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Assessment of Access and Participation of Students with Special Needs in Public Universities of Uganda

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The study explored the access and participation of students with disabilities in public universities in Uganda, evaluating current practices and identifying barriers to effective inclusion. This research is anchored in Uganda's commitments made at the Global Disability Summit to enhance educational opportunities for persons with disabilities. A qualitative approach was employed, gathering data through interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and observations with students with disabilities and administrators from both universities and secondary schools. The sample comprised 44 respondents, purposively selected from three public universities—Makerere University, Kyambogo University, and Mountains of the Moon University—and three secondary schools known for their focus on students with disabilities. Qualitative analysis, facilitated by NVivo14, uncovered critical challenges including limited parental and stakeholder involvement, restrictive admissions policies, inadequate training for lecturers in special needs education, and the inaccessibility of facilities like libraries and laboratories. Despite some affirmative action measures, significant barriers persist, such as physical inaccessibility, attitudinal challenges, and financial constraints. The study found that inclusive practices are inconsistently implemented, and many institutions lack essential assistive technologies and supportive services. Recommendations include strengthening stakeholder engagement, providing specialized training for lecturers, improving infrastructural accessibility, and increasing sensitization and advocacy efforts. The study also advocates for expanding the current 64 university admission slots for students with disabilities to 320, as pledged at the Global Disability Summit.

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INTRODUCTION

Uganda's population stands at 45 million, with a disability rate of 15%, translating to approximately 6.75 million individuals including children, women and men (Lugolobi. (2023). The right to education is guaranteed by the Constitution of Uganda (1995), which aligns with global efforts toward inclusive education (Sydoriv, 2024). Since 1997, Uganda has adopted Universal Primary Education, prioritizing the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream schools (Sarton et al., 2022). This shift, inspired by the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education underscores the universal right to education and has led to increased enrollment of children with disabilities in primary and secondary education (Majoko, 2017; Hang'andu et al., 2023).

Despite these advancements, access to higher education for students with disabilities remains limited. While Uganda has made significant strides in primary and secondary education, only 5% of children with disabilities are educated in inclusive settings within regular schools, and another 10% attend special schools (Lamichhane & Tsujimoto, 2023). At the university level, affirmative action measures were introduced in 2007, setting aside 64 slots for students with disabilities. However, this number has proven inadequate given the increasing number of eligible students, leading to many students with disabilities being excluded from higher education opportunities (Nizeyimana, 2019).

In February 2022, during the Global Disability Summit, the Ugandan government committed to

expanding the affirmative action slots from 64 to 320. This commitment aims to address the gap in higher education access for students with disabilities and to promote inclusivity at the university level (Government of Uganda, 2022). However, the implementation of this commitment requires substantial evidence to support the need for increased slots and to guide effective policies and practices. There is currently a lack of comprehensive data on the participation and achievements of students with disabilities in higher education, which hampers informed decision-making and resource allocation.

Challenges in accessing higher education for students with disabilities include physical inaccessibility, inadequate assistive technologies, and negative societal attitudes. These barriers hinder not only enrollment but also the educational achievements of students with disabilities (Kibret et al., 2024). The government's commitment to increase affirmative action slots highlights the need for a thorough evaluation of current practices and the development of strategies to remove these barriers. Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive understanding of the current state of access and participation, as well as the identification of effective inclusive practices. This study therefore assessed the extent of access, participation, and achievement of students with disabilities in Ugandan universities. It will explore the main factors that hinder their educational progress, map out existing inclusive practices, and document opportunities and best practices from other global contexts. The findings will inform the implementation of the government's commitment, contribute to policy

reforms, and support the development of a disability-inclusive model that enhances educational outcomes for students with disabilities in higher education.

Problem statement

Higher education in Uganda is meant to be fully inclusive, providing equitable access and opportunities for all students, including those with disabilities (Government of Uganda, 2022). Currently, the reality is starkly different. Despite affirmative action policies, only a limited number of students with disabilities have access to higher education, with slots for admission set at 64—a number insufficient to meet the actual demand. Physical barriers such as inaccessible university buildings, insufficient assistive technologies, and a lack of supportive services continue to impede their full participation. Additionally, negative attitudes and misconceptions among faculty and peers further exacerbate the challenges faced by these students. Financial constraints and inadequate data on the needs of students with disabilities further complicate the situation, making it difficult to implement effective solutions (Emong & Zeyen, 2023).

