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**PROMOTING INCLUSIVE EXCELLENCE THROUGH UNIVERSAL DESIGN FOR LEARNING IN UKRAINIAN UNIVERSITIES**

While educational systems around the world are becoming increasingly diverse, curricula and teaching methods often fail to take into account the diversity of learners’ needs, experiences, and abilities. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is an increasingly popular concept for developing flexible and accessible curricula. Based on the science of how people develop learner expertise, UDL promotes the development of learner competencies through proactive curriculum design that provides multiple opportunities for interaction, representation, action, and expression.

UDL is an evidence-based concept that involves creating flexible environments to ensure successful learning for all students, regardless of their disabilities. This idea emerged in the early 1990s in the United States and aims to remove barriers to learning by proactively planning the educational process, as opposed to an approach where adaptive measures are applied after difficulties are identified.

Over the past three decades “UDL has matured as a framework that can potentially prompt practitioners to uncover and consider their preconceived values, supporting practitioners to wrestle with their orientations toward learner variability, their framing of barriers to learning, and their beliefs about the capabilities of all learners” [2, p. 713].

UDL principles involve removing barriers to learning through systematic planning rather than remediation, which is well aligned with both international and national requirements for inclusive, quality education for all. The experience of educational institutions in Ukraine that implement the principles of UDL shows greater student engagement and achievement, skill development through reliance on individual strengths, and empowerment of vulnerable groups. This suggests that UDL has the potential to fundamentally change the educational paradigm in Ukraine, moving from universal standardization to a supportive culture of learning diversity.

Equal access to education and quality educational services in Ukraine is based on the principles proclaimed in the Law of Ukraine on Education, which states that the principles of state policy in the field of education and the principles of educational activity, among others, are to ensure equal access to education without discrimination on any grounds, including disability; development of an inclusive educational environment, universal design and reasonable adjustment.

The concept of UDL distinguishes between three concepts: equality, equity and expert learning. Equality means, on the one hand, equal access to educational services for all students, on the other hand, it does not ensure that the needs of students, which may differ significantly, are met. Equity implies that we provide adequate support to each student based on variability, which eliminates barriers that do not disappear when providing the same support to all students. Expert learning occurs when we focus on individual needs, so we not only promote equity but also involvement and engagement.

In line with UDL principles, the diverse learning needs of students are best met through barrier-free, proactive curriculum design from the very beginning. This can be realized by planning flexible pathways to fulfill degree requirements, such as blended or online courses, alternative internship sites, different modalities and formats of delivery and presentation of projects, tests, and other student outcomes.

The first principle of providing multiple means of representation involves providing students with different ways to access and learn course materials, such as hard copies, digital formats, audio recordings, and videos. This can be realized by teaching theoretical concepts through different media (text, video, podcasts, graphics), creating e-courses with adapted interfaces, using subtitles and voiceovers.

The second principle of multiple means of action and expression involves different ways of interacting with the course material and with each other, for example, by diversifying teaching and learning methods, organizational forms of learning, different types and forms of student interaction and their combination, such as work in small groups, pairs, individual work, group projects, online simulations.

 The third principle of multiple means of engagement involves different ways of acting and expressing, which means that students have the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in different ways, for example, through different assessment options such as essays, oral presentations, visualizations, audio reports, videos, etc.

Implementing UDL principles requires transforming teaching and learning through the lens of variability, flexibility, and challenges that are overcome through proactive, learner-centered design. This is important not only for people with disabilities or special educational needs but for all learners. Implementing the principles in higher education has the potential to promote student academic success, as UDL helps to make curricula more intuitive and accessible to students with different strengths and challenges that may otherwise hinder success. That teaches students how to develop strategies and advocate for themselves to improve access to education through various modes of engagement, representation, action, and expression. These soft skills, which are extremely relevant in today’s world, prepare students for adaptive lifelong learning.

UDL contributes to the development of professional values by providing real interdisciplinary dynamics through a variety of tools, mutual exchange of thoughts, feelings, and appreciation of different points of view, which are components of professional competencies. An inclusive classroom climate based on the principles of UDL, when students have a choice of different means of presenting information and learning outcomes, and when such practices are standard rather than corrective, creates a sense of shared responsibility and enhances the sense of freedom and personal responsibility for learning outcomes.

However, efforts of individual teachers are not enough to provide students with equal access to high-quality educational services. This can only be achieved through a multi-tiered support system (MTSS). It is designed to identify and address the strengths and needs of all students by optimizing data-driven decision-making, monitoring progress, and using evidence-based support. MTSS is a systemic approach that aims to create conditions for successful and sustainable systemic change, and to support students and teachers. In contrast to a reactive model that responds to declining student performance as a rationale for resources and services, MTSS places responsibility on the system, not the student, and is proactive in ensuring that all students receive what they need. All tiers are universally designed using UDL principles and provide equal access for all students; they include academic, behavioral, and social-emotional tiers. The MTSS model provides universal supports for all students, such as high quality, universally designed, culturally appropriate, and scientifically based curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

Implementing UDL and MTSS holds great promise for transforming teaching and learning in Ukrainian higher education institutions to make them truly inclusive and accessible for all students. While individual instructors have begun applying UDL principles in their classrooms, widespread and sustainable change requires support at the systemic level through an MTSS framework. Coordinated efforts are needed from educational leaders, administrators, faculty and support staff to provide the necessary flexible options, resources and professional development opportunities to fully realize the benefits of UDL. Stakeholder engagement will further strengthen implementation efforts. With coordinated multi-level support and commitment to inclusive excellence, these frameworks can indeed help reshape the educational paradigm to one that truly values all learners and supports them to reach their full potential.

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