work and Inclusion: Mainstreaming in Development Programs*; World Bank Publications: Washington, DC, USA, 2014.
20. ILO. *Achieving Equal Employment Opportunities for People with Disabilities Through Legislation: Guidelines*; International Labour Organization: Geneva, Switzerland, 2004.
21. Karger, H.J.; Stoesz, D. *American Social Welfare Policy: A Pluralist Approach*, 7th ed.; Pearson Education: London, UK, 2013.
22. Roggero, P.; Tarricone, R.; Nicoli, M.; Mangiaterra, V. What do people think about disabled youth and employment in developed and developing countries? Results from an e-discussion hosted by the World Bank. *Disabil. Soc.* **2006**, *21*, 645–650.
23. Ali, A.; Scior, K.; Ratti, V.; Strydom, A.; King, M.; Hassiotis, A. Discrimination and other barriers to accessing health care: Perspectives of patients with mild and moderate intellectual disability and their carers. *PLoS ONE* **2012**, *7*, e70855.
24. Piggott, L.; Houghton, A.-M. Transition experiences of disabled young people. *Int. J. Lifelong Educ.* **2007**, *26*, 573–587.
25. Madriaga, M. "I avoid pubs and the student union like the plague": Students with Asperger Syndrome and their negotiation of university spaces. *Child. Geogr.* **2010**, *8*, 39–50.
26. Slee, R. *The Irregular School: Exclusion, Schooling and Inclusive Education*; Routledge: Abingdon-on-Thames, UK, 2011.
27. Taylor, S.J. Before it had a name: Exploring the historical roots of disability studies in education. In *Vital Questions Facing Disability Studies in Education*; Danforth, S., Gabel, S.L., Eds.; Peter Lang: New York, NY, USA, 2006; pp. xi–xviii.
28. Booth, T.; Ainscow, M. *Index for Inclusion: A Guide to School Development Led by Inclusive Values*, 4th ed.; Index for Inclusion Network; Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education: Bristol, UK, 2016. Available online: https://www.ph-noe.ac.at/fileadmin/root_phnoe/Forschung/Migration/Index_curriculum_pages.pdf (accessed on 1 April 2025).
29. Bruyère, S.; Erickson, W.A.; VanLooy, S. Information technology and the workplace: Implications for persons with disabilities. *Disabil. Stud. Q.* **2004**, *24*, 4. <https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v24i4.880>.
30. Zheng, Q.; Tian, Q.; Hao, C.; Gu, J.; Li, X. Comparison of attitudes toward disability among caregivers, the public, and people with disability: Findings from a cross-sectional survey in China. *BMC Public Health* **2016**, *16*, 1024.
31. Scior, K. Public awareness, attitudes and beliefs regarding intellectual disability: A systematic review. *Res. Dev. Disabil.* **2011**, *32*, 2164–2182.
32. Yuker, H.E. *Attitudes Toward Persons with Disabilities*; Springer Publishing Company: Berlin/Heidelberg, Germany, 1994.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.