To address these challenges, the government of Uganda and other concerned partners have put in place interventions including, increasing the number of affirmative action slots to meet the commitment made during the Global Disability Summit is crucial, radio talk shows prenatal sensitization. Despite these interventions, the plight of students with special needs still hangs in balance with many left out and those admitted sometimes stranded at universities (Schuler, 2023). This study therefore assessed the access and participation of students with special needs in Public Universities of Uganda.

Research questions

- To what extent are students with disabilities accessing, participating, and achieving at university education?
- What are the main factors that hinder access, participation, and achievement in education

by students with disabilities at university level?

- What are the inclusive practices that are implemented to promote continuity of learning for students with disabilities from other universities globally?
- Which disability inclusive model can be adopted to promote access, full participation and improve learning outcomes among students with disabilities at university?

The objectives of Study:

- To determine the extent to which students with disabilities are accessing, participating, and achieving at university education,
- To Explore the main factors that hinder access, participation, and achievement in education by students with disabilities at university level,
- To Map out the inclusive practices that are implemented to promote continuity of learning for students with disabilities from other universities globally,
- Come up with a disability-inclusive model that can be adopted to promote access, full participation and improve learning outcomes among students with disabilities at the university

Literature Review

Access and Barriers to Higher Education for Students with Disabilities

Access to higher education for students with disabilities remains a global challenge. Several studies reveal significant underrepresentation of students with disabilities in higher education institutions worldwide (Emong, & Zeyen, 2023; Shaw, 2024; Zorec et al., 2024). In Uganda, the situation mirrors this global trend. Research by Nizeyimana (2019) indicates that the limited number of slots available for students with disabilities in public universities significantly hinders their access to higher education. Despite affirmative action policies, the number of students

with disabilities accessing university education remains low.

A recent study by Bileti et al. (2023) shows that even with affirmative action, the infrastructural and social barriers in Ugandan public universities are substantial. Physical accessibility remains a challenge, as many university buildings lack necessary modifications such as ramps and elevators, making it difficult for students with mobility impairments to navigate the campus. Similarly, findings by Shuayb (2024) further reveal that the majority of institutions have not yet adopted comprehensive accessibility audits or implemented inclusive design principles in their facilities.

In addition to physical barriers, students with disabilities often face significant attitudinal barriers. According to Victoria (2023) and Euscatogui and Saavedra (2024), many instructors and peers hold misconceptions about the abilities of students with disabilities, which can lead to discriminatory behaviors and lower expectations. These negative attitudes can severely impact the self-esteem and academic performance of these students. The authors argue that changing these attitudes through awareness programs and sensitivity training is crucial for fostering an inclusive educational environment.

Systemic issues, including financial barriers, also impede the educational progress of students with disabilities. A study by Owen (2024) points out that students with disabilities often incur additional costs related to their education, such as for assistive devices, personal attendants, and medical care. Despite some government scholarships and grants, these financial aids are insufficient to cover the extra costs, making it harder for students with disabilities to sustain their university education.

Inclusive Practices and Initiatives in Higher Education

Inclusive education practices are essential for promoting the participation and success of students with disabilities. According to Majoko (2023), effective inclusive practices involve

adapting teaching methods and materials to meet the diverse needs of all students, including the use of assistive technologies, differentiated instruction, and collaborative teaching approaches. However, in Uganda, inclusive practices are not widely implemented, and there is a need for more comprehensive training for lecturers and support staff (Emong & Zeyen, 2023).

A recent paper by Philemon and Amos (2024) discusses the role of assistive technology in higher education in a Tanzanian setting. The authors highlight that while assistive technology has the potential to significantly enhance learning for students with disabilities, its adoption in Tanzanian universities is still lacking. They emphasize the need for universities to invest in modern assistive devices and provide training for both students and faculty on their use to ensure effective integration into the learning process, thus the need for this study to find out what the Ugandan situation holds.

There are several opportunities and initiatives aimed at promoting the inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education. The Global Disability Summit 2022 saw the Government of Uganda commit to increasing the number of slots for students with disabilities in public universities from 64 to 320 (Government of Uganda, 2022). Additionally, international frameworks such as the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) provide a strong foundation for advocating for inclusive education policies and practices (Malaquias et al., 2024; Della Fina, 2023). Universities can leverage these commitments and frameworks to develop and implement more inclusive policies and programs.

