



 Research Article

Inclusivity and Sustainable Development: A Case for Zimbabwe Higher Education Towards the Universal Design University

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Abstract

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) aims to transform society toward peace and sustainability by reorienting educational practices and learning experiences. The United Nations 2030 Agenda underscores the importance of quality education and ESD as vital components for driving the transformation of the global economy, as highlighted in its goals. In this framework, the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, Innovation, Science and Technology Development (MHTEISTD) is actively implementing Education 5.0 in alignment with Sustainable Development Goal 4, which seeks to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.” To explore the integration of inclusivity and sustainable development principles within the context of Universal Design in Higher Education, a longitudinal cohort study was conducted. This research employed structured interviews with lecturers and students, alongside observations and facility reviews, to gather diverse perspectives on the current state of inclusivity in Zimbabwean higher education. The findings indicated that while all participants demonstrated some understanding of the concept of inclusive education, the actual inclusion of students with special needs was found to vary between inadequate and acceptable levels since the implementation of Education 5.0. Based on these findings, the study strongly recommends the formal enactment of the 2019 Inclusive Education Policy draft. This policy is crucial for establishing a clear implementation framework and action plan, which are necessary for enhancing the inclusivity of higher education. By doing so, it ensures that all students, regardless of their individual needs, have equitable access to educational opportunities, thereby fostering a more inclusive and sustainable academic environment in Zimbabwe.

Keywords: Education for Sustainable Development, Inclusivity, Special Needs, Universal Design University

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1. INTRODUCTION

Milutinovic (2013) advocates that the introduction of sustainable development education in the higher education (HE) arena is closely related to the predominant understanding of higher education role within society: it is the primary role of a university to develop individual skills and integrative knowledge of students, required for their better position on the job market or to contribute creating a democratic and ecologically just world. In the same context, the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, Innovation, Science and Technology Development (MHTEISTD) is implementing Education 5.0; teaching, research, community service, innovation and industrialisation to move the nation towards attaining the status of a middle-income by 2030 (Government of Zimbabwe, 2018). Gertz, Huang and Cyr (2018) posit that a just and peaceful society cannot be attained without everyone learning to live together sustainably. In other words, every aspect of our society needs to be saturated with the idea that diversity and inclusion are democratic goals. Consistent with the constitution of Zimbabwe, the Education Sector Strategic Plan to 2020 emphasises on addressing inequities and ensuring inclusive socio-economic development. The policy stance is in tandem with Sustainable Development Goal 4 which seeks to, ‘ensure inclusive and equitable

quality education and promote life-long learning opportunities for all', complemented by the African Union Theme of 'Leave No Child Behind for Africa's Development' (Government of Zimbabwe, 2018; Idris, 2017). According to Milutinovic (2013), Quality Higher Education and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) have become part of the discourse and issue in higher education contexts. Every phase or debate of higher education is now being urged to declare its support for ESD. ESD is a world where everyone has the opportunity to benefit from quality education and learn the values, behaviours and lifestyles required for a sustainable future and for positive societal transformation (Milutinovic, 2013; Idris, 2017).

Gertz, Huang and Cyr, (2018) acknowledge that, a broader understanding of inclusion targets the integration, empowerment, and voice of diverse involvement in all aspects of higher educational institutions' systems and processes. This is supported by Gaad and Almotairi, (2013) when they say that, inclusion needs attention from educators as a means of providing an appropriate education for all students. For example, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) estimates that 90% of children with disabilities in the global south do not attend schools with fewer than 10% of children with disabilities in Africa attending school, (Vergunst & McKenzie, 2022). Thus, according to this figure, it is clear that higher education is available to a limited number of individuals with disabilities or incapacity for work. Morley and Croft (2011) are of the view that in many sub-Saharan African countries, being disabled at least doubles the chance of having never attended school. In other words, exclusion from basic education means that there is a small pool of disabled students qualified to enter HE. In this regard, therefore, HE should play a pivotal role in the transition towards achieving quality in the entire education system.

As generators of knowledge and as Centres of community, universities have a responsibility to enhance access to the learning opportunities they offer. Gertz, Huang and Cyr (2018) hypothesise that, to chart, the present and future of the structural and cultural advance of the Universal Design University, ideas, cultures, and structures need to be transformed to counter the (dis)ableism prevalent throughout the academy as in society. Therefore, countries are duty-bound to ensure that education fulfils essential objectives as laid down in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in international human rights conventions. The study assessed the implementation of inclusivity in the MHTEISTD agenda for sustainable development and universal design university.

1.1. The Main Question:

How are students with special needs in selected Zimbabwean Higher Education institutions educationally and socially included in Education 5.0 towards sustainable development and Universal Design University?

1.2. Literature Review

1.2.1 Agenda for Sustainable Development

The higher education framework is informed by international conventions and agreements to which Zimbabwe is a signatory. Among them according to MoPSE, (2015) are the: UN- related initiatives to increase access, quality and relevance such as; the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (UNDESD 2005-14); Education for All (EFA) Dakar Framework (2000-2014) and the post- 2015 Sustainable Development Goals. Agenda for Sustainable Development, is a powerful universal framework for action to fight inequality among other things. The Agenda emphasises the roles of stakeholders in solving our common and globally interrelated challenges. Sustainability is a paradigm for thinking about the future in which environmental, societal and economic considerations are balanced in the pursuit of an improved quality of life (Carpentier & Braun, 2020; Singh, 2019 and Miura, 2018; Fedulova, et al 2019; Idris, 2017). As stipulated in the agenda Singh, (2019) posit that, sustainable development recognises that combating inequality within and among countries, creating sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth and fostering social inclusion are linked to each other and are interdependent. In this regard, Carpentier and Braun, (2020) observe that, SDGs address the root causes of inequality and conflicts by addressing economic, social and environmental issues in an integrated way. In other words, ESD motivates

us to identify and act in ways that contribute towards achieving our own vision of a more sustainable future. To achieve this, ESD requires that we reorient education to address sustainability and increase public awareness and the understanding of sustainability (Hopkins & McKeown, 2002; Miura, 2018). Miura, (2018) and Singh, (2019) note that SDG4 expresses the resolve of governments to ensure that good quality education is available to all without exclusion. According to Fedulova, et al, (2019) to involve more people with disabilities in the higher education system, it is necessary to create special conditions that make training possible and attractive for these individuals. However, it can be noted that globally people with disabilities and those living with HIV/AIDS continue to face multiple disadvantages, denying them both life opportunities and fundamental human rights (Carpentier & Braun, 2020). These dangers to society have become particularly acute in recent decades; this is evidenced by the awareness of the need to develop a concept of sustainable development (Fedulova, et al, 2019).

1.2.2. Inclusive Education (IE)

Inclusion can be defined as, serving students with a full range of abilities and disabilities in the general education classroom, with appropriate in-class support (Gaad & Almotairi, 2013). According to the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education Zimbabwe (2015:15), “Inclusivity refers to an education system that takes into account and addresses the different learners’ needs and abilities without disadvantaging any group or individual”. According to Fedulova et al. (2019), inclusive education is the process of development of general education, which implies accessibility of education for all categories of students, in terms of adapting to the various needs of these students by finding the optimal way of their education. Provisions on inclusive education, are laid down in the text of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, approved by the UN General Assembly on December 13, 2006 (Fedulova, et al 2019). The philosophy behind inclusion is ‘equity’ in education which means all learners have the right to be educated properly. Idris, (2017) concludes that, inclusive education tends to strengthen the capacity of an existing educational system to reach out to all learners and places requiring reforms of culture, policies and practices to accommodate diversity as well as connect to the remotest localities.

