



Challenges and opportunities influencing social inclusion and academic performance of students with disabilities in six Kenyan Universities

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Recommended Reference: Savatia, A. B., Onkware, K., & Njeru, F. (2026). Challenges and opportunities influencing social inclusion and academic performance of students with disabilities in six Kenyan universities. *African Quarterly Social Science Review*, 3(4), 498–510. <https://doi.org/10.51867/AQSSR.3.4.40>

ABSTRACT

Students with disabilities (SWDs) in higher learning institutions continue to experience institutional, resource-related, academic and socio-cultural barriers that may affect their participation and academic performance. This study examined the challenges and opportunities influencing social inclusion and academic performance of students with disabilities in six Kenyan universities. The study was guided by the Social Model of Disability and adopted a mixed-methods approach. The study was conducted in six universities namely, University of Nairobi, Kenyatta University, Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology, Maseno University, Catholic University of Eastern Africa and United States International University-Africa. The target population was students with disability, registrar academic affairs, dean of student affairs, deans of schools, director disability unit, disability student leaders and students without disability. Students with disability were sampled by simple random method, deans of schools and students without disability were sampled by purposive method while registrar academic affairs, director disability, dean student affairs and disability student leaders were sampled by census method. Data were collected through questionnaires, interview guide and FGD. Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson's chi-square tests and measures of association, while qualitative data were analyzed thematically. The findings showed that resource-related challenges were the most frequently reported (45.7%), followed by curriculum-related challenges (39.0%) and policy-related challenges (32.4%). Negative attitudes from fellow students were reported by 23.8% of respondents, while 17.1% reported negative attitudes from lecturers and staff. Although only 2.9% reported physical inaccessibility as a challenge, qualitative findings identified inaccessible or poorly designed ramps and limited accessibility of some facilities. The study also identified social support (39.0%) and academic and learning support (26.7%) as the most commonly reported opportunities, while financial support and transportation support were less frequently reported. Significant associations were found between gender and reported challenges ($\chi^2 = 55.479$, $df = 21$, $p < .001$) and between type of disability and reported challenges ($\chi^2 = 110.487$, $df = 42$, $p < .001$). The findings demonstrate that although universities provide various support opportunities, resource constraints, curriculum limitations, policy implementation gaps and socio-cultural barriers continue to affect the educational experiences of SWDs. The study concludes that effective inclusion requires universities to strengthen resource provision, curriculum flexibility, staff capacity, timely support services and institution-wide inclusive practices to enhance equitable academic participation and performance. The study recommends that universities should promote an inclusive culture through awareness and capacity building.

Keywords: Students with Disabilities, Academic Performance, Social Inclusion, Higher Education, Disability Inclusion, Kenya

I. INTRODUCTION

Social inclusion has become a central concern in contemporary social work practice due to its close relationship with human rights, social justice and equitable participation in society. As a profession, social work seeks to promote the well-being of vulnerable and marginalized populations by addressing structural barriers that limit their participation in social, economic and educational life. According to the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW, 2014), social work promotes social change, social development, social cohesion and the empowerment of individuals and communities. Persons with disabilities constitute one of the groups that have historically experienced exclusion across different social institutions, including education (Shakespeare, 2018). Consequently, social workers have increasingly engaged in advocacy and intervention efforts aimed at promoting inclusive educational environments for students with disabilities.

Within higher education, social inclusion extends beyond admission to universities to encompass students' meaningful participation in academic, social and co-curricular activities (Ainscow, 2020). It involves removing physical, social, cultural and institutional barriers that may hinder students' participation. Universities are therefore expected to provide accessible infrastructure, assistive technologies, reasonable accommodations, supportive learning environments and opportunities for equal participation (Abuya & Githinji, 2021). Such conditions are important because students' ability to access learning materials, attend classes, participate in teaching and assessment, and interact with lecturers and peers may have implications for their academic performance and progression.

Globally, the rights of persons with disabilities to participate fully in education have been emphasized through frameworks such as the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006) and the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015). These frameworks have encouraged governments and educational institutions to adopt policies promoting inclusive education. However, despite these commitments, students with disabilities continue to experience barriers in higher education, including inaccessible infrastructure, inadequate assistive technologies, limited support services, negative attitudes and institutional practices that do not adequately accommodate diverse learning needs (Moriña, 2017; Sachs & Schreuer, 2011). Such barriers may restrict students' access to learning resources and participation in academic activities, thereby creating challenges for their academic performance (Shaw et al., 2020).