Moreover, studies by Garwe (2023) and Ndayishimye and Dushimimana (2024) underscores the importance of community and stakeholder involvement in promoting inclusive education. They argue that creating inclusive university environments requires the collaboration of various stakeholders, including government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and the private sector. Indeed,

successful case studies where multi-stakeholder partnerships have led to the implementation of more inclusive policies and practices, providing a roadmap for similar efforts in other institutions. This study is yet to establish the facts on the ground in Ugandan Universities.

Needs of Students with Disabilities and Lecturers

Understanding the needs of students with disabilities and lecturers is crucial for creating an inclusive educational environment. Students with disabilities require accessible learning materials, assistive technologies, and supportive services to fully participate in higher education (UNESCO, 2020). Lecturers, on the other hand, need training in inclusive education practices, access to resources, and institutional support to effectively teach students with disabilities (Lopatina et al., 2024). Addressing these needs can help bridge the gap between policy and practice and enhance the educational experiences of students with disabilities.

Whereas Lopatina et al. (2024) and Shutaleva et al. (2023) point to the importance of professional development for lecturers in fostering an inclusive learning environment. Their research indicates that instructors at universities feel inadequately prepared to teach students with disabilities. Professional development programs focused on inclusive teaching strategies, disability awareness, and the use of assistive technologies are essential for equipping lecturers with the skills and confidence needed to support these students effectively.

Additionally, study by Aniyamuzaala (2012) highlights the need for accessible learning materials. The study shows that a significant number of students with disabilities struggle with accessing textbooks and other educational resources in formats that accommodate their needs and advocate for the production of learning materials in alternative formats, such as braille, large print, and digital versions compatible with screen readers, to ensure all students have equal access to educational content.

Support services are also critical for the success of students with disabilities in higher education. Mireku et al. (2024) conducting a systematic review of students' support services provision in higher education discuss the role of disability support offices in universities, which provide crucial services such as academic advising, counseling, and coordination of accommodations. However, Solomon et al (2024) notes that these offices are often under-resourced and lack the capacity to meet the growing demand for services. Strengthening these support structures is vital for ensuring that students with disabilities receive the assistance they need to thrive academically.

The literature reveals significant challenges and barriers faced by students with disabilities in accessing higher education, both globally and within Uganda. Numerous studies highlight the underrepresentation of these students in higher education institutions (Emong & Zeyen, 2023; Shaw, 2024; Zorec et al., 2024), with similar trends observed in Uganda where limited slots and inadequate infrastructure further impede access (Nizeyimana, 2019; Bileti et al., 2023). Physical barriers, such as the lack of accessibility features in older university buildings, and attitudinal barriers, including negative perceptions from instructors and peers, compound these challenges (Shuayb, 2024; Victoria, 2023; Euscategui & Saavedra, 2024). Systemic issues, including insufficient financial support for assistive technologies and additional educational costs, also hinder the academic progress of students with disabilities (Owen, 2024).

Despite some advancements, such as the establishment of disability resource centers and commitments from international frameworks (Global Disability Summit 2022; CRPD), inclusive practices are not yet widely implemented in Ugandan universities (Majoko, 2023). The literature emphasizes the need for more comprehensive lecturer training and the adoption of assistive technologies to improve educational outcomes (Philemon & Amos, 2024). Furthermore, collaborative efforts involving multiple stakeholders are crucial for creating inclusive educational environments (Garwe,

2023; Ndayishimye & Dushimimana, 2024). This underscores the necessity for further research to assess the current status and effectiveness of inclusive practices and policies in Ugandan universities.

Research gaps include the lack of empirical data on the implementation and impact of inclusive education practices in Ugandan universities and the effectiveness of current policies and support services. Additionally, there is a need for more detailed studies on the specific needs of students with disabilities and the training requirements of lecturers (Lopatina et al., 2024; Shutaleva et al., 2023). Addressing these gaps will provide a clearer understanding of how to improve accessibility and inclusion, ensuring that all students have equal opportunities to succeed in higher education.

Methodology

This research adopted a purely qualitative approach to explore the access and participation of students with disabilities in higher education within public universities in Uganda. The study utilized in-depth semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and observations to collect data on the experiences and perspectives of students with disabilities, lecturers, and university administrators.

Purposive sampling was employed to select the sample institutions, including Makerere University, Kyambogo University, and Mountains of the Moon University, as well as three secondary schools (Wakiso Secondary School for the Deaf, Sir Apollo Kaggwa Secondary School Unit for the Blind, and Saad Memorial Secondary School). These institutions were chosen based on their relevance to the study and their diverse experiences with disability inclusion. Data was collected from a sample size of 44 respondents composed of 2 administrators from the Ministry of education and sports, 3 Deans of students, 3 secondary school headteachers, 3 lecturers and 18 university students and 15 secondary school students purposively selected.

