Investing *in* Inclusion

A Guide to Disability-Inclusive Education for Higher Education Institutions

December 2024

IFC | International Finance Corporation
WORLD BANK GROUP

About IFC

IFC — a member of the World Bank Group — is the largest global development institution focused on the private sector in emerging markets. We work in more than 100 countries, using our capital, expertise, and influence to create markets and opportunities in developing countries. In fiscal year 2024, IFC committed a record $56 billion to private companies and financial institutions in developing countries, leveraging private sector solutions and mobilizing private capital to create a world free of poverty on a livable planet. For more information, visit www.ifc.org.

Investing *in* Inclusion

A Guide to Disability-Inclusive Education for Higher Education Institutions

Table of Contents

List of Acronyms

ADHD .... Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

AI .... Artificial Intelligence

AT .... Assistive Technology

CRPD .... Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

EdTech.................... Educational Technology

GDP .... Gross Domestic Product

G3ICT .... Global Initiative for Inclusive Information and Communication Technologies

HEI .... Higher Education Institution

ICT .... Information and Communications Technology

IFC .... International Finance Corporation

KPI .... Key Performance Indicator

LMICs .... Low-and Middle-Income Countries

OCD .... Obsessive Compulsive Disorder

PTSD .... Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

SDG .... Sustainable Development Goal

TVET .... Technical and Vocational Education and Training

UDL .... Universal Design for Learning

UN .... United Nations

UNESCO .... United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

UNICEF .... United Nations Children's Fund

WCAG .... Web Content Accessibility Guidelines

WHO .... World Health Organization

Introduction

Despite the significant increase in higher education access and participation globally, much remains to be done to ensure that the 1.3 billion people with disabilities benefit equitably from the promise of education.[1] Private higher education institutions (HEIs), which enroll a third of higher education students globally, can play a catalytic role in advancing inclusion and equity in education, as underscored by Sustainable Development Goal 4.

Globally, individuals with disabilities are more likely to be left out of education, at all levels, compared to their peers without disabilities. According to a World Bank study of 19 low-and middle-income countries (LMICs), the disability gap begins in childhood, as 11-year-olds with disabilities are 13 percent less likely to attend primary education compared to their peers without disabilities.[2] By age 16, the gap grows further, with boys and girls with disabilities being 17 percent and 15 percent less likely to complete primary school than their peers , respectively. The study also underscored that individuals with disabilities are 13.9 percent less

likely to complete secondary education compared to individuals without disabilities. These disparities persist in higher education. In the United States, only 23 percent of undergraduates with disabilities graduate with a bachelor's degree within five years, compared to 38 percent for undergraduates without disabilities.[3] In an UNDESA study covering 41 countries, the proportion of adults aged 25 and above who have completed higher education is half as high among those with disabilities compared to those without disabilities.[4]

Several factors shape education access and economic outcomes of persons with disabilities. Importantly, these factors (such as lack of accessible transport to school) can drive the exclusion of adults with disabilities. Within many higher education institutions in low-and middle-income countries, the lack of institution-wide policies and programs on disability inclusion remain a binding constraint. Additionally, country-level policy and regulatory environments can contribute to the exclusion of young people with disabilities from higher education as evidenced by the following figures:

Fewer than **25%** of countries recognize sign language as an official language.

In LMICs **1 in 5** students with disabilities dropped out of school during the pandemic across different levels of education.[5]

While **68%** of countries define inclusive education, a troubling **25%** still have laws supporting segregated education, effectively excluding students with disabilities from mainstream classrooms.[6]

For students with disabilities, negative stereotypes and attitudes often translate into stark economic and social outcomes. In many LMIC HEIs, there is a lack of diagnosis and understanding of students' individual needs due to developmental, psychosocial, physical, and behavioral disabilities, some of which are invisible. Consequently, students with disabilities are left behind in both educational attainment and learning, resulting in lower expected earnings in adulthood. Disability is not fully understood and accepted equally across the globe. In some cultures and societies, there is a belief that disability happens due to witchcraft.[7] According to the Department of Higher Education and Training in South Africa, such belief systems have unwittingly infiltrated higher learning institutions.[8] Moreover, stigma and negative attitudes contribute to the exclusion of people with disabilities for education systems. Girls and women with disabilities may experience higher rates of discrimination, stigma, bullying, sexual assault, and harassment.[9] The same beliefs can affect the accuracy of the data collection of persons with disabilities, as they may be less likely to disclose and self-declare their disabilities,

given that disclosure could lead to discrimination. In emerging markets, there is a lack of up-to-date data on disability, and the available numbers differ widely.[10] The consequences of educational exclusion extend beyond earnings. Students with disabilities are more likely to experience multidimensional poverty, including lack of access to healthcare, limited employment opportunities, and higher risks of social exclusion.

Higher education institutions can play a central role in equipping students with disabilities with the skills and knowledge needed to thrive in 21st century societies. Universities and tertiary-level technical and vocational education and training (TVET) institutions can become catalysts for inclusion and economic change by creating enrollment pipelines in secondary education, investing in accessible learning materials, assistive technologies, promoting universal design of learning-based differentiated curricula, fostering an accessible environment including accommodations, and fostering an overall culture of inclusion among other key measures. Inclusive learning not only empowers individuals to pursue higher education but also cultivates a more diverse and innovative learning environment for all students. Increasing access to higher education for persons with disabilities can also have a positive impact on the economy. In LMICs, each additional year of higher education can increase an individual's annual income by over 20 percent.[11]

This report provides guidance on disability inclusive education within HEIs, particularly in LMICs. It offers a two-pronged approach: (i) actionable guidance for HEIs to strengthen disability inclusion and mental health within the student body and workforce; and (ii) opportunities for HEIs to utilize an abbreviated "maturity model" to assess initial progress toward disability inclusion and accessible learning environments. This document also provides a case study that exemplifies opportunities to promote both business benefits and social inclusion. Additionally, this report highlights cross-cutting themes including funding accessible educational technology (EdTech); gender; physical accommodations for accessibility in the classroom; supporting equal access and outcomes for persons with disabilities; and encouraging HEIs to hire and employ more people with disabilities. Overall, this report emphasizes that disability inclusion is not just a social

responsibility but also a significant economic and business opportunity for both HEIs and investors in LMICs.

