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Bibliographic description of the article: Komar I. (2025). Developing barrier-free competence in future social work professionals. *Mountain School of the Ukrainian Carpathians*. 32. 77-81.

Бібліографічний опис статті: Комар І. (2025). Формування безбар'єрної компетентності в майбутніх фахівців соціальної сфери. *Гірська школа Українських Карпат*. 32. 77-81.

УДК 37.013

DEVELOPING BARRIER-FREE COMPETENCE IN FUTURE SOCIAL WORK PROFESSIONALS

Abstract. The article examines the process of developing barrier-free competence among future social work professionals as a key factor in ensuring inclusivity and accessibility of social services. The importance of forming barrier-free competence as a core component of professional training for future social specialists is substantiated. The concept of barrier-free accessibility is understood as a complex social phenomenon encompassing physical, informational, psychological, communicative, and other aspects of accessibility, thus requiring an interdisciplinary approach to its study and implementation.

Barrier-free competence is defined as an integrated set of knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes that enable a specialist to identify and overcome barriers in client interactions, build an inclusive environment, and support the participation of all population groups in social life. The article analyzes its structural components, which includes cognitive, operational-activity, emotional-value, and communicative components.

Attention is drawn to defining the content structure of competence, combining knowledge, practical skills, value orientations, and communicative abilities necessary to overcome diverse barriers in professional practice. The possibilities of integrating barrier-free topics into the process of professional training are analyzed, emphasizing the importance of applying an interdisciplinary approach, active teaching methods, and practical engagement with target groups. Recommendations are proposed for improving educational programs and the educational environment to develop socially responsible, competent professionals.

It is concluded that effective formation of barrier-free competence is possible only through comprehensive transformation of the educational process: from updating program content and implementing active teaching methods to changing the educational environment and involving students in real practices of inclusive interaction. Training specialists capable of acting within the logic of barrier-free accessibility is not only a requirement of modern professional ethics but also a prerequisite for social cohesion, justice, and sustainable development.

Keywords: barrier-free accessibility, barrier-free competence, social sector, professional training, inclusion, accessibility, social services, social work.

ФОРМУВАННЯ БЕЗБАР'ЄРНОЇ КОМПЕТЕНТНОСТІ В МАЙБУТНІХ ФАХІВЦІВ СОЦІАЛЬНОЇ СФЕРИ

Анотація. У статті розглядається процес формування безбар'єрної компетентності майбутніх фахівців соціальної сфери як ключового чинника забезпечення інклюзивності та доступності соціальних послуг. Обґрунтовано важливість формування безбар'єрної компетентності як ключового складника професійної підготовки майбутніх фахівців соціальної сфери. Поняття безбар'єрності розглянуто як комплексне соціальне явище, що охоплює фізичні, інформаційні, психологічні, комунікаційні та інші аспекти доступності, а отже, потребує міждисциплінарного підходу до його вивчення та реалізації.

Безбар'єрна компетентність визначається як інтегрована сукупність знань, умінь, цінностей та установок, що забезпечують здатність фахівця виявляти й долати бар'єри у взаємодії з клієнтами, будувати інклюзивне середовище та підтримувати участь усіх категорій населення в суспільному житті. У статті проаналізовано її змістову структуру, що включає когнітивний, операційно-діяльнісний, емоційно-ціннісний і комунікативний компоненти.

Акцентовується увага на визначенні змістової структури компетентності, що поєднує знання, практичні уміння, ціннісні орієнтири та комунікативні навички, необхідні для подолання різноманітних бар'єрів у професійній діяльності. Проаналізовано можливості інтеграції тематики безбар'єрності в процес професійної підготовки, підкреслено



важливість застосування міждисциплінарного підходу, активних методів навчання та практичної взаємодії з цільовими групами. Запропоновано рекомендації щодо вдосконалення освітніх програм і освітнього середовища для формування соціально відповідальних, компетентних фахівців.

Зроблено висновок, що ефективне формування безбар'єрної компетентності можливе лише за умов комплексної трансформації освітнього процесу: від оновлення змісту програм і впровадження активних методів навчання до зміни освітнього середовища й залучення студентів до реальних практик інклюзивної взаємодії. Підготовка фахівця, здатного діяти відповідно до логіки безбар'єрності, є не лише вимогою сучасної професійної етики, але й передумовою соціальної згуртованості, справедливості та сталого розвитку.