In our study, the inclusion of secondary schools is crucial for providing a comprehensive understanding of the educational landscape in Uganda. Secondary education serves as a critical bridge between primary and higher education, making it essential to examine how policies impact this stage to ensure continuity and effectiveness in the educational journey. By incorporating data from secondary schools, the study assessed the broader impact of policies across different educational levels, offering valuable insights that inform more effective policy design and implementation. This approach allowed for a more holistic view of the challenges and opportunities within the educational system.

Data collection involved conducting semi-structured interviews and FGDs to gather insights into the challenges and barriers faced by students with disabilities. Observations in educational settings documented physical accessibility and inclusivity practices. Nvivo 14 was used to analyze based on the objectives of the study. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data, providing in depth understanding of issues at hand. Ethical considerations, including informed consent and confidentiality, were strictly adhered to throughout the research.

Findings

This chapter presents findings from interviews with key informants on the access and participation of students with disabilities in Ugandan higher education. Insights from Ministry of Education officials offer a comprehensive view of the status, challenges, and opportunities. The discussion contrasts these findings with the reviewed literature, noting areas of alignment and divergence.

Access and Participation of Students with Disabilities

The government of Uganda supports various categories of disabilities in public universities, including visual impairments, auditory impairments, physical disabilities, and cognitive impairments. Speech impairments and chronic conditions such as sickle cell anemia, asthma,

epilepsy, and albinism. This aligns with the recommendations of the World Report on Disability (Della Fina, 2023), which underscores the importance of recognizing diverse disability categories to improve access to higher education. One of the deans revealed thus;

“All categories of students with disabilities are supported, and admission is open to all that qualify. During admission, students with disabilities go through an assessment to confirm their disability” (K13, 2024).

This broad categorization reflects a commitment to inclusivity; however, the implementation and effectiveness of support mechanisms still face significant challenges.

Despite the government’s provision of 64 slots annually for students with disabilities under government sponsorship, enrollment figures are not adequately captured. Research by Nizeyimana (2019) emphasizes that the limited number of slots hinders access to higher education for students with disabilities. Additionally, many universities struggle with inadequate infrastructure, as older buildings often lack necessary modifications like ramps and elevators (Bileti et al., 2023). This situation is evident in the interviews, where it was noted that while new buildings are more accessible, older ones present significant barriers. One respondent dean revealed that;

“The government gives 64 slots for admission for students with disabilities who are admitted on government sponsorship. The number that is known is 64, but others are admitted on private sponsorship, so the total number may be larger” (K2, 2024).

Further, one official at the ministry of education and sports revealed that:

“Many universities have buildings with no ramps and no lifts, making it difficult for students with disabilities. New constructions are accessible, but older buildings still pose significant challenges” (K3, 2024).

These findings reflect the global challenge of physical accessibility as highlighted by Shuayb

(2024) and underscore the need for comprehensive accessibility audits and inclusive design principles.

Important to note is the negative attitude of parents towards children with disabilities, especially those with non-physical impairments. One parent mentioned,

Many learners with impairments, especially non-physical impairments, have been taken away from school by their own parents due to a negative attitude or some demoralization. (K 29, 2024)

This indicates that the discouragement starts from home, affecting the children's self-esteem and motivation to pursue education.

Supporting literature highlights that parental attitudes significantly influence the educational attainment of children with disabilities (Kibret et al., 2024). Furthermore, the stigmatization and social exclusion that originate from negative perceptions at home can permeate into the broader educational environment, thereby reinforcing barriers to learning (Shuayb, 2024).

In addition to infrastructure issues, attitudinal barriers from faculty and peers further hinder the participation of students with disabilities. This aligns with the findings of Victoria (2023) and Euscatogui and Saavedra (2024), who note that negative attitudes and misconceptions can lead to discriminatory behaviors and lower expectations and supported by a respondent lecturer who had this to state;

“There are policies in place to support students with disabilities, but the attitudes of some lecturers and students are not always supportive. We need more awareness programs to change these attitudes” (K4, 2024).

Addressing these attitudinal barriers through targeted training and awareness programs is critical to fostering a more inclusive environment.

Financial barriers also play a significant role in limiting access to higher education for students with disabilities. Owen (2024) notes that students

with disabilities often face additional costs related to their education, which are not fully covered by existing financial aid programs. Similarly one of the deans stated thus;

“We provide some financial support for students with disabilities admitted on government, but it is not enough to cover all their needs, such as assistive devices and personal attendants” (K26, 2024).