Many international forums stress on the importance of providing an appropriate education for all students regardless of their abilities or disabilities. Inclusive education is about counteracting inequalities and recognition of diversity, and the importance of building institutional capacity to cater for students with special needs at the same time as the general educational goals are pursued (Idris, 2017). MoPSE, (2015) acknowledge that the Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (NO. 20) Act 2013 emphasises inclusivity, fairness, equity, relevance, equality (Article 6), the tolerance of our society has been growing. This is related to the rethinking by the society of its attitude towards people with disabilities, with the recognition of not only the equality of their rights, but also the awareness of society of their duty to provide equal opportunities for such people (Fedulova, et al 2019). Indeed, given the rise of attempts to provide education for all the numbers of university students who self-identify as disabled or are in need of individualised support to succeed in their studies has also grown rapidly. Gertz, Huang and Cyr, (2018) emphasise that, as the populations of recognised and socially validated disabilities or special educational needs continue to grow, universities must provide policies and programs for support and services that continue to vary considerably across societies for current and future students. Carpentier and Braun, (2020) observe that, achieving the ambitious 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development requires new innovative approaches that are socially inclusive and environmentally benign. It is apparent that inclusion is a journey; it is not a destiny (Gaad & Almotairi, 2013). Achieving the SDGs by 2030 is feasible but requires, new development models, reduced inequality gap and quality (Carpentier & Braun, 2020).

1.2.3. Barriers to Inclusive Education

This section discusses barriers to inclusive education, however, in cognisance of the fact that; commonly used conceptual frameworks for understanding and responding to disability are the medical and social models of disability. In the medical model, disability is conceptualised as a restriction or lack of ability to perform an activity in a ‘normal’ manner. It is considered to conflate disability and impairment, and locates the cause of disadvantage and focus for action in addressing disability within an individual disabled person, rather than in society, (Morley & Croft, 2011). According to Fedulova, et al (2019) persons with

disabilities include persons with persistent physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments who, when interacting with various barriers, may interfere with their full and effective participation in the life of society on an equal basis with others. Furthermore, the wide range of people with disabilities, include blindness and low vision, deafness and hearing loss, learning difficulties, cognitive limitations, limited movement, speech difficulties, photosensitivity and combinations of these. Equally, Morley and Croft, (2011) postulate that social models suggest that disability is the unnecessary economic, social and cultural oppression that occurs in addition to impairment. The growing disparity between healthy and physically disabled people has recently created more and more contradictions and crisis situations, due to which the world community is faced with global questions concerning the possibilities of the future existence of human civilisation (Fedulova, et al 2019). Ronald L. Mace who coined the term universal design, argues that what can be barrier-free for one person can be a barrier for someone else. Even specialists have problems with the design issue because of its complexity. Accessibility is a quality concept that is interpreted differently depending on the design approach used for the development. Seeing inclusive education for disabled students as the process of identifying and removing barriers is common in HE literature. However, just removing the barrier is not enough, the designer must address the issue from a broader angle (Morley & Croft, 2011; Persson et al, 2014).

There are countless barriers to inclusive education, the study discusses a few of these; clearly, myriad age-old barriers to full participation and social inclusion of disabled people in higher education persist everywhere. Thus, the 'barrier removal philosophy' advocated by principles of design for all theory emphasises enhanced attention and concrete efforts by all groups involved in making higher education a force for innovation and mobility on the path toward the 'knowledge society' (Gertz, Huang & Cyr, 2018). To begin with, learning disabilities (LD) are hidden disabilities, because they are not physically evident or noticeable when in general contact with the others. Gaad and Almotairi, (2013) observe that, the needs of students with LD are not as readily understood and accepted as the needs of students with more obvious disabilities e.g., visual, hearing or orthopedic impairments. However, the main goal of the design for all movement was that products are designed for an all-encompassing customer base and that a product is made to be usable by the widest possible range of people. Persson et al, (2014) acknowledges that this does not automatically imply that there is such a thing as a single solution that suits all. Secondly, higher education students have more unstructured time to manage and often lose their familiar support network of family and friends. Although all students in higher education experience these new learning conditions, students with LD are at greater risk of failure. Their ability to self-assess strengths, deficits, interests, and values is often impaired, and they may find decision-making a difficult and problematic process (Gaad & Almotairi, 2013).

Thirdly, as noted by Persson et al, (2014) are attitudinal barriers from hostile approaches, prejudice, and negative stereotypes to stigmatisation, marginalisation, and segregation have severely limited the participation and contribution of people with disabilities to community life. However, Social, scientific and legal changes provide increasing opportunities to challenge such views and improve the reactions to and treatment of people with disabilities. International legal frameworks, through the United Nations, for instance, work to provide safeguards against discrimination and to further environments of inclusivity (Gertz, Huang & Cyr, 2018). Fourthly, Fedulova, et al (2019) points out that, inclusive education is reduced to the acquisition and application of certain knowledge and skills that provide only a passive adaptation of a person to the environment. This is supported by Mader, Scott and Razak, (2013) when they point out that, there is a big gap between what is told in national or regional strategies and what is done to empower people to act accordingly). Therefore, to achieve the SDGs by 2030, we must dramatically step up the pace and breadth of implementation and truly embrace the principles of inclusion and sustainability, including sustainable finance (Singh, 2019).

The fifth barrier is that higher education setting provides less student-teacher contact and larger class sizes. Courses usually require long-range projects and infrequent evaluations, in contrast to short-term assignments and frequent grading experienced in high school (Gaad & Almotairi, 2013). Therefore, students with disabilities are confronted by a range of environmental and communication barriers (on) to the use of digital learning platforms that hinder their academic and social participation. Gertz, Huang and Cyr, (2018) admit that there are campus innovations that range from adapted signage and disability service Centres to diversity-oriented instruction and disability studies. The sixth barrier is that social, cultural, and educational structures exhibit institutionalised selection processes and discriminatory practices that reduce the learning

opportunities and expectations of disabled learners or those who are socially and educationally disadvantaged (Gaad & Almotairi, 2013; Gertz, Huang & Cyr, 2018). Finally, is the physical barriers to diversity and participation in higher education. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) introduced a federal law in 2006, for the rights of people with special needs. This law came to regulate the rights of persons with disabilities including their education rights (Gaad & Almotairi, 2013). Fedulova, et al (2019) posit that successful approaches to the implementation of inclusive education of students with disabilities may include: active(ly) involvement of students with disabilities in building an inclusive space.