Ключові слова: безбар'єрність, безбар'єрна компетентність, соціальна сфера, професійна підготовка, інклюзія, доступність, соціальні послуги, соціальна робота.

INTRODUCTION

The problem formulation. In contemporary society, barrier-free accessibility is increasingly regarded as a fundamental principle in building an open and inclusive social environment, where every individual, regardless of health condition, age, social status, or other characteristics, has the right to full participation in community life. In this context, the issue of fostering barrier-free thinking and the corresponding professional competencies among specialists in the social sphere, who serve as intermediaries between vulnerable population groups and the support system, becomes particularly relevant.

Social transformations, the growing diversity of the needs of social service clients, and regulatory changes, including the adoption of the National Strategy for Creating a Barrier-Free Space in Ukraine until 2030, necessitate new approaches to the professional training of specialists. In this context, the development of barrier-free competence among future social workers, social pedagogues, counselors, and other representatives of the social sphere becomes one of the key tasks of higher education.

Analysis of recent research and publications. The issue of barrier-free accessibility and the development of relevant competencies among specialists in the social sphere has recently attracted increasing attention from both Ukrainian and international scholars. Domestic studies primarily focus on inclusive education, social work with persons with disabilities, and human rights activities, while gradually expanding the scope to include issues of cross-sectoral cooperation, digital accessibility, and sociocultural barriers (Petrenko, 2019). International research often concentrates on the development of barrier-free space models as a component of social integration strategies, as well as on the formation of interdisciplinary competencies that respond to the current challenges of inclusion (UNICEF Ukraine, 2021).

The source base of the article includes Ukrainian legislative acts, such as the Law of Ukraine "On the Fundamentals of Social Protection of Persons with Disabilities," the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, as well as the National Strategy for Creating a Barrier-Free Space in Ukraine until 2030; scholarly works on inclusion, professional training of social sphere specialists, human rights, and social protection; and analytical reports of Ukrainian and international organizations (UNICEF Ukraine, 2021; United Nations, 2006; Ministry of Communities and Territories Development of Ukraine, 2020; Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, 2020; Law of Ukraine, 2019).

Overall, the analysis of contemporary scholarly approaches indicates the necessity of an interdisciplinary and holistic approach to the development of barrier-free competence, which takes into account not only knowledge and practical skills, but also the value-emotional and communicative dimensions of professional activity.

AIM OF THE RESEARCH

The purpose of the article is to provide a comprehensive theoretical substantiation of the phenomenon of barrier-free competence of future specialists in the social sphere as an essential component of their professional training, to define its essence, structure, and functional significance, as well as to analyze the opportunities and pathways for integrating the principles of barrier-free practices into the content and forms of the educational process in higher education institutions. Achieving this purpose aims to expand scientific understanding of the professional competence of social sphere specialists and to outline the prospects for implementing barrier-free practices in the higher education system of Ukraine.

RESEARCH METHODS

The study employs a set of theoretical methods appropriate to its aim and objectives. Analysis, synthesis, comparison, and generalization were used to examine scientific sources, normative frameworks, and international practices related to barrier-free competence. A system-structural approach made it possible to determine the role of this competence in the professional training of future social sphere specialists. Content analysis allowed us to identify key concepts and trends in contemporary research, while modeling and prognostic methods were applied to substantiate the structure of barrier-free competence and outline perspectives for its integration into higher education. The combination of these methods ensured the comprehensiveness and scientific validity of the findings.

RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH

In the scholarly literature, the concept of barrier-free accessibility is most often considered in an interdisciplinary context as a set of conditions that ensure free access to physical, informational, educational, and social spaces for all population groups. The concept of "barrier-free competence" is relatively new and does not yet have an established definition. However, it is gaining popularity in connection with the growing attention to the themes of inclusion, accessibility, human rights, and social justice.

For the purposes of this study, barrier-free competence of a social sphere specialist is understood as an integral quality that combines knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values, enabling effective action in conditions of diversity while taking into account the clients' needs related to physical, informational, psychological, and sociocultural barriers.



