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# Implementing the UN convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in higher education: Creating commitment from the top and knowledge sharing among HEIs

## Introduction

The Netherlands ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in July 2016. One of the obligations of the UN convention is to ensure an inclusive education system at all levels (Article 24). Inclusive education refers to education that is accessible for students with disabilities while minimising the need for specific adjustments (ECIO, n.d.-a). For higher education institutions this means that they should actively promote the inclusion of students with disabilities. Necessary and appropriate modifications and adjustments should be offered to remove the barriers experienced by students with disabilities unless those impose a disproportionate burden (Article 24 Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2006).

Achieving inclusive education is not easy. It asks for knowledge about accessibility, support from the top as well as the bottom of the institution and cooperation between different parties. Also, inclusive education is not achieved in one day and therefore the UN convention aims for a progressive realization (Article 4). However, this still means that institutions should take immediate action. **This article presents how a declaration of intent and workgroup for HEIs in the Netherlands stimulates them to implement the UN convention.** Furthermore, this article describes Dutch good practices of the implementation of the UN convention. Finally, practical recommendations to improve the implementation and impact of the UN convention on inclusive higher education are discussed.

## Declaration of intent

Although the UN committee states that state parties should introduce a policy framework for inclusive education together with a time frame for the implementation (CRPD/GC/4, §63), the Dutch government mostly decentralised the implementation of inclusive education at the institutions' level. The argument for this is that the institutions have more knowledge of what the students need and therefore the implementation may be more efficient. The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW) does indirectly encourage HEIs to implement the UNCRPD by subsidizing a program of the Dutch expert centre on inclusive education (ECIO). As part of this program, ECIO composed a [declaration of intent](#) on the UN convention for HEIs. By signing this declaration, institutions explicitly state that they aim to be an inclusive institution for students with disabilities. One objective of signed parties is

to strive for inclusiveness in the design of education, with special attention to flexibility in the curriculum, increasing the expertise of all employees, information provision, internationalisation and the transition to the labour market.

Since the introduction of the declaration of intent in 2017, eighteen HEIs have signed the declaration and this number continues to increase. Every signatory is celebrated with a small ceremony at the campus of the institution or online. The board member, who signs the declaration, and students with disabilities are present and have a conversation about what goes well and what can be improved for students with disabilities. Involving students in

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this implementation process is very important as they are the ones who know best what should be done. [Later in this article, how some Dutch HEIs organized the participation of students with disabilities in the policy process is explained.](#)

The institutions who signed the declaration are welcomed to the Workgroup UN Convention which is facilitated by ECIO. The workgroup gathers together three times a year to share knowledge and good practices of inclusive education. Every session evolves around another theme, such as information provision and student participation.

## The impact of the declaration of intent

In my master thesis, (Van Veen 2021) I assessed the impact of the UN convention, and more specifically the declaration of intent, on Dutch higher education institutions' policies and practices. The results show that the declaration of intent is contributing to the implementation process of the UN convention. It does this in two ways. Firstly, the declaration of intent leads to more commitment from the top of the organisation. A member of the board signs the declaration and therefore the topic of inclusive education stays on the agenda. Students and staff members can use the signing of the declaration as a valid argument in discussions about why attention should be paid to the accessibility of higher education for students with disabilities. Secondly, the declaration of intent has led to more collaboration between institutions. The institutions that signed the declaration congregate in the Workgroup UN Convention, where they share good practices and questions. Such knowledge sharing is beneficial for implementing the UNCPRD as the institutions can learn from each other and implement the UN convention more effectively.

## Comparative case study with four Dutch HEIs

In my thesis on the impact of the UN convention on Dutch higher education institutions (HEIs) policies and practices, I analysed the policy process for inclusive education of four Dutch HEIs, namely Hogeschool Utrecht, Hogeschool Rotterdam, Tilburg University and Universiteit van Amsterdam. Three of the institutions signed the declaration of intent and participate in the workgroup UN convention. Table 1 displays information about the type of institution, the number of students and programs on offer, and the year they signed the declaration.