In Africa, similar challenges persist despite increased policy attention to disability inclusion. Students with disabilities continue to experience barriers related to physical accessibility, learning resources, institutional support and negative attitudes (Chataika et al., 2012). These challenges may affect not only access to higher education but also academic participation, progression and performance. Conversely, accessible learning environments, appropriate support services, assistive technologies and positive relationships with lecturers and peers may provide opportunities for students with disabilities to engage effectively in their studies.

In Kenya, the government has established policy and legislative frameworks aimed at safeguarding the educational rights of persons with disabilities. These include the Special Needs Education Policy Framework (Ministry of Education, 2001), the Persons with Disabilities Act (Government of Kenya, 2003) and other higher education policies advocating equal access and participation. Kenya is also a signatory to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Universities have consequently established disability support services and other institutional mechanisms intended to facilitate the participation of students with disabilities (Gichaba, 2011). Despite these efforts, however, the existence of policies and institutional commitments has not necessarily translated into supportive academic experiences for all students with disabilities.

Evidence from Kenyan universities indicates that students with disabilities continue to encounter inaccessible infrastructure, inadequate assistive devices and technologies, difficulties accessing learning materials and institutional environments that do not adequately respond to their needs (Abuya & Githinji, 2021; Khakali, 2021). Students may also experience difficulties arising from limited disability awareness among lecturers, inflexible teaching and assessment practices and inadequate accommodation measures (Sharma & Michael, 2017; Moriña, 2017). These challenges may limit students' participation in teaching, learning and assessment and consequently affect their academic performance. At the same time, supportive lecturers, positive peer relationships, accessible learning resources, assistive technologies and effective institutional support services may create opportunities for students with disabilities to participate more fully and demonstrate their academic abilities.

Although considerable attention has been given to access to education and social inclusion, less attention has focused on the specific challenges and opportunities experienced by students with disabilities in relation to academic performance in Kenyan universities. There is therefore a need to examine how factors such as infrastructure accessibility, assistive technologies, learning resources, lecturer relationships, peer interactions and institutional support may constrain or facilitate the academic experiences of students with disabilities. It is against this backdrop that the present study sought to examine the challenges and opportunities for students with disabilities in relation to academic performance in six universities in Kenya.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Students with disabilities should have equitable opportunities to access, participate in and benefit from university education. The Constitution of Kenya (2010), the Persons with Disabilities Act (2003), the Universities Act (2013), and various disability-inclusive education policies provide a framework for promoting equal educational opportunities and participation of students with disabilities (SWDs) in Kenya. Universities are therefore expected to provide accessible learning environments, appropriate assistive technologies, adequate learning resources, academic support and reasonable accommodations that enable SWDs to participate effectively in teaching, learning and assessment and achieve their academic potential.

However, the reality in Kenyan universities indicates that the existence of these policy and legislative frameworks has not fully translated into enabling academic environments for students with disabilities. Evidence shows

that SWDs continue to experience inaccessible infrastructure, inadequate assistive technologies, difficulties accessing learning resources, limited academic support, challenges in peer interactions and limited participation in university activities (Abuya & Githinji, 2021). Students may also encounter limited disability awareness among lecturers, inflexible teaching and assessment practices and inadequate accommodation measures (Khakali, 2021). These challenges may constrain students' participation in teaching, learning and assessment and consequently affect their academic performance. At the same time, supportive lecturers, positive peer relationships, accessible learning resources, assistive technologies and effective institutional support may provide opportunities that facilitate academic participation and performance.

Despite evidence of these challenges, a research gap remains. Previous studies have largely focused on individual institutional constraints such as physical accessibility, availability of learning resources, institutional preparedness and policy implementation (Khakali, 2021). Limited empirical attention has been given to the challenges and opportunities experienced by SWDs in relation to academic performance as a broader area of inquiry. In particular, there is insufficient evidence on how factors such as infrastructure accessibility, assistive technologies, learning resources, lecturer-student relationships, peer support and institutional support services may constrain or facilitate the academic performance of SWDs within Kenyan universities. This gap limits a comprehensive understanding of the academic experiences of SWDs and the conditions that may support or hinder their performance. The present study therefore addresses this gap by examining the challenges and opportunities for students with disabilities in relation to academic performance in six universities in Kenya.

