





# Promoting inclusive education in Zimbabwe's higher and tertiary institutions: challenges and opportunities

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## ABSTRACT

In Zimbabwe's higher and tertiary institutions, inclusive education is critical for ensuring equal access to education and opportunities for all students, regardless of their ability or circumstances. The growing recognition of diversity and inclusion in society serves as a catalyst for change, encouraging higher and tertiary education institutions to adopt inclusive practices. This study explored the various educational contexts in higher and tertiary education and the specific challenges and opportunities associated with implementing inclusive education in such contexts in Zimbabwe. Steeped in an interpretivist philosophy and adopting a multiple case study design the study utilised interviews on purposively selected lecturers and administrators from three faculties in three state universities in Zimbabwe. Observations of facilities by the researchers and students' focus groups were also utilised to unravel specific challenges and opportunities in implementing inclusive education. The study proffers interventions that higher and tertiary education institutions in Zimbabwe can adopt in order to create an inclusive educational environment that embraces diversity, promotes equal opportunities, and prepares all students for success in a diverse and interconnected world.

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## INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has gained significant traction in recent years as an approach to providing equitable educational opportunities for all students, including those with disabilities or from diverse backgrounds. It is a rights-based approach to educating everyone and includes those who are subject to exclusionary pressures. Inclusive education, in higher and tertiary institutions, has evolved into a global movement aimed at embracing the differences in learning characteristics between students with and without disabilities in mainstream classes. According to UNESCO (2020), inclusive education takes into account all students, not simply those who are impaired. It is about collaborating with and learning from a diverse range of students. In light of the foregoing, challenges which may impede inclusion should be identified and addressed, and groups at high risk of exclusion should be continuously monitored (Ainscow et al., 2019).

Stated differently, inclusive education involves developing tertiary education institutions, schools

and education systems that can educate all learners in spite of their abilities or disabilities (Moosa and Bekker, 2021). In the view of Voltz et al. (2001) inclusive education is an approach through which teachers teach, react, and modify their teaching styles to accommodate every student in a classroom setup. In the same vein Swart et al. (2004) postulate that, inclusion means commitment to producing an education system that values and respects the diversity that exists within students. In the context of this study the researchers view inclusive education as education for all tertiary students despite their ability or disability. This is because those that are abled can also be disadvantaged because of their backgrounds.

## Background to the study

The establishment of inclusive education policies and practices in higher and tertiary institutions is crucial for enabling students from diverse backgrounds to access quality education. A study conducted by Murwati et al. (2019) highlighted the potential benefits of inclusive education, including improved academic outcomes, enhanced social

integration, and the development of empathy and understanding among students. According to UNESCO's [Global Education Monitoring Report \(2020\)](#), inclusive education is pivotal for fostering sustainable development, promoting social cohesion, and reducing inequality. However, several factors contribute to the disparities and barriers faced by marginalized groups in these educational settings. Zimbabwe's higher and tertiary education sectors continue to struggle with achieving inclusive practices due to various challenges. One significant challenge in promoting inclusive education in Zimbabwe is the unequal distribution of resources. This unequal distribution of resources creates barriers to learning and restricts students' chances for success. [Mukahana-Sangarwe et al. \(2018\)](#) highlighted the limited availability of accessible infrastructure, assistive technologies, and support services in higher and tertiary institutions, which hinder the meaningful participation of students in a majority of activities normally performed by students at tertiary level.

Moreover, societal attitudes and prejudices can also hinder inclusive education efforts in Zimbabwean higher and tertiary institutions. Research by [Chikoko and Mahachi \(2015\)](#) identifies negative attitudes and stigma toward students with disabilities, ethnic minorities, and individuals from marginalized backgrounds as significant obstacles to achieving inclusive practices. These biases contribute to exclusionary practices and create an unwelcoming environment for diverse students.

According to [Hlatywayo and Mapolisa \(2020\)](#), teachers' colleges in Zimbabwe do enroll students with disabilities as part of inclusion, despite the lack of clear enrolment procedures. They concluded that the inflexible curriculum did not take individual needs into account, negatively impacting inclusive practices. There is a need for consistency in how inclusive education is planned and conducted in higher learning. [Mercy et al. \(2023\)](#) also confirm that inclusive learning in higher education is generally not planned for. They advocated for conducting substantial studies on inclusive education in tertiary institutions, as most previous studies had concentrated on basic and secondary education.

