

Effectiveness of Disability Inclusion Policies across Institutions

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ABSTRACT

Disability inclusion policies have become central to promoting equal access, participation, and opportunities for persons with disabilities across educational institutions and workplaces. Despite the widespread adoption of legislative and institutional frameworks supporting inclusion, substantial disparities persist between policy intentions and implementation outcomes. This narrative review examines the effectiveness of disability inclusion policies across higher education institutions, K–12 education settings, and public and private sector organizations. It synthesizes evidence on policy design, implementation strategies, evaluation methodologies, and outcomes relating to accessibility, curriculum and assessment, employment, stakeholder engagement, and cultural change. The review further explores barriers that undermine policy effectiveness, including inadequate funding, weak enforcement mechanisms, insufficient stakeholder participation, inaccessible infrastructure, and persistent discriminatory attitudes. Evidence suggests that while well-designed disability inclusion policies improve access to education, employment opportunities, and social participation, their effectiveness depends largely on institutional commitment, resource allocation, monitoring systems, and the adoption of inclusive practices such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL). The review highlights the need for robust evaluation frameworks, longitudinal research, and stronger institutional accountability to bridge the gap between policy formulation and implementation. It concludes that sustainable disability inclusion requires coordinated legal, institutional, and community-driven approaches that prioritize accessibility, equity, and the meaningful participation of persons with disabilities.

Keywords: Disability inclusion, Inclusive education, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), Accessibility, and Policy effectiveness

INTRODUCTION

Disability inclusion policies in higher education institutions stipulate how students with disabilities are admitted, registered, and supported during their studies [1]. Since such policies were introduced, these institutions have been recognized as the primary social contributor allowing the inclusion of persons with disabilities. However, some gaps between policies and actual practices still exist [1]. Policies are important because they set the tone for how institutions consciously and unconsciously perceive and treat students with disabilities [2]. The gaps between the policies of the past and those of today reflect the milestones reached. Grounded in the grounded theory methodology, the analysis of policy documents of four selected universities confirmed that although important milestones have been reached since the inception of policies, substantive gaps still exist [3]. Those students continue to suffer under the burden of poor planning in addressing disability needs, sometimes not receiving required services for an entire semester. It is possible to include the design of disability inclusion policies within grounded theory methodology [2].

Conceptual Framework for Disability Inclusion

Disability inclusion spans multiple dimensions, including legislation, policies, and practices aimed at ensuring that individuals with disabilities have equal access to opportunities in society [3]. Disabled persons are among the most marginalised groups in society [4]. Subsequently, many political regimes are committed to the inclusion of disabled persons in education, employment, health services, social activities, and decision-making in both public and private sectors [5]. The goal of inclusion is to provide every person with equal opportunities to access and participate in all avenues of life. International treaties, national laws, and sectorial policies have formally enshrined this objective.

Examples of international instruments include the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the International Labour Organization's (ILO) Disability Inclusion Strategy [2]. At the national level, many governments committed to ensuring the availability of an inclusive environment and enacted policies aimed at the inclusion of individuals with disabilities [6]. Stakeholders need to be engaged in making disability inclusion policies effective. Disabled persons, as the immediate beneficiaries of any inclusion process, play a crucial role in articulating the needs for which policies or support mechanisms are required [7]. Their involvement is therefore essential [2]. Other stakeholders include government authorities, ministries, public agencies, and institutions providing education, vocational training, employment, and service delivery in both the public and private sectors [8]. Specialised agencies, committees, or councils specifically mandated to oversee the inclusion of disabled persons may also need to train the administrators and managers overseeing the disability-inclusive policies [9]. Ultimately, institutions and organisations delivering services in the areas of education, training, employment and livelihood are key players in this process. Within the disability inclusion framework, they are expected to ensure the availability of the environment, provisions, or resources that allow full access, participation, and benefit from the services provided [3].