1.3. Theoretical Framework

The crucial agenda of the 21st- century design, sustainability, can be categorised into to three main aspects; environmental, economic and social. Idris, (2017) opines that the aim of inclusive education is to eliminate social exclusion arising from attitudes and responses to diversity in race, social class, ethnicity, religion, gender and ability. The intention of sustainable development is therefore to coordinate the livability of ecological systems with social and economic activities (Vavik & Keitsch, 2013). To tie up disabilities, inclusivity and sustainability issues in higher education, the theoretical framework of Universal Design (UD) or ‘design for all’, guided this study. UD can be defined as the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptations or specialised design (Kadir & Jamaludin, 2013; Vavik & Keitsch, 2013; Persson et al, 2014). The European Institute for Design and Disability (EIDD) define design for all as, a design for human diversity, social inclusion and equality (Persson et al, 2014). This theory comes with seven key principles namely; equitable use, flexibility in use, simple and intuitive use, perceptible information, tolerance for error, low physical effort and size and space for approach and use. These were established by a working group of architects, product designers, engineers, and environmental design researchers, as design guidelines for various design disciplines including the built environment, product and communication (Gertz, Huang & Cyr, 2018; Kadir & Jamaludin, 2013; Vavik & Keitsch, 2013; Persson et al, 2014). UD target needs, social participation and access to goods and services by the widest possible range of users. For this reason, it is vital to consider the inclusion and advancement of persons who have been excluded from interacting in society for different reasons. In other words, UD seeks to reduce disablement by planning for participation and usage by all in advance (Gertz, Huang & Cyr, 2018; Vavik & Keitsch, 2013). According to Kadir and Jamaludin (2013), a universally designed environment provides comfort, adaptability and flexibility that can help to reduce human life cycle impact and encourage residents’ participation in the community. Universal Design University stems in part from applying architectural principles articulated by Mace, to allow everyone access to higher education, a goal that over the years has benefitted from Disability Studies and principles of design for all (Gertz, Huang & Cyr, 2018).

UD is a rising global trend and can be related to social sustainable development (SSD), (Vavik & Keitsch, 2013). Gertz, Huang and Cyr, (2018) postulate that, social sustainability relates to how the environment influences the human quality of life, thus, a socially sustainable built environment should be created through smart planning and design SSD strives to take future generations into consideration, and to live with the awareness that human actions make an impact on others and the world at large. As a result of its macro-focus, SSD does not ask about the individuals’ or groups’ quality of life but encompasses general political issues such as human and labour rights, corporate governance, empowerment of people and the equal inclusion of all citizens (Vavik & Keitsch, 2013). The practice of design for all makes conscious use of the analysis of human needs and aspirations and requires the involvement of end users at every stage in the design process (Persson et al, 2014). In this context, intellectual, advocacy and activist discourses facilitating the development of such accessible higher education are joined in the multidisciplinary and global field of Disability Studies, a field of inquiry that sharpens critical dialogue on the social and political constructions of dis/ability and ‘ab/normality’ (Gertz, Huang & Cyr, 2018). While there has been some progress on some university campuses, higher education’s outdated customs have more often prevailed, making the realisation of design for all inconsistent, even though principles informing university education have long promoted the idea of diversity and inclusion (Gertz, Huang & Cyr, 2018). The study interrogates the deliberate presence of universal design, inclusivity and socially sustainable development by MHTEISTD in the Education 5.0 endeavour.

2. METHODS

2.1. Research Design

The study investigated the implementation of inclusivity and sustainable development principles within the framework of a Universal Design University, focusing on the inclusion of students with special needs as per the MHTEISTD agenda for sustainable development by 2030. A qualitative longitudinal cohort study design was employed. This design was chosen to capture changes and provide rich nuanced understanding of students with disabilities in higher education. The cohort consisted of inclusive students, sharing the common experience of navigating higher education with special needs.

2.2. Data Collection Methods

Various data collection methods were utilised to enhance the validity of the findings: Structured Interviews were conducted with both students and teaching staff to gather diverse perspectives. Observations were in situ assessments of the educational environment and support systems. Facilities reviews: were carried out as evaluations of the accessibility and inclusivity of institutional facilities. Lastly, relevant literature and institutional policies were reviewed.

2.3. Participants

12 students from 6 higher education institutions, representing different academic levels (first to fourth year), were purposively selected to include those with overt special needs and to ensure a range of perspectives across different academic levels.

Teaching staff that is 16 educators from 2 universities and 4 teacher training colleges were randomly and purposively selected based on their expertise to ensure a diverse range of perspectives while still focusing on skill in inclusive education.

2.4. Sample Size

The decision to interview 12 students and 16 teaching staff was based on the principle of saturation, ensuring that the data collected would provide a comprehensive view of the inclusivity landscape in the institutions studied.

Identifying and recruiting students with disabilities proved challenging due to stigma and limited visibility. However, the authors engaged with disability support services within institutions to reach potential participants and foster trust. Secondly, inconsistencies in physical accessibility across institutions affected the observational component. Data collection was adjusted to include discussions with participants about their experiences of accessibility, providing context to observational data. Finally, to ensure consistent interpretation of qualitative data among researchers, regular team meetings were held to discuss emerging themes and ensure consistency in data coding and analysis.

2.5. Ethical Considerations

Clearance and Consent: Approval was obtained from the National University of Science and Technology (NUST) and other participating institutions. Participant Rights: informed consent, confidentiality, and protection from harm were prioritised. Participants were anonymised (coded as Std. A-K for students and L1-12 for lecturers) to ensure privacy.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Background Information on Special Needs

The data collected from the interviews with lecturers and students revealed significant insights into the current status of inclusivity for students with special needs in Zimbabwean higher education.

Lecturer Experience: out of the 16 teaching staff interviewed, 10 lecturers reported having taught more than 24 special needs students in the past five years. This indicates a level of familiarity and experience

among faculty regarding the challenges and needs of these students. As of the study period, 5 lecturers had students with special needs in their classes. These students faced a variety of challenges, including: physical limitations that hindered their ability to perform certain tasks, social challenges that created barriers to engagement and hearing impairments that required additional support.

Student Perspectives: the study included 12 students, among whom 3 were identified as living with disabilities. These disabilities included: hearing impairments; impacting their communication and interaction in classes. Notably, of the 3 students with disabilities, only one disclosed their status to the institution during enrollment. This highlights potential barriers in communication and support, as well as the stigma that may discourage students from revealing their needs.

3.2. Training in Special Needs Education

The findings revealed critical gaps in training and preparedness among lecturers working with special needs students in Zimbabwean higher education. Specifically, it was found that only 3 out of 16 lecturers had received some form of training related to handling special needs students. However, this training consisted primarily of components rather than comprehensive certifications tailored to effectively address the needs of learners with disabilities. Responses from Lecturers:

L13

I did inclusive education as a component when I was doing my first degree in ECD.

L14

I have a component on my degree on special education.

Limited Training Opportunities: many lecturers reported a lack of access to specialised training programs focused on inclusive education. **Need for Comprehensive Certification:** while some lecturers had participated in training sessions, they emphasised that these were not sufficient for full competency. **Desire for Practical Strategies:** lecturers expressed a strong desire for training that includes practical strategies and tools to engage special needs students. **Awareness of Diverse Needs:** lecturers acknowledged the diversity of needs among students with disabilities and the importance of tailoring approaches accordingly. The responses highlighted the urgent need for: comprehensive training programs, ongoing professional development and collaborative learning opportunities. By addressing these training gaps, institutions can better equip educators to meet the diverse needs of special needs students, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and supportive educational environment.