This report also highlights the central role of mental health and well-being in fostering inclusive and equitable higher education systems. It explores interventions for mental health support in HEIs, including through curriculum innovation, health services, institutional environment, and community engagement.

This report comes at a time of transformation in higher education, offering unprecedented opportunities to advance disability inclusion within learning environments and provide a more accessible and adaptive learning experience for all. The COVID-19 pandemic significantly accelerated the growth of distance and hybrid learning solutions. Recent developments in artificial intelligence offer low-cost solutions that can rapidly advance accessibility in online and offline learning environments. For instance, AI-powered screen readers, text-to-speech, and speech-to-text applications are becoming increasingly powerful and inexpensive. Additionally, personalized and adaptive learning solutions are becoming mainstream, offering new avenues to tailor education to the needs of all learners, including people with disabilities. These transformational forces offer HEIs a unique opportunity to rethink their operating and delivery models to advance access and outcomes for persons with disabilities.

This report is part of ongoing World Bank Group efforts to advance disability inclusion in education systems. The document builds on existing World Bank publications on inclusive education, including "Criteria for the World Bank's Disability-Inclusive Investment Project Financing (IPF) in Education (2021)" and "World Bank Inclusive Education Resource Guide (2020)." The report augments the World Bank Group's literature on disability inclusion through its deep dive on private HEIs in emerging markets. Additionally, this report is well aligned with the World Bank Group's 2018 commitments to further efforts toward mainstreaming disability inclusion in education operations. As part of the global effort to strengthen disability inclusion in education, the World Bank has committed to ensuring that all its investment project financing in education will be disability-inclusive by 2025. At IFC, we believe that students with disabilities

should have equal access to education services, and that education institutions should provide an environment that seeks to develop their personality, talents, and creativity, as well as their mental and physical capabilities, to their fullest potential.

The challenge and opportunity of disability inclusion in higher education

The concept of disability has evolved over time and is now generally understood as a social, rather than as a medical notion.[12] According to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), "persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments. Which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others."[13] Until recently, disability was defined as the result of an individual's condition. The limitation was associated with the person, not the environment. Today, we know that disability occurs at the point of interaction between a person and an inaccessible environment. Physical, cognitive, and social exclusion are the result of a mismatch between what a person wants to achieve and an environment that does not support them or is accessible to their requirements to participate. This updated definition, first adopted by the World Health Organization, presents an unprecedented opportunity to embrace a more holistic approach to inclusive education.

In addition to visible disabilities, these "invisible disabilities" are of particular relevance to higher education systems:

Cognitive
Persons with a cognitive or developmental disability.

Neurodivergent
Persons with autism, persons with dyslexia, dyscalculia, dyspraxia, or dysgraphia, persons with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), persons with Sensory Processing Disorder, persons with Tourette Syndrome, persons with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) or neurodivergence.

Mental Health
Persons with Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), people living with bipolar disorder, anxiety and/or depression.

Barriers to disability inclusion in higher education

Within HEIs, several barriers prevent the full participation of people with disabilities. These include the following:

1. Resource barriers

Inclusive education often requires additional resources, such as specialized teaching materials, assistive technologies, reliable access to internet, remote learning opportunities, and support staff who can support students with disabilities. Many educational systems struggle to generate and allocate these resources effectively.

2. Attitudinal barriers

Discriminatory attitudes, bullying, stigmatization, and violence may persist among some educators, students, parents, as well as community members, hindering students' full participation in education systems. Women and girls with disabilities often experience heightened bullying and gender-based violence both in and out of school.[14]

3. Infrastructure and accessibility barriers

Physical barriers, such as inaccessible buildings, the lack of ramps, or inadequate transportation, can prevent students from participating fully in education.

4. Pedagogical barriers

Curricula, instructional methods, and assessments approaches may prevent students from fully participating in higher education. For instance, traditional assessment methods may not accurately reflect the progress of students with diverse skill sets. For instance, traditional assessment such as written tests are inaccessible for blind students.

5. Cost barriers

Persons with disabilities are more likely to experience multidimensional poverty than their peers without disabilities.[15] Hence, the inability to afford costs, whether direct (tuition and fees) and indirect (transport, assistive devices, etc.), may impede their access and participation in higher education systems.

6. Policy barriers

The lack of policies and procedures within HEIs supporting enrolment, admission, program choice, and reasonable accommodation can bar individuals with disabilities from accessing HEIs.

Addressing these barriers will be vital to ensuring that the promise of education benefits all students.

