



Towards an Africa Model for Ensuring Equal Opportunity to Higher Education for Students with Disabilities

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Abstract

Students with disabilities in higher education in Africa face significant challenges accessing quality education due to a lack of accessible infrastructure, limited support services within universities, and societal attitudes towards disability, often preventing them from fully participating in academic life, despite some universities making efforts to improve inclusion; with many students experiencing barriers related to physical access, assistive technology, and appropriate curriculum adaptations. Ensuring equal opportunities for students with disabilities in the higher education setting is not just a legal requirement; it's a fundamental human and moral obligation. Every student, regardless of their abilities or disabilities, deserves an environment that nurtures learning, growth, and success. Accommodating students with disabilities in higher education institutions is an ongoing journey that involves making adjustments, providing support, and fostering a culture of inclusivity and accessibility. This article will explore key considerations, challenges, recommendations to achieve this goal and proposing an African model for ensuring equal opportunity to higher education for students with disabilities.

Keywords: *Model, Ensuring Equal Opportunity, Higher Education, Students with Disabilities.*

Introduction

Education in general, and post-secondary education in particular, is a predictor of gainful employment in meaningful occupations, opening opportunities for career development, hence for quality of life (Duta, Scguri-Geist, & Kundu, 2009; Getzel, Stodden, & Brief, 2001). The importance of higher education in providing students with disabilities decent employment opportunities and social status cannot be overemphasized. At this time in many countries where there is legislative endorsement of access to higher education, and of changes in attitudes resulting from the struggle for equal rights for people with disabilities, it is crucial to broaden knowledge and understanding of the broad perspective of achievements and experiences of this group of students in higher education, and to compare them with those of students without disabilities.

Regardless of changes in many countries' legislation and the development of programmes for students with disabilities, in recognition of the importance of higher education for individuals, families, and society at large, low enrolment and high first-year dropout have been found (Duta et al., 2009; Mpofu & Wilson, 2004). Low enrolment and high dropout can be understood as the result of inadequate accessibility of higher education institutions, lack of support, adverse social attitudes and social isolation, as well as low financial capacity (Johnson, 2006; Mpofu & Wilson, 2004). Still not withstanding the revolution in social and legislative policies in African countries on provision of equal opportunities for education and employment for people with disabilities, there is still a long way to go (Quinn & Waddington, 2009; United Nation Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2006).

Over 235 million students were enrolled in higher education in the world in 2020, more than doubling the 100 million students enrolled in 2000. The gross enrolment ratio reached 40% globally in 2020, yet only 9% in Sub-Saharan Africa (UNESCO, 2022). Statistical data on students with disabilities recruited annually into higher education institutions on

the continent as a whole is not readily available due to limited literature in this realm. However, based on the attitudinal, environmental and other societal barriers faced by people with disabilities, these numbers can be assumed to be low as mentioned above. Recruiting students with disabilities in higher education, more often than not, requires an additional effort from the institution and its partners. A range of strategies have been tested and implemented by various institutions. Here, we highlight the deliberate mobilisation strategies employed by the Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program at University of Gondar in Ethiopia and the outreach activities to pre-university education institutions by University of Ghana (Mastercard Foundation, 2021).

Equal Opportunity to Higher Education for Persons with Disabilities

The rights of persons with disabilities have been the subject of much attention in the United Nations and other international organizations over a long period of time. The most important outcome of the International Year of Disabled Persons, 1981, was the World Programme of Action concerning Persons with disabilities, adopted by the General Assembly by its resolution 37/52 of 3 December 1982. The Year and the World Programme of Action provided a strong impetus for progress in the field. They both emphasized the right of persons with disabilities to the same opportunities as other citizens and to an equal share in the improvements in living conditions resulting from economic and social development.

The Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities was developed on the basis of the experience gained during the United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons (1983-1992). The International Bill of Human Rights, comprising the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, as well as the World Programme of Action concerning Disabled Persons, constitute the political and moral foundation for the Rules. The purpose of the Rules is to ensure that girls, boys, women and men with disabilities, as members of their societies, may exercise the same rights and obligations as others.

Rule 5 indicates that: States should recognize the overall importance of accessibility in the process of the equalization of opportunities in all spheres of society. For persons with disabilities of any kind, States should (a) introduce programmes of action to make the physical environment accessible; and (b) undertake measures to provide access to information and communication.

Meanwhile, Rule 6 clearly shows that: States should recognize the principle of equal primary, secondary and tertiary educational opportunities for children, youth and adults with disabilities, in integrated settings. They should ensure that the education of persons with disabilities is an integral part of the educational system.

Many efforts have been made to try to create an educational culture where students feel competent, valued, and not excluded, regardless of their characteristics, interests, abilities, or difficulties. In this sense, access to university for persons with disabilities is a legally recognised right in many African countries (Yssel, Pak & Beilke, 2016). Despite this, there are still legal gaps in its implementation, contributing to the fact that the path of these institutions towards inclusion is increasingly long (Alcain & Medina, 2017). We are aware that there is gradually a greater commitment on the part of African universities to move towards this objective. In spite of this, works and studies that give students a voice conclude that universities become an obstacle course that, on many occasions, generates a premature abandonment of university studies (Mullins & Preyde, 2013, Moriña & Cotán-Fernández, 2017). On the contrary, it should be noted that students with disabilities recognise the value of universities for their social and educational inclusion, but at the same time they consider that their experiences in this institution are not always positive. Therefore, it is not enough to guarantee access, but rather it is necessary to establish policies and plans to ensure that all students, including those with disabilities, remain and succeed in university studies (Thomas, 2016).

Along these lines, in recent years, studies have focused on the different barriers encountered by students with disabilities during their time at university. However, the most common barriers include architectural barriers, lack of information, inaccessible technologies, or regulations that are not applied, as well as teachers. Regarding the latter, teachers are identified as the main obstacle to inclusion (Hewett, Douglas, McLinden & Keil, 2017), as their attitude towards people with disabilities is essential to facilitate student learning (Sharma, Loreman & Simi, 2017; Alesech & Nayar, 2019). Other research focuses on the teacher profile, especially on personal competences as essential values for working in inclusive contexts (Fernández-Batanero, 2020; Boynton & Mahon, 2018). Studies that have given a voice to inclusive teachers have concluded that when it comes to facilitating the learning of students with disabilities, the diversity of active and participatory methodological strategies where students are included, more affective and emotional, is just as important (Aguirre, Carballo & López-Gavira, 2020).

Another line of research in relation to the possible barriers encountered by students with disabilities focuses on the teaching and learning processes themselves (Bunbury, 2020). These studies show how reasonable adjustments to the curriculum (flexible timing and methodological strategies) to help students participate in the teaching and learning processes on an equal footing with their peers can contribute to the retention and success of students with disabilities (Burnbury, 2020; Moríña, Perera & Melero, 2020). Another key element of educational projects that concerns both students and teachers is the assessment tests. Research addressing this issue points to the difficulty for teachers to adjust, especially in examinations. Studies coincide in pointing out the lack of receptiveness of teachers to enable different modes of assessment (Moswela & Mukhopadhyay, 2011).

The UNESCO conference in Salamanca (1994) had an impact not only on educational thought, policy, and practice, but also on culture (Ainscow, Slee & Best, 2019). Today, it continues to present an indispensable point of reference for all those involved in the struggle for inclusive education. This legacy immersed in the digital age is leading educational institutions and professionals to a profound transformation and a radical change in their ways of doing, acting, and training. In the framework of the European Higher Education Area, a more inclusive character is being demanded from the University, as evidenced in different international declarations (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2018). Furthermore, Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 on education of the European Agenda 2030 calls for ensuring an inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030. It emphasizes the importance of inclusion and equity as the foundation for quality education and learning.