This aligns with the literature, highlighting the need for more comprehensive financial support mechanisms to ensure that students with disabilities can fully participate in higher education.

Capacity of Lecturers and Teaching Materials

The capacity of lecturers to teach students with disabilities varies. While some lecturers have specialized training, many lack the skills needed to support all categories of disabilities. This finding is consistent with Majoko (2023), who emphasizes the importance of adapting teaching methods and materials to accommodate diverse student needs. The need for targeted professional development programs for lecturers is evident, as highlighted by Lopatina et al. (2024) and Shutaleva et al. (2023). To this end, lecture respondents indicated thus;

“Some lecturers do have the capacity to teach students with disabilities, but the majority do not. There are very few lecturers with skills in sign language and braille, which are specialized training” (K4, 2024).

“To say that all lecturers have the capacity to teach all categories of disabilities is not accurate. There is a need for deliberate efforts to build capacity in special needs education across universities” (K7, 2024).

These statements align with Lopatina et al. (2024) and Shutaleva et al. (2023), who argue that many instructors feel inadequately prepared to teach students with disabilities. They advocate for professional development programs focused on inclusive teaching strategies, disability awareness,

and the use of assistive technologies to equip lecturers with the necessary skills and confidence.

Teaching and learning materials are often insufficient, a concern echoed by Owen (2024), who points out the financial barriers related to additional costs for assistive devices and personal support. This highlights the necessity for increased investment in assistive technologies and accessible learning materials, as discussed by Philemon and Amos (2024).

“Universities provide teaching-learning materials but often fall short. Budget constraints and prioritization issues impact the adequacy of these resources” (K12, 2024).

“There is a need for more teaching and learning materials for special needs, but institutions face budget constraints that limit their ability to provide these resources” (K1, 2024).

These observations by the deans are consistent with Owen (2024) and Philemon and Amos (2024), who emphasize the financial challenges that universities face in providing adequate resources for students with disabilities. The lack of sufficient assistive technologies and accessible learning materials significantly hinders the educational progress of these students.

Furthermore, the insights from students underscore the personal impact of these deficiencies:

“It is frustrating when you cannot access the materials needed for your studies. Sometimes I feel like giving up because the university doesn't have the resources for students like me” (K17, 2024).

“I've had to use my own money to buy assistive devices because the university doesn't provide them. It's really tough on my finances” (K10, 2024).

As highlighted by student respondents, there is a financial burden and an emotional toll of inadequate support, aligning with the findings of Emong and Zeyen (2023), who discuss the

broader financial and systemic barriers in higher education for students with disabilities.

The physical environment of schools poses significant challenges. Students with mobility impairments, for example, struggle with navigating hilly terrains and lack proper pathways. One student expressed,

“We are disturbed especially when it comes to mobility, the school is on a hilly place, there are no special pathways for us, many of us had accidents especially trying to access the dormitory section” (K41, 2024)

Additionally, the absence of accessible facilities, such as latrines and libraries, further exacerbates the difficulties these students face, as highlighted by another student,

“We do not have our own latrine, and the library is not easy to reach also” (K37, 2024).

Research by Mohapatra et al. (2024) highlights the critical need for accessible infrastructure to support the mobility and independence of students with disabilities. The lack of such facilities not only impedes access to education but also affects the overall well-being and safety of these students.

The shortage of specialized teachers significantly hinders the education of students with disabilities as noted by one headteacher respondent,

“There are no qualified personnel to facilitate teaching in our school for the visually impaired learners. We had one teacher who was taken by another school to teach physics because the government had not yet taken him up for payroll in this school. When he got an opportunity to be on the government payroll in another school, he left” (H3, 2024).

This reveals the systemic issue of retaining qualified staff due to financial constraints and better opportunities elsewhere.

Research by Lopatina et al. (2024) underscores the critical need for trained educators who can address the unique needs of students with disabilities. The retention of such personnel is often undermined by inadequate compensation and lack of institutional support (Shaheen, 2024).

Findings above point to the need for capacity building among lecturers, the critical role of inclusive teaching methods and materials, and the financial and infrastructural barriers impeding access and participation for students with disabilities. Majoko (2023) and Lopatina et al. (2024) both underscore the necessity for professional development in inclusive education, while Owen (2024) and Philemon and Amos (2024) emphasize the need for sufficient funding for assistive technologies and accessible materials. These challenges are further exacerbated by budget constraints and prioritization issues within universities, as noted by lecturers and students alike.