The foregoing is important because studies on inclusivity are still frequently framed within a special need viewpoint. The notion of inclusion in education in general and higher and tertiary education in particular has moved beyond the assumption that inclusion only applies to children with special needs ([Qvortrup and Qvortrup, 2017](#)); it now applies to all students. There is a scarcity of research that

demonstrates, methodologically, how inclusive environments engaging all students can be established in practice ([Nilholm 2021](#)).

### **Problem statement**

Students who enroll in tertiary education institutions come from diverse backgrounds. Consequently, resource levels will differ but all such students need to undergo programmes offered in higher and tertiary institutions. In the course of our duties as lecturers we have interacted with students with physical challenges, those with special needs, the disabled, those from poor backgrounds, the advantaged in terms of accessibility to everything and those from remote areas which are underserved. Despite the commitment to inclusive education in Zimbabwe, higher and tertiary institutions continue to face significant challenges in promoting inclusivity ([Chitiyo and Muwana, 2018](#)). This research therefore aims to not only investigate the challenges faced by higher and tertiary education institutions in Zimbabwe with respect to promoting inclusive education but also proffer strategies aimed at creating a more inclusive learning environment.

### **Research objective**

The objectives of the research are to establish the challenges faced by higher and tertiary education institutions in Zimbabwe with respect to promoting inclusive education, to determine the potential benefits of inclusive education in higher and tertiary institutions and to proffer strategies aimed at creating a more inclusive learning environment.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Adopting an interpretivist research philosophy this qualitative study explores, through a multiple case study, challenges and opportunities in implementing inclusive education in three tertiary education institutions in Zimbabwe. Such an approach recognizes the importance of context, multiple perspectives, and the influence of social interactions in shaping educational practices ([Junjie and Yingxin 2022](#)). Interpretive approaches also rely on questioning and observation in order to discover or generate a rich and deep understanding of the phenomenon being investigated, in this case challenges and opportunities of inclusive education as well as intervention strategies that could be adopted to ensure inclusivity in higher and tertiary education institutions in Zimbabwe. The study employed a purposive sampling method, selecting three state universities: Midlands State University (MSU) in the

Midlands Province, Lupane State University (LSU) in Matebeleland North Province, and Bindura University of Science Education (BUSE) in Mashonaland Central Province. This selection was based on diversity of programs and regional representation. A qualitative study was conducted to explore perspectives on inclusive education among administrators, lecturers, and students across three selected universities. The methodology included semi-structured interviews aimed at delving into participants' views on accessibility, student support services, and attitudes towards inclusive education. Key questions included: How do you define inclusive education within your institution? What challenges have you encountered in implementing inclusive practices? Can you provide examples of successful inclusive initiatives at your university? What support do you believe is necessary to enhance inclusive education? In addition to interviews, observations of classroom interactions and student focus groups were conducted to gather diverse insights on inclusive practices. Data collection adhered to ethical guidelines, including informed consent and confidentiality of participants' responses. Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data, allowing for the identification of common themes and insights related to inclusive education practices in Zimbabwean higher education.

## ■ ■ RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Understanding of inclusive education

One of the major challenges identified in this study was lack of awareness and understanding among faculty and staff regarding what constitutes inclusive education. Interviews conducted showed that lecturers and administrators have different interpretations of inclusive education. Two participants from universities MSU and BUSE defined inclusive education as:

*"... taking into consideration those students with special needs, assisting them in every way possible"*

Another participant from university B understood inclusive education as:

*".....a system of education that provides equal opportunities for all students"*

Students, in the three universities cited unequal treatment as a sign of lack of inclusive education in an institution. The discrepancy evident in the above conceptualisation of inclusive education is likely to lead to suggesting different strategies for addressing inclusive education in tertiary education institutions. The above discrepancy was also noted by Mitiku et al. (2014) in their research in Ethiopia.

The interviewed lecturers and administrators from the three tertiary education institutions identified the need for training and professional development programs in order to enhance their knowledge and skills in inclusive education. The trainings will expose lecturers and administrators to skills on how to deal with students from diverse backgrounds. For instance, some students may not respond or participate during class activities because they may feel inferior hence education institutions should make everyone feel at home. One of the participants from BUSE mentioned the challenge of staff turnover and bringing in new staff members without any education experience, hence the need for these trainings. Another participant from university B commended the faculty of education for initiating the Post Graduate Diploma in Tertiary Education as a way of training lecturers with no teaching qualification. In her own words she noted that:

*"As lecturers we are not equipped with materials to use and the necessary training, therefore some of these challenges require that lecturers be adequately trained to address them"*

In support of the foregoing [Chikwature et al. \(2016\)](#) observed that lecturers need to be adequately equipped with the knowledge and skills to support diverse learners. In concurrence, [Syeda et al. \(2022\)](#) posit that inclusive education in higher education can be facilitated through improved teacher training and capacitation.