In the case of persons with disabilities, the European Agency for Special Needs, and Inclusive Education (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2018) and the United Nations High Commissioner recognised inclusive education as an opportunity for their empowerment (United Nations, 2019), as well as an opportunity to remove barriers to learning and participation for all learners (Ramberg & Watkins, 2020). However, at present, practices of educational exclusion and discrimination are still present in all education systems, constituting real barriers or obstacles to progress (Lacono, Keefe, Kenny & Mckinstry, 2019).

Challenges to Equal Opportunity in Higher Education for Persons with Disabilities in Africa

The effective right to higher education for persons with disabilities continues to be limited in all African educational systems due to different factors. A reflection on some of them will be presented below, emphasizing that the possibility of eradicating them is in the hands of higher education systems.

The first challenge facing the right to higher education for persons with disabilities is that higher education systems assume that this recognized right refers to an “inclusive higher education” (Art. 24 International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities). Therefore, honoring this commitment to inclusive higher education requires understanding that inclusion is not generated spontaneously, but it requires deliberate, planned and continuously assessed action on the part of university institutions themselves. It is also necessary to understand that the commitment to persons with disabilities cannot be reduced to the provision of services and/or programmes aimed at students with disabilities.

It is essential to overcome the individual actions based on the medical model of disability that stigmatizes this group. And, at the same time, move toward measures included in the social model, more focused on adapting university processes and contexts to everyone’s needs. Likewise, university institutions must understand that inclusion has a holistic nature, which integrates the different dimensions of university life and affects all its members. In this regard, we can mention the anecdotal presence of people with disabilities among academic and university services staff. Although people with disabilities have expanded their representation among university students, the doors of universities remain narrow for teachers and researchers with disabilities.

The second challenge is the existence of ableist beliefs within the university culture that assign negative values to persons with disabilities or question their right to higher education. These ideas explain the fear of students and academics to reveal their disability in their institutions and justify their rejection to support systems that might identify them as persons with disabilities.

The third challenge is the poor adaptation of physical spaces, virtual (management and learning) environments and university communication systems based on international regulations on accessibility. The persistence of barriers in this regard prevents many people with disabilities from being able to move freely, managing academic resources and taking part in academic, sports, cultural or leisure activities on equal terms with the rest of the university community.

The fourth challenge for students with disabilities in our African university environment is related to the low flexibility of curricula and the traditional teaching and learning processes they are expected to go through. The almost non-existent training of university teachers in inclusive pedagogies does not allow them to implement flexible, collaborative and

enriching teaching methods that adapt to everyone's needs. Instead, they depend on reactive and individualized support strategies that stigmatize them and point to them as "not capable."

The fifth challenge is the inadequacy of academic mobility programmes and extracurricular activities to the needs of students with disabilities. Students with disabilities face much greater difficulties than the rest of the university community when trying to participate in exchange and/or mobility experiences. In addition, the likelihood of taking part in sports and cultural activities is limited due to the poor accessibility of venues. These complementary activities are also part of the academic experience, and they must be offered to everyone on equal terms.

The sixth challenge refers to the few participatory association and representation mechanisms for students with disabilities in university structures and bodies, which does not allow their voices to be heard within the system. Universities should guarantee active representation of persons with disabilities in formal and informal university structures.

The seventh challenge is the lack of mechanisms to evaluate progress in the representation and participation of students with disabilities in higher education systems. Many African university institutions do not have an evaluation system that allows them to know the level of satisfaction of students with disabilities or how this indicator moves over time. It is necessary to agree on continuous monitoring and evaluation mechanisms that measure quantitatively and qualitatively the universities' commitment to people with disabilities.