1.2 Research Objective

To examine the challenges and opportunities influencing social inclusion and academic performance of students with disabilities in six Kenyan universities.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

2.1.1 Theoretical Perspective

The study was guided by the Social Model of Disability which was developed by Mike Oliver in 1983, posits that disability arises not from an individual's impairment but from societal structures, attitudes, and institutional barriers that limit participation (Oliver, 2013). This model recognizes that all students, including those with disabilities, have diverse needs and that attitudes, policies, social perceptions and institutional practices can be adapted to support inclusion. In higher education, the model highlights the impact of social, physical, institutional and cultural factors on the experiences of students with disabilities (SWDs).

Regarding the challenges and opportunities in relation to academic performance. The model provides a framework to understand barriers and enablers in the university setting. Challenges such as inaccessible facilities, limited institutional support and negative social attitudes are conceptualized as socially constructed barriers, while opportunities such as inclusive campus designs, tailored support services and positive social interactions represent enabling factors that can enhance academic outcomes. Applying the Social Model, universities are encouraged to remove social, physical, cultural and institutional barriers, thereby creating an inclusive environment that supports both the social and intellectual development of SWDs. This approach ensures that students can participate fully in academic and campus life, improving academic performance and closing gaps in progression, classroom engagement and completion rates relative to non-disabled peers.

2.2 Empirical Review

2.2.1 Challenges and Opportunities influencing social inclusion and academic performance of Students with Disabilities in Six Kenyan Universities

Students with disabilities experience interconnected institutional, resource and socio-cultural barriers that can limit their participation and academic success. The Social Model of Disability emphasizes that such barriers arise largely from inaccessible environments, institutional practices and social attitudes rather than disability itself. Despite advances in inclusive education policies, significant gaps remain between policy commitments and their implementation in higher education. International frameworks, including the UNESCO Salamanca Statement (1994), Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and Sustainable Development Goal 4, recognize the right of persons with disabilities to inclusive and equitable education (UNESCO, 2018). However, studies show a persistent gap between policy formulation and implementation, particularly where institutions lack adequate funding, monitoring mechanisms, institutional capacity and stakeholder commitment.

In developed contexts, legislation such as the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (SENDA, 2001) has strengthened institutional obligations to provide reasonable accommodations. Nevertheless, evidence suggests that

implementation may remain procedural rather than transformative, with institutions meeting minimum legal requirements without substantially changing curriculum, teaching and assessment practices (Artiles et al., 2006). The challenge is more pronounced in developing countries, where weak enforcement, inadequate resources and limited institutional capacity constrain implementation (Save the Children, 2010). In South Africa, for example, disability support units have been established in universities, but concerns remain regarding the emphasis on access rather than retention, progression and academic success (Mbuva, 2019). Lack of reliable disability data further limits effective planning and resource allocation. The literature therefore indicates that the existence of disability policies does not necessarily guarantee effective inclusion. However, relatively few studies directly examine how policy implementation affects the academic performance of SWDs in higher education. This gap is particularly relevant in the Kenyan university context.

Adequate financial, human, technological and infrastructural resources are essential for implementing inclusive education. Studies from well-resourced contexts show that access to assistive technologies, learning centers and academic accommodations can improve persistence and completion among SWDs (Newman & Madaus, 2015; Newman et al., 2016). However, resource availability alone does not guarantee inclusion because institutional capacity and staff preparedness also influence the effectiveness of support (Hong, 2015). Resource constraints are more pronounced in developing countries. Studies in South Africa and Tanzania report inadequate teaching materials, equipment and accessible library services (Adewumi & Mosito, 2019; Majinge, 2014). Infrastructural inaccessibility has also been reported as a persistent barrier (Kabuta, 2014). Inadequate funding further limits the provision of assistive devices, accessible materials and staff training (Mohuebi et al. 2025; Esky, 2009).

Similar challenges are evident in East Africa. Kogei (2013) and Okongo et al. (2015) identify inadequate teaching and learning materials as barriers to participation among SWDs, while Khakali (2021) reports limited lecturer preparedness in Kenyan universities. Although the literature establishes resource inadequacy as a major barrier, fewer studies demonstrate how specific resource constraints translate into academic performance outcomes. This remains an important gap in higher education research.