The business case for disability inclusion in higher education

Inclusive education doesn't only advantage people with disabilities—it also offers significant benefits to HEIs. By adopting disability-inclusive policies and practices, universities and TVET centers can benefit from the following:

1. Increased enrollments

By offering accessible and inclusive education, institutions can tap into an underserved population and attract a wider pool of students, including learners with disabilities. In South Africa for instance, persons with disabilities represent 7 percent of the population. However, only 5 percent have access to formal education compared to 12 percent for persons without disabilities.[16] By addressing the untapped market of potential learners with disabilities, HEIs can boost enrollment numbers and generate additional tuition revenue.

2. Diversity of thought and talent

By creating inclusive and diverse learning environments, HEIs can foster supportive learning spaces for all learners. Inclusive policies, programs, and language that embrace students and teachers from diverse backgrounds—including those with undiagnosed or unrecognized disabilities—can ensure that individuals feel valued and supported to thrive.

3. Improved retention and employability

Adopting Universal Design of Learning (UDL)[i] and enhanced online learning environments can potentially increase retention, completion rates, and employability outcomes for all students, including students with disabilities.

4. Enhanced social legitimation

By championing disability inclusion, private universities and TVET institutions can enhance their reputation among key stakeholders, including philanthropic or charitable organizations seeking to support inclusive education.

5. Compliance

Several countries are implementing policies to encourage or mandate disability inclusion in education. In Peru, for instance, Law No. 29973 requires HEIs to reserve 5 percent of job vacancies to persons with disabilities. Additionally, the law encourages HEIs to implement UDL in faculty training and curricula. As more countries adopt laws on disability inclusion, institutions can get ahead of the curve by mainstreaming disability inclusion in their policies and programs.

[i] Universal Design of Learning (UDL)
Universal design is defined as "the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without need for adaptation or specialized design." While the concept emerged primarily with regard to disability issues, universal design strives to be a broad-spectrum solution that helps everyone, including elderly people, people with strollers, pregnant women, and children, in addition to people with disabilities. Its goal is to remove physical barriers and create a more inclusive environment. Universal Design of Learning (UDL) refers to the design of educational programs, solutions, or services that can be used by all people without the need of additional adaptation or a specialized design. For higher education institutions, UDL entails recognizing that learners have different needs. Hence, instruction methods, learning resources, and assessments should be tailored to meet this variety of needs. Because inclusive education is an "ongoing process" systems transformation is constant and iterative, rather than a one-time event.

Why private higher education institutions can make a difference

The recommendations in this report are specifically tailored to private HEIs given the pivotal role they can play in underpinning inclusive education. These include the following:

Reach

Globally, 33 percent of students in higher education are enrolled in private institutions.[17] Given this reach, private TVETs and universities can play a significant role in improving access and outcomes for persons with disabilities.

Autonomy and agility

Private HEIs' autonomy can support the quick adoption of disability inclusive practices and policies. For instance, a private university can quickly amend its curriculum to include disability-positive language, or update hiring policies to recruit more persons with disabilities.

Provide a demonstration effect

By championing disability inclusion, private HEIs can set a powerful example for other institutions to follow. Historically, private institutions have contributed to introducing new programs and teaching modalities.[18] By implementing the disability inclusion practices outlined in this guide, private HEIs can raise the benchmark for excellence in the education sector.

Low-hanging fruits

Several low-cost measures such as closed captioning or audiobooks can advance disability inclusion in private HEIs. These can serve as quick wins to galvanize momentum for further change, as explained in the following section.

How institutions can advance disability inclusion

This section presents examples of interventions to advance disability inclusion in HEIs with best practices specifically tailored to the private sector.[19][20] Initial actions represent low-cost (often free) early interventions that can provide quick wins for students with disabilities. Further actions to improve student experiences and accessibility interventions are more substantial in nature. While this list is far from exhaustive, it provides a primer on disability inclusion for universities and TVET centers operating in resource-constrained and emerging contexts.[ii]

[ii] This section draws heavily from two resources: (1) Toolkit for Inclusive Higher Education Institutions by Anna M. Kelly and Lisa Padden; and (2) Disability Inclusion Guidance for Companies by CDC. Both documents provide suitable information for further reading.

Planning and governance

Initial actions:

- Conduct an institutional disability audit.
- If there are students and staff with disabilities, interview them to get their perspectives on exclusion/inclusion in the institution.
- Engage with associations and organizations of people with disabilities on developing/enhancing an accessibility and inclusion action plan.
- Elevate disability to a strategic priority and sensitize all students and staff on its importance.

Further actions:

- Demonstrate leadership commitment by mainstreaming disability inclusion in institutions' mission statement, policy and strategy documents, awards, and so on.
- Develop an action plan and commit long-term budget and resourcing to disability inclusion and mental health interventions.
- Strengthen partnerships with Organizations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) employers, and other organizations championing disability inclusion.

Student lifecycle and campus culture

Initial actions:

- Target and represent persons with disabilities positively in outreach materials and communications.
- Ensure communications are accessible to prospective students (using tools such as sign language, closed caption, screen reader).
- Ensure that admission and support services information is available in accessible formats, such as large print brochures, accessible admission/career sites.
- Use disability-positive language and imagery in all communications. Avoid negative terms such as "handicapped" or "suffering from."
- Ensure availability of mental health resources and guidance.
- Create inclusive enrollment pipelines that ensures students with disabilities are part of the pipeline in secondary education.

Further actions:

- Provide career education, advice, and guidance to all students.
- Develop admission, retention and outcome (learning, employment) KPIs for students with disabilities.
- Gather disability disaggregated data to understand and better serve student populations.
- Create culture of disability inclusion programs (awareness day on campus, resource center, clubs, groups and student organizations).
- Train employees, staff, and on-campus student leaders.