The eighth challenge is the inability of African higher education institutions to consider multiple and intersectional discrimination affecting students with disabilities. Most people with disabilities experience discrimination for two or more reasons (disability and gender, disability and ethnicity, disability and socioeconomic status, etc.) and this accumulated effect significantly hinders their chances of academic success and professional development. Universities must proactively promote actions that minimize the impact of these inseparable variables on this group of persons.

What Recommendations can be made to Correct these Challenges?

In order to correct the challenges affecting persons with disabilities in terms of their right, equal opportunity and access to higher education, there are some guiding principles that must be adopted in Africa. Some of these include:

- African governments should collectively embrace and implement the human rights model of disability in the general education system. In so doing, persons with disabilities would be recognized as rights holders and not objects of charity.
- African governments must move away from the notion of segregating persons with disabilities from regular education institution and embrace an inclusive education philosophy. Most persons with disabilities have the capacity to learn in the same education system as individuals without a disability. Only in exceptional cases where the impairment of the individual is severe, that specialised institutions should be considered.
- Recognizing that persons with disabilities are among the most marginalized in any society (WHO 2011), higher education must be treated as a socio-economic imperative for persons with disabilities by governments within Africa. Consequently, persons with disabilities should be exempt from paying tuition fees at higher education institutions that are funded by government.
- African governments must jointly promote the development of modern assistive technologies within Africa in order to make them more affordable to persons with disabilities. Similarly, African governments must ensure that each person with a disability that is pursuing higher education, receive an assistive technology once every three years.
- Stake holders in the education of persons with disabilities in higher education should conduct awareness campaigns that consolidate a university culture that views disability positively and that reinforces institutional responsibility to tend to the needs of students with disabilities.
- Governments should approve a continental regulatory framework (statutes and regulations) based on African realities, consistent with international regulations on the rights of persons with disabilities and implement sanctioning systems in case of non-compliance with the regulations.
- Ensure full accessibility in physical spaces, virtual environments, services, procedures and information channels, as well as teaching processes, curriculum, educational materials and teaching and assessment methods.
- Develop throughout the continent similar teacher training programs in inclusive teaching or pedagogy, universal design for learning (UDL) and provision of reasonable accommodation for students with disabilities.
- Promote collaboration agreements between universities to ensure full participation of students and faculty with disabilities in national and international mobility programmes so that they have the human, material and technical support they need. At the same time, increase the creation of virtual mobility programmes as internationalization options for people with disabilities who wish to take part in them.

Ensuring Equal Opportunity to Higher Education for Students with Disabilities in Africa

