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Inclusive Education in Malawian Higher Education Institutions: An Investigation into Implementation Challenges

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Abstract

Although Inclusive Education receives support from the Malawi government through the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology, UNICEF (2020) notes that there are still challenges in the enrollment of learners with disabilities. This study was conducted to investigate the challenges of inclusive education in institutions of higher learning in Malawi. A sample of 125 participants was used in a mixed method study that used an exploratory research design. A survey questionnaire and in-depth interviews were used in complementarity to collect quantitative and qualitative data from students, lecturers, and administrators from ten higher education institutions. The study established the existence of low enrolment of learners with disabilities in institutions of higher learning and revealed disparities in views on the effectiveness of inclusive education and accommodation of the types and degrees of disabilities. Lack of relevant technical expertise, resources, disability-friendly infrastructure and weak policy were identified as some of the challenges compromising the effectiveness of inclusive education at tertiary level. The study recommends improved training of inclusive education lecturers, provision of resources and strengthening of inclusive education policy for Malawi to achieve equity in tertiary education provision.

Keywords*: inclusive education, learners with a disability, institutions of higher learning, human rights, Malawi*

Introduction

Learners with disabilities face several obstacles during their academic journey and their continuous marginalisation has enduring consequences for their social positioning, especially in post-secondary educational establishments (UNESCO, 2019). The Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology

in Malawi is tasked with advancing inclusivity at all rungs of education (National Planning Commission, 2020). Nonetheless, there are still major enrollment barriers for learners with disabilities, particularly in higher education (UNICEF Malawi, 2020). This study looked into the difficulties associated with inclusive education in Malawi's higher education establishments.

Since its introduction in Jomtien in 1990 and confirmation at the Salamanca Conference in Spain in 1994, inclusive education has garnered more attention in the educational discourse (UNDP, 2015). The meaning of this inclusive education varies. In order to foster meaningful learning experiences, Artiles et al. (2015) define inclusive education as a technique that takes into account the different learning requirements of children, young people, and adults. But in Malawi, the terms "inclusive education" and "special needs education" (SNE) are frequently used interchangeably Conflicts can arise since there is not always a clear distinction between these phrases. One example of this is when the Special Needs Education module was made mandatory for teacher trainees rather than the inclusive education module.

Diverse interpretations of inclusive education are available. According to Mbewe, Kamchedzera, and Kunkwenzu (2021), inclusive education is an instructional approach that focuses on strengthening institutional capacity in order to increase educational organisations' capacity to offer access to all students. According to Malawi's Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology's (MoEST) (2017) , inclusive education is a process of changing the educational system to meet the various requirements of all students. This definition was adhered to in this study as building institutional capacity and addressing a range of learning needs are combined.

In Malawi's past, inclusive education has been linked to learners with disabilities and special education needs. Nonetheless, the National Strategy on Inclusive Education lists twenty child groups that must be included (MoEST, 2017). On the other hand, people with disabilities and special education needs were the focus of this study. As a cornerstone of an equitable and just society, education is a fundamental human right, which forms the basis of inclusive education. Launched in 1990, programs like Education For All (EFA) sought to give access to education for a variety of populations, including those with disabilities (UNDP, 2015; United Nations, 2019).

The 1994 Salamanca Conference, which promoted changes in mainstream schools to accommodate learners with special needs, signaled a dramatic movement towards inclusive education (UNESCO, 1994). In order to uphold the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the World Declaration of Education for All, the Salamanca Statement encouraged learner engagement in normal classroom settings. According to the 2000 Dakar inclusive education review forum (UNDP, 2015; United Nations, 2019), Education must take into account the needs of disadvantaged people, including those with disabilities.

