

DEVELOPMENT SCENARIOS OF COLLABORATION IN THE FIELD OF INCLUSIVE HIGHER EDUCATION BETWEEN RUSSIA AND CIS COUNTRIES: PROJECT-FORESIGHT

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Abstract

The study describes the results of the first round of a foresight project conducted in July 2025, aimed at identifying promising scenarios for the development of cooperation between Russia and CIS countries in the field of inclusive higher education. The research was a continuation of two preliminary pre-foresight sessions held in the spring of 2025. An expert survey, developed based on the initially formulated scenarios, was sent to experts from Russia, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan for refinement. Experts assessed the probability of six different scenarios across three-time horizons (5, 10, and 15 years) on a five-point Likert scale and selected the most probable scenario for each time interval. The key findings of the study demonstrate cautious optimism. In the short term (5 years), the most probable scenario is recognized as the realistic "Points of Growth" scenario, characterized by parallel national initiatives with the exchange of best practices. In the medium term (10 years), preference is given to the "Points of Growth – Regional Synergy" scenario, which implies the deepening of inter-university cooperation and the emergence of regional centers. The long-term forecast (15 years) shows a divergence of opinions but a clear shift towards more optimistic and cooperative scenarios, in particular, the "International Hub – Integration through Cooperation" scenario, indicating the experts' belief in the potential for deeper integration over time. Negative scenarios implying isolation or a minimal level of cooperation received the lowest probability ratings. The conclusion of the study is that experts believe in the progressive development of inclusive education within the EAEU space, but they view this process as gradual, starting with local initiatives. Russia is seen as a potential source of expert knowledge, but successful cooperation requires dialogue on equal terms and adaptation to national contexts. The main challenges noted by experts are institutional and cultural barriers, conservative attitudes, and a lack of funding, while human capital is named the key resource base for initiating changes. The main result of the first iteration was the refinement of the expert questionnaire for the subsequent, expanded round of the project-foresight.

Keywords: *Inclusive education, international cooperation, Russia, CIS countries, scenarios, expert survey.*

1. Introduction

Inclusive higher education is increasingly framed as a rights-based and development priority. International normative instruments explicitly require States to ensure non-discriminatory access to tertiary education and provide reasonable accommodation for students with disabilities (UN, CRPD).

These commitments were further articulated in the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action, which positioned inclusion as a guiding principle for education systems and policy reform (UNESCO, 1994).

At the policy level, the inclusion agenda is reinforced by the Sustainable Development Goals, while global monitoring frameworks continue to document persistent exclusion and unequal participation of learners with disabilities across education levels, including higher education (UNESCO GEM, 2020).

Within the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), inclusive education in higher education is marked by a pronounced implementation gap: formal legal provisions have expanded, but institutional practices, resources, and socio-cultural readiness vary considerably across countries. In the Russian Federation, the organization of education for learners with disabilities is regulated, inter alia, by the Federal Law No. 273-FZ, including provisions on 'special conditions' and reasonable adjustments within education organizations (Russian Federation. Federal Law No. 273-FZ).

So, the development of inclusive higher education is a global priority, reflected in both international commitments and national strategies. Within the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), this process is characterized by significant diversity in approaches, legislative frameworks, and levels of practical implementation. While the formal principles of inclusion are often enshrined in law, their practical application in universities faces numerous institutional, cultural, and resource-related challenges.

Creating a collaborative space in this area is seen as a way to accelerate development, share best practices, and overcome common obstacles. This article presents the results of the preliminary (pre-foresight) stage of a study aimed at developing scenarios for cooperation between Russia and CIS countries in inclusive higher education. The goal of this stage was to formulate key hypotheses and potential development pathways based on a dialogue between experts from different countries.

2. Methodology: Pre-foresight expert sessions

The primary method for the initial data collection was the organization of two structured focus group discussions (pre-foresight sessions) in May 2025.

- The first session (May 22) involved experts from CIS countries: Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan.
- The second session (May 23) involved experts from leading Russian universities and organizations involved in inclusive education.

The discussions were moderated according to a pre-developed guide that covered the following key themes: the state of legislation, institutional practices, societal and cultural barriers, the role of various actors (teachers, parents, volunteers), the issue of employment for graduates, and prospects for international cooperation.

The sessions were transcribed, and their content was subjected to qualitative thematic analysis. The main task was to identify common problems, resources, and expectations, as well as to formulate possible scenarios for future interaction.

