

Inclusive Horizons in Architecture Education: A Critical Comparative Analysis of International Accreditation Standards

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ABSTRACT:

Architecture programs are expected to produce graduates capable of designing inclusive and accessible built environments; however, the extent to which accreditation standards promote inclusivity in architectural education remains insufficiently examined. This study conducts a comprehensive comparison of six internationally recognized architectural accreditation frameworks—NAAB (USA), RIBA (UK), CACB (Canada), ASIIN (Germany), KAAB (South Korea), and ANPADEH (Mexico)—to evaluate their integration of inclusive educational and informational practices for individuals with disabilities. Employing a qualitative comparative research design based on systematic document analysis, the study examines the most recent official accreditation standards. Ten assessment criteria were applied: equal opportunities, disability recognition, accessibility, support services, psychological well-being, studio facilities, assessment flexibility, inclusive methodology, graduate competencies, and continuous improvement. The findings reveal significant variation among the accreditation systems, with NAAB demonstrating the highest level of inclusion. While accessibility and inclusive design are consistently emphasized as core graduate competencies across all frameworks, support services for individuals with disabilities, reasonable accommodations, inclusive learning design, and inclusive studio practices are rarely explicitly addressed. The study concludes that current accreditation systems primarily prioritize inclusive architectural practice over inclusive architectural education, underscoring the need for future accreditation standards to explicitly incorporate inclusive education requirements for individuals with disabilities. This would ensure that architecture schools embody the accessibility principles expected of their graduates in professional practice.

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1. Introduction

Architecture schools are expected to produce graduates capable of designing accessible environments for all (Ahmed, 2021; Shulanki et al., 2018). Accordingly, accreditation standards in many countries require students to understand accessibility legislation and inclusive design principles prior to entering the profession (Newton et al., 2024). However, limited attention has been given to whether architectural education itself offers an equally accessible learning environment. This situation presents a notable paradox: while students are taught to eliminate barriers in the built environment, some continue to encounter such barriers during their studies (Boyes, 2014). This study addresses this issue by comparing the current accreditation standards of six internationally recognized frameworks: the National Architectural Accrediting Board (NAAB, 2026) in the United States, the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA, 2021) in the United Kingdom, the Canadian Architectural Accrediting Board (CACB, 2025), the ASIIN Network (2023) in Germany, the Korean Architectural Accrediting Council (KAAB, 2024), and ANPADEH (2026) in Mexico. The analysis examines how these frameworks address the inclusion of students with disabilities, the use of accessible teaching practices, and institutional responsibilities.

Effective assessment of disability inclusion in architectural accreditation requires consideration of multiple interconnected dimensions of educational quality. At the institutional level, explicit commitments to equal opportunity and non-discrimination establish the foundation for inclusive higher education by guaranteeing students' rights to equitable access and participation (United Nations, 2006; UNESCO, 2020). Closely related is the explicit recognition of disability within accreditation standards, as the clarity of disability-related policies within institutions is widely regarded as an indicator of organizational commitment to inclusion and accountability.

Beyond institutional policy, inclusive education relies on the accessibility of both physical and

digital learning environments. Accessible buildings, learning management systems, instructional resources, and communication platforms are essential to ensure that students with disabilities can participate equally with their peers (Burgstahler, 2021; CAST, 2024). The availability of institutional support services, such as disability resource offices, assistive technologies, academic accommodations, and specialist advising, is also critical and has been consistently identified as a key factor influencing student success and retention in higher education (Burgstahler, 2021). Given the demanding nature of architectural education, student well-being and mental health support constitute an important dimension of educational quality (Patil et al., 2026), particularly in studio-based learning environments where stress and workload are often intensified (Kamel & Khalil, 2025; Koch et al., 2021). The distinctive pedagogical characteristics of architectural education necessitate consideration of inclusive teaching and assessment practices. Design studios, critiques, juries, fieldwork, and project-oriented assessments often present barriers for students with disabilities unless reasonable accommodations and flexible assessment methods are provided (Boys, 2014). As a result, contemporary inclusive education emphasizes proactive approaches such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which promotes designing curricula, teaching methods, and assessment strategies that accommodate learner variability from the outset rather than relying solely on individual accommodations (CAST, 2024).

Accreditation should also ensure that graduates possess competencies in accessibility, Universal Design, and inclusive design, reflecting the profession's responsibility to create environments usable by diverse populations (Steinfeld & Maisel, 2012). Equally important are mechanisms for continuous quality assurance and institutional improvement, which enable educational programs to monitor the effectiveness of their inclusive practices and respond to evolving educational and societal expectations (UNESCO, 2020).