Curricula, instructional techniques, and organisational frameworks must all be modified for inclusive education to fulfill the needs of all learners. It is the duty of mainstream educational institutions to provide inclusive education and make the required modifications for learners with impairments. The word "disability" changes depending on the situation. It is characterised in this study in accordance

with Banks and Zuurmond (2015), to includespeaking difficulty, physical disability, visual impairment, and hearing impairment. In Malawi, the initiatives to modify learning spaces and approaches are supported by the Disability Act of 2012 in Malawi and other international agreements (Malawi Government, 2012; National Statistics Office, 2019).

The provision of inclusive education in higher education establishments continues to face obstacles in spite of attempts. The National Strategy on Inclusive Education (MoEST, 2017)identifies several obstacles, which include disparities in social support, unfavourable attitudes, inaccessible infrastructure, and a dearth of counseling services. In order to enhance the participation of students with disabilities in Malawi's higher education system, this study attempted to address these problems.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study were to:

1) establish the enrolment status of learners with disabilities in institutions of higher learning.

2) identify types and degrees of disabilities accommodated in institutions of higher learning.

3) establish perceptions of key stakeholders towards inclusive education in institutions of higher learning, and

4) identify the challenges that affect the implementation of inclusive education in institutions of higher learning.

Theoretical Framework

This study was informed by two theories (Vygotsky's theories of social constructionism epistemology and dysontogenesis) and three models (the social model, human rights model, and medical disability model).

Vygotsky's Theory of Social Constructionist Epistemology

Special Education and Inclusive Education models are grounded in Vygotsky's philosophy of social constructionist epistemology, which emphasises the importance of social interactions in the learning process (Vygotsky, 1978). In contrast to Piaget's theory of separate cognitive development, Vygotsky suggested that higher mental processes are co-constructed through shared activities and internalisation (Woolfolk, 2016). The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which is the difference between what learners can accomplish on their own and with assistance from knowledgeable people like instructors and peers, is essential to Vygotsky's theory. This procedure, known as scaffolding, aids learners in overcoming their constraints (Mosito et al., 2017). Vygotsky advocated for collaborative learning and imitation above direct instruction, advising educators to create settings in which learners assist one another (Bartlett & Burton, 2016). Vygotsky is criticised for undervaluing biological predispositions and individual effort. Thus, support from capable

individuals like parents, guardians, teachers, and peers becomes essential for learners with disabilities to enable them achieve great exploits beyond their limitations.

Vygotsky's Theory of Dysontogenesis

By emphasising strengths over weaknesses, Vygotsky's theory of dysontogenesis, commonly referred to as the theory of distorted development, offers a framework for enhancing educational results for learners with disabilities (Rodina, 2006; Hogan, 2019). This practice-focused approach strongly emphasises the value of interpersonal relationships, social interactions, and skill empowerment in order to promote a positive social perception of individuals with disabilities.

Vygotsky's theories continue to have an impact on inclusive education practices, despite objections that they ignore biological limitations and lack concrete instructional applications. In order to determine the ideal social circumstances for the growth of disabled children in inclusive environments, Rodina (2006) applied Vygotsky's social constructionist theory which continues to influence inclusive education practices globally and serves as the cornerstone of the Russian framework for special needs education.

Vygotsky's theory of dysontogenesis highlights the possibility of positive transformation and improvement in learners with impairments. This theory advocates for a societal perspective that appreciates and empowers the skills of people with disabilities by emphasising their strengths over their weaknesses, and it offers a framework for examining the mechanisms that make these changes possible (Rodina, 2006; Hogan, 2019). Even though some critics contend that Vygotsky's theories are overly broad and ignore the biological components of disability, his work has had a significant impact on the development of inclusive education approaches. This framework was used to identify various challenges encountered in the process of providing inclusive services in institutions of higher education and exploring ways of redressing them.

Medical Disability Model

In order to investigate the biological basis of disabilities, the study used the medical disability paradigm, which maintains that disabilities are essentially caused by biological reasons and are, therefore, immutable, frequently resulting in discrimination and oppression (Hogan, 2019). The study countered this with insights from the social model, which acknowledges the diversity in disabilities that emerge from biological differences and advocates for a comprehensive approach and pooling of resources, teaching strategies, and interventions that specifically designed to support individuals with a range of disabilities in the educational process (Hogan, 2019).