3.3. Identification of Special Needs Students

Students with special education needs primarily include those with disabilities, as defined by the Global Campaign for Education (GCE, 2022). These disabilities can manifest in various forms, including:

- **Learning Disabilities:** often referred to as hidden disabilities, these do not have visible signs and can include conditions such as dyslexia and dyscalculia. Because they are not physically evident, the needs of students with learning disabilities may be less understood and accepted compared to those of students with more apparent disabilities.
- **Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD):** this condition can affect focus, self-control, and organisation, impacting academic performance and classroom behavior.
- **Intellectual Disabilities:** these involve limitations in intellectual functioning and adaptive behaviors, affecting a student's ability to learn and interact socially.
- **Behavioral Disorders:** conditions such as oppositional defiant disorder (ODD) and conduct disorder can influence a student's behavior and interaction within the educational environment.
- **Physical Disabilities:** these can include mobility impairments that affect a student's ability to access educational resources and participate fully in classroom activities.

- Sensory Impairments: this category includes visual and hearing impairments, which can significantly impact communication and learning experiences.

The following were some of the responses:

L1 mentioned that;

Mere observation, when students have challenges in grasping and performing certain tasks due to physical, mental or social challenges. It's very difficult to identify, but the 2 I taught had a very small degree of disability.

L5 indicated that;

Through physical appearance, if it is a physical challenge or an overt impairment. However, if there is a Disability Disclosure Policy or a Disability Resource Centre students can open up about (on) the challenges they have.

L6, L7, L8 and L9 concurred when they noted;

You can see as they perform their normal daily activities. Disabilities on walking, inability to do a particular task. Visible physical features and behaviour.

L10 and L11 corresponded when they mentioned that;

Late responses to oral questions. When asked to respond to a question verbally.

L12 confessed that,

Most of the time I get to discover it while I am teaching and assessing.

L3 confirmed that they were informed by the admissions office.

The study revealed that lecturer participants predominantly relied on observation to identify students with special needs. This approach has several implications that include: Limited Awareness: relying solely on observation may lead to misidentification or overlooking students who may require support, particularly those with hidden disabilities like learning disabilities. Inconsistent Identification: since observation can be subjective, there may be inconsistencies in how different lecturers identify and respond to the needs of students.

While there was mention of the Disability Disclosure Policy and the presence of a Disability Resource Centre, reliance on these frameworks varied among institutions. Disability Disclosure Policy encourages students to voluntarily disclose their disabilities, which is crucial for ensuring they receive the necessary accommodations. However, the effectiveness of this policy hinges on students feeling safe and supported in disclosing their conditions. Disability Resource Centres serve as vital resources for both students and staff, providing information, support, and advocacy for students with disabilities. However, the level of awareness and utilisation of these centres varied among lecturers and students, affecting overall support.

The reliance on observation for identifying special needs students highlighted a significant gap in the proactive identification and support processes within Zimbabwean higher education. To improve outcomes for students with disabilities, institutions must enhance training for lecturers, promote awareness of hidden disabilities, and encourage the utilisation of established policies and resource centres. Implementing structured identification processes will foster a more inclusive educational environment, ensuring that all students receive the support they need to succeed.

3.4. Assisting Special Needs Students During Lectures

Creating an inclusive educational environment involves not only supportive policies but also an inclusive culture that values and accommodates all students. Studies such as Jacklin and Robinson (2007) in the UK have highlighted the significance of informal support networks for disabled higher education students, emphasising that such support from peers, friends, and family can be invaluable. Similarly, research by Chataika and Karangwa (2010) in Zimbabwe and in Rwanda (2008) underscores the reliance of disabled students on non-disabled peers for assistance, such as reading key texts aloud for visually impaired students (Morley & Croft, 2011).

The following were some of the responses from the interview:

Std. E spoke of;

Combined teaching methods and well illuminated lecture rooms.

Std. L mentioned;

inclusive education.

Std. K noted that;

The buildings were constructed in a way that accommodates all students.

With regard to the same issue, the study established that lecturers responded according to specific needs as they saw it fit within the confines of inclusive learning environments. This included counselling, adaptations, accommodations and creating an inclusive environment. The following were some of the responses:

L1, L9 and L10 concurred when they declared that;

By offering resources to enhance their learning. Offering counselling. Mostly give them more time to complete the work. Inclusion and support

L3 and L6 agreed when they said that;

By creating an inclusive environment. Having appropriate infrastructure (inclusive one).

L2, L4 and L8 concurred when they said that;

It depends on (with) the disability type. Some require adaptations and accommodations that would enable their physical and/or sensory functioning. Sitting positions, seat height, avoidance of light sensitivity. Sitting in front of the lecture room next to the lecturer and raising my voice. Notifying the department concerned.

L5 observed;

Rooms accessible with wheelchairs

L7 Indicated that;

Assist by reducing stressful stimuli to their disability e.g. for those with poor eyesight, encourage them to sit upfront.

The findings from this study revealed a spectrum of responses regarding how well institutions and lecturers were assisting students with special needs during lectures: Some lecturers employed diverse teaching methods, incorporating multimedia and hands-on activities to engage all students. However, there were inconsistencies in how these methods were applied across different courses and instructors. Many lecturers did not adapt their teaching styles to accommodate the needs of students with disabilities. This lack of differentiation meant that some students struggled to participate fully in lectures. Students with disabilities often depended on informal support from their peers. This peer support was crucial in helping students with disabilities navigate academic challenges, though it often depended on the willingness of fellow students to assist.

Many institutions faced significant infrastructure barriers that hindered accessibility. Common issues included: inadequate classroom layouts that did not accommodate mobility aids. Lack of assistive technology to support learning for students with sensory impairments and inaccessible lecture halls and facilities that prevented full participation.

While some institutions had policies aimed at supporting inclusive education, the implementation of these policies varied. In some cases, there was a lack of awareness among lecturers about available resources or accommodations. Additionally, some students felt that institutional support mechanisms, such as Disability Resource Centres, were underutilised or not sufficiently promoted.

The mixed reactions regarding the support provided to students with special needs highlighted the need for a more coordinated approach to inclusivity in higher education. Enhancing teaching methods, promoting peer support, and addressing infrastructure challenges are critical steps in creating a truly inclusive educational environment. Institutions must prioritise training for lecturers on inclusive practices, raise awareness of available support resources, and actively encourage a culture of collaboration and assistance among students. By doing so, they can better meet the needs of all students and foster a more equitable learning experience.

3.5. Inclusive Education

The concept of IE gained significant traction following the World Conference on Special Needs Education in 1994, where representatives from 92 governments and 25 international organisations came together in Spain. This conference produced a pivotal statement advocating for the education of all children with special needs, emphasising the importance of inclusive practices (Idris, 2017). Furthermore, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD) underscores the necessity of inclusive education at all levels, including tertiary education and lifelong learning (Gertz, Huang, and Cyr, 2018). This global mandate highlights the responsibility of educational institutions to ensure that all learners, regardless of their abilities, have access to quality education in an inclusive environment. The following were some of the responses:

Std. A, D and K defined it as;

Learning that caters for everyone despite physical challenges. Accommodating all students regardless of their disabilities. All learners should be treated the same despite their disabilities.

Std. B and C described;

Inclusivity is whereby all learners, regardless of the nature of their physical and mental capabilities, are given equal opportunities to learn. The students are not stereotyped because of their physical disabilities, such as albinism or handicapped. Having learners with different learning abilities learning together.