Barrier-free competence includes the ability to identify existing barriers in interactions with clients; to conduct professional activities in a way that minimizes or eliminates these barriers; and to initiate changes in the environment to ensure equal access to resources, services, and opportunities.

In the professional practice of social sphere specialists, the concept of barrier-free accessibility gains particular significance, as these professionals are often the first to interact with individuals facing various forms of exclusion. In this context, barrier-free accessibility does not merely refer to the presence of ramps or wide, accessible doors. It primarily involves recognizing the diversity of clients, being sensitive to their needs, and creating conditions for equal access to services and full participation in social life (UNICEF Ukraine, 2021).

In the course of interacting with social sector institutions, clients often encounter a variety of barriers that complicate or even prevent the full realization of their rights, as well as access to services and social resources. These barriers are multidimensional and manifest both at the level of infrastructure and environmental organization, and in the sphere of communication, social relations, and psychological perception.

Physical barriers concern the inaccessibility of buildings, transport infrastructure, and public spaces for people with disabilities or low-mobility groups. This includes, in particular, the absence of ramps, elevators, tactile elements, and specially equipped transport, which significantly limits the opportunities for these individuals to participate in social life.

Informational barriers consist of difficulties in perceiving or accessing information. These may include the excessive formalization and bureaucratization of official documents, as well as the absence of adapted formats (such as Braille, sign language interpretation, or "easy-to-read" texts), which deprives a significant portion of clients of the opportunity to understand their rights and utilize available services.

Digital barriers are exacerbated in the context of societal digitalization. They are associated with the technical inaccessibility of electronic services for people with disabilities (for example, the lack of screen reading or keyboard navigation), as well as with low levels of digital literacy among older adults, residents of rural areas, or socially vulnerable groups.

Psychological barriers manifest in clients' internal experiences and past encounters: fear of stigmatization, distrust of institutions, apprehension regarding potential reactions of specialists, as well as negative experiences from previous interactions with social services, which may lead to refusal of assistance.

Communication barriers are associated with difficulties in the process of mutual understanding between the client and the specialist. They may arise due to the use of professional jargon, language barriers, the presence of biased or hostile language, as well as insufficient development of empathy and intercultural communication skills among social workers.

Sociocultural barriers are more profound and complex, as they are shaped by prevailing societal stereotypes and prejudices. They are particularly evident in relation to persons with disabilities, internally displaced persons, older adults, and other vulnerable groups. Such barriers exacerbate social isolation of clients and may result in repeated discrimination even during the provision of social services.

Thus, the barriers encountered by clients in the social sphere are complex in nature and require a systemic approach to overcome, through the creation of an inclusive, barrier-free environment, the enhancement of professionals' sensitivity, and the implementation of equality and non-discrimination policies at all levels of social interaction. Understanding this is an essential component of the professional training of future social workers, as it shapes their capacity to provide accessible, inclusive, and needs-sensitive social services to diverse population groups.

In the contemporary context, a social sphere specialist cannot be limited to the role of merely executing individual social functions. Their professional activity must encompass the roles of intermediary, advocate, and agent of change, which involves actively promoting the development of a barrier-free social environment. Scholarly literature emphasizes that the key elements of such professional competence include: identifying the barriers that clients face in everyday life; establishing partnership-based, trusting, and non-hierarchical relationships with clients; adapting communication to clients' needs and capacities (including the use of "easy-to-read" language, visual support tools, and pauses for information processing); involving clients in the decision-making process; and ensuring inter-agency cooperation and a comprehensive approach involving medical, educational, human rights, and other institutions. The integration of these approaches into professional training contributes to the development of barrier-free competence among future social sphere specialists, which is a necessary condition for ensuring equal access to social services for all citizens (Koval, 2017).

Barrier-free competence of a social sphere specialist represents an integrated construct that combines cognitive, operational, emotional-value, and communicative components necessary for effective professional interaction in conditions of diversity. Its development constitutes an important task of professional training, as it enables the specialist not only to recognize the existence of barriers in the client's environment but also to actively contribute to their elimination within the scope of their professional role.