Policy Adequacy and Implementation

Policies aimed at supporting students with disabilities in Uganda are established but often fall short in practice. The government's provision of 64 slots for students with disabilities, reflecting an affirmative action approach, has not sufficiently met the needs identified in recent research. This gap in implementation aligns with findings by Nizeyimana (2019) and Bileti et al. (2023), who argue that despite the policy's intentions, the actual access to higher education remains significantly constrained. One official made the following revelation;

“Uganda has very good policies on paper, but implementation is problematic due to lack of funds. The Persons with Disabilities Act 2020 has good provisions, but enforcement remains a challenge” (K26, 2024).

This statement underscores the disconnect between policy design and its execution, a challenge highlighted in the literature. Bileti et al. (2023) emphasize that while policies may be theoretically sound, practical barriers such as inadequate funding often impede their effectiveness.

Another respondent had this to say;

“The government set aside 64 slots for students with disabilities, but this number is inadequate. There are many others who are left out. We need more data to assess the

actual need and implement the commitment effectively” (K22, 2024).

This comment by the ministry official reflects a recognized shortfall in affirmative action measures. Research by Nizeyimana (2019) corroborates this observation, noting that the limited number of slots does not align with the growing demand for higher education among students with disabilities.

The uncertainty about employment prospects for graduates with disabilities remains a significant concern. A student shared their worries, stating,

“We wonder if we are going to get jobs after all (K35, 2024)

This sentiment is echoed by the dean of students, who remarked,

“The working world does not have leveled policies to accommodate graduates with disabilities, especially learners with intellectual impairment” (K30, 2024)

This lack of inclusive employment policies diminishes the incentive for students with disabilities to pursue higher education.

Literature suggests that inclusive education must extend beyond academic support to include career guidance and job placement services (Kumar, 2023). Moreover, there is a pressing need for policies that promote equal employment opportunities for graduates with disabilities (Nolan & Gleeson, 2017).

The government's efforts to promote inclusion, such as representation in university governance and local councils, are essential but insufficient. Practical issues like financial barriers and inadequate responses from law enforcement persist. This situation is reflected in the statements recorded by student respondents;

“The government has put in place enabling laws and structures, including representation in guild councils. However, issues related to accessing services remain” (K1, 2024)

“Universities have disability resource centers and support structures in place, but more

needs to be done to address security and safety concerns for students with disabilities” (K33, 2024).

These findings resonate with the concerns raised by Euscategui and Saavedra (2024) and Victoria (2023), who emphasize that despite legal frameworks, issues such as financial corruption and inadequate safety measures undermine the effectiveness of supportive structures.

Further insight is provided by students and lecturers, who also express dissatisfaction with the implementation of policies.

“Even though policies are in place, many students with disabilities still face bureaucratic obstacles when accessing necessary services. The implementation of these policies is often hindered by administrative delays and a lack of clarity” (H2, 2024).

This observation supports the argument by Emong and Zeyen (2023), who highlight that bureaucratic inefficiencies can obstruct the realization of inclusive education practices.

Additionally,

“While the university has a disability resource center, the support often feels inadequate. We need more proactive measures and regular reviews of how well these policies are actually supporting students” (K22, 2024).

This sentiment is consistent with the findings of Lopatina et al. (2024) and Shutaleva et al. (2023), who point out that despite the presence of support structures, there is often a need for more comprehensive and regularly evaluated measures to effectively support students with disabilities.

While Uganda has established policies and structures to support students with disabilities, their inadequate implementation highlights significant gaps. Addressing these issues requires a multifaceted approach, including better funding, more data-driven decision-making, and active efforts to overcome bureaucratic and practical barriers. The literature supports this need for a

more robust and effective implementation of policies to truly meet the needs of students with disabilities in higher education.

Pedagogical Training and Innovations

The integration of special needs education into pedagogical training for lecturers and the adoption of innovative support structures are essential for enhancing educational access and success for students with disabilities. This is in line with the current research and stakeholder perspectives to underscore the significance of these efforts.

The need for integrating special needs education into pedagogical training for lecturers is widely recognized. Research by Emong and Zeyen (2023) and Lopatina et al. (2024) emphasizes the critical role of professional development in fostering inclusive teaching practices. Shutaleva et al. (2023) further assert that such training is fundamental for ensuring that lecturers are equipped to accommodate diverse learning needs effectively.