Curriculum, instruction, and assessment

Initial actions:

- Provide all learning materials in advance of classes in a format accessible to persons with disabilities.
- Ensure that instruction and assessment materials adhere to accessibility guidelines (12+ font size, color contrast, sans-serif fonts, screen reader capabilities, sign language, and closed caption availability, etc.).
- Provide student support through dedicated advisors and tutors.

Further actions:

- Integrate Universal Design of Learning into curriculum development, instruction, and assessments.
- Make assessments, as well as grade rubrics and descriptors accessible to all students.
- Develop guidelines to include students with disabilities in assessments, ensuring their full participation through necessary accommodations.

Physical and digital learning environments

Initial actions:

- Conduct an accessibility audit to evaluate accessibility of the institution's physical classrooms, workspaces, student accommodation and the physical environment.
- Ensure that website and online learning environments meet the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) international standards.

Further actions:

- Commit long-term budget to improve the accessibility of physical and digital learning environment.
- Caption all video and audio files according to country-specific guidelines and embed sign language for accessibility.
- Invest in reasonable accommodations and adjustments to make physical, digital, and experiential learning environment more accessible.
- Factor disability inclusion and accessibility into procurement policies.

Technology as an enabler

Initial actions:	Further actions:
• Provide students with reasonable accommodations, which include digital enhancements/ accommodations (screen readers, speech to text, etc.). • After considering issues of safety, bias, and other risk, explore the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools such as text-to-speech technology, automatic transcription of videos, and sign-language to text applications. • Educate staff about leveraging technology to support inclusive education. • Ensure in-person and online therapy/ counseling provided to students with mental health concerns.	• Dedicate funding to provide assistive technology equipment to learners with disabilities. • Set aside budget and learning and development for assistive tech accommodations. • Ensure classroom technology (i.e., digital whiteboards and student computers) are equipped for assistive technology. • Ensure that mental health resources are provided through learning platforms.

Human resources and capacity building

Initial actions:	Further actions:
• Hire staff with disabilities. • Conduct an accessibility audit throughout human resource cycle (recruitment, onboarding, training, compensation, and performance management). • Ensure workplace is accessible for staff with disabilities. • Ensure staff have resources at on-boarding period that are accessible.	• Benchmark recruitment, retention, and promotion of staff with disabilities. • Provide continuous training on unconscious bias and disability awareness to staff, students, and the university community. • Create curriculum around disability justice and history.

The Disability Inclusion and Accessibility Maturity Model for higher education institutions

Drawing inspiration from the "Accessibility Maturity Model" created by the Global Initiative for Inclusive ICTs (G3ICT), a United Nations initiative, this report proposes a streamlined methodology for assessing disability inclusion and accessibility in HEIs.[21] This methodology evaluates an institution's approach to disability inclusion and accessibility across these key areas: Planning and Governance, Student Lifecycle and Culture, Curriculum and Instruction, Physical and Digital Learning Environments, Technology and Human Resources. HEIs can measure the level of accessibility and maturity across their organization by following the self-assessment and the step-by-step process.

Step 1:

Review policies.
Review the institution's existing policies, programs, and regulations related to disability inclusion and accessibility.

Step 2:

Consider digital and physical accessibility.
Reflect on the accessibility of various HEI environments, including physical spaces, digital resources, study materials, and learning courses.

Step 3:

Identify gaps.
Evaluate the level of support currently offered to students and staff with disabilities, including academic support, training, financial aid, and career services.

Step 4:

Evaluate maturity.
Evaluate the maturity of the institution referencing Table 1 below. Take note of dimensions where the institution is in the "initial" or "defined" stage.

Step 5:

Use maturity model to inform action.
HEIs that use this model will gain a clear roadmap for achieving their accessibility goals. The model outlines distinct levels of maturity, allowing HEIs to benchmark their current progress and identify areas for improvement.

Step 6:

Implement a system for tracking implementation and outcomes.
HEIs should set clear goals and implement a system for tracking progress with implementing improvements and changes in enrollment and the learning environment for disabled students.

By following these steps, HEIs can leverage the Disability Inclusion and Accessibility Maturity Model to create a more inclusive and welcoming environment for everyone.

This assessment, based on the Accessibility Actions outlined above, allows LMIC HEIs to gauge current standing and identify areas for improvement. By taking the initial assessment, HEIs can leverage this model to create a more inclusive environment and make informed accessibility commitments and interventions.

Table 1: Simplified Institutional Evaluation Model for Disability Inclusion

Dimension	Maturity level		
	Initial	**Defined**	**Optimized**
Planning and governance	No formal disability inclusion policy exists. Implementation is ad hoc and inconsistent, with limited budget.	Disability inclusion policy exists, but implementation is limited. Minimal strategic alignment and exec support.	Disability inclusion is a priority in policy documents, with dedicated budget, exec support, strategic alignment and continuous improvement.
Student lifecycle and campus culture	Limited or no consideration of disability inclusion in the student lifecycle. No or few structured initiatives to promote inclusive culture.	Disability inclusion issues are considered in student lifecycle. Campus culture is growing more inclusive with some structured disability initiatives.	Disability inclusion is fully integrated throughout the student lifecycle. Several initiatives contribute to highly inclusive campus culture.
Curriculum, instruction, and assessment	Limited or ad hoc implementation of UDL in curriculum development, instruction and/or assessment.	Partial implementation of UDL in curriculum development, instruction and/or assessment.	UDL is fully mainstreamed across curriculum development, instruction, and assessment.
Physical and digital learning environments	Limited or ad hoc accommodations and adjustments in physical, digital, and experiential learning environments.	Some adjustments exist in physical or digital environments, but limited exec/policy support hinders progress.	Reasonable accommodations and adjustments make physical, digital, and experiential learning environment highly accessible.
Technology as an enabler	Limited or ad hoc deployment of accessible and assistive technology to support inclusive learning.	Some accessible and assistive technology solutions are deployed. Limited alignment with institution's digital strategy.	Innovative deployment of accessible and assistive technology. Disability inclusion is the institution's digital strategy.
Human resources and capacity building	No disability inclusion KPIs exist for recruitment, training, and retention exist.	Disability inclusion KPIs exist for recruitment, training, and retention, but monitoring is limited.	Disability inclusion KPIs for recruitment, training, and retention are continuously monitored and corrective actions implemented.