### Inadequate finances and other resources

One challenge identified by lecturers, administrators and students related to inadequate resources in facilitating inclusive education in higher and tertiary education institutions. For inclusion to occur every institution would be required to provide facilities like lifts, ramps, barrier free classrooms, toilets, laboratories, physical libraries, technology hubs, and e-libraries. Observations conducted by the researchers noted that from MSU, LSU and BUSE physical infrastructure was generally not adequate considering the student population each university carries. For instance, MSU had a student population of 26000 but does not have enough computer laboratories for these students. In the words of a lecturer from MSU *"Students are expected to bring their own laptops"* (*Bring your own device policy*). *Considering that students come from diverse home backgrounds it would mean that some students will lag behind because of inadequate computer laboratories."*

Observations made at BUSE revealed that there were inadequate lecture rooms and lecture theatres. Responding to a question on how conventional and

block release students share lecture rooms one administrator asserted:

*"At this university we have discovered that it is difficult to house conventional and block release students at the same time hence we hire classrooms from the nearby primary school."*

Observations, however noted that the block release students who use the hired primary school classrooms sit on chairs appropriate for early childhood learners. Thus in terms of classrooms it may be difficult to provide inclusion in some higher and tertiary education institutions.

In light of the varied nature of higher and tertiary education students' backgrounds, financial challenges affect the majority of students. An administrator from university B asserted that:

*"Most of our students are not able to pay registration and tuition fees on time. Three quarters get to the time of writing examinations before paying fees and as a faculty we almost always request a waiver for these students to write examinations."*

The foregoing observations point to the difficulty of creating an inclusive environment for learners at higher and tertiary education institutions. Creating a more inclusive campus culture (Dewsbury and Brame 2019) is an opportunity to promote inclusive education. Such a culture can be enhanced by developing and implementing policies and procedures that support inclusive education. Additionally, there is also need to identify specific needs of different student groups, such as students with disabilities, students from low-income families, students from marginalized groups, students from different races, students from different religions, students from different programmes and levels in order to foster inclusion.

### **Modularisation**

One challenge identified by lecturers and administrators in the three universities was modularisation. In the last two decades, universities have progressively adopted modular curriculum structures for the implementation of their curriculum. The system has drawn a lot of special interest in vocational technical education and higher education (Safder et al. 2012). The Zimbabwean Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education Science and Technology Development through Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE) embraced the use of the modular system in the Zimbabwean universities in 2021. The ministry considers the localized modular system as a home-grown solution to the problems facing the Zimbabwean higher and tertiary education system. The universities have been

suffering from unforeseen closures caused by student strikes and unforeseen disasters like the COVID-19 induced lockdowns. Notwithstanding the foregoing observations lecturers and administrators in the three universities argue that modularisation has shortened the students' learning time from 13 weeks to 5 weeks. In the words of one administrator from LSU:

*"It now takes five weeks to complete a module which previously was completed in 13 weeks. It is now difficult to cater for individual differences hence inclusive education cannot be operationalized in universities"*

Through focus group discussions students, however welcomed modularisation as it reduced the number of modules they cover in 5 weeks. In the words of one student from BUSE:

*"We can now concentrate on fewer modules including doing practical's in laboratories. This assists us to link theory and practice."*

Globally, modularization involves the fragmentation of the curriculum into small, independent

Modules or units that are not necessarily sequential and are typically brief. Students receive credit upon completion of these modules, which can eventually result in a qualification once a specific number of credit points is reached (French, 2015). Although there are different types of modular academic programs designed for different purposes and using different terminology, Yoseph and Mekuwanint (2015) argue that all modular systems make learning measurable and quantifiable. It claims to be based on the idea that knowledge can be divided into units. Unlike traditional linear study programs that follow a set of subjects, modular programs consist of individual, self-contained modules that can be studied in any order and at different speeds. According to Dejene (2019), program modularization involves breaking down the content of a program rather than focusing on time framed achievements. The curriculum reform marks a shift from a time-based learning system to a credit-based system. However, modularity is also associated with providing knowledge in smaller and easier to understand parts, making it suitable for condensed and intensive modes of teaching. Evident from the foregoing is the different perceptions of modularisation between lecturers and administrators on the one hand and students on the other. Once again this points to a need for lecturer and administrator capacitation on the modular system and its merits in the context of promoting inclusive education in higher and tertiary education institutions.