3. Key findings from expert discussions

3.1. Regulatory harmonization and the implementation gap

Experts across both sessions emphasized the discrepancy between formal legal commitments and actual institutional implementation. While several CIS countries have adopted inclusive education principles at the legal level, practical provisions for higher education remain uneven, with limited enforcement mechanisms and unclear entitlement structures (e.g., benefits for applicants with disabilities, service standards, and financing rules).

A recurring issue was the lack of reliable and comparable statistics on students with disabilities in universities, which complicates planning, benchmarking, and monitoring. In the CIS session, experts noted that even central authorities may not have readily available data on enrollment and support arrangements in higher education.

From a cooperation perspective, experts framed ‘harmonization’ less as formal unification and more as pragmatic alignment: shared definitions, comparable indicators, and interoperable guidance on ‘special conditions’ and reasonable accommodation in higher education.

3.2. Socio-cultural barriers: Stigma, disclosure, and student agency

Both CIS and Russian experts highlighted that stigma and fear of negative peer reactions are major barriers to inclusion in higher education. The willingness to disclose disability status was described as a sensitive ‘threshold’ that affects access to accommodations, psychosocial support, and participation in campus life.

Experts described cases where students avoided attending classes due to anticipated stigmatization, suggesting that legal provisions alone do not generate inclusive practices without sustained cultural change and campus-level interventions.

3.3. The ambivalent role of families and the ‘tutoring gap’

Family involvement was portrayed as simultaneously enabling and constraining. In the absence of formal tutoring and support services, parents often substitute institutional support; however, intensive guardianship can hinder autonomy, socialization, and transition to independent adult roles.

Experts also pointed to the need for alternative support infrastructures, including inclusive volunteering programs. Russian experts reported promising practices such as university-wide elective courses on ‘inclusive volunteering’, which can institutionalize peer support without making it coercive.

For cooperation agendas, these findings imply that cultural interventions and support service models (including volunteering and tutoring) should be treated as core elements of cross-country learning, not as optional add-ons.

3.4. Human resources and professional development

A consistent theme was the shortage of trained staff and the uneven integration of inclusion-related competencies into teacher education and continuing professional development. Belarus was discussed as demonstrating a more systemic approach, including long-standing curriculum components and structured professional development for faculty; other countries were described as being at early stages of institution-building in this area.

Experts recommended that cooperation prioritize scalable professional development formats (hybrid courses, joint modules, internships) and the preservation of effective elements of special pedagogy within inclusive didactics, avoiding 'methodological dilution'.

3.5. Transition to employment and inter-agency coordination

Experts framed employment outcomes as a key indicator of inclusion effectiveness in higher education. Suggested solutions included: employer involvement in final assessments, development of career support networks, and partnerships with 'strong' employers able to offer adapted workplaces and sustain accommodation costs.

Russian experts emphasized that employment challenges cannot be solved by education authorities alone; effective solutions require inter-agency coordination, including labor and social protection institutions, as well as policies on quotas, benefits, and wage incentives.

3.6. Cooperation instruments: Hubs, monitoring, and coordination

On international cooperation, experts converged on the value of creating coordination and resource infrastructures. Proposals included a network of regional hubs (often linked to leading universities), common methodological packages, joint research programs, and a monitoring system with agreed indicators of university inclusiveness.

At the same time, experts cautioned against one-directional 'donor-recipient' dynamics. The most broadly supported vision was parity-based cooperation with mutual learning, where Russia is an important resource actor but not an unconditional leader.

4. Formulated cooperation scenarios

Based on the discussions, three preliminary scenarios for the development of cooperation were formulated:

1. Pessimistic Scenario ("Independent Initiatives / Sandboxes"): Each country develops its inclusive education system independently, with minimal cooperation. Interaction is limited to sporadic exchanges. This scenario is driven by a lack of mutual information, institutional barriers, and a focus on internal issues.

2. Realistic Scenario ("Points of Growth - Regional Synergy"): Development is based on parallel national initiatives with active exchange of best practices. Key elements include: regular conferences, mutual training for teachers, student exchanges, joint methodological developments, and the creation of a network of regional resource centers. Cooperation is gradual and parity-based.

3. Optimistic Scenario ("International Hub - Integration through Cooperation"): Deep integration with Russia playing a leading coordinating role. It involves harmonizing legislation, creating a unified competency center, implementing large-scale joint educational and anti-stigma programs, and forming a common monitoring system for the inclusiveness of universities.

