How do we overcome barriers to accessing higher education for people with disabilities?

The question and the problem

Evidence suggests that gaps in educational achievement between people with and without disabilities is greatest in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). Education is one of the fundamental rights for individuals, with educational attainment being associated with multiple positive outcomes related to improved employment rates, social inclusion, self-sufficiency, and independent living. The Global Campaign for Education (2014) has emphasized that education must be equitable, inclusive, and free to achieve universal education and has emphasized the need for concrete steps to overcome all forms of discrimination. Literature highlights multiple barriers for young people with disabilities in accessing higher education, including lack of financial assistance, policy provisions and regulations in higher education (HE) institutes. This evidence brief summarises what we know about how to overcome the under-representation of people with disabilities in higher education.

Recommendations

- **Recommendation #1**: Construct accessible infrastructure in higher education institutions for students with disabilities.
- **Recommendation #2**: Develop inclusive higher education systems and governmental policies, especially in LMICs.
- **Recommendation #3**: Strengthen training and accountability in educational institutions to address the needs of students with disabilities.
- **Recommendation #4**: Provide large-scale awareness programs to eliminate stigma against people with disabilities.

“Despite differences between non-disabled students and students with disabilities, studies have shown that for students with disabilities in high learning institutions, student life integration, especially peer study groups, and university staff training were emphasised along with structural modifications needed for campus facility access”.

[Margaret, Trotta et al; 2015]
Challenges

Challenge #1: Limited access to early education leads continues to create barriers for further educational attainment for young people with disabilities.

- According to WHO, about 15% of the world’s population lives with some form of disability. Children with disabilities have consistently impaired access to education e.g. they are 49% more likely to have never attended school compared with children without disabilities and are 5–10 times more likely to be excluded from school than children without disabilities. As they mature into young adults with disabilities, the barriers experienced in early schooling can contribute to further educational attainment. Which is associated with multiple negative outcomes e.g. limited opportunities for professional skills-development, financial dependence, social exclusion and cycles of chronic poverty.
- The lack of inclusive education as part of a country’s educational policy is a key contributor to the exclusion of students with disabilities, underscoring the importance of engaging government players in the conversation.

Challenge #2: Lack of accessibility to participate in higher education facilities.

- Accessibility refers to the extent to which products, services (course instructional materials, devices, and pedagogical activities), or facilities are available to everyone.
- Several factors influence the accessibility of education for higher education students with disabilities, including the stigmatised attitudes and perceptions of parents of students with disabilities, communities and college staff.
- HE institutions are found to be rarely fully accessible to persons living with disabilities as a mix of services are often required and there are not enough services available to students with disability to address their requirements. In higher education, physical access limits choice, as does provision of support services.
- A key barrier to access is the lack of accessible educational policy, that mandates inclusive environments in educational institutions. Often educational policy in LMICs is not inclusive, since people with disabilities are frequently not included during development. It is essential to have a standard education policy that will cover all students, regardless of their condition.
- Poorer students, including those with disabilities, are less likely to access higher education institutions. Students with disabilities are not given priority due to a dearth of scholarships, bursaries, grants, and full or partial loans to eligible students from disabled and marginalised groups.

Challenge #3: Lack of trained or special education staff or research on access barriers in higher education

- Higher education staff lack essential experience and skills in working with students with disabilities, and the limited awareness of working with young people with disabilities in general, can lead to stigma and discrimination.
- An educator’s attitude is critical in the education of students with disabilities because their judgement can have a lasting social, emotional and intellectual influence on the student’s well-being.
- There has been inadequate research to investigate perceptions of students with disabilities in higher education in LMICs. While some researchers have sought to understand the experiences of students with disabilities while accessing higher education, few have elicited direct suggestions from students on improvements for how to meet their needs.

Challenge #4: Lack of flexibility in educational curricula and subsequent adaptation

- Students living with disabilities who enrol in higher educational institutions in LMICs rarely receive appropriate course materials and curricula. This may be because existing curricula in higher learning was historically developed to only accommodate non-disabled students and was not appropriate for students with disabilities who are studying all kinds of disciplines at the institution.
- Additionally, teaching and assessment strategies at higher educational institutions also lack relevant accommodation for disabled learners’ needs to track their progress in achieving the learning outcomes of their subjects and show mastery of concepts.
How did we find answers
We conducted a review of reviews, systematic, descriptive, and other types of review evidence to investigate the experiences of students with disabilities when participating in or accessing higher education systems in LMICs. All recommendations were based on reviews of literature from low- and middle-income settings, as well as some reviews of literature from high-income countries where the recommendations made were transferable to low-resource settings. This evidence note is based on the findings of seven reviews of low- and middle-income countries’ evidence, three reviews covering the literature from various settings, and three reviews concerning evidence from high-income countries.