Std. E, H and G agreed when they said that;

Education that encompasses students of various physical, psychological and emotional caliber without discrimination. Both learners should be taught under the 'same roof' or environment without discrimination. Education for all.

Std. F and I concurred when they said that;

Inclusive education is whereby students have equal rights to education regardless of their abilities and disabilities. Education that enables learners of diverse abilities to learn together in the same environment.

Std. J and L agreed that when they said;

All learners should have the opportunity to learn together and should have equal access to the general education system and should receive individual accommodation where needed based on disability or other differences. Children with special needs being in the same class with those without special needs. Not being discriminated.

The findings of this study revealed that all students demonstrated an awareness of the inclusive education concept. Key themes and terms frequently mentioned by students included: Equal Opportunities and Access: students expressed the importance of ensuring that everyone has equal opportunities to participate in educational activities, highlighting the need for equitable access to resources and support. Catering for Everyone: the notion of accommodating diverse needs was prevalent. Students recognised that an inclusive education system should address the varied requirements of all learners, ensuring that no one is left behind. “Same Roof” Philosophy: the phrase “same roof” emerged as a metaphor for inclusivity, indicating the desire for all students to learn and interact together in the same environment, fostering a sense of community and belonging. Education for All: a strong sentiment was expressed around the idea that education should be accessible to all individuals, regardless of their backgrounds or abilities. This aligns with the global vision of inclusive education as a fundamental right.

The widespread awareness of inclusive education among students signified a positive shift toward embracing diversity within the educational landscape. However, while students recognised the ideals of inclusivity, there remains a need for institutional practices and policies to reflect these values concretely. By ensuring that educational environments are equipped to meet the diverse needs of all learners, institutions can fulfill their commitment to inclusive education as mandated by global conventions and local policies. Continued efforts to educate and train staff, alongside fostering a culture of inclusivity, are essential to transforming awareness into actionable support for all students.

On the same issue, lecturers defined inclusive education as: an environment that accommodates; teaching able and disabled; enabling equal participation; catering or education for all learners; equal access among other phrases. The following were some of the responses from the interviews:

L1, L4 and L8, viewed inclusive education as;

a non-discriminatory type of education e.g. based on disability, culture, gender, race, tribe, level of perceived intelligence and so on. Education that caters for all learners regardless of ethnic group, social class, gender. Every learner should be catered for in the learning environment regardless of gender, background, physical or any other challenges.

L2, L9, L11, L12 and L14 defined it as;

Education for all in same settings. leaving no-one behind. The right to equal access to education for every learner. Taking all on board, or normalising a class. Its normalising the class, taking all learners on board.

L3, L6 and L10 saw it as;

Education that caters for all people regardless of abilities and physically well-being. Education that enables equal participation, treatment and involvement in teaching and learning activities. Teaching both sets of students who are able bodied and those challenged.

L5, L7 and L13 viewed it as,

Creating an environment that accommodates special needs learners in the same classrooms with normal learners. Accommodating students with disabilities. Education that accommodates learners with different disabilities.

Lecturers provided valuable insights into their understanding of inclusive education, defining it through several key phrases that reflected their commitment to fostering an accommodating and supportive learning environment. Their definitions included: An Environment That Accommodates: lecturers emphasised the importance of creating a physical and emotional environment that welcomes all students, regardless of their abilities. This entails adjustments in teaching practices and classroom setups to ensure that everyone feels included. Teaching Able and Disabled Students: many lecturers highlighted the necessity of teaching both able-bodied and disabled students together. This integration not only promotes inclusivity but also enriches the learning experience for all students, fostering mutual understanding and respect. Enabling Equal Participation: a recurring theme in the definitions was the goal of enabling equal participation. Lecturers recognised that inclusive education should allow all students to engage actively in classroom discussions, activities, and assessments, ensuring that everyone has a voice. Catering to All Learners: lecturers pointed out the need for educational approaches that cater to the diverse learning needs of all students. This involves recognising individual differences and tailoring instructional strategies accordingly to support various learning styles and challenges. Equal Access: the concept of equal access was frequently mentioned, reflecting the belief that all students should have the same opportunities to benefit from educational resources and support services. This includes physical access to facilities, as well as access to information and technology.

The definitions provided by lecturers illustrated a shared understanding of the principles underlying inclusive education. Their focus on accommodation, integration, equal participation, and access indicated a commitment to creating an educational environment where all students can thrive. However, translating these ideals into practice requires ongoing training, institutional support, and the development of strategies that effectively address the diverse needs of students. By aligning their teaching methods with these inclusive principles, lecturers can contribute significantly to fostering a more equitable and supportive educational landscape.

3.6. Ministry/College/University Policy on Inclusivity

The landscape of inclusive education has been shaped significantly by global trends, as highlighted by Morley and Croft (2011), who note that the widening participation of disabled individuals in higher education has been bolstered by the implementation of anti-discriminatory legislation, treaties, and policy frameworks. Similarly, Imrie (2014) emphasises the importance of legal frameworks that ensure social justice for disabled individuals, advocating for policies that reflect inclusive practices across all sectors. Some participants were not sure of the specific statutes on inclusivity.

L1, L6 and L9 cited;

No learner should be left behind. Non-discriminatory, education for all. All students should be accommodated.

L2, L7 and L12 mentioned;

Accessible classrooms, rooms of convenience and total acceptance of each other. Students with special needs should learn together with other students and not be discriminated. The learners should be taught in the same learning environment no matter their abilities for proper life orientation with their age mates.

L10, L11, L13 and L14 agreed on;

Mainstream inclusivity. Education access equity to all. Inclusive a must in schools and in programmes. All learning areas to address learners' needs.

L8, L15 and L16 were not sure as they said;

It's not clear but courses which have students that need a wheelchair use a room that does not need steps. It's not there, may not be known. Not sure.

In Zimbabwe, the Education Act of 1987 articulates the right to education for every child, defining children with special needs as those who require special equipment, teaching, or a combination of both to benefit from schooling. Despite this foundational recognition, the current state of inclusive education policies reveals significant gaps: Lack of Specific Legislation: according to the Global Campaign for Education (GCE, 2022), there is no specific legislation or comprehensive policy dedicated to inclusive education in Zimbabwe. This absence of targeted policy hampered the implementation of effective inclusive practices across educational institutions. Participant Awareness: when prompted about their knowledge of inclusive education policies, both students and lecturers reported an inability to cite specific statutory instruments or formal policies addressing inclusivity. This indicated a significant lack of awareness regarding the legal frameworks that should underpin their educational practices.

Perceived Inclusive Practices: despite the lack of formal policies, participants articulated several inclusive practices that they valued, including: Accessible Classrooms: recognition of the need for physical environments that facilitate access for all students. Accommodation: acknowledgment of the importance of making adjustments to teaching methods and assessments to meet diverse needs. Inclusivity and Non-Discrimination: a strong belief in the principle that all students should be treated equally and have the opportunity to participate fully in educational activities.

The findings indicated a critical gap in the formalisation of inclusive education policies within Zimbabwean higher education. While participants expressed a clear understanding of inclusive practices, the lack of specific legislation and policy frameworks posed challenges to the effective implementation of inclusivity. To advance inclusive education, it is essential for policymakers to develop comprehensive legal frameworks that not only recognise the rights of students with special needs but also provide actionable guidelines for educational institutions. This will help ensure that all students receive the support and accommodations necessary to thrive in an inclusive learning environment.