Negative cultural beliefs and social attitudes remain important barriers to the inclusion of SWDs. Disability may be associated with stigma, superstition, incapacity or social exclusion, particularly in some developing contexts (Florien, 2008; Opini, 2010; Murugami, 2009). Such beliefs can affect students' confidence, participation and sense of belonging. Stigma operates through stereotyping, separation and discrimination, which can restrict educational participation and social interaction (Link & Phelan, 2014). Similarly, Dung (2020) shows that social attitudes influence motivation, confidence and academic engagement. Within universities, negative attitudes among lecturers and peers can further reinforce exclusion. Mariga et al. (2014) and Engelbrecht (2006) demonstrate that teacher attitudes influence students' perceptions rather than examining their direct relationship with measurable academic outcomes. There is therefore a need for research that links stigma, social exclusion and institutional attitudes, universities provide opportunities that can enhance the participation and academic success of SWDs. These include financial support, assistive technologies, academic and social support, and opportunities for leadership and self-advocacy. Inclusive education can also contribute to employment, social participation and economic independence. Zang (2018) emphasize the importance of teacher preparation in promoting inclusive practices. Although cultural attitudes are widely recognized as barriers, much of the literature examines them as general perceptions rather than examining their direct relationship with measurable academic outcomes. There is therefore a need for research that links stigma, social exclusion and institutional attitudes to the academic performance and progression of SWDs in universities.

2.2.2 Opportunities for Students with Disabilities in Universities

Despite these challenges, universities provide opportunities that can enhance the participation and academic success of SWDs. These include financial support, assistive technologies, academic and social support, and opportunities for leadership and self-advocacy. Inclusive education can also contribute to employment, social participation and economic independence (Lamichhane & Sawada, 2013). Scholarships, bursaries and grants can reduce financial barriers and support the retention and progression of SWDs. Chiwandire and Vincent (2019) demonstrate that disability-targeted funding can widen participation and improve retention. Similarly, Ngonyani et al. (2021) found that disability scholarships in Tanzania help meet additional costs associated with assistive devices and specialized transportation.

In Kenya, initiatives such as the Krystle Kabare Scholarship at the University of Nairobi and programmes administered by the National Council for Persons with Disabilities (NCPWD), including the Ustawi Scholarship Programme, provide financial assistance to students with disabilities. However, despite evidence that financial assistance improves access and retention, limited research directly examines its relationship with academic performance among university students with disabilities. Assistive technologies provide important opportunities for SWDs by improving access to information, communication and learning materials. The WHO and UNICEF (2022) identify

assistive technology as an important mechanism for improving access to education and independent participation. However, access remains highly unequal, particularly in low-income settings.

Studies from African universities indicate that assistive technologies such as Braille displays, screen readers and adaptive software can improve learning and academic outcomes (Perdison, 2024). In African higher-education contexts, inclusive education increasingly emphasizes the need for institutions to move beyond the mere provision of support services towards more responsive and institution-wide approaches to participation. Dalton et al. (2019) argue that inclusion, universal design (UD), and universal design for learning (UDL) provide important frameworks for creating learning environments that accommodate diverse student needs rather than relying solely on individual adjustments. From this perspective, effective inclusion requires institutions to embed accessibility within curriculum design, teaching, learning resources and assessment practices. Nevertheless, the existence of disability policies and support structures does not necessarily guarantee their effective implementation. In Kenya and other African higher-education contexts, this highlights the need to examine not only whether institutional support mechanisms exist, but also how effectively they are implemented and whether they meaningfully improve the participation and learning experiences of students with disabilities. Challenges and opportunities are often examined separately, with limited attention to how they interact to influence academic performance. Relatively little empirical research has examined these relationships within Kenyan universities. This study therefore addresses this gap by examining how institutional challenges and opportunities shape the academic experiences and performance of SWDs in selected Kenyan universities. limited longitudinal evidence exists on the sustained academic effects of these technologies, particularly in resource-constrained universities.