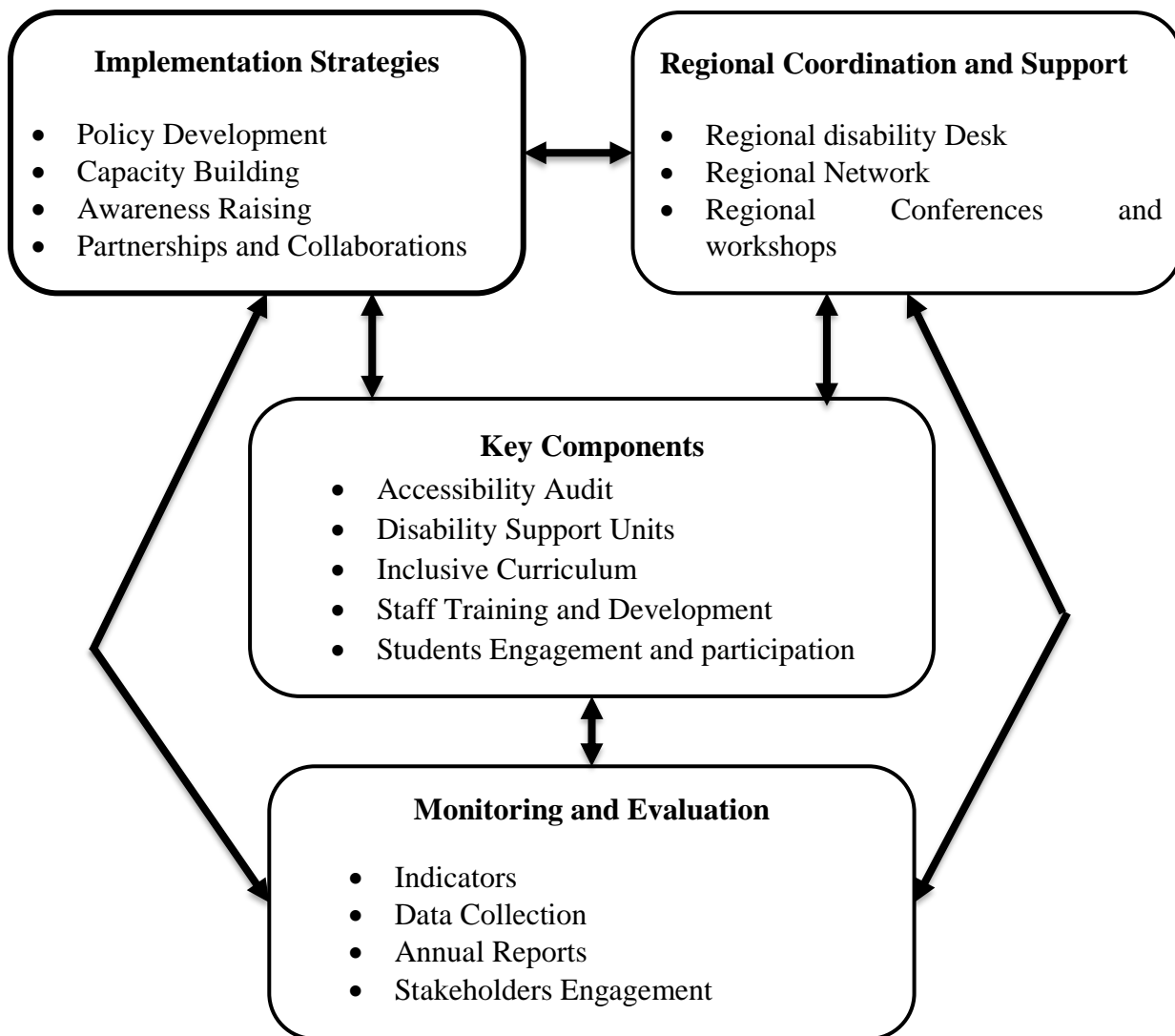
Africa is home to a diverse population of students with disabilities, who face significant barriers in accessing higher education. Despite efforts to promote inclusive education, many higher education institutions in Africa remain inaccessible to students with disabilities. This is a result of physical, attitudinal, and systemic barriers that hinder the participation and success of students with disabilities.

The Need for a Regional African Model

To address these challenges, there is a need for a regional African model that promotes inclusive higher education for students with disabilities. This model should be grounded in the principles of equality, equity, and social justice, and should aim to create a culture of inclusion and diversity within higher education institutions.

The Inclusive Higher Education in Africa (IHEA) Model: Louise Mimfoumou Olo epse Edou & Patrick Fonyuy Shey, 2025

The IHEA Model is a proposed regional African model that aims to promote inclusive higher education for students with disabilities.



The Inclusive Higher Education in Africa (IHEA) Model Edou & Shey, 2025

Key Components of the Model

The model is based on the following key components:

Accessibility Audit

Regular accessibility audits should be conducted to identify and address physical and digital barriers within higher education institutions. This should include the provision of accessible infrastructure, such as ramps, elevators, and accessible restrooms.

Disability Support Units

Dedicated disability support units should be established within higher education institutions to provide support services, advice, and guidance to students with disabilities. These units should be staffed by trained professionals who have expertise in disability support.

Inclusive Curriculum

Higher education institutions should develop and implement inclusive curricula that incorporate diverse perspectives, experiences, and learning needs. This should include the provision of accessible course materials, such as braille and audio materials.