The leading element of barrier-free competence is the cognitive component, which encompasses knowledge of types of barriers, their nature, causative factors, and mechanisms for overcoming them, as well as understanding the legal and regulatory foundations of barrier-free accessibility and inclusion. This includes awareness of human rights, principles of the anti-discrimination approach, and the specifics of interaction with representatives of vulnerable groups, including persons with disabilities, older adults, internally displaced persons, and individuals with experiences of violence. Knowledge of barrier-free accessibility should not be fragmented but systemic, integrated into the professional worldview of the future specialist.

The operational-activity component entails the development of practical skills and abilities necessary to ensure barrier-free interaction. This includes, in particular, the capacity to adapt communication forms and methods to the needs of a specific client; the ability to identify barriers in physical, informational, or social environments; and proficiency



in interviewing, counseling, facilitation, and social support tools, taking into account the principles of accessibility and equality. This component also encompasses the ability to engage in inter-agency collaboration and to function effectively within multidisciplinary teams working with vulnerable groups.

The emotional-value component plays a key role in developing a specialist's readiness to act from a position of humanity, respect for individual dignity, and openness to "otherness." It involves fostering empathy, internal motivation to support others, the ability to reflect on one's own biases, and preparedness for intercultural and gender-sensitive interaction. It is at this level that the foundation is laid for responsible and sensitive treatment of clients who experience stigmatization or marginalization.

The communicative component involves the ability to establish effective, ethically sound, and inclusive interactions with diverse categories of clients. This includes proficiency in using plain language, avoiding discriminatory terminology, employing visual and non-verbal aids to support comprehension, and the capacity for active listening, constructive dialogue, and conflict resolution. In the contemporary context, digital communication is increasingly important; therefore, future specialists must possess skills in using online services, social networks, and remote support platforms while adhering to accessibility principles.

Thus, barrier-free competence of future social sphere specialists is multidimensional and interdisciplinary. Its development requires a systemic approach that combines theoretical training, practical experience, value orientation, and continuous professional self-improvement.

Education oriented toward the principles of barrier-free accessibility should promote not only the training of specialists with a specific set of skills but also the development of socially responsible individuals capable of building professional relationships based on respect, equality, and dignity. In this context, barrier-free accessibility is not merely an auxiliary principle or a separate topic, but a holistic approach that permeates all levels and components of professional training. Its integration into the educational process is an important step toward transforming the social sphere into an environment where every individual can be heard, accepted, and supported (UNICEF Ukraine, 2021).

The preparation of future social sphere specialists in higher education is not only a process of knowledge acquisition but also a space for shaping worldview, values, professional attitudes, and competencies that determine the quality of future practice. The development of barrier-free competence within this process should become a cross-cutting principle, integrated into the content, methodology, and organization of the learning process.

An analysis of current educational programs for the training of social workers, social pedagogues, and other specialists in the social sphere indicates that the issue of barrier-free accessibility is most often addressed within courses on inclusive education, human rights, social work with specific client groups, ethics, gender equality, or elective courses. At the same time, the majority of topics focus on disability-related issues, while other types of barriers (psychological, digital, communicational, sociocultural) remain outside the scope of training. This highlights the need to review and expand the content of curricula, taking into account the contemporary understanding of barrier-free accessibility as a multifaceted phenomenon.

An interdisciplinary approach plays an important role in the development of barrier-free competence, as it involves linking professional knowledge with ethical, legal, cultural, and psychological aspects. For example, courses in the fundamentals of law may include topics on access to justice for vulnerable groups, while psychology courses may address barriers in interpersonal communication and methods for overcoming them. This approach enables students not only to acquire isolated knowledge but also to develop a holistic understanding of the issue of barriers in the social space.

Equally important is the teaching methodology. Traditional lecture-seminar formats should be complemented by active learning methods, such as case analysis, role-playing, simulation of professional situations, meetings with clients of social services, and invited experts with lived experience of disability or other forms of vulnerability. Immersive practices (for example, educational excursions to barrier-free spaces or examining urban environments for accessibility) are effective means of developing empathy, critical thinking, and the ability to notice "invisible" barriers.