Leadership participation provides students with disabilities (SWDs) with opportunities for self-advocacy, empowerment and involvement in institutional decision-making. Inclusive leadership can enable students to influence policies and contribute to more responsive university environments (UNICEF, 2025). However, evidence on the academic benefits of leadership participation remains limited. Existing literature largely focuses on empowerment, confidence and advocacy, with less attention to whether leadership participation contributes to academic performance among SWDs. This leaves an important gap regarding the relationship between leadership participation and academic success.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The study adopted a mixed-methods approach and descriptive research design. The mixed-methods approach enabled the researcher to collect both quantitative and qualitative data, while the descriptive design enabled examination of existing challenges and opportunities without manipulating the study environment (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Babbie, 2010). The study focused on accessibility, assistive technologies, learning resources, lecturer-student relationships, peer support, institutional support and academic participation as factors related to academic performance.

3.2 Study Area

The study was conducted in six universities in Kenya namely, University of Nairobi, Kenyatta University, Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology, Maseno University, Catholic University of Eastern Africa, and United States International University-Africa.

3.3 Target Population

The target population comprised 408 students with disabilities enrolled in the six selected universities. The study also included registrars of academic affairs, deans of student affairs, directors of disability units, deans of schools' disability student leaders and students without disability.

3.4 Sampling and Sample Size

The six universities were purposively selected. Students with disability were selected using proportionate and simple random sampling. Using Yamane's (1967) formula at a 7.5% margin of error, a sample of approximately 124 students with disabilities was obtained. Deans of schools and students without disability were selected purposively, registrar academic affairs, dean student affairs, director disability unit and disability student leaders were included through census sampling.

3.5 Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

Data was collected using questionnaires, semi-structured interview guides, focus group discussion guides and observation checklists. Questionnaires were administered to students with disabilities to obtain information on challenges, opportunities and academic performance. Interviews were conducted with key informants to obtain

institutional perspectives on academic support and factors affecting students with disabilities. Focus group discussions provided peer perspectives, while observation checklists were used to assess accessibility of facilities, learning resources and assistive technologies.

3.6 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS. Frequencies and percentages were used to summarize the data, while Pearson correlation, chi-square and regression analysis were used where appropriate to examine relationships between challenges, opportunities and academic performance. Statistical significance was determined at $p \leq 0.05$. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically. Data from interviews, focus group discussions and observations were coded and organized into themes relating to academic challenges, opportunities, accessibility, resources, lecturer support, peer support and institutional support. Quantitative and qualitative findings were integrated during interpretation.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval and research authorization were obtained before data collection. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and participation was voluntary. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through the use of respondent codes. Data were securely stored and used only for research purposes. The researcher also ensured that data collection procedures accommodated the accessibility needs of participants with disability.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Response rates

The study examined the challenges experienced by students with disabilities (SWDs) in six universities in Kenya. The findings indicate that SWDs experience multiple institutional, academic, resource-related and socio-cultural barriers. Resource-related challenges were the most frequently reported (45.7%), followed by curriculum-related challenges (39.0%) and policy-related challenges (32.4%). Negative attitudes from fellow students were reported by 23.8% of respondents, while 17.1% reported negative attitudes from lecturers and staff. Admission delays accounted for 10.5%, while 2.9% reported inaccessible facilities. Only 3.8% reported experiencing no challenges. The findings demonstrate that barriers to inclusion extend beyond physical accessibility to include resources, institutional practices, curriculum and social attitudes. This is consistent with the Social Model of Disability, which locates disability-related exclusion largely within environmental, institutional and social barriers rather than individual impairment (Oliver, 2013).

4.1.1 Resource-Related Challenges

Resource-related challenges were the most frequently reported barrier, affecting 48 respondents (45.7%). The challenges included inadequate learning materials, limited assistive technologies, insufficient financial resources and delays in accessing institutional support. The finding is consistent with Kogei (2013) and Okongo et al. (2015), who identified inadequate teaching and learning materials as barriers to the participation of students with disabilities. Similarly, Khakali (2021) reported limited preparedness among lecturers and inadequate capacity to use assistive technologies in Kenyan universities. Newman and Madaus (2015) also demonstrate that access to disability-related accommodations and support services at the postsecondary level is influenced by institutional and student-level factors. The qualitative findings confirmed that the challenge involved not only the availability of resources but also delays in accessing them. A Dean explained:

Students with visual disability have access to electronic learning materials. The challenge is that there are delays in receiving these materials by SWDs (Respondent 1.5, 1 July 2025).

The finding suggests that delays in providing accessible learning materials can limit students' timely participation in teaching, assignments and assessment. From the Social Disability Model perspective, inadequate or delayed institutional support creates disabling conditions within the university environment.