Policy Landscape across Institutions

Disability inclusion policies are prevalent across diverse institutions and occupy substantial space within legal frameworks. Educational settings are governed by national, regional, and institutional laws mandating disability inclusion policies that address rights and support mechanisms for students and employees [4]. The Swedish Education Act, for example, requires educational institutions to provide appropriate support for students to facilitate learning and avoid segregation on the basis of disability [5]. In addition, section 114 of the Swedish Higher Education Ordinance mandates that the curriculum and examination procedures at individual higher education institutions enable students who have a documented disability to complete their education. Inclusion policies within the public and private sectors vary in scope, but norms regarding rights and support follow similar principles [9]. Disability inclusion policies within educational and employment settings therefore constitute the phenomenon under examination [10]. These policies typically encompass disability rights, access to support services, and adjustments to environment, assessment, and curricula. Prospective analyses suggest that many institutions possess such policies; publicly available texts describing these policies form the basis for further understanding of the associated ecosystem [11]. Institutions fall within three broad categories: higher education, K-12, and publicly or privately funded workplaces. The landscape of inclusion policies varies across these categories, as do the surrounding conditions and support components [12]. Within higher education, inclusion policies govern rights and access to services for students. In the K-12 sector, the phenomenon is nationally regulated; all students are entitled to support, and the policies outline both rights and obligations. Within the public and private sectors, nationally driven frameworks specify mandatory components of established policies, while additional elements may be projected and remain optional [1].

Higher Education Institutions

Disability inclusion policies within higher education institutions (HEIs) aim to increase the participation and success of students and staff with disabilities through the provision of access, support, and accommodations. Usually, HEIs address the policy through the establishment of a disability unit, accompanied by a stand-alone document, integrated within another document or related policy [13]. The policy content includes a set of national legal documents with the International Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Disability inclusion policies constrained by both input and output are archived [14]. Since the national governing structures vary among public, private, and parastatal institutions, such differences in national governance therefore determine the scope of academic freedom when framing institutional disability policies, the degree of detail within these documents, the relationship between input and output conditions, and whether the documents are publicly available [1]. HEIs often implement mandated Disability Inclusion Policies that outline the purpose of the policy. For example, an institutional policy at the University of Cape Town indicates a commitment to the right to access, accommodation, and inclusion in all aspects of the institution's educational, research, and social mission [4]. A related Disability Inclusion Policy at the University of Namibia states similar commitments, but also includes a specific mission statement focused on the inclusion of students with disabilities [3]. HEIs typically incorporate disability inclusion policies in either the Admission Policy or the Employment Equity Policy, particularly in the case of higher educational institutions [4]. The National Commission for Higher Education in Uganda mandates the establishment of a disability unit and the formulation of a disability policy in public universities and degree-granting institutions. While K-12 institutions are specifically required to address disabilities within the curriculum, whereas higher institutions are not explicitly instructed [5]. Higher educational institutions are legally encouraged to introduce Disability Inclusion Policies in order to promote inclusion [1].

K-12 Education Settings

Disability inclusion policy design in K-12 educational settings is guided by legal frameworks such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act which, based on civil rights legislation, promote the right of students with disabilities to formal instructional support [5, 6]. In the U.S., the policy implementation responsibilities of local educational agencies (LEAs) and higher education institutions (HEIs) are often similar, especially where HEIs serve as contract agencies. The main policy requirements common to K-12 settings include furnishing necessary physical and instructional aids (for example, ramps, additional time on tests, Braille texts), promoting an inclusive climate (fostering social integration among students), and establishing midway transition supports (i.e. assistance for students progressing from high-school into post-secondary education) [5].

Public and Private Sector Organizations

Organizations aspire to recruit and retain individuals with disabilities for various reasons: recognition of their social obligation to champion the rights of this marginalized group, pursuit of competitive advantage by reaching new customer segments and employee groups, or fulfillment of legal requirements associated with operating as federal contractors [6]. The approach to disability inclusion in the workplace may be mandatory or voluntary; in mandatory frameworks, legislation explicitly requires such policies, while in voluntary schemes, organizations themselves opt to institute measures [10]. Government mandates regulate access to policy provisions, policy formulation, implementation, and the stakeholders from, and tools through, which policy access is available [7]. Individuals with disabilities, employees, and other social activists are typically designated as the target groups, yet wide variation exists in such designations [11]. Implementing a disability policy in the workplace is easier under a company model that permits such adoption [12].