3.7. Barriers to Inclusive Education in Zimbabwe Higher Education

The implementation of inclusive education in Zimbabwean higher education was hindered by several significant barriers. Drawing from the framework proposed by Muzira and Bondai (2020), which emphasises the importance of readiness in terms of resources and preparedness, the findings of this study revealed a range of obstacles that institutions faced. The following came from the student participants:

Std. A, G, H, J and K noted that;

There is inadequate funding for useful resources, such as equipment and investment in inclusive education. Shortages of advanced equipment to cater for special needs. Shortage of learning equipment braille and hearing aids.

Student B, C, G, I and K concurred when they said;

Barriers include unavailability of Special Needs teachers/lecturers. Shortage of specialists, lack of expertise or shortage of qualified personnel. There is limited personnel trained to cater for the various cases of special needs of clients. Unavailability of tools and equipment used by those physically and mentally handicapped in these institutions, stereotypes associated with how other students and lecturers view the disadvantaged, and the unavailability of funding by the government in order to help promote inclusive education.

Std. D, E, G, F and K agreed when they said;

Some of the infrastructure was not designed to accommodate all students. Infrastructure does not permit; emphasis is highly on the able bodied. Infrastructure not friendly to learners with special needs for example rails and rumps. Lack of infrastructure.

Std. J observed; *Inappropriate curriculum, untrained facilitators, poor organisation of the education system.*

Unavailability or Shortage of Resources: many institutions lacked the necessary resources to support inclusive education, including teaching materials tailored for students with special needs, assistive technologies, and learning aids. This shortage limited the ability of educators to effectively accommodate diverse learning requirements. Funding Constraints: insufficient funding for inclusive education initiatives posed a major barrier. Without adequate financial support, institutions struggled to implement necessary changes, such as hiring specialists, acquiring resources, and modifying infrastructure to meet the needs of all students. Lack of Specialists: there was a notable shortage of trained professionals with expertise in special education. This lack of specialists limited the capacity of institutions to provide appropriate support and guidance for both students with disabilities and their lecturers. Inappropriate Infrastructure: many higher education institutions featured physical environments that were not conducive to inclusion. Inaccessible classrooms, lecture halls, and facilities hindered the participation of students with mobility impairments and other disabilities, preventing them from fully engaging in the educational experience. Curriculum Limitations: the existing curriculum often failed to accommodate diverse learning needs. A lack of flexibility in teaching methods and assessment strategies meant that students with special needs may not receive the tailored support they required to succeed academically. Cultural Attitudes and Awareness: societal attitudes towards disabilities can also act as a barrier to inclusion. Stigmatisation and lack of awareness about the importance of inclusive practices among both faculty and students can create an unwelcoming environment for those with disabilities.

The barriers identified in this study illustrate the multifaceted challenges faced by Zimbabwean higher education institutions in implementing inclusive education. Addressing these obstacles requires a coordinated effort to enhance resource availability, secure funding, and develop infrastructure that supports all learners. Additionally, increasing awareness and training for staff on inclusive practices can foster a more supportive and inclusive educational environment. By tackling these barriers, institutions can better meet the needs of students with special needs and promote an equitable learning experience for all.

Lecturer participants mainly observed; inaccessible infrastructure, limited resources, untrained personnel, misaligned policies among other barriers. The following came from the participants:

L1, L3, L6 and L8 observed that;

Inaccessible lecture rooms, no suitable infrastructure and resource centres for the learners with special needs. Environmental, barriers. Poor infrastructure e.g. steep ramps or no ramps, no lifts to lecture rooms above ground level, lack of other resources e.g. for the blind. lack of institutional infrastructure that is user-friendly to those living with disability such as the availability of lifts to higher floors.

L2, L7 and L9, L15 and L16 were in agreement when they noted;

Lack of funding mainly from the government. Lack of resources.

L3, L6, L13 and L14 agreed when they cited;

Untrained lecturers, lack of proper training to lecturing staff, insufficient course outlines and trained staff in this area.

L8, L10 and L15 concurred when they observed that;

Language not in accessible formats e.g. braille, sign language, attitudinal barriers, ignorance on disability issues, misaligned policies e.g. Zimbabwe ratified the UNCPRD in 2013 but it's not yet aligned to Constitution and other policies. A lack of a clear policy. Promotions for inclusivity still very low/ Implementation very low.

L12 mentioned;

Lack of proper campaigns for learners' opportunities available in higher institutions due to limited exposure.

Lecturer participants in the study identified several key barriers to inclusive education within Zimbabwean higher education. Their observations underscored the challenges faced in creating an inclusive environment for all students, particularly those with special needs. The primary barriers noted include: **Inaccessible Infrastructure:** many lecturers highlighted the inadequacy of physical facilities, such as classrooms and lecture halls, which were not designed to accommodate students with disabilities. Issues such as the lack of ramps, elevators, and accessible restrooms hindered the participation of students with mobility challenges. **Limited Resources:** a common concern was the shortage of essential resources necessary for supporting inclusive education. This included a lack of specialised teaching materials, assistive technologies, and learning aids that are crucial for meeting the diverse needs of students. **Untrained Personnel:** the absence of adequately trained staff in inclusive education practices was a significant barrier. Lecturers expressed the need for professional development and training to equip them with the skills and knowledge required to support students with varying abilities effectively. **Misaligned Policies:** participants noted that existing policies often do not align with the principles of inclusive education. The lack of clear, actionable guidelines hampered the implementation of inclusive practices within institutions, leaving lecturers uncertain about their responsibilities and the resources available to them. **Cultural Attitudes:** some lecturers pointed out that societal attitudes toward disabilities contributed to an unwelcoming environment. **Misconceptions and stigma** surrounding disabilities affected the willingness of both faculty and students to engage inclusively.

The barriers identified by lecturer participants highlighted the critical challenges that impeded the advancement of inclusive education in Zimbabwean higher education. To overcome these obstacles, institutions must prioritise infrastructure improvements, resource allocation, and staff training. Additionally, aligning policies with inclusive education principles is essential for fostering an environment where all students can thrive. Addressing these barriers will help create a more equitable and supportive educational landscape for students with special needs.

3.8. Inclusion of Students with Special Needs in Zimbabwe Higher Education

The study explored various dimensions of inclusion for students with special needs within Zimbabwean higher education, revealing differing perspectives between students and lecturers on key aspects of inclusivity. **Student Views:** the majority of student participants considered the inclusion of students with special needs as standard, suggesting a sense of acceptance and integration within their educational environments. **Lecturer Views:** in contrast, most lecturer participants perceived the inclusion of students as inadequate, indicating concerns about the effectiveness of current practices and support systems.

3.9. Accessibility of Amenities by Students with Special Needs

Referencing Persson et al. (2014), disability is framed as the gap between individual capabilities and environmental factors. **Student Perspectives:** most students rated the accessibility of amenities for those with special needs as fair, suggesting some level of adequacy in the physical environment. **Lecturer Perspectives:** conversely, the majority of lecturers classified accessibility as unsatisfactory, highlighting significant barriers that still existed in facilities and resources.