Social Model

The social model was used in the study to supplement Vygotsky's viewpoint and the medical disability model. This theory highlights that social structures generate repressive and discriminatory conditions for people with disabilities. It emerged in response to the medical model's understanding

of disability as a solely biological issue (Bampi, Guilhen, & Alves, 2010; Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2013). According to the social model, social constraints prevent individuals with disabilities from fully engaging in social activities, and disability is, therefore, seen as a kind of social oppression. By identifying and addressing socially constructed barriers, the study aimed to promote a healthy learning environment by respecting the rights of individuals and providing customised treatments.

Human Rights Model

According to Gordon and Salyutov (2017), the Human Rights paradigm support position that disability is socially constructed and to improve the status of those who live with disabilities society must guarantee their equal rights and privileges. In order to support constructive attempts to solve their issues, this model places a strong emphasis on the respect and acknowledgment of learners with disabilities as equal members of society. In order to provide an inclusive and encouraging learning environment, the research attempted to identify rights-related obstacles faced by learners with disabilities and investigate solutions to resolve these issues.

Methodology

This study used deployed a mixed-method design to gather and analyse day because it was largely exploratory.

Study Area

The study focused on higher education institutions as cases since very little, in any, research on inclusive education had been there. Malawi has over 50 higher education institutions with a target enrollment of over 50, 000 learners; 5,500 lecturers and administrators and 1,500 policy makers, hence a total of 57,000 people, dispersed throughout Malawi. The primary target group for this study consisted of learners, lecturers, administrators, and government representatives from educational institutions. These constituted study's sampling frame.

Sample Size

Depending on the type of investigation, sampling entails choosing a certain number of participants from a wider population using probability or non-probability approaches. Equal odds of selection and statistical conclusions are made possible by probability sampling, which encompasses techniques such as simple random, systematic, stratified, and cluster sampling (Taherdoost, 2016; Etikan & Bala, 2017). For the purpose of gathering preliminary data for qualitative studies, non-probability sampling techniques like convenience, purposive, voluntary response, and snowball sampling are frequently employed. Participants in this study were chosen from eight (8) Malawian higher education institutions using a combination of non-probability (purposive sampling) and probability (simple random and stratified selection). Using Cochran's formula to account for time, money, and resource restrictions, the sample size was determined to be 125 participants, 90 of whom were learners. Below is the sampling summary table:

| Approach	Sample	Categories	Sampling Method	Tools
Quantitative	90 learners	Service beneficiaries	Random	Survey Questionnaire
	26 lecturers/tutors	Service providers	Stratified	
Qualitative	7 higher education administrators	Policy makers	Purposive	Interview Guide
	2 government officials	Policy makers	Purposive	

Results

Participants Demographic Characteristics

According to the data, ninety out of 125 participants, or 72 percent of them, were learners from the selected higher education institutions, 53 identifying as male and 37 as female. The involvement of the lecturers/tutors was at 22 men and 4 women made up the 21% (26) of the total. Six percent (7) of the study participants were administrators from higher education institutions, of which two (2) were female and five (5) were male. Of the participants, two percent (2) were from government ministries that have a significant role in inclusive education. Two government representatives, one male and one female, took part. 125 people who were sampled were able to complete the study constituting a total of 81 male and 44 female participants. Access of learner participants was restricted to only those who had returned on campus for examinations as the majority were home.

Learner participants by class

Higher Education Institution learners' participation at 90 with 21% Year 1, 19 learners, Year 2, 36% thus 32 learners, Year 3 with 17 learners constituting 19% and Year 4, 22 learner participants which made up 24%.