4.1.2 Curriculum-Related Challenges

Curriculum-related challenges were reported by 41 respondents (39.0%), making them the second most frequently reported barrier. The challenges included limited curriculum flexibility, inaccessible learning materials and inadequate adaptation of teaching and assessment practices to diverse learning needs.

This finding is consistent with Artiles et al. (2006) who highlight continuing challenges in achieving meaningful inclusion within mainstream educational systems. The finding also complements Khakali's (2021) observation that lecturers in Kenyan universities may have limited preparedness to address the learning needs of students with disabilities. The qualitative findings indicated that disability support was often available at policy level but was not consistently translated into classroom practice. A Director of Disability Services explained:

Support exists in documentation but our lecturers are not trained on how to address disability-specific needs. This could be the major contributor to the low academic performance of SWDs (Respondent 1.3, 23 June 2025).

The finding indicates that curriculum inclusion requires more than formal policy provisions. Lecturer preparedness and flexible teaching and assessment practices are necessary to translate institutional commitments into meaningful academic support.

4.1.3 Policy Related Challenges

Policy-related challenges were reported by 34 respondents (32.4%). The finding indicates that although disability policies and support structures exist, their implementation is not always consistent. This finding agrees with the literature reviewed, which identifies a persistent gap between policy formulation and implementation. The UNESCO Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) and Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities provide a framework for inclusive education, but Save the Children (2010) notes that implementation in developing contexts may be constrained by inadequate resources, weak institutional capacity and limited enforcement. Similarly, Mbuyha (2019) demonstrates that the establishment of disability support structures does not necessarily guarantee comprehensive inclusion. The qualitative evidence illustrates this implementation gap. Director disability noted that;

Support exists in documentation but implementation is weak, especially where lecturers are not adequately trained (Respondent 1.3, 26 June 2025).

The finding suggests that the presence of policies alone does not ensure effective inclusion. Implementation requires adequate resources, trained staff, coordination and institutional monitoring.

4.1.4 Negative Attitudes from Fellow Students

Negative attitudes from fellow students were reported by 25 respondents (23.8%). These attitudes included limited peer support, social exclusion and inadequate awareness of disability inclusion. The finding is consistent with Florian (2008), Opini (2010) and Murugami (2009), who associate disability with social stigma, negative perceptions and exclusion in some African contexts. Link and Phelan (2001) further explain that stigma operates through stereotyping, separation and discrimination, while Dung (2020) demonstrates that social attitudes can influence confidence, motivation and academic engagement. The qualitative findings illustrate the effect of peer attitudes. One respondent in the FGD discussion stated that;

Most students are unsupportive because they are not aware of social inclusion practices in the university. This is the reason why SWDs perform average in their academics (Respondent 2.6, 27 June 2025).

The finding suggests that negative peer attitudes may limit participation in group activities, peer learning and social interaction. In accordance with the Social Model of Disability, such exclusion represents a social barrier created by the university environment rather than by the students' impairments.

4.1.5 Negative Attitudes from Lecturers and Staff

Negative attitudes from lecturers and staff were reported by 18 respondents (17.1%). Although this proportion was lower than resource, curriculum and policy-related challenges, it remains important because lecturers and staff directly influence students' learning experiences and access to academic support. The finding is consistent with Mariga et al. (2014) and Engelbrecht (2006), who demonstrate the importance of teacher attitudes in inclusive education. Zhang et al. (2018) similarly emphasize the importance of teacher preparation in promoting inclusive practices. A dean of school noted that;

Some students are understanding, but others lack awareness of inclusive teaching practices (Respondent 1.4, 1 July 2025).

Although the quotation refers to students, it reflects the broader issue of limited awareness of inclusive practices within the university environment participation, when necessary, accommodations are not available. The finding suggests that staff preparation and institutional awareness are important for ensuring that policies and accommodations are implemented consistently.

4.1.6 Admission Delays

Admission delays were reported by 11 respondents (10.5%). The delays were associated with verification procedures, accommodation arrangements and delayed access to support services. Although admission delays were less frequently reported than resource and curriculum challenges, they may affect students' early participation when necessary, accommodations are not available at the beginning of their studies. This finding can be related to Newman and Madaus (2015), who demonstrate that access to disability-related accommodations and services at the postsecondary

level is not automatic and may depend on institutional processes and students' ability to access support. An FGD participant explained:

"When support services are delayed, students start classes already disadvantaged because they cannot access materials and assistance at the same time as others" (Respondent 2.4, 30 June 2025).