Methodologies for Assessing Policy Effectiveness

Disability inclusion policies are a critical aspect of institutional commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. The effectiveness of these policies must be carefully evaluated to foster accessibility and inclusion for marginalized communities [13]. Disability inclusion policies typically apply to students and employees with physical, mental, and learning disabilities, and embody values of accessibility, equity, inclusion, and social justice [8]. These guiding principles inform the design of policies, and their implementation is meant to produce desired outcomes through the provision of supports, accommodations, and resources in accessible formats [14]. Similarly, institutions of higher learning are subject to federal laws, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Section 504 of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act and Section 508 of the 1998 Workforce Investment Act, that proscribe discrimination and establish minimum standards for physical access, while K-12 and postsecondary institutions are further governed by specific state laws that exert additional requirements [15]. Institutions are expected to take proactive measures to enhance accessibility, inclusive design, and equitable opportunities, but implementation reports suggest that progress remains slow, inconsistent, and inequitable [9]. Employment equity policies, which may be authorized separately from disability inclusion policies, share similar aims and offer opportunities for integrated evaluation [16]. Disability policies are meant to address barriers to access and participation that are present in every institutional setting [17]. Interaction with a range of embedded tools, resources, and materials that impact the effectiveness of these policies heightens the need for precise analyses that can elucidate their degree of success in promoting access and inclusion as defined in institutional policies and legislation addressing students and employees with disabilities [18].

Evaluation Designs

Research on disability inclusion policies often neglects nuanced evaluations of their implementation and effectiveness [1]. Within the educational sector, empirical inquiries consistently yield uncertain conclusions regarding the impact of disability inclusion policies on the academic performance of disabled students [2]. Such incomplete evaluations impede the progress of further inquiries, including examinations of factors that influence policy efficacy or the dissemination of successful practices across jurisdictions [3]. Addressing this lacuna, the present work concentrates on the effectiveness of disability inclusion policies, defined as formal institutional commitments to address the needs of disabled students through a combination of measures and supports. The significant and anticipated consequences of these policies in the higher education context make it a valuable setting for study [10]. The analysis delineates a comprehensive framework to facilitate systematic inquiries [4]. It articulates the core components of inclusion policies, links them to widely acknowledged objectives (accessibility, participation, achievement, retention, employment, and satisfaction) articulated through relevant theoretical lenses (equity, universal design, and psycho-social-environmental), and maps the resulting causal relationships [5]. Numerous stakeholders, students, educators, administrators interact within each policy environment. Responsibility for implementation thus rests with: [1] the institution, which defines a policy framework; [2] dedicated offices, which oversee concrete measures; and [3] individuals who champion and broach specific actions. Institutions operate within diverse contextual parameters funding modalities, legislative environments, and decision-making structures that exert a profound influence on policy contents and impacts [4]. The contemporary landscape comprises three distinct types of educational

institutions higher education, K–12, and training organizations each characterized by unique institutional features, policy frameworks, and implementation procedures that collectively impact policy effectiveness [5].

Metrics and Indicators

Policy effectiveness is evaluated using multiple indicators assigned to six priority domains: access to infrastructure, curricular materials, and assessments; participation in instructional activities; achievement of learning outcomes; retention in programs of study; employment in positions consistent with educational attainment and career interests; and overall satisfaction with the educational experience [6, 10]. Data are gathered via surveys, institutional records, user-tracking systems, and publicly available statistics [8].

Data Collection and Ethical Considerations

To examine the effectiveness of disability inclusion policies in different contexts, it is essential to know that the most robust evidence relies on longitudinal, quasi-experimental or mixed-method designs [7]. Quasi-experimental designs, such as with-and-without or differences-in-differences approaches, exploit naturally occurring instances of policy variation across otherwise comparable units and are the next most informative category [8]. Longitudinal and cross-sectional data can be combined in such models. Aggregated data can also be included at the unit of analysis level to account for institutional, sectoral or regional influences [1]. Educational policies address access, participation, achievement and retention for all learners, including those with debilitating conditions [9]. Equally, the employment and career advancement of persons with disabilities in the public and private sectors can be measured with clear indicators. Satisfaction surveys with diverse stakeholders can provide complementary insights on perceived effects of policies, such as changes in the built environment within institutions [10]. Anonymized data collection is preferred. Therefore, the modality of instruments for instance, mobile or online is of notable importance [11]. Established, well-governed data-sharing frameworks have been put in place, which can assist in compliance with ethical, accessibility and interoperability standards and reduce participant burden [12].