Enrolment status of learners with disabilities in institutions of higher learning
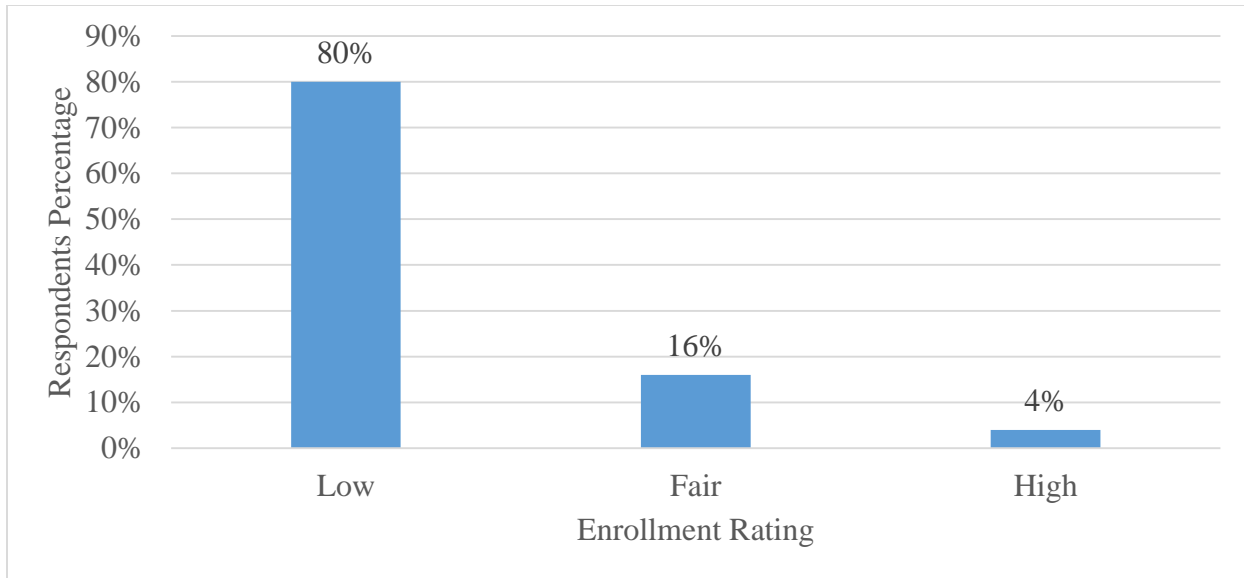
The study sought to get a rating from lecturers of the selected universities on the enrollment of learners with disabilities. Only lecturers rated the enrolment due to their access to enrollment and attendance records in the institutions. Eighty percent (80%) of the lecturer participants rated it low, 16% indicated