



ASEAN Journal of Community and Special Needs Education



Journal homepage: <https://ejournal.bumipublikasinusantara.id/index.php/ajcsne>

Strengthening Inclusive Higher Education for Students with Disabilities through Institutional Practices and Managerial Perceptions in Public Universities

Andualem Mola Maru^{1,2,*}

¹University of South Africa, Pretoria, Gauteng, South Africa

²Jimma University, Jimma, Ethiopia

Correspondence: E-mail: andualem.mola@ju.edu.et

ABSTRACT

This study examined managerial perceptions and institutional practices affecting the inclusion and support of students with disabilities in public universities. A mixed-methods approach guided by the pragmatic paradigm was employed. Quantitative data were collected through questionnaires administered to department heads, teachers, and students with and without disabilities from selected public universities, while qualitative data were gathered through interviews with university presidents, deans, and disability center coordinators. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics, while qualitative data were interpreted through phenomenological analysis. Students with disabilities continue to experience limited academic and social inclusion, weak instructional support, inadequate implementation of inclusive education policies, institutional resistance, limited infrastructure, and insufficient specialized services. The study highlights the need for stronger managerial accountability, improved policy enforcement, accessible infrastructure, disability-specific support services, and professional development for staff to strengthen inclusive higher education.

ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Submitted/Received 14 Nov 2025

First Revised 19 Jan 2026

Accepted 19 Feb 2026

First Available online 14 May 2026

Publication Date 01 Sep 2026

Keyword:

Disability inclusion;

Ethiopian public universities;

Higher education management;

Inclusive education;

Students with disabilities.

1. INTRODUCTION

Students with disabilities are among the groups who often experience barriers to full participation in higher education. Disability is understood as the interaction between long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments and environmental or attitudinal barriers that may hinder full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others. Therefore, the barriers faced by students with disabilities are not caused only by impairment itself but also by inaccessible infrastructure, limited support services, negative attitudes, weak policy implementation, and institutional systems that fail to respond to learner diversity. Inclusive higher education must address both individual learning needs and the structural conditions that create exclusion.

Globally, universities have increasingly recognized the importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Higher education institutions are expected to create learning environments where all students, including students with disabilities, can access academic programs, participate in campus life, and receive appropriate support. Inclusive education in higher education can improve academic participation, social integration, self-confidence, and students' sense of belonging when it is supported by effective institutional policies and practices (Fernández-Batanero *et al.*, 2022; Moriña, 2017). However, many universities still face challenges in translating inclusive principles into daily academic and administrative practice.

In the Ethiopian context, inclusive education has been supported through national strategies and policy commitments influenced by international frameworks such as the Salamanca Statement and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Ethiopia has made efforts to expand access to education and promote equity at different levels of the education system (Tiruneh, 2019). Nevertheless, students with disabilities in Ethiopian public universities continue to face significant barriers. These include inaccessible infrastructure, limited assistive technologies, insufficient instructional support, lack of disability-specific services, weak data systems, and inconsistent implementation of inclusive education policies (Kocha and Senapathy, 2022).

Institutional practices play a central role in determining whether inclusive education becomes a reality or remains only a policy commitment. Practices such as accessible campus design, reasonable accommodation, inclusive pedagogy, disability support services, staff training, assistive technology provision, and student participation in decision-making are necessary for strengthening inclusion. However, when institutional systems are fragmented, under-resourced, or poorly coordinated, students with disabilities may experience exclusion despite the existence of formal policies. Previous studies show that weak support systems, bureaucratic barriers, insufficient resources, and unclear implementation mechanisms can limit the participation of students with disabilities in higher education (Vincent and Chiwandire, 2019; De Moraes Costa and Pieczkowski, 2020; Papadakaki *et al.*, 2022).

The perceptions and commitments of higher education managers are especially important because managers influence institutional culture, policy implementation, resource allocation, and the quality of support services. University presidents, deans, department heads, disability center coordinators, and other academic leaders help determine whether disability inclusion is treated as a central institutional responsibility or as a marginal welfare issue. When managers understand disability from a rights-based and inclusive perspective, they are more likely to support structural change, inclusive teaching practices, and accessible service delivery. In contrast, negative perceptions, low expectations, and charity-based views of

disability may reinforce exclusion and limit the academic participation of students with disabilities (Assefa and Adamu, 2023; Dunn, 2019).