The case for promoting mental health in higher education

Mental health and well-being are essential to fostering inclusive and equitable higher education systems. By addressing the intersection of disability and mental health, HEIs can ensure that all students have the support they need to succeed academically, and identification of disability is an important dimension. There is evidence that within education systems, students with disabilities may face increased risks of mental health challenges.[22] Additionally, the frequency of mental health challenges in young adults with disabilities could be up to five times higher than in those without disabilities.[23]

By investing in comprehensive mental health and well-being programs and interventions, HEIs can support students with disabilities and enhance the institutional ecosystem and completion outcomes. This holistic approach contributes to a more supportive and resilient academic community, benefiting all members and fostering an environment conducive to success and well-being.[24] The benefits of investing in mental health HEIs include the following:

Enhancing student performance:

Inclusive mental health care adapts to individual preferences, fosters autonomy, and amplifies diverse voices.[25] By providing inclusive mental health services, HEIs can contribute significantly to enhancing learning outcomes for all students, including those with disabilities. In a U.S. survey, over 60 percent of college students reported that counseling services enhanced their academic performance, underscoring the importance of these services in supporting student success.[26]

Increase student retention:

By investing in mental health, HEIs can boost student retention and completion rates. A 2023 study found that 40 percent of undergraduate students had considered dropping out, with most citing personal mental health and emotional stress as principal factors.[27] This highlights the importance of mental health support in HEIs to help mitigate these challenges and improve student retention.

Improve staff morale and learning outcomes:

Mental distress affects not only students but also faculty and staff.[28][29] By addressing mental health holistically, HEIs can potentially enhance staff morale. Comprehensive mental health strategies can potentially contribute to a more positive work environment, leading to improved overall well-being and job satisfaction among HEI employees.

Societal benefits:

In addition to gains to institutions, investments in mental health also benefit society as a whole. Some estimates show that for each $1 invested[30] in universal school-based mental health interventions aiming at mental health prevention and promotion, there is an expected $24 economic return in 80 years, resulting from savings in further health/mental health care, improved school outcomes, productivity, and better life chances for students with mental health disabilities.

Several types of early interventions can be implemented in schools to support students with disabilities. Preventive programs can promote positive mental health behaviors and build resilience in students, equipping them with tools to support their academic and social success. Early identification through screening tools and training for educators can ensure timely intervention, preventing mental health concerns from escalating. Additionally, support services like individual or group counseling, peer support groups, and connections to external mental health resources can provide crucial assistance.

Tailoring mental health interventions is essential to address the specific challenges faced by students with disabilities. For example, a student with a visual impairment may benefit from mental health resources delivered in a verbal communication format, while a student with a learning disability may require additional support in managing academic challenges. The following are additional examples of interventions and actions that HEIs can take to promote mental health. For more information, explore the [Mental Health brief](#) by WHO, UNICEF and UNESCO.

Examples of actions to strengthen mental health

(Adapted from guidance by WHO, UNICEF, and UNESCO)[31]

Policies and curriculum

- **Develop clear policies** on confidentiality, assessment, management, and referral pathways for learners and staff experiencing mental health problems.
- **Mainstream strength-based approaches** and mental health education in the curriculum.

Health services

- Provide or support access to multimodal **mental health** services.
- Ensure that learners, staff, and other stakeholders are aware of and **understand referral pathways** on- and off-campus.
- Prioritize **prevention and early detection**.

Institutional social-emotional and built environment

- Set up **peer support programs** for new learners.
- Ensure **extracurricular activities are** inclusive and accessible to all.
- **Strengthen staffs' ability** to build positive relationships with students.
- Provide **safe, calming spaces** to support mental health.

Leadership and community engagement

- Ensure **strong leadership commitment** to the promotion of mental health.
- Engage **parents, guardians, community leaders**, local organizations and other key groups in developing and implementing mental health interventions.

Case Study:
How Continental University is championing inclusive education in Peru

In recent years, **Continental University in Peru** has emerged as a champion of inclusive education, implementing a comprehensive strategy to support disability inclusion for students and staff. With an enrollment of over **66,000 students** across online, hybrid, and traditional programs, the university exemplifies the potential and challenges inherent in mainstreaming inclusion within higher education. Additionally, Continental's mental health and disability inclusion programing have benefitted over 10,000 individuals. The following section outlines the key elements that have marked their inclusive education journey.

Establishment of an Inclusion Unit and Policies

In September 2022, Continental University's board **established a dedicated Inclusion Unit** tasked with two main objectives: (i) to support a holistic and integrated approach to inclusion; and (ii) to promote the academic success and employment outcomes of learners with disabilities and other vulnerable groups. Additionally, **a disability inclusion policy** was developed, outlining priority actions and guidelines to support not only students with disabilities but also other vulnerable groups, including individuals with learning disabilities and chronic illnesses. The establishment of this unit and policies served as a strong signal to various stakeholders, position inclusion as a strategic priority for the university.