that it was fair while 4% considered the enrollment high. This was triangulated by the enrollment statistics in the sampled institutions which showed an enrollment of learners with disabilities ranging from zero to 53 and mostly below 20 from a total institutional enrollment that ranged from 300 to 8500.
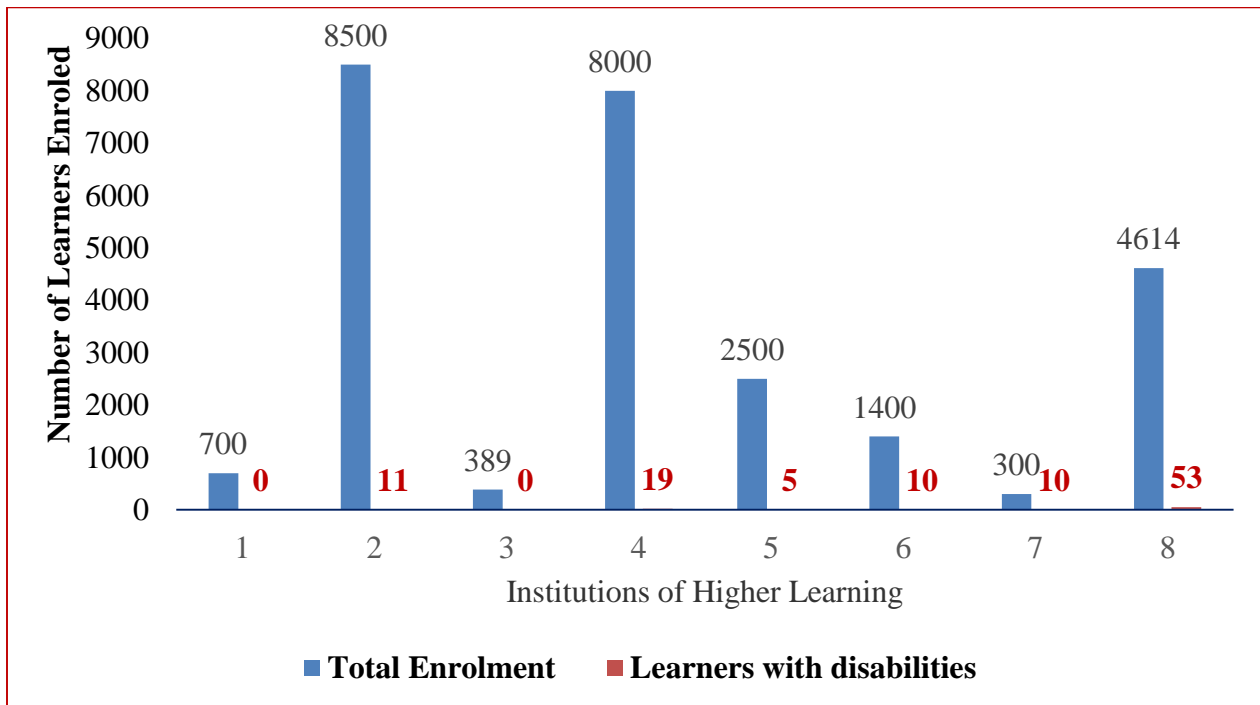
Types and degrees of disabilities accommodated in institutions of higher learning