Staff Training and Development

Regular training and development opportunities should be provided for staff on disability awareness, inclusive teaching, and support services. This should include training on disability etiquette, accessible teaching practices, and the use of assistive technology.

Student Engagement and Participation

Higher education institutions should encourage student engagement and participation through inclusive extracurricular activities, leadership roles, and decision-making processes. This should include the provision of accessible sports facilities, cultural events, and student organizations.

Implementation Strategies

The IHEA Model should be implemented through the following strategies:

Policy Development

Higher education institutions should develop and implement policies that promote inclusive higher education, including accessibility, inclusive teaching, and support services.

Capacity Building

Higher education institutions should build their capacity to provide inclusive education through staff training, infrastructure development, and resource allocation.

Awareness Raising

Higher education institutions should raise awareness about disability and inclusive education among students, staff, and the wider community.

Partnerships and Collaborations

Higher education institutions should foster partnerships and collaborations with disability organizations, government agencies, and other stakeholders to promote inclusive higher education.

Regional Coordination and Support

The IHEA Model should be coordinated and supported at the regional level through the following mechanisms:

Regional Disability Desk

A regional disability desk should be established to provide technical support, guidance, and resources to higher education institutions.

Regional Network

A regional network of higher education institutions, disability organizations, and government agencies should be established to promote inclusive higher education.

Regional Conferences and Workshops

Regional conferences and workshops should be organized to share best practices, challenges, and innovations in inclusive higher education.

Monitoring and Evaluation

The IHEA Model should be monitored and evaluated through the following mechanisms:

Indicators

Indicators should be developed to track progress, including enrollment rates, graduation rates, and employment rates of students with disabilities.

Data Collection

Data should be collected on the number of students with disabilities, types of disabilities, and support services provided.

Annual Reports

Annual reports should be published on progress, challenges, and innovations in inclusive higher education.

Stakeholder Engagement

Stakeholders, including students with disabilities, disability organizations, and government agencies, should be engaged in monitoring and evaluation processes.

The IHEA Model provides a comprehensive framework for promoting inclusive higher education in Africa. By implementing this model, higher education institutions can ensure equal opportunities for students with disabilities, thereby fostering a culture of diversity, equity, and social justice.

Concluding Remarks

In order for Africa to ensure equal opportunity and access for persons with disabilities in higher education, the goals around disabilities should be recognised as part of a broader process of higher education transformation, focused both on redressing the inequalities of the past and building the capacity of the university system to meaningfully contribute to Africa's development within a globalised, knowledge-driven world, including through greater responsiveness to diversity. These policy goals will also give meaning within the context of higher education to constitutional provisions and associated legislation that protect the rights of people with disabilities from unfair discrimination and recognise them as having been historically disadvantaged and thus the focus of measures aimed at redressing these inequities.

For the lives of persons with disabilities to be meaningfully transformed, higher education is preeminent. This is why the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities treats education as a fundamental right for persons with disabilities. Higher education contributes to the professionalization of persons with disabilities which is needed to transform these individuals from poverty to prosperity. But this right to higher education is being stymied by many factors such as costs and accessibility. For these to be corrected, governments within Africa must play a quintessential role and it must begin with an acceptance of the human rights model of disability. In this model, persons with disabilities are seen as rights holders and not the traditional objects of charity that is deeply entrenched in Africa. True empowerment comes through teaching a man to fish, rather than giving a fish. Enforce the right to higher education for persons with disabilities and these individuals will become a meaningful part of African society.

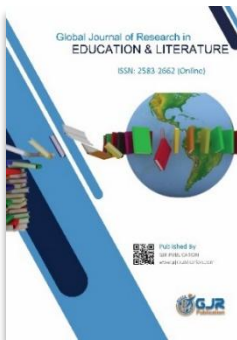
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