

Inclusive Practices in Higher Education Institutions: A Systematic Review of Barriers and Support Mechanisms

Cleandy Jane R. Obquia, MAED¹, Dr. Gladys S. Escarlos²

¹Don Carlos Polytechnic College, Teacher Education Department

²Central Mindanao University, Professional Education Department

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive education has become a critical priority in higher education institutions (HEIs) as they respond to increasing student diversity and global demands for equity and accessibility. This systematic review examines inclusive practices in HEIs, with a focus on identifying barriers to implementation and institutional support mechanisms that promote inclusion. The study synthesized literature published between 2010 and 2025, including peer-reviewed journal articles, policy documents, and international reports retrieved from databases such as Google Scholar, ERIC, Scopus, and Web of Science. Using predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria, selected studies were analyzed through thematic and narrative synthesis.

Findings reveal that HEIs continue to encounter significant barriers, including inadequate institutional support, limited faculty preparedness, inaccessible physical and digital infrastructure, insufficient assistive technologies, and negative attitudes toward diversity. Despite these challenges, several effective support mechanisms were identified, such as faculty development programs, inclusive instructional strategies, student support services, disability support offices, and the integration of assistive technologies. Institutions with strong policy frameworks and leadership commitment demonstrated more consistent and effective implementation of inclusive practices.

The review concludes that while progress has been made in promoting inclusive education in higher education, gaps remain in policy implementation, resource allocation, and institutional accountability. Strengthening faculty competencies, improving accessibility, and ensuring sustained institutional support are essential for achieving equitable and inclusive learning environments. The findings provide evidence-based insights for policymakers, educational leaders, and institutions seeking to enhance inclusive education practices in higher education.

Keywords: inclusive education, higher education institutions, accessibility, barriers, support mechanisms

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has become a central priority in higher education institutions (HEIs) as global and national policies emphasize equity, accessibility, and participation for all learners. Universities and colleges are increasingly expected to accommodate diverse student populations, including students with disabilities, marginalized groups, indigenous learners, and those from varying socioeconomic backgrounds.

Despite strong policy frameworks promoting inclusive education, higher education institutions continue to face significant challenges in implementation. Studies have reported persistent issues such as inadequate institutional support, lack of accessible infrastructure, limited faculty preparedness, insufficient instructional materials, and negative attitudes toward diversity. These barriers hinder the full realization of inclusive education in higher education settings.

To address these concerns, institutions have introduced various support mechanisms, including inclusive policies, faculty training programs, assistive technologies, student support services, and inclusive instructional

strategies. These interventions aim to create equitable and accessible learning environments that enhance student participation and academic success.

How the intervention might work is through strengthening institutional systems that support inclusion. Faculty training improves teachers' ability to address diverse learning needs, while assistive technologies enhance accessibility. Student support services provide academic and psychosocial assistance, and inclusive policies ensure institutional accountability. Through these mechanisms, higher education institutions can reduce barriers and promote equitable educational outcomes.

It is important to conduct this review because existing studies on inclusive education in higher education are fragmented across different contexts. A systematic review provides a comprehensive synthesis of evidence, identifies recurring challenges and effective strategies, and supports evidence-based policy and institutional decision-making.

This study is therefore designed as a systematic review of literature, policy documents, and empirical studies focusing on inclusive practices in higher education institutions.

Objectives

This systematic review aims to examine inclusive practices in higher education institutions, with particular emphasis on identifying barriers to implementation and institutional support mechanisms that promote inclusion.

Specifically, the study aims to:

1. Identify the inclusive practices implemented in higher education institutions;
2. Examine the barriers affecting the implementation of inclusive education in higher education settings;
3. Analyze the institutional support mechanisms that facilitate inclusive practices;
4. Synthesize existing evidence on effective strategies for promoting inclusion and accessibility in higher education; and
5. Propose evidence-based recommendations for strengthening inclusive education policies and practices in higher education institutions.

METHODOLOGY

This systematic review draws upon a wide range of local and international studies focusing on inclusive education, higher education practices, and institutional policy implementation.

The review includes peer-reviewed journal articles, books, policy reports, and international organization publications from 2010 to 2025. Sources were selected based on relevance to inclusive practices, barriers, and support mechanisms in higher education.

Databases such as Google Scholar, ERIC, Scopus, and Web of Science were used. Keywords included are inclusive education in higher education, barriers to inclusive education, inclusive teaching practices, accessibility in universities, institutional support for inclusion, and diversity in higher education.