Table 1: Case study descriptions

Institution	Type of institution	Number of students	Number of study programs	Year of signing declaration
Hogeschool Utrecht	University of applied science	34,000	22 faculties with 62 bachelor programs	2018
Hogeschool Rotterdam	University of applied sciences	40,000	13 faculties with 83 study programs	
Tilburg University	Research university	19,000	5 faculties with 20 bachelor and 80 master programs	2019
Universiteit van Amsterdam	Research university	40,000	7 faculties with 20 bachelor and 200 master programs	2018

For the analysis, desk research and interviews were conducted. The respondents of these interviews consisted both students and staff members. The staff members were involved in different ways with the policy process. Their roles were often policy advisor or student dean. In the end, nineteen respondents contributed to the study and nine policy documents were accessible for the study.

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## An integral approach

The results of the study show that the four institutions started making policies on inclusive education at different times. The **two hogescholen** were relatively early and therefore have the policy already more integrated into the entire organisation and its plans and budget. Formulating a policy is useful as it clarifies what is expected and who is responsible for what. However, this can be a long process. Therefore, differences in how far the policy is implemented at the HEIs is apparent. The two **hogescholen** are further ahead in the implementing stage.

This study also shows many similarities between the four institutions. All four institutions used an integral approach for the formulation and implementation of the policy. At the start of the policy process, a network of staff members is set up to work on inclusive education. The network consists of, for example, student deans, members of the exam committee, policy advisors on physical accessibility and student psychologists. This integral approach contributes to the effectiveness of the policy as different perspectives are included and the staff members are more inclined to support the policy. Everyone in the institution has a role to play in the creation of inclusive education. Yet, everyone has another perspective due to their function within the organisation. By getting a representative of every department around the table, there is a better understanding of each other's views and concerns.

A good example of an integral approach is that of Hogeschool Utrecht. The HEI created the role of 'monitoring officer'. Each of the 22 faculties has a monitoring officer now who signals bottlenecks for students with disabilities and advises the faculty in the implementation process. This is an extra role for staff members, next to their other position in the institution. By having a monitoring officer at every faculty, the institution ensures that there is an overview of the inclusiveness of education throughout the organisation.

## Involve students with disabilities

Next to different staff members being involved in the policy process, students with disabilities are involved as well. At many Dutch HEIs, [platforms](#) for students with disabilities are initiated, with the aim to hear from the students themselves what should be improved. Some students are also hired as student assistants by the institution, which means that they get paid for their work. This demonstrates that the input of the students is appreciated and recognized as important. To encourage this process, ECIO facilitates meetings in which the student platforms of different institutions can get in touch with one another to share good practices and challenges. Also, ECIO organizes [interviews](#) between students and board members about the implementation of the UN convention. This is helpful for both parties to understand each other better and to discuss solutions for the barriers that are experienced by students.

## Bottlenecks for inclusive education

Multiple good practices for the implementation of the UN convention can be identified in Dutch higher education and these good practices are shared in the workgroup UN convention. Still, there are many improvements to make. The results of the master's research show that there is not enough expertise about certain topics inside the organization. For example, digital accessibility is complex and often no staff member has enough knowledge about it. Besides the lack of local expertise, there is also not enough expertise in the entire country about making different aspects of education accessible. The HEIs miss national standards to which they have to conform. These could give more guidance on how to become more inclusive. Finally, financial resources are significant in this matter.

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Most people are willing to work towards inclusiveness, yet there is a lack of time and budget. Dutch higher education institutions did not receive a separate budget for the implementation of the UN convention. Therefore, the implementation of the convention is delayed because, for each plan related to inclusive education, the institutions must first assess whether there is a budget for it.

## Ways to improve the implementation of the UNCRPD

The results of this research offer multiple recommendations to improve the implementation of the UNCRPD. To start, one bottleneck for the implementation is the lack of guidance from the national government. Achieving inclusive education is very complicated, therefore, acquiring more knowledge is necessary. Consequently, the first way to improve the implementation is by increasing the research on inclusive education in order to expand understanding of this topic. Moreover, this increased knowledge should then be converted into concrete guidelines and standards for the institutions. Knowledge sharing between institutions is generally recognized as beneficial in the implementation process and this is already done within the Workgroup UN Convention. The declaration of intent and the establishment of the workgroup are proved to be valuable in the implementation process. It would also be valuable to set up a separate budget for implementing the convention as this would address the bottleneck of a lack of resources.

Achieving inclusive education is a long process. It is important to cooperate with each other in this process. This includes cooperation between different departments within the institution, cooperation with students with disabilities and cooperation between different HEIs in a workgroup.

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