Monitoring Student Disability Statistics

As part of its commitment to inclusive education, Continental University implemented a robust monitoring system. Each year, **all students are required to complete a form** where they can self-identify as having a disability. Those who self-identify then participate in an in-depth interview to further clarify their specific needs. As of 2024, **146 students** at Continental have **self-identified as having a disability**, with physical and visual impairments constituting the majority. Plans are underway to enhance the tracking of employment outcomes for graduates with disabilities.

Awareness Raising and Training Initiatives

The lack of knowledge and awareness regarding disability was a key obstacle to mainstreaming disability inclusion. Continuous training, awareness-raising, and sensitization became priorities. Continental undertook several initiatives in this regard, including the following:

- Training, webinars, and workshops on disability inclusion for all university staff.
- Cultural events aimed at awareness-raising, such as **hosting an Accessibility Film Festival** to promote an understanding of inclusion.
- Collaborative workshops with external organizations, including Peru's National Council for the Integration of Persons with Disabilities.
- A **mandatory course** on accessibility and inclusion for all faculty members, introducing the principles of Universal Design for Learning.

Capacity-building initiatives on inclusion have been well-received. For instance, workshop participants' **satisfaction exceeded 95 percent.**

Leveraging Technology for Inclusion

The university has implemented accessibility policies for virtual classrooms to ensure content production adheres to **WCAG 2.0 standards**.[32] Additionally, the university invested in and deploys several accessibility tools to enhance user experience and support academic

development. For content accessibility, the university utilizes Ally, a tool that converts accessible content into various formats to better support students' academic growth. Additionally, ReadSpeaker allows users to listen to the content of the virtual classroom, which is particularly beneficial for individuals with visual disabilities.

Collaborative Efforts to Address Challenges

The mainstreaming of **Universal Design of Learning** as well as reasonable accommodation in classrooms is challenging. Overcoming these hurdles has **required collaboration** among leaders from various teams and teachers themselves. The Inclusion Unit provides basic guidelines for classroom accommodations tailored to each student's specific disability. Teachers then can implement these actions in consultation with the student, ensuring agreed-upon support in classes, practices, and evaluations.

Calma: An Inclusive Approach to Mental Health Support

In March 2020, at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the university launched the **Calma Program**, Peru's first online psychological first aid initiative. Calma, which is Spanish for "Calm", employs trained volunteers to support the emotional and mental health of users. To ensure Calma's services were accessible to all beneficiaries regardless of personal characteristics, reasonable adjustments and communication support were implemented and invested in. These included the use of multiplatform video calls, live subtitling, attention to native and sign languages, and supporting materials such as videos, images, and infographics. In addition to Calma, the university hosts a psychological care center staffed with eight full-time psychologists that emphasizes preventive care and early detection. When students require additional care, they are referred to an external medical establishment. In 2022, following a mental health survey of employees and teachers, the university also launched a dedicated mental health service for staff called the "Sanamente" program, which means "healthy mind."

Accommodation & Accessibility Services

Continental University **provides reasonable accommodation** services tailored to the individual needs of students for classes and assessments. In the Calma psychological services, adjustments are made to accommodate the accessibility needs of students with disabilities, including material adaptation, environment modification, and provision of technical resources or personalized support.

Inclusion as an Ongoing Endeavor

Continental University acknowledges that the journey toward inclusion is continuous, with numerous opportunities for enhancement. Efforts are underway to tailor employability interventions for specific groups and to cultivate a more inclusive workforce. Additionally, the university is proactive in engaging with associations to refine accessibility and inclusion practices and is committed to ongoing capacity building for mainstreaming Universal Design for Learning among faculty.

Vision for the Future

When asked what they would do if they had a "magic wand," Continental University envisions a comprehensive approach to inclusion, innovative communication strategies for disability inclusion, and an "Employability Without Borders" program to facilitate the integration of people with disabilities into the workforce. These ambitions paint a future-forward vision to advance inclusion in higher education.

Call to Action

The global push for sustainability and inclusion hinges on dismantling educational barriers for all, particularly the 1.3 billion people with disabilities. While ethical and social arguments for inclusion are strong, the economic case presents a compelling investment opportunity for HEIs. HEIs that prioritize accessible learning unlock a vast pool of untapped talent. This fosters a more diverse and innovative workforce, a key driver of economic growth. Studies show graduates with disabilities demonstrate high loyalty and commitment, potentially leading to increased productivity and reduced turnover costs for businesses. The cost of exclusion is significant—estimates suggest nations lose up to 7 percent of GDP by not including people with disabilities in the workforce.

Key Takeaways

The current reality presents a challenge, but also an opportunity. However, HEIs can take action in key areas to underpin disability inclusion and universal accessibility:

- **Invest in a holistic approach to inclusive education:** Allocate a budget line to mitigate physical barriers and infrastructure limitations and create a digital environment where students with disabilities can learn and thrive. Collaborate with Organizations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) and accessibility experts.

- **Utilize the Maturity Model and Self-Assessment Tool:** Employ the Maturity Model to assess progress and identify areas for improvement in accessibility and disability inclusion practices.

- **Incorporate Cross Cutting Themes:** Scale up and strengthen funding for accessible technology (AT); gender, mental health interventions; support equal access and outcomes for persons with disabilities.