The selected studies were analyzed and synthesized to identify key themes such as barriers, institutional challenges, and effective support mechanisms:

Author/Year	Title of Study	Focus	Relevance to Review
Ainscow (2020)	Promoting Inclusion and Equity in Education	Policy and inclusion frameworks	Provides global perspective on inclusive education
Moriña (2017)	Inclusive Education in Higher Education	Barriers and opportunities	Directly discusses inclusion in HEIs
Florian (2019)	Inclusive Education Theory and Practice	Inclusive pedagogy	Supports instructional strategies

Graham (2020)	Inclusive Education for the 21st Century	Policy and practice	Links theory to institutional application
Nilholm (2021)	Research on Inclusive Education	Theoretical development	Highlights gaps in inclusion research
Avramidis & Norwich (2018)	Teachers' Attitudes Toward Inclusion	Attitudinal barriers	Explains faculty-related challenges
Alquraini & Gut (2019)	Inclusion of Students with Disabilities	Support mechanisms	Identifies key inclusion components
Booth & Ainscow (2016)	Index for Inclusion	Institutional framework	Tool for assessing inclusion
UNESCO (2020)	Global Education Monitoring Report	Global inclusion trends	Benchmark for international practices
WHO (2022)	Global Report on Disability	Accessibility and equity	Emphasizes inclusion for persons with disabilities
Oliver (2017)	Social Model of Disability	Conceptual framework	Explains systemic barriers
Slee (2018)	Inclusive Education Critique	Policy critique	Challenges traditional inclusion models
CHED (2021)	Policies on Inclusive Education	Philippine context	Provides national policy framework
United Nations (2016)	Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities	Human rights approach	Legal foundation of inclusion

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings of this systematic review highlight that inclusive education in higher education institutions (HEIs) remains a complex and multifaceted process that requires systemic transformation rather than isolated interventions. The synthesis of the reviewed literature indicates that while policies promoting inclusion are increasingly present, their translation into practice continues to be inconsistent and uneven across institutions.

One of the most prominent findings is the persistence of institutional and structural barriers. Many HEIs face challenges related to inadequate funding, limited institutional commitment, and weak implementation of inclusive policies. These findings are consistent with the work of Ainscow (2020), who emphasized that achieving inclusion requires not only policy development but also sustained institutional support and systemic reform. Similarly, Graham (2020) argued that inclusive education initiatives often fail when institutions lack the structural capacity to operationalize inclusive principles effectively. The gap between policy and practice suggests that inclusion is frequently treated as a compliance requirement rather than an institutional priority.

Another critical issue identified is faculty preparedness, which significantly influences the success of inclusive practices. The review reveals that many instructors lack sufficient training in inclusive pedagogy, resulting in limited ability to address diverse learning needs. This finding aligns with Avramidis and Norwich (2018), who highlighted that teachers' attitudes and competencies are key determinants of inclusive education outcomes. Florian (2019) further argued that inclusive teaching requires a shift in pedagogical thinking, where diversity is viewed as a normal aspect of classroom practice rather than a challenge. Without continuous professional development, faculty members may struggle to implement differentiated instruction and inclusive assessment strategies effectively.

The review also underscores the importance of accessibility as a foundational component of inclusion. Both physical and digital barriers continue to restrict student participation in higher education. Inaccessible infrastructure, lack of assistive technologies, and poorly designed digital learning environments create significant obstacles for students with disabilities. These findings are supported by the World Health Organization (2022), which reported that structural and environmental barriers remain among the primary factors limiting educational access for persons with disabilities. Furthermore, Oliver's (2017) social model of disability provides a theoretical lens for understanding these challenges, emphasizing that disability is not inherent to the individual but is created by societal and institutional barriers.

In addition to structural barriers, attitudinal factors play a significant role in shaping inclusive education outcomes. The review indicates that negative perceptions, bias, and lack of awareness among faculty and peers contribute to the marginalization of students from diverse backgrounds. Slee (2018) argued that inclusive education requires a fundamental shift in institutional culture, where diversity is recognized as a strength rather than a deficit. Similarly, Nilholm (2021) highlighted that improving inclusive practices requires not only structural reforms but also changes in beliefs and values within educational systems. These findings suggest that inclusion is as much a cultural issue as it is a structural one.