A key factor in the development of barrier-free competence is the organization of the educational environment within the higher education institution itself. It is important that students not only study barrier-free accessibility as a theoretical concept but also experience it in practice within the educational setting. This concerns accessibility of information and electronic services, support for students with disabilities, the communication style of faculty, and the openness of administration to the needs and requests of students.

Programs of practical, educational, and volunteer-based training hold significant potential for fostering barrier-free thinking. It is through direct interaction with representatives of vulnerable groups, under real social challenges, that students develop the capacity for reflection, empathetic communication, and professional flexibility. Participation in community initiatives, social projects, and inclusion-promoting events also contributes to the integration of knowledge and values.

Thus, the development of barrier-free competence cannot be confined to a single course or module. It is a long-term, cross-cutting process encompassing all components of professional training: curriculum content, teaching methods, organization of the educational environment, practical experience, and the pedagogical culture of interaction.

Given the importance of barrier-free competence as a professional attribute of future social sphere specialists, it is considered appropriate to propose a series of practical steps to improve the educational process in higher education institutions.

First, it is necessary to systematize and expand the content of academic disciplines by integrating the topic of barrier-free accessibility not only within the scope of inclusive education or social work with persons with disabilities, but



also into a broader context-including human rights, social protection, digital inclusion, communicative ethics, and gender and cultural sensitivity. It is advisable to include dedicated topics or modules focused on analyzing barriers across various spheres of social life.

Second, the use of interactive and practice-oriented teaching methods should be intensified, such as scenario simulations, analysis of real cases, role-playing, and group discussions involving practitioner experts and representatives of target groups. Such methods contribute to the development not only of the knowledge component but also of the emotional-value component of barrier-free competence.

Third, it is important to provide students with opportunities to undertake practical training in institutions that implement accessibility and inclusion principles, as well as to involve them in community initiatives, projects, and campaigns aimed at overcoming barriers in society. This fosters skills in advocacy, social partnership, and effective communication with diverse client groups.

Fourth, internal policies of educational institutions themselves should be developed in accordance with the principles of barrier-free accessibility. The educational environment should become a space free from discrimination, with accessible infrastructure, clear educational resources, open communication, and respect for student diversity.

Furthermore, it is advisable to develop indicators for assessing the development of barrier-free competence, which could be used in evaluating students' learning outcomes as well as for internal quality monitoring in higher education institutions.

Thus, barrier-free competence of a social sphere specialist represents an integrated quality that combines knowledge of barriers and mechanisms for overcoming them, practical skills in adapting communication and ensuring accessibility during social interaction, a value-based foundation of empathy, respect, and sensitivity, as well as the ability to engage in inclusive language and digital communication. The development of this competence constitutes a fundamental professional principle that ensures high-quality and ethical social support for diverse population groups. Fostering barrier-free competence among future social sphere specialists is an essential condition for building an inclusive, just, and humane society. The ability to recognize and understand the barriers encountered by different population groups, as well as to act in ways that contribute to their elimination, is a key manifestation of professionalism in social work.

CONCLUSIONS AND PROSPECTS OF FURTHER RESEARCH

Comprehensive training of social workers, social pedagogues, and counselors, which integrates the topic of barrier-free practices into educational programs, actively employs practical and intersectional teaching methods, ensures the creation of an accessible university environment, and involves participation in community projects, contributes to a profound transformation of students' attitudes towards accessibility and equality. Such an approach embeds in professional consciousness the perception of barrier-free interaction as a norm of social space.

Barrier-free competence serves as a factor in the realization of social justice and human rights in social work. A specialist trained in accordance with the principles of barrier-free practice becomes an agent of change, capable of creating conditions of dignity, participation, and partnership. Therefore, the advancement of competence in this area is not only relevant but also essential for effective, responsible, and humanistic social practice. Development of this competence is a necessary condition for the high-quality preparation of specialists capable of working effectively in the context of diversity and the principles of inclusion. The proposed theoretical provisions may be applied in the modernization of educational programs, the development of methodological support, and the implementation of barrier-free practices in higher education.

The prospects for further research lie in the development of criteria and indicators for assessing the level of barrier-free competence, the creation of diagnostic tools for its evaluation, as well as the study of the effectiveness of pedagogical technologies aimed at fostering this competence among higher education students.

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Received 12.05.2025
Accepted 02.06.2026