Evidence on Policy Outcomes

Widespread commitment to disability inclusion has generated extensive policy activity across numerous organizations [13]. Institutions are establishing comprehensive frameworks with articulated objectives, guidelines, substantial resources, and elaborate governance structures. As policies span diverse settings and target varied populations, comparing approaches proves challenging [11]. Consequently, delineating the content, salience, and expected impacts of existing frameworks facilitates meaningful cross-institutional analysis [14]. An extensive body of research demonstrates significant effects of inclusive policies on access, achievement, retention, and career progression for underrepresented groups [15]. Findings on the impact of special measures for people with disabilities, however, remain limited [16]. The effective implementation of disability inclusion policies should foster comparable outcomes to promote full participation within educational and professional environments [17].

Accessibility and Physical Inclusion

Significant barriers hinder the capacity of postsecondary institutions to ensure equitable access and opportunities for participation by persons with disabilities [1]. Efforts directed toward ameliorating physical impediments to campus access are notably limited in scope, remain largely uncoordinated and disjointed, and often engage in the minimalization of institutional burden [12]. For instance, although high-profile courthouses, governmental offices, and federally funded infrastructure projects undergo recurring assessments of existing design constraints under the physical accessibility regulations of the United States Architectural and Transportation Barriers Compliance Board (commonly referred to as the ABA Accessibility Guidelines [ABAAG]) associated with the Architectural Barriers Act (ABA), comparable initiatives involving university facilities receive little attention [13]. Efforts to remove barriers often advance haphazardly and implement only the most rudimentary measures to allow persons with physical disabilities to occupy designated areas irrespective of often-severe restrictions on movement originating from excessive distances, intramural access limitations, or physical separation from student populations without disabilities [14]. Not only do gaps abound in planned transitions to accessible environments, but lack of focus on access to social inclusion, educational media, and electronic access constitutes a pervasive deficiency across many institutions [15].

Curriculum and Assessment Inclusivity

Disability Inclusion Policies that seek to ensure equitable curriculum and assessment availability are common across international education systems, including K–12 and higher education [11]. Policy features representative of inclusion practice in curriculum and assessment are found in universities, colleges, secondary schools, and other learning settings [12]. Curricular inclusion signifies a curriculum that focuses on disability representation and offers differentiated instruction [1]. Method, timing, and content of assessments can limit participation by specific groups of learners and therefore various means of equitable assessment delivery have been developed [1]. Accessibility measures mandated by legislation or policy may help remove physical barriers and contribute towards equitable curriculum and assessment delivery [2]. Institutions aiming for inclusive practice have adopted universal design in the learning and teaching process and within the curriculum. Universal design encompasses the notions of access, participation, achievement, progression, employability, retention, and customer satisfaction. Institutions aspiring to

an inclusive teaching, learning, and assessment culture, employ practices that embody this model across the curriculum [3].

Employment and Career Advancement

Institutions adopt various programs to foster the hiring, advancement, and retention of disabled employees. Most organizations report that formal or informal programs contribute to a welcoming atmosphere and greater awareness of disability-related hiring issues [13]. The federal contractor affirmative action requirement, implemented through the 2013 revision to Section 503 of the Rehabilitation Act, encourages recruitment, hiring, promotion, and retention of disabled people [6]. When universal design principles and social justice frameworks are integrated across occupational sectors, employees with disabilities gain equitable access to career opportunities [14]. Universal design in the workplace refers to principles and practices that apply to all employees, regardless of ability, at every stage of the employment cycle [15]. Accommodations typically benefit only a small number of workers. Measures such as career exploration assistance, skills development, trial employment, training program evaluation, and promotion enhancement that support employees with disabilities also assist the entire workforce [4].