3.10. Availability of Specialists to Support Special Needs Learners

The availability of specialists is crucial for supporting students with special needs. **Student Perspectives:** many student participants viewed the availability of specialists as sufficient, indicating they felt supported in their educational journey. **Lecturer Perspectives:** however, most lecturers considered the

availability of specialists to be insufficient, pointing to a gap in professional support that could enhance the learning experience for these students.

3.11. Accommodations in Learning Environments

Accommodations refer to the adjustments made to support diverse learners. Student Perspectives: most students deemed the accommodations in learning environments as adequate, reflecting their experiences of receiving the necessary support. Lecturer Perspectives: on the other hand, the majority of lecturers viewed accommodations as inadequate, suggesting that many students may not be receiving the tailored support they need.

3.12. Universal Design (UD) or 'Design for All' on Campus

The principles of Universal Design advocate for environments that are usable by all individuals. Student Perspectives: a majority of students found the embrace of Universal Design to be reasonable, indicating a positive perception of efforts made towards inclusivity. Lecturer Perspectives: in contrast, most lecturers regarded the application of Universal Design principles as scanty, suggesting a need for greater commitment and implementation across campuses.

3.13. The Introduction of Education 5.0

The study assessed the impact of the Education 5.0 initiative on inclusivity. Student Perspectives: participants noted changes such as improved access to information, adjustments in infrastructure, and updates to the curriculum. However, some students felt that there were no significant improvements to report. Lecturer Perspectives: there was a recognition of the need for comprehensive infrastructure; physical, promotional, and financial to support the goals of Education 5.0 effectively (Muzira and Bondai, 2020). The following were some of the responses;

Std. A noted;

Access to information, availability of resources and levels of segregation declined. There is good interaction with learners with abilities

Std. B, I and J observed that;

Special needs students are allowed to learn with those without disabilities. The curriculum now accommodates all learners.

Std. E and F cited;

A few revamped pathways an infrastructure.

Std. D, G and I concurred when they indicated that;

Nothing as of yet. Very little or nothing at all. Nothing much. It could be too soon to notice remarkable change.

Std. K acknowledged that;

Teachers are being trained but the number is still small therefore learners in rural areas are still disadvantaged.

On the same aspect, the majority of lecturer participants noted that nothing had changed on inclusivity since the introduction of education 5.0. Only L6 noted that; *ramps are being put on most structures for accessibility.*

The findings highlighted a disconnect between student and lecturer perceptions of inclusion and support for students with special needs in Zimbabwean higher education. While students generally reported fair accessibility and adequate accommodations, lecturers expressed concerns about the inadequacy of inclusion practices, specialist availability, and infrastructure. Addressing these disparities is essential for fostering a truly inclusive educational environment. Institutions must prioritise enhancing resources, training, and policy alignment to ensure that all students, regardless of their abilities, can thrive in higher education settings.

3.14. Improving the Quality of Inclusive Education in Zimbabwe Higher Education

The concept of Universal Design (UD) presents an essential framework for enhancing inclusive education in Zimbabwean higher education. As articulated by Gertz, Huang, and Cyr (2018), integrating UD principles into educational settings can help universities meet societal expectations and create an inclusive environment for the diverse array of teachers and learners. The following were some of the responses:

Std. A, E, F and G suggested;

Equip institutions with enough resources that is human, equipment and infrastructure. Provide resources. Improve the infrastructure.

Std. B, C, G, I and K recommended that;

The government should have the will power to transform the education system of this country, through funding and putting value in education. Education is underfunded and there's ignorance on the part of those in power (government), leading to underdevelopment in the education system. In order to help improve inclusive education, the government should then fund the education sector by procuring equipment and training as well as employing specialist teachers/lecturers in Special Needs Education. Government to avail funds that will spear bear the inclusivity. Needs for disabled should be considered in the national budget. The government should offer full support in terms of monetary issues, infrastructure and so on.

Std. D, E, G and L suggested;

Increasing the support systems. Improve on facilities. Reduce the number of learners per class, training more personnel so that they handle both learners with disability and without. It would help to empower personnel in strategic positions within the Ministry.

Provide free equipment to students and providing free education to students. Give first preference to graduates leaving with disabilities.

On the same aspect of improving the quality of inclusive education in Zimbabwe higher education, lecturer participants responded as follows:

L1, L5, L7, L13 and, L14 advocated for a need,

To build resource centres equipped with special/ resource people for learners with special needs at colleges and universities. Resource institutions. More resources should be channeled to students with needs. Better facilities.

L2 and L6 advised that;

There is need for serious intervention from the government and charity organisations in terms of funding, training and monitoring. Provision of funding for Universal Design and other resources

L3 and L4 suggested the need to;

Train/recruitment of special needs personnel. Re-train staff on how to handle the disadvantaged learners.

L5, L6, L8 and L10 were in agreement when they supported;

Massive awareness raising, sensitisation on disability issues and increasing advocacy. Aggressive awareness programs for inclusivity. A broad campaign to mobilise learners from grass roots

L9 suggested;

Mandatory inclusion of components on taking care of learners with special needs in teacher education.

L11, L12 and L13 concurred when they advocated for;

Seriousness on the part of policy makers and engagement of appropriate personnel. seriousness on the part of the government. Clearer and vibrant policy.

To improve the quality of inclusive education, student participants highlighted several crucial areas for development: Adequate Resources: Government Support: students emphasised the necessity for increased government investment in education. This included not only financial support but also the provision of human capital, such as hiring trained specialists and support staff who can assist students with special needs. Facilities Improvement: there was a clear call for the enhancement of physical infrastructure to ensure accessibility. This involved upgrading classrooms, libraries, and other facilities to accommodate students with diverse needs. Training and Development: students underscored the importance of training for lecturers and staff on inclusive teaching practices. Professional development initiatives could equip educators with the skills needed to address the specific challenges faced by students with special needs. Awareness Campaigns: raising awareness about the importance of inclusivity among the broader student body and faculty was seen as vital. This could foster a more supportive culture and encourage peer collaboration, enhancing the overall learning experience for all students. Curriculum Adaptation: participants suggested that the curriculum should be reviewed and adapted to be more inclusive. This might include offering a wider range of materials and teaching methods that cater to different learning styles and abilities. Enhanced Support Services: the establishment of robust support services, such as counseling and mentorship programs, was highlighted as essential. These services could provide additional layers of assistance for students with special needs, helping them navigate academic challenges. Feedback Mechanisms: implementing effective feedback mechanisms for students to voice their concerns and suggestions regarding inclusivity in education was considered important. This could facilitate continuous improvement in practices and policies.

To realise the potential of Universal Design in improving inclusive education, Zimbabwean higher education institutions must prioritise adequate resource allocation, infrastructure development, and comprehensive training for staff. By addressing these critical areas, universities can create a more inclusive environment that supports the diverse needs of all students, ultimately enriching the educational landscape for everyone involved. Through collaborative efforts between government, institutions, and the community, the goal of an inclusive higher education system can become a reality.

3.15. Agenda for Sustainable Development Progress

The concept of sustainable development is fundamentally intertwined with social equity and inclusivity. As noted by Fedulova et al. (2019), achieving sustainable development in a socially unjust world

is inherently challenging. This study aimed to assess the progress made by MHTEISTD in Zimbabwe towards advancing the agenda for sustainable development, particularly with inclusivity in mind. The following were student participants' responses:

Std. A, F observed that;

It's positive but a lot needs to be done especially in funding of activities. The pace has been low, resources acquired are more channeled towards urban life than peri-urban and rural schools.