HEIs have a critical role to play in ensuring no student is left behind. By prioritizing accessible, adaptive, and inclusive learning experiences, HEIs can unlock the economic and societal impact. Inclusive learning cultivates a more vibrant environment for all students, fostering innovation, economic growth, and a more just and sustainable future. This presents a high-yield economic opportunity for HEIs and a chance to create a more prosperous and inclusive future for all.

Annex

Self-Assessment: Questionnaire to Benchmark the Maturity and Accessibility of Higher Education Institutions and Universities:

Students with Disabilities and Mental Health

- Does the university provide gender-neutral and accessible toilets?
- Does the institution provide on-campus residence accessible to persons with disabilities?
- Does the institution provide wheelchair-accessible classrooms and facilities?
- Does the institution provide clear directional signs with large, high contrast print?
- Do all levels of the facility connect via a wheelchair-accessible route of travel in case of emergency, fire or disaster?
- Are there safe emergency exits and alarms for people with different disabilities? (Deaf, Hard of Hearing, Blind, Wheelchair users)?

Digital Environment & Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

- Does the institution provide captioned videos for class lectures?
- Does the institution provide alternative text for graphic images on web pages?
- Does the institution have procurement policies promoting accessible products?
- Does the institution adhere to website accessibility standards?
- Does the institution provide access to internet and accessible software for Blind or Low Vision users?
- Does the institution provide closed captioning for virtual courses?
- Does the institution provide Braille display technology and/or desktop magnifiers?
- Does the institution's website say how students can request disability-related accommodations?
- Are electronic resources, including web pages, compliant with accessibility guidelines or standards adopted by the student's institution or their specific project or funding source?

Student Life & Curriculum

- Does the institution course syllabus include a disability inclusion statement, which invites students with disabilities to meet with instructors to discuss learning accommodations?
- Does the institution provide flexible study schedules for students with disabilities?
- Does the institution offer part-time and/or flexible learning options (online, evening, or weekend classes)?
- Does the institution provide curriculum and extra-curricular support to encourage program completion?
- Are there mental health guidance counselors or student resources for those with mental health disabilities?
- Do institution or class events occur in accessible facilities, and is this information included in publications promoting events?
- Are institution brochures available in any alternative formats such as large print, Braille, or electronic files?
- Does the institution provide accessible transport options for students and staff (especially women), if transportation services are offered?

Data and Measurable Outcomes

- Does the institution collect disability and accessibility data from students, with a data privacy policy clearly communicated?
- Does the institution collect disaggregated data on graduation and drop-out rates, including by disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, and race/ethnicity?
- Does the institution collect disaggregated data on key indicators of students with disabilities and their employment after graduation, including by sexual orientation, gender identity, race, and disability?

For Employees/Staff with Disabilities at Institutions

Recruitment

- Does the institution integrate inclusivity and accessibility aspects into job advertisements and the hiring process?
- Does the institution actively seek and encourage applicants with disabilities?
- Are staff members familiar with how to respond to requests for disability-related accommodations during the interview process?

Retention

- Does the institution offer flexible work schedules for employees?
- Does the institution have a disability and accessibility policy in place for employees of the institution with disabilities?
- Does the institution have a specific department or organizational capacity to receive requests and address the disability needs of employees (and students)?
- Is institution management familiar with the anti-harassment policy related to people with disabilities?
- Does the institution provide reasonable accommodations for employees and staff with disabilities, (i.e., flexible work schedules or accessibility of physical areas, etc)
- Does the institution provide software that is compatible with assistive technology for employees with disabilities?

Disability Disaggregated Data

- Does the institution collect disability and accessibility data from employees, with a data privacy policy clearly communicated?
- Does the institution have a data privacy policy and controls on access to sensitive data?

References

1 United Nations. "We Need to Do Better for 1.3 Billion People around the World." United Nations, n.d. www. un.org/en/desa/we-need-do-better-13-billion-people-around-world

2 Male, Chata, and Quentin Wodon. *Disability Gaps in Educational Attainment and Literacy*, Washington, D.C.: World Bank & Global Partnership for Education, 2017. https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/pt/396291511988894028/pdf/121762-replacement-PUBLIC-WorldBank-GapsInEdAttainmentLiteracy-Brief-v6.pdf

3 (Postsecondary National Policy Institute Students with Disabilities in Higher Education CENSUS OVERVIEW)

4 United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. *Disability and Development Report: Realizing the Sustainable Development Goals by, for, and with Persons with Disabilities*. New York: UNDESA, 2018. https://social.desa.un.org/publications/un-flagship-report-on-disability-and-development-2018

5 United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. *Disability and Development Report 2024: Accelerating the Realization of the Sustainable Development Goals by, for and with Persons with Disabilities*. New York: UNDESA, 2024. https://social.desa.un.org/publications/un-flagship-report-on-disability-and-development-2024

6 UNESCO. *Global Education Monitoring Report: Inclusion and Education*. New York: UNESCO, 2020. https://www.unesco.org/gem-report/en/inclusion

7 Abrahams, Dureyah, Beata Batorowicz, Peter Ndaa, Sumaya Gabriels, Solomon M. Abebe, Xiaolin Xu, and Heather M. Aldersey. ""I'm Not Asking for Special Treatment, I'm Asking for Access": Experiences of University Students with Disabilities in Ghana, Ethiopia and South Africa" *Disabilities* 3, no. 1: 114-128. February, 2023. https://doi.org/10.3390/disabilities3010009

8 Abrahams, Dureyah, Beata Batorowicz, Peter Ndaa, Sumaya Gabriels, Solomon M. Abebe, Xiaolin Xu, and Heather M. Aldersey. 2023. ""I'm Not Asking for Special Treatment, I'm Asking for Access": Experiences of