The finding suggests that timely identification and provision of support are important components of effective inclusion.

4.1.7 Students Reporting No Challenges

Only four respondents (3.8%) reported experiencing no challenges. Although this represents a small proportion, it demonstrates that some students experience relatively supportive university environments. This finding is consistent with the literature on inclusive educational environments. Howe and Mercer (2008) and Bossaert et al. (2015) emphasize qualitative and the importance of supportive peer interaction and inclusive learning environments in enhancing participation. In FGD carried out, a participant stated that:

When lecturers understand our needs and provide support early, learning becomes easier and we are able to perform like other students (Respondent 2.8, 27 June 2025).

This finding demonstrates that disability-related difficulties are influenced by the extent to which the university environment provides appropriate support. It also reinforces the Social Model of Disability by demonstrating that reducing environmental barriers can facilitate participation.

4.1.8 Physical Accessibility and Infrastructure

Only three respondents (2.9%) identified inaccessible facilities as a challenge. This suggests that physical accessibility was less frequently reported than resource, curriculum, policy and attitudinal barriers. However, the qualitative and observational findings showed that some physical barriers remained. The literature reviewed identifies infrastructure as an important component of inclusion. Kabuta (2014) reports persistent infrastructural inaccessibility, while Adewumi and Mosito (2019) and Muyungu (2015) identify resource and equipment limitations in African higher education institutions. The study's observations showed accessible entrances and walkways in some university facilities. However, the FGD findings revealed continuing accessibility problems:

The ramps were too steep or were completely missing and elevators in the administration block were not accessible to students using wheelchairs" (Respondent 2.2, 30 June 2025).

The difference between the quantitative and qualitative findings suggests that physical accessibility has improved in some areas but remains inconsistent across facilities. The findings therefore indicate that physical accessibility should be assessed alongside less visible barriers such as curriculum, resources and attitudes.

4.1.9 Relationship Between Gender and Challenges Faced by SWDs

The study examined whether gender was associated with the challenges experienced by SWDs. The Pearson chi-square test showed a statistically significant association between gender and reported challenges, $\chi^2(21) = 55.479$, $p < .001$. The finding indicates that male and female students did not report challenges in identical patterns. However, the result should be interpreted as an association rather than a causal relationship. The literature reviewed emphasizes that disability experiences may be shaped by social and institutional factors, including differences in access to support and participation. Given that 88.6% of cells had expected frequencies below five, the chi-square result should be interpreted cautiously because this violates an important assumption of the Pearson chi-square test. Therefore, the finding provides evidence of an observed association in this sample but should not be presented as definitive evidence of a general gender effect. The result supports the need for further intersectional analysis of disability, gender and institutional support within Kenyan universities.

4.1.10 Relationship Between Type of Disability and Challenges Faced by SWDs

The study also examined the relationship between type of disability and reported challenges. The Pearson chi-square test showed a statistically significant association, $\chi^2(42) = 110.487$, $p < .001$, with Cramer's $V = .725$.

The finding indicates that the pattern of challenges varied according to disability type. This is consistent with the literature reviewed, which demonstrates that different disabilities may require different forms of institutional support. For example, Newman and Madaus (2015) found differences in receipt of accommodations according to disability characteristics, while Khakali (2021) highlights the importance of institutional preparedness and assistive technology in supporting students with disabilities. The finding supports the Social Model of Disability because different institutional environments may create different barriers depending on the interaction between students' needs and available support. Universities should therefore avoid a one-size-fits-all approach and provide support that responds to different disability-related needs.

4.2 Opportunities for Students with Disabilities

The study also examined opportunities available to SWDs in the universities. Social support was the most frequently reported opportunity (39.0%), followed by academic and learning support (26.7%), transportation support (14.3%) and financial support (12.4%). A further 7.6% reported that they had not benefited from any of the listed opportunities. The findings indicate that universities provide several forms of support, although access is uneven across different areas. This is consistent with the literature, which identifies social inclusion, financial assistance and assistive technologies as important mechanisms for enhancing participation and educational success among SWDs (Chiwandire & Vincent, 2019).