Managerial attitudes and institutional commitments can either enable or hinder inclusive higher education. Positive managerial engagement may promote collaboration, improve disability support services, and encourage staff to adopt inclusive teaching strategies. However, limited awareness, resistance to reform, and lack of accountability may weaken institutional responses to students with disabilities. Studies on higher education inclusion have emphasized that leadership, management commitment, and institutional coordination are necessary for creating inclusive campus environments (Nīmante *et al.*, 2021).

Although Ethiopia has policy commitments related to inclusive education, stronger empirical evidence is still needed on how managers perceive students with disabilities and how institutional practices affect inclusion in public universities. Existing discussions often focus on policy frameworks, access, or general barriers, but less attention has been given to the combined analysis of managerial perceptions, institutional practices, support systems, and the experiences of students with disabilities. This gap is important because inclusive education cannot be strengthened without understanding how institutional actors interpret their roles and how their practices shape the academic and social experiences of students with disabilities.

This study investigated managerial perceptions and institutional practices related to the inclusion of students with disabilities in public universities. Specifically, it examined how higher education managers perceived students with disabilities, how institutional support systems were implemented, and what barriers affected inclusive education practices in public university settings. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study generated quantitative evidence and qualitative insights into the challenges and possibilities of strengthening inclusive higher education for students with disabilities.

The study contributes to community and special needs education by highlighting the importance of institutional accountability, accessible infrastructure, disability-specific support, inclusive pedagogy, and professional development for university staff. The findings are expected to inform university leaders, policymakers, disability support offices, and educators in improving inclusive practices and ensuring that students with disabilities can participate more fully and equitably in higher education.

2. METHODS

This study used a mixed-methods research design guided by the pragmatic paradigm. A convergent parallel approach was applied because the study aimed to examine managerial perceptions and institutional practices toward students with disabilities using both quantitative and qualitative evidence. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected during the same phase, analyzed separately, and then integrated to provide a broader understanding of inclusion, support systems, and institutional barriers in public universities.

The study was conducted in selected public universities in Ethiopia. Ten public universities were selected from the total population of public universities using simple random sampling. The quantitative participants included department heads, teachers, and students with and without disabilities. A total of 50 department heads, 112 teachers, and 162 students participated in the survey. The student group included students with physical, hearing, and visual impairments, as well as students without disabilities. For the qualitative component,

six key informants were selected using convenience sampling. These participants included two university presidents, two deans, and two disability center coordinators.

Quantitative data were collected using a structured questionnaire designed to examine perceptions, institutional practices, and barriers related to the inclusion of students with disabilities. The questionnaire was administered to department heads, teachers, and students. Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with university presidents, deans, and disability center coordinators. The interviews were used to explore managerial engagement, awareness of inclusive education, institutional support, service delivery, and challenges in managing diversity and inclusion.

Ethical procedures were observed throughout the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. Informed consent was obtained before data collection. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained, and the data were used only for academic purposes.

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS Version 26. Descriptive statistics, including mean and standard deviation, were used to summarize participants' responses. One-way ANOVA was used to examine differences in perceptions among teachers, department heads, and students regarding barriers to inclusive education. Qualitative data were analyzed using phenomenological analysis with the support of ATLAS.ti. Interview responses were coded, categorized, and interpreted to identify recurring themes related to managerial perceptions, institutional support, service delivery, and barriers to inclusion.

The quantitative and qualitative findings were then integrated during interpretation. This integration allowed the study to compare statistical patterns with participants' lived experiences and institutional explanations. Through this process, the study provided a more comprehensive understanding of how managerial perceptions and institutional practices shaped the inclusion of students with disabilities in public universities.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the quantitative and qualitative findings on managerial perceptions, institutional practices, and barriers affecting the inclusion of students with disabilities in public universities. The quantitative findings describe the views of teachers, department heads, and students regarding inclusion and institutional barriers, while the qualitative findings provide deeper insights from university presidents, deans, and disability center coordinators. The integration of both sets of findings provides a more comprehensive understanding of how institutional practices and managerial perceptions shape inclusive higher education.

The perceptions and institutional practices related to students with disabilities are presented in **Table 1**. Students with disabilities were not perceived as fully included academically and socially. The mean scores for academic and social inclusion were relatively low across teachers, department heads, and students. Similar patterns appeared for staff willingness to support students with disabilities, inclusive teaching strategies, and adequate instructional support. These findings suggest that formal inclusion may exist at the policy level, but students with disabilities still experience limited support in daily academic and social life.

Table 1. Perceptions and institutional practices related to students with disabilities.