Std. B noted that;

The whole process is hindered by the unavailability of funding. Sustainable development is enhanced where the environment under which it is produced is conducive. Currently, the country is nosediving into abject poverty, due to policy inconsistencies and corruption by the central government officials, making the whole environment unconducive.

Std. C, G, H, I, J and K agreed when they said;

Sustainable development is now just a concept on paper, due to the lack of will power by those in authority. The policy is there but it's a white elephant no implementation. It is commendable to have policies to increase awareness of the need for inclusivity in education. The ministry's progress is almost half way towards their way. They implement and emphasis without follow ups to make sure things are in the pipeline. The ministry is a bit relaxed, there isn't much being done. Its average.

Std. D

There is shortage of learning equipment.

Std. E concluded that;

Not so much has been done considering that our classes are partially inclusive.

On the same aspect lecturer participants highlighted little progress in this regard. The following were some of the responses:

L1 and L16 noted that;

A lot has to be done in order to achieve the aims and goals. Staff development is key. Fair progress.

L3 observed that;

A lot still needs to be done on the ground rather than just making nice blueprints with zero implementation.

L9, L10, L11 and L13 concurred that;

There is little progress. More resources should be channeled to students with disabilities. Very slow. Quite slow.

L2 and L15 concluded;

No noticeable change so far. I do not see anything tangible so far.

L7 and L12 agreed that;

The Ministry has made great strides but needs to keep track with changes on the ground to stay relevant. Policies are in place but they are yet to be instituted or implemented fully. It is sound.

L8 indicated that they were not sure.

Policy Implementation Gaps: the findings indicated significant gaps in the implementation of existing policies aimed at promoting inclusivity within higher education. While there may be frameworks in place, effective execution remained a critical challenge. Institutions often struggled to translate policy into practice, which undermined efforts to create inclusive educational environments. **Need for Comprehensive Strategies:** there is a clear need for more comprehensive strategies that prioritise inclusivity within the broader context of sustainable development. This involves integrating inclusive practices into all aspects of higher education, from curriculum design to infrastructure development. **Resource Allocation:** adequate resource allocation is crucial for facilitating sustainable development goals. The study revealed that insufficient funding and resources hindered the ministry's ability to effectively implement inclusive policies. Increased investment in human capital and infrastructure is necessary to support these initiatives. **Monitoring and Evaluation:** effective monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are essential for assessing the impact of policies on inclusivity. The study highlighted the lack of robust systems to track progress and outcomes related to inclusive education, making it difficult to identify areas for improvement. **Collaboration and Partnerships:** strengthening collaboration between government, educational institutions, and civil society organisations can enhance the effectiveness of inclusive education initiatives. Partnerships can help mobilise resources, share best practices, and foster a collective commitment to sustainable development.

The progress made by MHTEISTD towards the agenda for sustainable development, particularly in terms of inclusivity, revealed that much work remains to be done. By addressing policy implementation gaps, enhancing resource allocation, and fostering collaboration, Zimbabwe can move closer to achieving sustainable development goals that prioritise social equity. Ensuring that inclusivity is at the forefront of educational practices is vital for building a just and sustainable society.

4. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study revealed several critical issues regarding the inclusion of students with special needs in Zimbabwean higher education. Key observations and conclusions drawn from the research are as follows:

- **Mixed Perspectives on Inclusion:** While many students perceived their educational experience as adequately inclusive, lecturers expressed significant concerns regarding the effectiveness of inclusion practices. This disparity indicates that while some progress had been made, there were still substantial gaps that needed to be addressed for full educational and social inclusion.
- **Policy Gaps and Implementation Challenges:** The findings highlighted that although policies aimed at promoting inclusivity existed, their implementation often lacked. Effective policy execution is crucial for fostering an environment that supports students with special needs in line with the principles of Education 5.0 and sustainable development.
- **Resource Limitations:** A significant barrier identified was the lack of adequate resources, including funding, trained personnel, and accessible facilities. Addressing these resource gaps is essential for creating a supportive educational environment where students with special needs can thrive.
- **Need for Training and Development:** The study underscores the necessity for comprehensive training for lecturers and staff in inclusive education practices and Universal Design principles. Enhanced training will equip educators to better support diverse learners, thereby facilitating both educational and social inclusion.
- **Importance of Collaboration:** Collaborative efforts among government, educational institutions, and civil society organisations are vital for creating a robust support system for students with special needs. Such partnerships can help mobilise resources, share best practices, and promote a collective commitment to inclusivity.

- Continuous Monitoring and Evaluation: Implementing effective monitoring and evaluation mechanisms is crucial for assessing the impact of inclusion strategies. This allows institutions to make informed adjustments to their practices, ensuring that they meet the needs of students with special needs in a sustainable manner.
- While there were positive indicators of educational and social inclusion for students with special needs within the framework of Education 5.0, significant challenges remained. To enhance inclusion towards achieving a Universal Design University, institutions must prioritise policy implementation, resource allocation, staff training, and collaboration. By addressing these areas, MHTEISTD can move closer to realising its goals of sustainable development and inclusivity for all learners.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance inclusivity and support for students with special needs in Zimbabwean higher education:

- Encourage Disclosure During Application: Students should be encouraged to disclose any disabilities or specific learning difficulties during the application process. This proactive approach is essential for making necessary accommodation adjustments and implementing universal design principles effectively. Institutions should create a supportive environment that emphasises the importance of disclosure for receiving appropriate support.
- Enactment of the 2019 Inclusive Education Policy: The timely enactment of the 2019 Inclusive Education Policy draft is crucial. This policy should provide a clear implementation plan and framework for addressing the needs of learners with disabilities. It must outline specific guidelines for institutions to follow, ensuring that inclusivity becomes a standardised practice across all higher education institutions.
- Staff Development Programs: There is a pressing need for ongoing professional development for staff in line with the MHTEISTD agenda for inclusive education and sustainable development. Training programs should focus on:
 - a. Understanding various disabilities and their implications for learning.
 - b. Implementing effective teaching strategies that accommodate diverse needs.
 - c. Creating awareness about the importance of inclusive practices and the resources available to support them.
- Strengthening Disability Resource Centres: Institutions should enhance the capacity and resources of Disability Resource Centres to provide adequate support services, including counselling, academic assistance, and advocacy for students with disabilities.
- Improving Physical Accessibility: Conduct comprehensive audits of campus facilities to identify and address accessibility barriers. Investments should be made to ensure that all areas, including classrooms, libraries, and restrooms, are accessible to individuals with disabilities.
- Fostering an Inclusive Culture: Institutions should promote an inclusive culture that encourages respect and understanding for students with disabilities. Awareness campaigns, workshops, and peer support programs can help reduce stigma and encourage open conversations about disabilities.
- Regular Monitoring and Evaluation: Implement a system for regular monitoring and evaluation of inclusivity practices within institutions. This could involve collecting feedback from students and staff, assessing the effectiveness of policies and practices, and making necessary adjustments based on findings.
- Collaboration with Stakeholders: Foster partnerships with disability advocacy organisations, community groups, and governmental bodies to share resources, expertise, and best practices in promoting inclusivity in higher education.

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