Seven out of eight administrators were interviewed as one was not available. The seven administrators indicated that higher education institutions support a wide range of disabilities of varying degrees. The most common disability supported by these institutions is visual impairment (71%), which is followed by physical disabilities (57%), albinism (43%), learning difficulties (29%), and hearing impairment (14%). These disabilities vary in intensity from moderate to acute, and the kinds that are accommodated depend on the choices made by the respective institutions. While some educational institutions purposefully provided accommodations for learners with disabilities, emphasising learning challenges and visual and hearing impairments, others unknowingly admit learners with disabilities because they lacked the necessary pre-selection infrastructure. Learners with impairments were admitted in relatively small numbers each academic cycle—four or fewer on average—although enrollment had been steadily rising over time.

Key stakeholder perception towards inclusive education in institutions of higher learning

The seven administrators who participated in interviews had favorable opinions on inclusive education and emphasised its importance in lowering discrimination and giving learners with disabilities equal opportunity. They emphasised how inclusion lowers stigma by fostering coexistence and levelling the playing field. Nonetheless, challenges were identified, including insufficient resources and infrastructure, which impede successful execution. Administrators stated that inclusive education was still hard to implement in schools without the right rules and assistance; as a result, learners were frequently diverted to courses that are not inclusive. Officials from the government agreed that inclusive education is important, but they also pointed out that funding must match political will. Individuals with disabilities, low self-esteem and closed attitudes about impairments were also noted as barriers. It was generally agreed upon that inclusive education encourages acceptance, support, and socialising among pupils in spite of these obstacles. However, there were different perception on the effectiveness of inclusive education among learners and lecturers as indicated in the figure below:
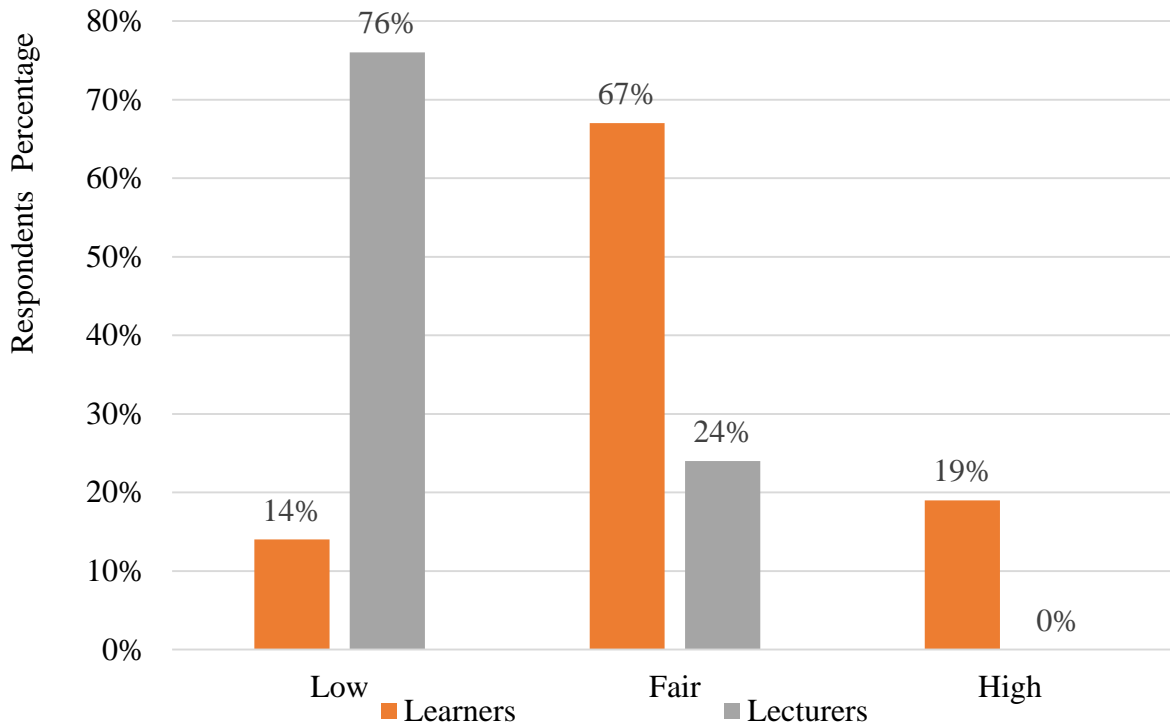
Rating of how effective inclusive education is in respondents institutions

Challenges that affect the implementation of inclusive education in institutions of higher learning

A number of issues affecting inclusive education at higher education institutions were noted by both lecturers and learners. 76% of lecturers reported a lack of experience with special needs education, 68% mentioned a lack of resources for inclusive education, and 64% mentioned infrastructure that is not accessible to people with disabilities. Furthermore, 52% of respondents emphasised the lack of a resource centre, 48% stated the absence of inclusive education policy, 20% mentioned the absence of political will and support, and 12% mentioned that lecturers were unaware that learners with disabilities were there. According to the learners, there is a deficiency of pertinent technical support in 67% of cases, inadequate learning resources in 59%, and unfavorable learning infrastructure in 43% of cases. Additionally, 29% of respondents mentioned insufficient moral support from classmates, and 30% mentioned insufficient academic and moral support from instructors.

Causes of the challenges

The challenges in adopting inclusive education in higher education institutions have been attributed to a number of factors, according to lecturers and tutors. The absence of policy direction was

identified by 56% of participants as the main contributing factor. 52% of respondents then mentioned that they were unaware of inclusive schooling choices. Furthermore, 48% of respondents mentioned inadequate institutional readiness. 8% of the respondents attributed the difficulties to negative perceptions. A lack of resources, the nature of the task, and a lack of awareness of the existence of students with impairments were among the other explanations cited by 16% of participants. The most often cited reason for difficulties in inclusive education was the absence of policy direction.