VARIABLE	POSITION	MEAN	STD. DEV	F	P-VALUE
Students with disabilities feel included academically and socially.	Teacher	2.20	0.71	3.11	0.046
	Dep. Head	2.32	0.74		
	Students	2.05	0.73		
University staff are willing and able to support students with disabilities.	Teacher	2.25	0.71	3.11	0.046
	Dep. Head	2.32	0.82		
	Students	2.08	0.65		
Teaching strategies promote inclusion of students with disabilities.	Teacher	2.33	0.65	3.64	0.027
	Dep. Head	2.06	0.62		
	Students	2.15	0.71		
Disability is seen as a challenge to institutional policies.	Teacher	2.16	0.65	3.05	0.049
	Dep. Head	1.98	0.82		
	Students	2.33	1.12		
Students with disabilities can perform like their peers.	Teacher	2.28	0.74	4.56	0.011
	Dep. Head	1.90	0.89		
	Students	2.29	0.89		
Adequate instructional support is provided for students with disabilities.	Teacher	2.08	0.67	3.11	0.046
	Dep. Head	2.00	0.83		
	Students	2.33	1.21		
Families should take primary responsibility for supporting students with disabilities.	Teacher	2.38	0.79	3.06	0.048
	Dep. Head	2.24	0.72		
	Students	2.55	0.92		
Disability is a natural part of human diversity.	Teacher	2.81	0.96	3.15	0.044
	Dep. Head	3.00	1.07		
	Students	2.59	1.21		
Managers hold negative views about the abilities of students with disabilities.	Teacher	3.33	0.92	4.62	0.010
	Dep. Head	3.00	1.16		
	Students	2.91	1.24		
Negative attitudes toward disability among students and staff.	Teacher	3.04	0.98	3.04	0.049
	Dep. Head	3.12	1.22		
	Students	3.36	1.14		
Students with disabilities are capable of meeting academic and institutional requirements.	Teacher	3.62	1.01	6.75	0.001
	Dep. Head	3.92	1.14		
	Students	3.27	1.31		
Students with disabilities have an equal right to education.	Teacher	3.84	1.12	4.65	0.010
	Dep. Head	4.38	0.72		
	Students	3.83	1.30		

The results also show significant differences among respondent groups in several items, including academic and social inclusion, staff support, teaching strategies, instructional support, perceptions of disability, and equal educational rights. These differences indicate that inclusion is not experienced or interpreted uniformly across stakeholder groups. While some respondents recognized the rights and capabilities of students with disabilities, other responses suggested continuing negative attitudes and uncertainty about institutional responsibilities. This finding supports previous studies showing that inclusive higher education depends not only on policy availability but also on institutional culture, managerial commitment, and the readiness of staff to implement inclusive practices (Fernández-Batanero *et al.*, 2022; Moriña, 2017; Papadakaki *et al.*, 2022).

The relatively high scores on students' equal right to education and their capability to meet academic requirements indicate that positive beliefs exist within the institutions. However, these positive beliefs are weakened by low scores related to actual inclusion, instructional support, and staff willingness. This gap shows a difference between normative acceptance of inclusion and practical implementation. In other words, stakeholders may agree that students with disabilities have the right to education, but institutional practices may still fail to provide the conditions needed for meaningful participation.

The barriers to inclusive education practices are presented in **Table 2**. The strongest barriers were poor understanding and implementation of disability-related policies, resistance to inclusive education practices, and inadequate resources and infrastructure. These items received consistently high mean scores across teachers, department heads, and students. This indicates broad agreement that the main barriers are not limited to individual attitudes but are also embedded in institutional systems. The findings are consistent with studies indicating that inaccessible infrastructure, weak policy enforcement, and insufficient support systems remain major challenges for students with disabilities in higher education (Vincent and Chiwandire, 2019; De Moraes Costa and Pieczkowski, 2020).

Moderate barriers were also found in management support, staff knowledge and training, teacher support, engagement methods, collaboration, and investment in training. These findings indicate that inclusive education requires more than physical access. It requires staff capacity, professional development, institutional coordination, and practical strategies for engaging students with disabilities in learning. The significant differences in teacher support, engagement methods, and staff collaboration suggest that some groups perceive these barriers more strongly than others. This may reflect differences in experience, role, and direct exposure to students with disabilities.

The barriers identified in **Table 2** also show that inclusive education is affected by both structural and attitudinal factors. Structural factors include infrastructure, resources, policy implementation, and training investment. Attitudinal and cultural factors include resistance to inclusive practices, lack of collaboration, and weak understanding of how to support students with disabilities. These findings align with previous literature showing that inclusive education requires institutional change, inclusive culture, and leadership commitment (Ainscow, 2020; Nĩmante *et al.*, 2021).