Cultural and Attitudinal Change

Cultural and attitudinal change may represent the most profound impact of disability inclusion policies across education and employment institutions [10, 11]. Such policies can promote structural transformations influencing the visibility of disabled persons, the nature of interactions with peers, and the overall stigma perceived by stakeholders [14]. Inclusively-oriented legislation is believed to improve general perceptions of disability, facilitating the dismantling of barriers and the conversion of well-being into qualitative dimensions favouring growth [13]. Positive modifications to organizational climate can thus reduce discrimination in recruitment and professional development, enhance employment conditions for disabled personnel, and incite additional actions favouring diversity and equity [2].

Barriers to Policy Effectiveness

Policies aimed at fostering disability inclusion across various domains have proliferated in recent decades. They articulate the commitment to ensure equitable rights and opportunities for people with disabilities both at national and institutional levels, vested with enforceable provisions [12]. However, the intended outcomes of these policies are frequently hindered or completely undermined [13]. Barriers limiting effectiveness of disability inclusion policies encompass uneven enforcement, lack of engagement with stakeholders, funding and resource constraints, unaligned internal policies, exclusionary culture, misinformation on disabilities, stigma, and negative attitudes towards people with disabilities [15]. Addressing these constraints is essential in order to advance meaningful disability inclusion policy implementation at a broad level [16]. Support for disability inclusion mandates dedicated funding, personnel, and resources at institutions. The extreme under-allocation of such provisions significantly constrains the accessibility of services and materials for individuals with disabilities, as well as the provision of necessary accommodations [1]. Attention to the operationalization of related resource allocations after the initial approval of a policy proposal is highly critical to limit the perpetuation of barriers constraining policy objectives [17].

Best Practices and Case Studies

The Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles have previously been defined as providing multiple means of engagement, representation, and action/expression [12]. Four of the universities in the Ontario study shared many common outputs that linked directly to the UDL guidelines. To engage students, varied common outputs to attract interest and sustain effort had been implemented. Representational outputs were similarly well covered in the form of varied readings, screen-capture videos, and lecture outlines and power point slides [13]. While progress on action/expression was more limited, these institutions encouraged diverse methods of submission and allowed for more retakes beyond the standard policy in order to enhance student motivation. McMaster University went beyond the other three institutions with its assertion that multiple means of engagement, representation, and action/expression were essential for developing inclusive learning environments [14]. UDL was therefore consistently evident across the data, but the Ontario institutions had chosen different emphases under the broad umbrella of UDL [15]. Students who were completing an online graduate-level course in the field of special education and universal design at Ontario universities shared their experiences with developing, delivering, and evaluating inclusive courses. During the discussion, one institutional survey was reviewed and analyzed within the context of the UDL framework. Subsequently, the broader data set of sixty institutional responses collected earlier in the study was also examined [16]. The participating institutions reflected a range of governance structures, locales, and sizes, yet all continued to reinforce their commitment to wider access and inclusion for designated groups subsequently [1]. Furthermore, all of the institutions were pursuing ongoing efforts both to develop accommodations for new disabilities and to strengthen support within the broader educational community. Despite their concurrent engagement with disability policy and practice, there were important differences among the contexts in which the Ontario respondents operated [17].

Universal Design for Learning in Practice

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) ensures education is engaging, equitable, and effective for all students. Educational plans, programs, and components are designed from the outset to be inclusive and accessible to the broadest possible spectrum of learners. When UDL eliminates learning barriers, accommodations are not required, and access is equally available [16]. Learning systems must be flexible and adaptable, yet they rarely evolve. Even when individuals or task requirements change, previously effective solutions for barriers and constraints often remain unchanged. Educational systems therefore require proactive planning from the outset in order to achieve the full benefits of UDL [17].

Stakeholder Engagement and Community Involvement

Stakeholder participation is vital for raising awareness of the rights of people with disabilities and guaranteeing their representation in decision-making and public policy, with the ultimate objective of improving their quality of life and fostering their economic independence [14]. Assessing the stakeholder engagement process in disability policymaking and its community involvement capacity is the primary goal. Collaborative decision-making and co-production tools, along with the role of disability organizations, will be examined, as they are important in creating inclusive policies that target the needs of people with disabilities and that prevent stigmatization and discrimination from recurring [15]. Encouraging a broader spectrum of involvement among a variety of businesses in the field, and in different areas as well, such as media, sport, health, transport, and the arts, leads to a better governance of disability that advances the interest of people with disabilities within a society [16]. Even though there remains a great deal to be accomplished, integrating community perspectives fosters a digital system of governance capable of meeting the diversities of public service needs to ensure an inclusive society [18].