A number of alternatives were put up by both lecturers and learners to solve the challenges associated with inclusive education in post-secondary institutions. A majority of 72% of learners and 76% of professors strongly recommended technical training. Other important measures that received approval from 68% of lecturers and 44% and 67% of learners, respectively, were the creation of institutional policies and the supply of inclusive education resources. A majority of 60% in both groups emphasised the importance of disability awareness. Furthermore, although 48% of academics and 36% of learners advised clear government and regulatory policies, 52% of lecturers and 48% of learners suggested upgrading institutional infrastructure. Educating instructors about the existence of learners with impairments was one of the other alternatives, as indicated by 4% of instructors and 1% of learners, who offered no specific suggestions.

Interpretation

The study established low the enrolment status of learners with disabilities in institutions of higher learning facilitated by systematic discrimination. The study also revealed disparities in the types and degrees of disabilities accommodated in institutions of higher learning due to lack of capacity and a gap in policy direction. The diversity in types of disabilities agrees with the theory of dysonto-genesis and medical model on the diverse disabilities requiring diverse approaches to address them. Diverse perceptions were established among key stakeholders towards inclusive education effectiveness in institutions of higher learning supporting the social model that disability is socially constructed. The study revealed challenges of lack of teacher expertise, lack of resources, infrastructure that is not disability friendly and policy gap affecting the implementation of inclusive education in institutions of higher learning. Vygotsky's Social constructionism supports the need for all players to supports the learners with disabilities for their performance beyond the limitations.

Conclusion

The study concluded that there were remarkably low enrollment of learners with impairments in higher education institutions, which indicated social disparities and intellectual inequality. The empowerment of individuals with disabilities is hindered by this restricted access, which keeps them from realising their full potential and making significant contributions to society. The results showed the differences in enrolment, with some universities enrolling very few or no learners with disabilities, indicating a lack of consistency in inclusion policies throughout institutions. Furthermore, the study showed that lecturers considered enrolment as insufficient, even when learners thought it was fair, highlighting the necessity for a more standardised approach to inclusion.

The study also showed that although universities accepted a wide range of disabilities, they had a difficult time offering inclusive education that works. These challenges include a lack of expert teachers, insufficient assistive technology resources, and infrastructure that is not disability-friendly. These challenges make it more difficult for the institutions to provide meaningful inclusion, which jeopardises the equal access and participation of individuals with disabilities in higher education. The study also revealed indications of institutional segregation and selective inclusion that was dependent on the kind and severity of impairment, which reflected discriminatory attitudes and negative perceptions.

Furthermore, the study also highlighted how important it is to change policies in order to improve inclusive education. It recommended the development of national and institutional policies focused on increasing access and participation of learners with disabilities. The issues noted, such as a deficiency of resources, expertise, and infrastructure that is accessible to individuals with disabilities, ought to be addressed by these policies. The study revealed that these policy changes would guarantee that people with disabilities have equal chances in higher education and would give inclusive education a clear mission and direction which would make the adoption of inclusive practices easier.

The study also highlights the role of positive perceptions towards inclusive education from government ministries and stakeholders, which signal potential improvements in inclusive education services. It does point out, though, that a number of variables, such as institutional capability, teacher expertise, and resource availability, affect the effectiveness of inclusive education. Hence, the development of inclusive education practices would need raising stakeholder awareness of disability concerns and enhancing teachers' capability through seminars and specialised training programs.

The study concludes with a number of recommendations for further research, such as analysing current approaches to improve the participation and access of learners with disabilities, evaluating how well these learners perform in post-secondary institutions, and investigating the roles regulatory bodies play in putting inclusive education practices into practice. These suggestions seek to close the gaps found in the research and advance the creation of inclusive education practices and policies that guarantee equitable opportunity for all students, regardless of their disability.

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