Students' experiences reflect the impact of current pedagogical training inadequacies. One student noted,

"Many of my lecturers lack the training necessary to effectively support students with disabilities. This makes it challenging to get the help I need" (K12, 2024).

This feedback aligns with the findings by Emong and Zeyen (2023), which highlight the gap in training and the need for comprehensive professional development programs.

Lecturers also recognize the shortcomings in their training.

"Our training did not adequately cover strategies for teaching students with disabilities. This lack of preparation affects our ability to provide the support needed" (K18, 2024).

This sentiment underscores the need for incorporating inclusive teaching strategies into training programs, as emphasized by Lopatina et al. (2024).

University administrators support this view.

"Pedagogical training for staff should include aspects of special needs education to ensure all students are accommodated in the classroom" (K17, 2024).

This perspective highlights the importance of integrating special needs education into training curricula to better prepare lecturers for diverse classroom environments.

Secondary school headteachers also stress the importance of early and ongoing training.

"My school sent two teachers to receive basic training in special needs education last year. I did this to allow them to train their colleague teachers and also offer the necessary support to learners with special needs. This foundational training is crucial for preparing students and educators for higher education challenges" (H1, 2024).

This viewpoint reinforces the need for consistent training across all educational levels to build a solid foundation for inclusive practices.

Innovative practices, such as the establishment of disability resource centers and inclusive loan schemes, are critical for improving support for students with disabilities. The Global Disability Summit 2022 highlighted these innovations as essential steps forward (Government of Uganda, 2022). Bileti et al. (2023) further emphasize the importance of both physical and administrative support structures in enhancing accessibility. University administrators affirm the value of these innovations by stating thus;

"Disability resource centers and inclusive loan schemes are positive innovations. All universities should establish these centers to support students with disabilities effectively" (K23, 2024).

This statement reflects the recognition of the need for robust support systems to address academic and financial challenges faced by students with disabilities.

Students also express appreciation for these innovations but point out areas needing improvement.

“The disability resource center has been helpful, but there are still gaps in how assistive technologies are integrated into the learning process” (K26, 2024).

This feedback highlights the need for continuous refinement of support structures to better meet students' needs.

Lecturers acknowledge the benefits of these innovations but also identify implementation challenges.

“While assistive technologies and resource centers are valuable, not all lecturers are trained on how to use these tools effectively. This inconsistency affects the quality of support” (K18, 2024).

This observation aligns with the need for better training on assistive technologies, as emphasized by Emong and Zeyen (2023).

Models for Improvement

Several effective models can be adopted to improve access, participation, and learning outcomes for students with disabilities. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) promotes flexible teaching strategies and materials that cater to diverse learning needs, ensuring equitable access to educational content and activities. Assistive Technology Integration, by providing tools such as screen readers and speech-to-text software, facilitates access to educational resources and academic tasks. Inclusive Pedagogy and Training emphasizes the need for faculty development in inclusive teaching practices and disability awareness, while Accessibility Audits and Physical Modifications focus on addressing physical barriers to make campus facilities and digital platforms accessible. Peer Support and Mentoring Programs offer personalized academic and social support, enhancing the educational experience for students with disabilities. Together, these models provide a comprehensive approach to fostering an inclusive educational

environment and improving outcomes for students with disabilities.

Discussion of the Findings

The findings of this study highlight both progress and ongoing challenges in the inclusion of students with disabilities in Ugandan higher education institutions. Despite government efforts, such as the allocation of 64 government-sponsored slots, these measures fall short of meeting the growing demand. This underrepresentation aligns with global trends, as observed by Emong and Zeyen (2023) and Shaw (2024), who emphasize systemic barriers to higher education for students with disabilities. In Uganda, as Nizeyimana (2019) notes, the static number of slots over the past decades fails to accommodate the increasing number of students with disabilities seeking higher education, indicating the need for a more dynamic policy framework.

While supportive policies exist, their implementation is often hindered by practical barriers such as inadequate funding and insufficient enforcement, creating a significant gap between policy intent and practice. Bileti et al. (2023) argue that infrastructural and attitudinal barriers within Ugandan universities continue to impede the full realization of these policies. Many older university buildings lack essential modifications like ramps and elevators, a challenge further corroborated by Shuayb (2024) who highlights the absence of comprehensive accessibility audits and inclusive design principles. These deficiencies exacerbate the difficulties faced by students with physical disabilities in navigating campus environments.