By identifying common approaches and existing gaps, this study offers recommendations to strengthen accreditation standards and ensure that accessibility becomes a defining characteristic of both architectural education and professional practice.

2. Methodology

This study used a qualitative comparative research design using systematic document analysis to examine the extent to which international architectural accreditation frameworks incorporate disability inclusion into architectural education. Document analysis was selected because it delivers a systematic approach for evaluating policies and accreditation standards across multiple organizations. The findings are presented according to ten evaluation criteria, followed by an overall comparison of framework scores and inclusiveness levels. Scores were assigned solely on the basis of evidence extracted from the official accreditation documents.

3. Results

The analysis included six internationally recognized frameworks: NAAB (United States), RIBA (United Kingdom), CACB (Canada), ASIIN (Germany), KAAB (South Korea), and

ANPADEH (Mexico). Only the most recent official accreditation standards and policy documents published by these organizations were analyzed. A comparative evaluation framework consisting of ten criteria was developed from the literature on inclusive higher education, disability rights, quality assurance, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and architectural education (ENQA, 2015; Lovell et al., 2007; Moore et al., 2022; Rose et al., 2006; UNESCO & UIA, 2023; United Nations, 2006). The criteria assessed equal opportunity, disability recognition, accessibility, disability support services, mental health support, studio accommodations, reasonable assessment accommodations, inclusive pedagogy, graduate competencies regarding accessibility, and continuous quality improvement. Each framework was analyzed using qualitative content analysis and scored on a three-point scale: 2 = explicit requirement, 1 = partially addressed, and 0 = not addressed. Scores were summed to produce a maximum of 20 points, and the overall level of inclusiveness was classified as Comprehensive (17–20), Advanced (13–16), Developing (9–12), Emerging (5–8), or Minimal (0–4). The results were then compared to identify similarities, differences, and gaps in disability inclusion across international architectural accreditation systems.

Table 1: Synthesis of Disability Inclusion in Architecture Accreditation Standards

Criterion	NAAB	RIBA	CACB	ASIIN	KAAB	ANPADEH
C1. Explicit Equal Opportunity / Non-discrimination Policy	2	2	2	1	1	0
C2. Explicit Mention of Disability	2	1	1	0	0	0
C3. Accessibility Requirements (Learning Environment)	2	1	2	1	1	1
C4. Disability Support Services	2	1	1	0	0	0
C5. Student Mental Health Support	2	1	0	0	0	0
C6. Studio/Jury Accommodations	1	0	0	0	0	0
C7. Flexible Assessment / Reasonable Accommodation	1	0	1	0	0	0
C8. Inclusive Pedagogy / UDL Principles	1	1	0	0	0	0
C9. Graduate Competencies in Accessibility / Universal Design	2	2	2	1	1	1
C10. Continuous Monitoring & Improvement	2	2	2	2	2	2

Total Score (/20)	17	11	12	5	5	4
Inclusiveness Level	Compre- hensive	Develop- ing	Develop- ing	Emerging	Emerging	Minimal
Scoring Scheme: 2 = Explicit requirement, 1 = Partial or implied requirement, 0 = Not explicitly addressed						

4. Discussion

Although all frameworks emphasize educational quality, professional competence, and continuous improvement, the findings show considerable differences in how inclusion is conceptualized and operationalized. Overall, accreditation systems place greater emphasis on preparing graduates to design accessible and inclusive built environments than on ensuring that architectural education itself is accessible and inclusive for students with disabilities.

Among the frameworks analyzed, NAAB demonstrated the most extensive approach to disability inclusion. Its accreditation standards explicitly address equity, diversity, student support services, accessibility, and institutional responsibility for providing an inclusive learning environment. This finding shows the broader influence of disability rights legislation and inclusive higher education policies in the United States, where accessibility and reasonable accommodation have become essential elements of educational quality (United Nations, 2006). Although NAAB does not explicitly require UDL or detailed accommodation for studio-based assessment, it establishes the strongest institutional framework for supporting students with diverse learning needs. CACB and RIBA occupy an intermediate position. Both frameworks emphasize equality, diversity, and professional responsibility as requiring graduates to understand accessibility and inclusive design. However, disability inclusion is primarily addressed through broad institutional principles rather than explicit accreditation requirements. Neither framework delivers detailed guidance on disability support services, accessible studio pedagogy, mental health provision, or reasonable accommodations during design reviews and juries. Consequently, responsibility for implementing inclusive educational practices largely rests with institutional policies and national legislation rather than with accreditation