University Students with Disabilities in Ghana, Ethiopia and South Africa" *Disabilities* 3, no. 1: 114-128. February, 2023. https://doi.org/10.3390/disabilities3010009

9 UN Girls' Education Initiative and Leonard Cheshire. *Leave No Girl with Disabilities Behind: Ensuring efforts to advance gender equality in education are disability-inclusive.* New York: UNGEI, 2021. https://www.ungei.org/publication/leave-no-girl-with-disabilities-behind

10 Patrinos, Harry. "50 Years after Landmark Study, Returns to Education Remain Strong." *World Bank Blogs*, May 3, 2023. https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/education/50-years-after-landmark-study-returns-education-remain-strong

11 Psacharopoulos, George, and Harry Patrinos. *Returns to Investment in Education: A Decennial Review of the Global Literature.* Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2018. https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/entities/publication/604f36b2-3890-5fbe-929c-6576f29dd109

12 Alasuutari, Hanna, and Shawn Powers. *Criteria for the World Bank's Disability-Inclusive Investment Project Financing in Education.* Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2021. https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/712711627321467972/pdf/Criteria-for-the-World-Bank-s-Disability-Inclusive-Investment-Project-Financing-IPF-in-Education-Guidance-Note.pdf

13 United Nations. "Article 1." www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities/article-1-purpose.html

14 Rousso, H. (2003), Education for All: A Gender and Disability Perspective Ortoleva, S., Lewis, H. (2012), Forgotten Sisters – A report on violence against women with Disabilities

15 Mitra, Sophie and Posarac, Aleksandra and Vick, Brandon C., "Disability and Poverty in Developing Countries: A Snapshot from the World Health Survey." World Bank Social Protection Working Paper No. 1109. April, 2011. http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1908128

16 Census 2011: Profile of Persons with Disabilities in South Africa.

17 UNESCO. *Global Education Monitoring Report 2021/2: Non-state actors in education: Who chooses? Who loses?* New York: UNESCO, 2022. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000379875

18 Tamrat, Wondwosen and Damtew Teferra. "Emerging Contours of African Private Higher Education." *Inside Higher Ed*, November 26, 2017. www.insidehighered.com/blogs/world-view/emerging-contours-african-private-higher-education

19 Social Development Direct. *Disability Inclusion Guidance for Companies*. London: CDC Group, 2021. https://toolkit.bii.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/CDC-Disability-Inclusion-Company-Guidance-FINAL.pdf

20 Kelly, Anna M., and Padden, Lisa. *Toolkit for Inclusive Higher Education Institutions: From Vision to Practice*. Dublin: UCD Access & Lifelong Learning, 2018. https://www.ucd.ie/t4cms/0274_UCD_TOOLKIT_1118_ONLINE_LR.pdf

21 Global Initiative for Inclusive ICTs. "What we do." https://g3ict.org/what-we-do

22 McMillan, J. and J. Jarvis "Mental Health and Students with Disabilities: A Review of Literature." *Journal of Psychologists and Counsellors in Schools*, Volume 23 Special Issue 2: Wellbeing and the prevention of violence in young people, December 2013, pp. 236 – 251. Cambridge University Press. https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-psychologists-and-counsellors-in-schools/article/abs/mental-health-and-students-with-disabilities-a-review-of-literature/C7DD0A37C44E61BB14F6DEF8DEA06EA1

23 CDC. "The Mental Health of People with Disabilities." *Center for Disease Control and Prevention*, November 30, 2020. www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/features/mental-health-for-all.html

24 Hejl, Luke. "Importance of Mental Health Services on College Campuses." *TimelyCare*, June 23, 2020. https://timelycare.com/blog/mental-health-in-college-students/

25 Okoli, C. "Inclusive Mental Health Care Is Responsive Health Care." *Journal of the American Psychiatric Nurses Association*. 2023;29(1):79-82. doi:10.1177/10783903221141894

26 LeViness, Peter, et al. "The Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors Annual Survey 2018." AUCCCD. https://www.aucccd.org/assets/documents/Survey/2018%20aucccd%20survey-public-revised.pdf

27 McPhillips, Deidre. "Mental Health Struggles Are Driving More College Students to Consider Dropping Out, Survey Finds." *CNN*, March 23. 2023. www.cnn.com/2023/03/23/health/mental-health-college-dropout-survey-wellness/index.html

28 van Niekerk, Rudolph and Maria van Gent. "Mental health and well-being of university staff during the coronavirus disease 2019 levels 4 and 5 lockdown in an Eastern Cape University, South Africa" *South African Journal of Psychiatry* [Online], Volume 27, March 8, 2021. https://sajp.org.za/index.php/sajp/article/view/1589

29 Flannery, Mary Ellen. "The Mental Health Crisis among Faculty and College Staff." *NEA* Today, March 7, 2024. www.nea.org/nea-today/all-news-articles/mental-health-crisis-among-faculty-and-college-staff

30 Grande AJ, et al. "Efficacy of school-based interventions for mental health problems in children and adolescents in low and middle-income countries: A systematic review and meta-analysis." *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 13:1012257, January 6, 2023. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyt.2022.1012257

31 World Health Organization. "Health Promoting Schools." *WHO*, n.d. www.who.int/health-topics/health-promoting-schools

32 World Wide Web Consortium. "Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) Overview." *WCAG*, 2024. https://www.w3.org/WAI/standards-guidelines/wcag/