Evidence-informed Recommendations and Actions

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<th>Key Recommendations</th>
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<td>Construct accessible infrastructure in higher education institutions for students with disabilities.</td>
<td>Need to ensure that infrastructure at higher education institutions is modified for access e.g., construction of ramps and accessible features in classrooms, braille for textbooks, sign-language access in lecture theatres and libraries so that these are accessible to all students including those with disabilities.</td>
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<td>Use of the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) Framework (“UDL is an instructional design framework that takes into account the wide range of variations in skills and abilities that exist across all learners and provides a research-based set of principles and guidelines for inclusive curriculum development and delivery”). To eliminate restrictive environments, use of UDL in university settings can allow all students to benefit from education.</td>
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<td>In order to effectively implement Universal Design in university education, educators must possess the necessary competencies. This includes proficiency in leveraging technology and modifying pedagogical materials and approaches. To attain these competencies, formal instruction in Universal Design for Learning (UDL) can be a valuable resource.</td>
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| Developing inclusive higher education systems and governmental policies to standardise procedures across the country. | Adoption of inclusive policy measures to ensure equal opportunity for selection of people with disabilities at higher academic institutions, that moves away from segregated schooling and strongly emphasises that persons with disabilities of all ages shall have the same rights to education and training in inclusive settings. |
| | Governments should develop a targeted education policy for students with special needs, which should be mandated for all educational institutions. Policies should adopt a multisectoral approach to enhance opportunities and social inclusion of students with disabilities |
| | A monitoring body should be responsible for ensuring that procedures are being appropriately delivered. Uptake can be improved by incentivising universities to maintain high-quality standards. |
Strengthening educational institutions through capacity building and accountability measures

- For inclusive higher education to work, educators need to be effectively prepared and hold positive attitudes towards inclusion. Educator training focussed on sensitization and curriculum adaptation is required that integrates the concepts of teaching a diverse range of students with disabilities.

- Formation of an accessibility committee which will be responsible for ensuring that all institutional environments e.g., lecture theatres, libraries, sports and leisure areas are accessible to all students. The committee members should include and be led by students with disabilities.

- Embark on a robust sensitisation programme for students, teachers, parents and the community at large to control discrimination and eliminate stigma on students with disabilities. Sensitization can be integrated starting from secondary schools, high schools as well as in colleges and universities.

Large-scale awareness programs with the goal to eliminate stigma against people with disability.

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Policy priorities

To increase uptake of inclusive policies, governmental bodies should clearly mandate the central role of higher education institutions in providing inclusive services, enhancing access, organising logistics, creating awareness, ensuring disabled-friendly facilities and developing specific policies to address issues concerning disabilities. This can be done by increasing funding allocations, having Offices of Disability at the ministry of social welfare which will ensure that all allocated funds will be utilised as intended; and incorporating Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to increase the meaningful and equal participation of students with disabilities. The development of policies is a process requiring intensive consultation as literature suggests that inclusive policies which are ambiguous i.e., containing little in the way of direct statements around the plans and resources for implementation act as a significant barrier to the effective implementation of inclusive education.

Conclusion

Students with physical disabilities face many challenges ranging from inaccessible infrastructure, inadequate teaching/learning materials, stigma, and discrimination. This contributes towards the disparity in obtaining further livelihood and professional development opportunities between people who are able-bodied and those with disabilities. It is time to rethink the approach to attaining inclusive education.

GAPS & RESEARCH NEEDS

Further research is needed to examine facilitators to access and meaningful knowledge acquisition for people with disabilities in higher education, as well as participation in extracurricular activities. Further qualitative research is needed to provide an exploration of educators’ perspectives, acceptability of approaches that work, and funding or resource challenges.
Acknowledgements

Included sources

3. Hayes AM, Bulat J. Disabilities inclusive education systems and policies guide for low-and middle-income countries.

Publication details: This brief has been peer reviewed by David John Musendo, PhD Candidate at International Centre for Evidence in Disability, LSHTM, Onaiza Qureshi, Knowledge Exchange Office at Disability Evidence Portal, LSHTM and Sarah Marks, Research Fellow at International Centre for Evidence in Disability, LSHTM.

Publication details: © London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, March 2023.


Disclaimer: The views expressed in this publication are those of the author/s and should not be attributed to Disability Evidence Portal and/or its funders.