Resource Allocation and Sustainability

Accessible and inclusive education depends on the allocation of sufficient resources to support policy implementation [15]. Consequently, examining the adequacy of existing funding and the sustainability of chosen models constitutes an important component of disability inclusion policies in education and training [16]. Besides assessing funding caps, investigating cost burdens imposed on institutions provides valuable insights into sustainability. Although accompanying cost-benefit analyses are essential for wider implementation, they remain neglected in mainstream consideration of inclusion policies at the expressed time [15]. Most higher education institutions adhere to the guaranteed-funding-for-accommodation model, whereby accommodation resources are allocated separately from institutional core funding. Several jurisdictions impose funding caps tied either to specific types of accommodations or to pre-defined funding envelopes [16]. Government grants typically do not target universally designed products, although fully universally designed systems would reduce accessibility barriers [17]. Similarly, no universal-profile model has emerged for either programs or course content across widely differing geographic or institutional contexts despite the demonstrated benefits of universally designed curricula. Initiatives focusing on the universally designing aspect of curricular resources would substantially enhance the reach of accreditation requirements [1].

Policy Recommendations for Institutions

Disability inclusion policies are expected to promote independent living among people with disabilities, foster economic growth, and enhance their accessibility to social and community services [4]. Within educational settings, such policies aim to ensure equal access, participation, and achievement in educational opportunities [1]. The effectiveness of disability inclusion policies remains largely underexplored across institutions in different geographic contexts: higher education, K-12 education, public sector organizations, and private sector firms [16].

More than 20 different jurisdictions have enabled laws enforcing the right to inclusion for people with disabilities. Only 5% of higher education systems worldwide have formally adopted national regulations on the inclusion of learners with disabilities, and just 10% of higher education institutions have established policies governing disability support or services [17]. The continued reliance on ad hoc accommodations suggests that much still needs to be done to safeguard the inclusion of learners with disabilities in higher education. These trends underline the need for rigorous evaluation of disability inclusion policies and corresponding capacity-building support tailored to specific geographic contexts and institutional settings [18].

CONCLUSION

Disability inclusion policies are fundamental instruments for advancing equity, accessibility, and social justice across educational institutions and workplaces. The literature demonstrates that although significant progress has been made through international conventions, national legislation, and institutional policies, the effectiveness of these policies remains uneven due to persistent implementation challenges. Barriers such as inadequate funding, inaccessible infrastructure, weak institutional commitment, limited stakeholder participation, insufficient monitoring and evaluation, and enduring societal stigma continue to restrict the realization of genuine inclusion. Evidence from higher education institutions, K-12 education systems, and public and private organizations indicates that comprehensive disability inclusion policies contribute positively to improved accessibility, academic achievement, employment opportunities, and organizational culture when supported by adequate resources and effective implementation mechanisms. Best practices, including Universal Design for Learning, inclusive curriculum

design, accessible assessment methods, and active engagement of persons with disabilities in policy development, have demonstrated considerable potential to enhance policy outcomes. However, policy adoption alone is insufficient to achieve meaningful inclusion. Institutions must establish clear accountability mechanisms, invest in accessible infrastructure and support services, strengthen staff capacity through continuous training, and develop robust monitoring and evaluation systems to assess policy effectiveness. Furthermore, greater collaboration among governments, educational institutions, employers, disability organizations, and communities is essential to ensure that disability inclusion policies respond to the diverse needs of persons with disabilities. Future research should focus on longitudinal and comparative evaluations of disability inclusion policies across different institutional and geographical contexts to generate stronger evidence on long-term outcomes and effective implementation strategies. Ultimately, achieving sustainable disability inclusion requires moving beyond policy compliance towards creating inclusive institutional cultures that recognize disability as an integral dimension of diversity and uphold the rights, dignity, and full participation of all individuals.

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