Despite these challenges, the review identifies several effective support mechanisms that contribute to the successful implementation of inclusive education. Among these, faculty development programs are consistently emphasized as critical. Training initiatives that focus on inclusive pedagogy, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and differentiated instruction have been shown to enhance teaching effectiveness and student engagement. Alquraini and Gut (2019) identified structured support systems and teacher preparation as essential components of successful inclusion, particularly for students with diverse learning needs.

Moreover, student support services such as counseling, mentoring, and disability support offices play a vital role in promoting student success. These services provide both academic and psychosocial support, which are crucial for improving retention and engagement. Moriña (2017) emphasized that students in higher education benefit significantly from institutional support structures that address both learning and well-being needs. The presence of these services reflects a more holistic approach to inclusion, extending beyond classroom practices.

Another important finding is the role of institutional leadership and policy frameworks in driving inclusive education. Institutions with clear policies, strong leadership commitment, and well-defined implementation strategies demonstrate more consistent inclusive practices. The Commission on Higher Education (2021) underscores the importance of institutional accountability and policy alignment in promoting inclusive education within HEIs. In addition, international frameworks such as those from UNESCO (2020) and the United Nations (2016) emphasize that inclusion must be embedded in institutional systems to ensure sustainability and equity.

However, the review also reveals a gap between individual-level practices and institutional-level implementation. While many faculty members adopt inclusive teaching strategies in their classrooms, these efforts are often not supported by broader institutional systems. This finding suggests that inclusive education is frequently driven by individual initiative rather than coordinated institutional action. Booth and Ainscow (2016) highlighted that sustainable inclusion requires a whole-institution approach, where policies, practices, and cultures are aligned to support diverse learners.

Finally, the findings suggest that inclusive education in higher education is a continuous and evolving process. As higher education institutions become more diverse, the need for adaptive and responsive inclusive practices becomes increasingly important. The United Nations (2015) emphasizes that achieving equitable and inclusive education is a key component of sustainable development, requiring long-term commitment and collaboration among stakeholders.

In summary, the results of this systematic review demonstrate that while progress has been made in promoting inclusive education in higher education institutions, significant challenges remain. The effectiveness of inclusive practices depends on the interaction between institutional structures, faculty competencies, accessibility, and cultural attitudes. Moving forward, HEIs must adopt a comprehensive and integrated approach to inclusion, ensuring that policies are effectively implemented, resources are equitably distributed, and inclusive values are embedded within institutional culture. Only through such a holistic approach can inclusive education become a meaningful and sustainable reality in higher education.

CONCLUSIONS

Inclusive practices in higher education institutions are present but are not consistently implemented and remain largely dependent on individual initiatives rather than institutional systems.

The implementation of inclusive education is hindered by persistent barriers such as limited institutional support, inadequate resources, insufficient faculty preparation, inaccessible infrastructure, and negative attitudes toward diversity.

Institutional support mechanisms, including faculty development, student services, and assistive technologies, are essential for inclusion but are uneven in availability and effectiveness across institutions.

Evidence-based strategies such as Universal Design for Learning, flexible assessment, and inclusive teaching approaches are effective in promoting student participation and reducing learning barriers when properly applied.

Inclusive education in higher education requires stronger institutionalization through clear policies, committed leadership, and coordinated systems to ensure consistent and sustainable implementation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Policymakers and institutional leaders may strengthen support in addressing existing barriers by allocating sufficient funding, improving physical and digital accessibility, and ensuring the availability of inclusive learning resources. These efforts should be prioritized to reduce inequities among learners.

School administrators may be encouraged to fully institutionalize inclusive practices by integrating them into official policies, curriculum design, and quality assurance systems. This will ensure that inclusive education is consistently implemented across programs rather than relying on individual faculty efforts.

Teaching and non-teaching staff may also strengthen and expand student support systems such as counseling services, disability support units, and academic assistance programs. These services should be made more accessible, well-coordinated, and responsive to student needs.

Faculty development may be continuously enhanced through structured training programs focused on inclusive pedagogy, differentiated instruction, and the use of assistive technologies. This will equip educators with the necessary competencies to effectively handle diverse learning needs.

Finally, institutions may adopt evidence-based instructional approaches such as Universal Design for Learning, collaborative learning, and flexible assessment strategies. Strong leadership commitment and continuous monitoring should be established to ensure that inclusive education is effectively implemented and sustained over time.

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