standards themselves. The findings also demonstrate that ASIIN, KAAB, and ANPADEH continue to prioritize traditional quality assurance indicators, including curriculum design, faculty qualifications, educational resources, and continuous improvement. While these frameworks provide strong mechanisms for evaluating academic quality, they contain limited explicit references to disability inclusion. Accessibility is generally considered only in relation to educational infrastructure or professional competencies rather than as an educational right of students with disabilities. As a result, disability-inclusive education receives comparatively little attention within these accreditation systems. Most accreditation systems explicitly expect graduates to understand accessibility, Universal Design, and the needs of diverse users. However, relatively few require architecture schools to demonstrate equivalent levels of accessibility for their own students. This discrepancy reveals an important contradiction within architectural education: institutions are expected to teach inclusive design but are not necessarily required to model inclusive pedagogical practice (Rieger & Rolfe, 2021).

An additional significant finding is the limited attention given to the unique characteristics of architectural pedagogy. Unlike many other disciplines, architecture relies heavily on studio-based learning, collaborative design, public critiques, fieldwork, model making, and visual communication. (Hettithanthri & Hansen, 2021). These activities may cause substantial barriers for students with physical, sensory, neurodevelopmental, or mental health disabilities. Despite these challenges, none of the reviewed accreditation frameworks explicitly requires reasonable accommodations for studio teaching, design juries, or critiques. Given that the design studio is the core of architectural education, this omission is one of the most significant gaps identified in the comparative

analysis. Similarly, UDL is largely absent from the accreditation frameworks examined. UDL has become an internationally recognized approach for designing flexible learning environments that accommodate learner diversity while reducing the need for individual accommodations (Rose et al., 2006). Integrating UDL principles into architectural accreditation could improve participation for students with diverse abilities without compromising academic standards or professional competencies. The absence of explicit UDL requirements, therefore, represents a missed opportunity to align architectural education with contemporary developments in inclusive higher education. The findings also indicate that student well-being receives relatively little attention. Mental health challenges have become increasingly recognized within architecture education because of intensive studio culture, challenging workloads, and high levels of stress (Moore et al., 2022). Except for NAAB, none of the reviewed frameworks explicitly require mental health support or counseling services as part of accreditation. Given the growing international emphasis on student well-being, this represents another area where accreditation standards could be strengthened.

Overall, the comparative analysis suggests that disability inclusion has not yet become a core dimension of quality assurance in architectural education. Current accreditation systems remain primarily concerned with educational outcomes, curriculum quality, and professional competence, while disability inclusion is often addressed indirectly through general statements on diversity or institutional responsibility. As international higher education increasingly embraces inclusive education as a fundamental principle (United Nations, 2006; UNESCO, 2020), architectural accreditation standards should evolve accordingly.

Future revisions of accreditation frameworks could strengthen disability inclusion by explicitly requiring accessible physical and digital learning environments, disability support services,

reasonable accommodations for studio-based learning and assessment, mental health support, and the adoption of UDL principles. In addition, accreditation agencies could incorporate measurable indicators for monitoring inclusive educational practices as part of continuous quality assurance. Such developments would help ensure that architecture schools not only teach inclusive design but also embody the principles of inclusion and accessibility within their own learning environments. Ultimately, aligning accreditation standards with inclusive educational practices would strengthen both the quality and social relevance of architectural education while preparing future architects to lead the creation of more equitable and universally accessible built environments.

5. Conclusion

This study compared six internationally recognized architectural accreditation frameworks to evaluate their integration of disability inclusion in architectural education. The findings revealed that while all frameworks emphasize educational quality and professional competence, most prioritize preparing graduates to design accessible environments rather than ensuring inclusive learning environments for students with disabilities. NAAB demonstrated the most comprehensive approach to inclusion, followed by CACB and RIBA, whereas ASIIN, KAAB, and ANPADEH provided comparatively limited guidance on disability-inclusive educational practices. Overall, the analysis identified a significant gap between inclusive architectural practice and inclusive architectural education. The findings suggest that future accreditation standards should explicitly incorporate requirements for accessible learning environments, disability support services, reasonable accommodations, mental health support, UDL, and continuous monitoring of inclusive educational practices to better align architectural education with contemporary principles of equity, accessibility, and social responsibility.

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