Attitudinal barriers add another layer of complexity, with misconceptions and discriminatory behaviors by instructors and peers significantly affecting the academic experiences of students with disabilities. Victoria (2023) and Euscatogui and Saavedra (2024) emphasize the detrimental effects of negative perceptions, which lower expectations and undermine the self-esteem and academic performance of these students. The persistence of such attitudes indicates a critical

need for targeted interventions, such as awareness programs and sensitivity training, to foster a more inclusive educational environment.

Financial constraints further compound these challenges, limiting access to necessary resources and support services. Owen (2024) points out that students with disabilities often incur additional costs for assistive devices, personal attendants, and medical care. Although government scholarships and grants are available, they are typically insufficient to cover these expenses, leaving many students struggling to sustain their education. This financial strain is consistent with the systemic issues identified by Philemon and Amos (2024), who emphasize the need for more comprehensive financial support mechanisms to ensure that students with disabilities can fully participate in higher education.

The capacity of lecturers to effectively teach and support students with disabilities remains a significant concern. Despite some progress, such as the establishment of specialized units and training programs in special needs education, many lecturers still lack the requisite skills to accommodate diverse learning needs. Lopatina et al. (2024) and Shutaleva et al. (2023) advocate for extensive professional development in inclusive education practices, noting that the current lack of preparation among lecturers is a major barrier to the effective inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education. This gap in training underscores the urgent need for targeted professional development programs that equip faculty with the skills and confidence needed to support a diverse student body.

In response to these challenges, innovative practices such as the establishment of disability resource centers and inclusive loan schemes have emerged as critical strategies for enhancing support for students with disabilities. The Global Disability Summit 2022 (Government of Uganda, 2022) identified these innovations as essential for advancing inclusive education. However, despite these efforts, the adoption of inclusive practices remains uneven across Ugandan universities. Majoko (2023) emphasizes that while these

initiatives are promising, their success depends on consistent implementation and ongoing refinement to meet the evolving needs of students with disabilities.

The importance of community and stakeholder involvement in promoting inclusive education cannot be overstated. Studies by Garwe (2023) and Ndayishimye and Dushimimana (2024) highlight the need for collaboration among various stakeholders, including government agencies, NGOs, and the private sector, to develop more inclusive university environments. Successful case studies where multi-stakeholder partnerships have led to the implementation of more inclusive policies and practices offer valuable insights for similar efforts in Uganda. This collaborative approach is essential for addressing gaps in policy and practice and for creating more inclusive educational settings that fully support the needs of students with disabilities.

Conclusion

The findings from this study reveal a nuanced landscape of both progress and persistent challenges in the inclusion of students with disabilities in Ugandan higher education. While the government's initiatives, such as the allocation of 64 slots and the establishment of supportive structures, demonstrate a commitment to inclusivity, substantial barriers remain. Inadequate implementation of policies, infrastructural shortcomings, and a lack of specialized resources continue to impede the full participation of students with disabilities. The disconnect between policy intentions and actual practices, coupled with ongoing issues in physical accessibility and support systems, underscores the need for a more comprehensive and effective approach to addressing these challenges.

To improve access and outcomes for students with disabilities, a multifaceted strategy is essential. This should include expanding the number of government-sponsored slots, enhancing infrastructural accessibility, and ensuring that financial aid fully addresses the additional costs faced by these students. Investing in targeted

pedagogical training for lecturers and establishing well-resourced disability centers are critical steps towards fostering an inclusive educational environment. Moreover, engaging a wide range of stakeholders and adopting frameworks such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and the integration of Assistive Technology can significantly contribute to creating a more equitable and supportive higher education system. By addressing these critical areas, Uganda can make substantial progress towards achieving genuine inclusivity and improving educational outcomes for students with disabilities.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, several targeted recommendations are proposed to enhance the accessibility and inclusion of students with disabilities in Ugandan higher education. These recommendations aim to address the identified barriers and leverage existing policy frameworks to create a more supportive academic environment. Implementing these strategies will be crucial in fostering a more inclusive and equitable educational system.

- **Increase Budget Allocations:** Enhance funding for assistive technologies and specialized resources to address the financial barriers faced by students with disabilities.
- **Expand Infrastructure Upgrades:** Prioritize retrofitting older university buildings with accessibility features, such as ramps and elevators, to improve physical access.
- **Enhance Lecturer Training:** Develop and implement comprehensive training programs for lecturers on inclusive teaching practices, including specialized skills for supporting students with disabilities.
- **Strengthen Disability Support Services:** Bolster the capacity and resources of disability support offices to provide more effective academic advising, counseling, and accommodations.

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