The one-way ANOVA results on differences in perceptions among teachers, department heads, and students regarding barriers to inclusive education are presented in **Table 3**. There was no statistically significant difference among teachers, department heads, and students in their overall perceptions of factors that hinder the promotion and implementation of inclusive education, $F = 1.93$, $p = 0.15$. Since the p-value is greater than 0.05, the differences among the three groups were not statistically significant. This result suggests that the barriers to inclusive education were commonly recognized across respondent groups.

The absence of significant differences is important because it indicates a shared institutional awareness of the barriers affecting students with disabilities. Teachers, department heads, and students generally recognized that weak policy implementation, institutional resistance, inadequate infrastructure, limited support, and insufficient training hinder inclusive practices. However, shared recognition does not automatically lead to institutional change. Public universities need stronger mechanisms for translating awareness into coordinated action, resource allocation, and accountability.

Table 2. Barriers to inclusive education practices in higher education institutions.

VARIABLE	POSITION	MEAN	STD. DEV	F	P-VALUE
Policies, rules, and strategies supporting students with disabilities are poorly understood and implemented.	Teacher	4.60	0.62	1.60	0.20
	Dep. Head	4.78	0.42		
	Students	4.62	0.68		
There is resistance to adopting inclusive education practices.	Teacher	4.63	0.59	1.24	0.29
	Dep. Head	4.76	0.43		
	Students	4.60	0.72		
The university lacks adequate resources and infrastructure to support students with disabilities.	Teacher	4.55	0.64	1.56	0.21
	Dep. Head	4.74	0.44		
	Students	4.57	0.72		
Management provides inadequate support for students with disabilities.	Teacher	3.59	1.00	1.96	0.14
	Dep. Head	3.66	1.19		
	Students	3.36	1.21		
Staff lack knowledge and training to effectively support students with disabilities.	Teacher	3.40	1.08	0.062	0.94
	Dep. Head	3.46	1.23		
	Students	3.40	1.18		
Teachers receive insufficient support to develop positive attitudes toward inclusive education.	Teacher	3.15	1.08	3.87	0.02
	Dep. Head	3.62	0.945		
	Students	3.44	1.14		
Methods for engaging students with disabilities in inclusive education are poorly understood.	Teacher	3.13	0.99	3.39	0.03
	Dep. Head	3.34	1.19		
	Students	3.47	1.09		
Academic and administrative staff are unwilling to collaborate with students with disabilities.	Teacher	2.86	1.07	4.32	0.01
	Dep. Head	2.96	1.01		
	Students	3.28	1.34		
Investment in training educators to support students with disabilities is insufficient.	Teacher	2.53	1.01	2.84	0.06
	Dep. Head	2.84	1.17		
	Students	2.83	1.12		

Table 3. One-way ANOVA on differences in perceptions among teachers, department heads, and students on factors (hamper the promotion and implementation of inclusive education).

SOURCE	SUM OF SQUARES	DF	MEAN SQUARE	F	SIG.
Between Groups	1.16	2	0.58	1.93	0.15
Within Groups	96.61	321	0.30		
Total	97.77	323			

Note: Significance level was set at 0.05.

The qualitative component of the study provided deeper explanations of the quantitative findings. Information about the interview participants is presented in **Table 4**. The interview participants included university presidents, deans, and disability center coordinators. These participants were selected because they had direct or indirect responsibility for institutional decision-making, academic management, and disability support services. Their responses provided important insights into managerial engagement, institutional awareness, service delivery, and challenges in implementing inclusive education.

Table 4. Information about the interview participants.

NAME	SEX	SERVICE YEAR IN POSITION	UNIVERSITY NAME	QUALIFICATION	CODE
PRT1	M	3	G/2U	Ph.D. (Biology)	1/G2U/PRT1
PRT2	M	2	G/1U	MA (English)	1/G1U/PRT2
D1	M	5	G/1U	MA (Psychology)	2/G1U/D1
D2	M	16	G/2U	Ph.D. (ELM)	2/G2U/D2
CD1	M	6	G/1U	MA (SNIE)	1/G2U/CD1
CD2	M	5	G/2U	MA (History)	2/G2U/CD2

Note: PRT = president, D = dean, and CD = disability center coordinator.