Table 1. Describing of scenario.

Scenario	Core logic	Typical instruments (examples)
Pessimistic ('Sandboxes / Independent initiatives')	Minimal coordination; country-specific trajectories dominate; cooperation remains ad hoc.	Occasional conferences; small grants and pilot exchanges; open digital repository of materials; voluntary adoption of templates.
Realistic ('Points of growth – Regional synergy')	Gradual, parity-based cooperation via hubs and shared tools; emphasis on feasible alignment and peer learning.	Network of regional resource hubs; joint CPD modules; 'inclusive audits' and mobile expert teams; annual inclusiveness ranking; shared indicator set and monitoring platform.
Optimistic ('International hub – Integration through cooperation')	High integration with formalized governance; joint policy and data infrastructure; large-scale joint programs.	Interstate coordination council; model legal packages; unified database/monitoring; joint degree programs; cross-country anti-stigma campaigns; network career center for graduates with disabilities.

5. Discussion

The pre-foresight stage revealed a shared understanding of the fundamental problems in developing inclusive higher education in the CIS region, as well as a cautious optimism regarding the potential for cooperation.

Experts believe in progressive development but view it as a gradual process starting with local initiatives and exchanges (the "Points of Growth" scenario). In the long term, a shift towards more integrated forms of cooperation is considered possible.

Russia is seen as a resource but not as an unconditional leader. The success of cooperation depends on building a dialogue on equal terms, respecting national specifics, and focusing on mutually beneficial projects. The main challenges identified are legislative harmonization, overcoming cultural stigma, and securing funding.

The formulated scenarios served as the basis for the next research stage—a broader expert survey to assess their probability and desirability at different time horizons. The results of this pre-foresight phase underscore the importance of a multilateral expert dialogue as a starting point for designing a common future in the socially significant sphere of inclusive education.

The pre-foresight findings highlight that inclusive higher education cooperation in the CIS space is constrained by a combination of institutional, resource, and cultural factors. From a policy perspective, experts implicitly distinguish between 'paper harmonization' (formal similarity of legal norms) and 'functional harmonization' (shared operational definitions, indicators, and service standards that can be implemented and monitored). This distinction is consistent with rights-based interpretations of inclusive education, which emphasize not only access but also the provision of effective support and the removal of attitudinal barriers.

The strong preference for the realistic scenario can be interpreted as an expert assessment of political and administrative feasibility. Rather than endorsing rapid integration, experts prioritize 'buildable' cooperation components: hub networks, professional development modules, and shared monitoring tools. In the short term, these components can reduce coordination costs and create cumulative learning effects without requiring full legal unification.

Cultural stigma emerges as a central 'bottleneck' shaping the effectiveness of any technical or legal solutions. Experts' emphasis on disclosure reluctance suggests that universities function as key agents of cultural change, where anti-stigma interventions, peer support, and inclusive volunteering can complement formal accommodations. This aligns with global evidence that attitudinal barriers remain a major determinant of educational participation for learners with disabilities.

The discussions also point to a structural 'tutoring gap': where dedicated support services are absent or underdeveloped, families become default support providers. While such substitution can enable participation, it can also reproduce dependency and impede student autonomy. For cooperation design, this implies that service models (tutoring, psychosocial support, assistive technology provision) should be explicitly addressed alongside infrastructure and legal topics.

Finally, experts' focus on employment outcomes and inter-agency coordination indicates that inclusive higher education cannot be assessed in isolation from labor market structures and social protection policies. Scenario packages that include employer partnerships and transition support are therefore likely to be more sustainable, especially in contexts where resource constraints limit universities' capacity to provide comprehensive services.

Limitations of the pre-foresight stage include the small number of experts and the qualitative nature of evidence. However, the sessions provided a high-resolution map of problem areas and feasible instruments, which can be operationalized in the next project stage through structured expert surveys and probability/desirability ratings for each scenario component.

6. Conclusion

The pre-foresight expert sessions identified a shared diagnosis of the main barriers to inclusive higher education in Russia and CIS countries: an implementation gap, limited data and monitoring capacity, insufficient staff training, persistent stigma, and fragmented transition-to-employment support. Experts' scenario preferences converge on a parity-based, incremental cooperation pathway (regional synergy), combining hub networks, shared tools, and monitoring. The scenario framework developed at this stage will inform the next round of project-foresight, where scenario components will be quantified and prioritized across time horizons.

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