### Preferential treatment

One barrier to implementing inclusive education in higher and tertiary education institutions is preferential treatment. During focus group discussions with students at the three universities some concerns were raised in the way students were excluded in some of the activities at the university. Most of them were in agreement that there is no inclusive education as some departments are favoured as compared to others. When asked to explain one student from university A observed that:

*"Students from faculties of Law and Medicine are given special treatment therefore we cannot say there is inclusive education at our institution".* Another student from the same university further explained that there is no inclusive education. In his own words:

*"Those in these favoured departments are given their own digital libraries, their own computer laboratories and studios. Additionally, students in these departments have libraries with expensive books when some of us have to move around looking for a single textbook and not even find one."*

At BUSE students also raised concerns about preferential treatment. In that university students studying Agriculture are said to be getting preferential treatment from administration. A student from this university observed that:

*"Whenever our chairperson requests for transport to take us to historical sites for excursions we do not get any transport allocated to us. But when Agriculture students request to go on field trips they are provided with a bus, sometimes to spend 2 to 3 days out. This is not treating students fairly.* Lecturers and administrators from the three universities concurred with students' observations with respect to what appears to be preferential treatment. What is evident here is a lack of clear directives and frameworks on inclusive practices. In order to facilitate inclusive education in higher and tertiary education institutions there might be need for clear policies (Moriña and Carballo, 2017).

### Strategies

Given the results from the study the research suggests the following as strategies to implement inclusive education in higher and tertiary institutions:

- Lecturers and administrator capacitation,
- Developing and implementing clear policies and procedures that support inclusive education within the higher and tertiary institutions.
- Identify specific needs of different student groups so as to know how to include them.
- Provision of adequate infrastructure and resources, use of technology services to implement inclusion.

## CONCLUSION

From the experiences and perspectives of students, lecturers and administrators, inclusive education creates a diverse and inclusive learning environment that can foster mutual respect, understanding, and collaboration among students. Lecturers interviewed reported that inclusive practices contribute to a positive and enriching educational experience for all students. They also noted that inclusive education has the potential to improve academic performance by providing tailored support and accommodation to students with diverse needs. Such support may include assistive tools as well as technology which can adapt teaching processes, stimulate concentration and improve learning outcomes for all students. Such support also helps reduce social exclusion (Chambers, 2019). Students, in this study concurred with lecturers that their academic outcomes can be enhanced through collaboration, peer learning and sharing of ideas. Inclusive practices have the potential to promote individualized learning and address barriers that may hinder students' academic progress (Koroleva and Mukhlaeva, 2022).

Inclusive education promotes social integration and emotional well-being among students. Lecturers and administrators emphasized that inclusive practices contribute to the development of empathy, tolerance, and acceptance of differences among students, creating a more inclusive society. The lecturers further noted that this can also help the students after graduation as they will meet people from diverse backgrounds in workplaces. Additionally, inclusive education can help in fostering social integration and embracing diversity within higher and tertiary education institutions as acknowledged by McDuff et al. (2020).

The study also noted that technology can significantly enhance inclusive education by providing assistive tools and fostering participation for students with diverse needs and reduce social exclusion (Hamburg and Bucksch, 2016; Chambers, 2019). Research indicates that educational technology can effectively adapt teaching processes, stimulate concentration, and improve learning outcomes for all students (Pinto-Llorente et al., 2018). However, implementing inclusive technology requires appropriate knowledge and skills from educators, as well as organizational support and curriculum adaptations (Hamburg and Bucksch, 2016; Chambers, 2019).

Since inclusive practices contribute to a positive and enriching educational experience for all students, improved academic performance and promotion of

individualized learning. There is need for lecturers and administrator capacitation, provision of adequate infrastructure and resources and development and implementation of clear policies and procedures that support inclusive education. Additionally, universities should leverage on technology to support diverse learning needs. Finally, community engagement that is involve everyone to achieve inclusive education.

## ■ DECLARATIONS

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### Authors' contribution

All authors contributed equally to the research, data analysis, and manuscript writing.

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### Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests in this research and publication.

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