The first qualitative theme concerned managerial engagement with students with disabilities. Interview responses indicated that managers maintained some communication with students with disabilities, but this engagement was not always translated into strong institutional commitment. Students with disabilities received similar treatment to other students, while students with disabilities rarely raised concerns about academic or administrative matters. Although such responses may suggest equal treatment, disability-specific needs were not sufficiently identified or addressed. Treating all students the same without reasonable accommodation can reproduce exclusion because students with disabilities may require differentiated support to participate equitably.

The second theme concerned awareness among college and faculty management. Some participants reported limited understanding of disability-related needs and inclusive education principles among academic leaders. Others emphasized the absence of written institutional policies and the difficulty of implementing inclusive practices due to bureaucracy and faculty resistance. This finding supports the quantitative evidence showing that disability policies and strategies were poorly understood and implemented. It also reflects the need for stronger institutional frameworks, clearer procedures, and systematic awareness-building among university leaders and staff.

The third theme focused on institutional management support. Participants reported mixed managerial attitudes toward disability inclusion. Some managers showed positive attitudes, while others did not give sufficient attention to disability issues. Respondents also noted that strengths and weaknesses in supporting students with disabilities were not systematically identified. Disability inclusion was not yet managed through a coherent monitoring and evaluation system. Without such systems, universities may fail to identify gaps in accessibility, instructional support, accommodation, and student participation.

The fourth theme concerned academic and management service delivery. Participants reported improvements in awareness, infrastructure, assistive technology, and designated dormitories. However, concerns remained regarding the adequacy and appropriateness of services. One important issue was the suggestion that students with disabilities should receive a separate curriculum. While differentiated support may be necessary, separating students from the general curriculum may undermine inclusion if it leads to segregation rather than reasonable accommodation. Inclusive higher education requires accessible pedagogy, flexible assessment, assistive technology, and reasonable accommodation within shared academic environments (Moriña, 2017).

The fifth theme concerned challenges in managing diversity and inclusion initiatives. Participants reported that disability laws and proclamations often remained at the level of documentation and were not fully translated into practice. The absence of a dedicated enforcement body, weak institutional policy, and negative attitudes hindered implementation. This finding strongly supports the quantitative results, which identified policy implementation, institutional resistance, and resource limitations as major barriers. Inclusion requires not only awareness but also enforcement, accountability, and sustained institutional leadership.

The inclusion of students with disabilities in public universities is limited by both systemic and managerial factors. Quantitative findings revealed low perceptions of academic and social inclusion, weak instructional support, and high levels of agreement on major barriers. Qualitative findings explained these patterns by showing that policy implementation was weak, managerial commitment was inconsistent, and service delivery often lacked specialization. Taken together, the findings show that inclusion is recognized as important, but institutional systems have not yet fully translated this recognition into accessible, responsive, and accountable practices.

These findings have important implications for strengthening inclusive higher education. First, public universities need stronger policy enforcement and clearer implementation mechanisms. Policies should be translated into operational guidelines, resource plans, and accountability systems. Second, managers and academic staff need professional development on disability inclusion, reasonable accommodation, inclusive pedagogy, and rights-based approaches. Third, universities need to improve infrastructure, assistive technologies, disability support services, and data monitoring systems. Finally, students with disabilities should be meaningfully included in planning and evaluation processes. This would help ensure that institutional practices reflect their actual experiences and needs.

Strengthening inclusive higher education requires an integrated approach that combines managerial accountability, institutional reform, professional development, accessible infrastructure, and student-centered support. Students with disabilities cannot be fully included through policy statements alone. Their inclusion depends on how managers understand disability, how institutions allocate resources, how staff implement inclusive practices, and how support systems respond to individual needs.

4. CONCLUSION

The inclusion of students with disabilities in public universities remains limited by weak institutional practices, inconsistent managerial commitment, and insufficient support systems. Although stakeholders recognized the right of students with disabilities to participate in higher education, the findings showed a clear gap between inclusive policy commitments and actual implementation. The quantitative and qualitative findings confirmed major barriers, including low academic and social inclusion, limited instructional support, poor policy implementation, institutional resistance, inadequate infrastructure, and lack of disability-specific services. Strengthening inclusive higher education, therefore, requires stronger policy enforcement, accessible infrastructure, assistive technologies, professional development for staff, and active involvement of students with disabilities in planning and evaluation. Future studies may examine the effectiveness of intervention programs, inclusive pedagogy training, assistive technology, and disability support centers in improving the participation of students with disabilities in higher education.

5. AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. The authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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