4.2.1 Social Support Opportunities

Social support was the most frequently reported opportunity, with 41 respondents (39.0%) identifying it. The support included peer relationships, inclusive participation, priority accommodation and other forms of social assistance. The finding is consistent with Howe and Mercer (2008), who emphasize the importance of peer interaction in supporting participation and academic achievement, and Bossaert et al. (2015), who associate meaningful peer engagement with reduced social exclusion and improved participation. An FGD participant explained:

Students with disabilities are usually given hostels near lecture halls, which makes movement easier and helps us feel that the university cares about our needs (Respondent 2.4, 27 June 2025).

The finding suggests that social and institutional support can strengthen students' sense of belonging and facilitate participation in university examination time, accessible learning materials, alternative assessment arrangements life.

4.2.2 Academic and Learning Support Opportunities

Academic and learning support was reported by 28 respondents (26.7%). The support included additional examination time, accessible learning materials, alternative assessment arrangements and assistive learning technologies. The finding is consistent with Newman and Madaus (2015), who demonstrate that postsecondary students with disabilities may require disability-specific accommodations and support services. Newman et al. (2016) similarly show that planning for postsecondary accommodations is associated with increased receipt of support. A Dean explained:

We provide academic accommodations such as extra examination time, alternative assessment methods and assistive learning technologies depending on the student's disability (Respondent 1.2, 1 July 2025).

The finding demonstrates that academic accommodations can reduce barriers to participation by enabling students to access learning and assessment in ways that respond to their needs.

4.2.3 Transportation and Mobility Opportunities

Transportation support was reported by 15 respondents (14.3%), making it one of the less frequently reported opportunities. Qualitative findings indicated that some improvements had been made to walkways and mobility pathways, although support remained uneven. The finding is consistent with Ngonyani et al. (2021), who highlight the importance of support for additional disability-related costs, including specialized transportation. Chiwandire and Vincent (2019) similarly emphasize the importance of funding mechanisms that support equal participation and retention. An FGD participant reported:

The university has improved some walkways and ramps, which makes it easier for students using wheelchairs to move between lecture rooms (Respondent 2.1, 27 June 2025).

The finding suggests that improvements in mobility infrastructure create opportunities for participation, although broader and more consistent mobility support remains necessary.

4.2.4 Financial Support Opportunities

Financial support was reported by 13 respondents (12.4%). The support included bursaries, scholarships and other forms of financial assistance. This finding is consistent with Chiwandire and Vincent (2019), who identify disability-targeted funding as an important mechanism for widening participation, supporting retention and promoting equal outcomes for SWDs. Ngonyani et al. (2021) similarly demonstrate the importance of disability scholarships in addressing additional costs associated with disability. A participant explained in the FGD noted that:

The bursary support I received helped me pay part of my fees and reduced the burden on my family (Respondent 2.6, 1 July 2025).

The relatively low proportion of students reporting financial support suggests that such opportunities may not reach all students who require them. Financial support therefore remains an important component of comprehensive disability inclusion.

4.2.5 Assistive Technology as an Opportunity

Although assistive technology was not presented as a separate category in the quantitative opportunity results, qualitative findings showed that it formed part of academic support. The literature reviewed identifies assistive technology as an important mechanism for improving access to information and learning. WHO and UNICEF (2022) identify assistive technology as an important contributor to participation and independent functioning. Studies by Perdison (2024) similarly report positive educational outcomes associated with assistive technology. The qualitative findings showed that access to accessible electronic materials and assistive technologies facilitated learning. This suggests that universities should strengthen both the availability and timely provision of assistive technologies.

4.2.6 Leadership Inclusion Opportunities

Leadership opportunities provide SWDs with avenues for participation, advocacy and institutional engagement. The literature reviewed identifies leadership as an emerging dimension of disability inclusion. UNICEF (2025) emphasizes the importance of involving young persons with disabilities in decision-making. Although leadership was not separately quantified in the current study, the broader findings on social participation indicate that universities provide opportunities for SWDs to participate in institutional and student activities. Such opportunities can strengthen student agency and contribute to more responsive institutional practices.

4.2.7 Limited Access to Available Opportunities

Eight respondents (7.6%) reported that they had not benefited from the available opportunities. Although this was a relatively small proportion, it demonstrates that the existence of support services does not necessarily guarantee access. This finding is consistent with Newman and Madaus (2015), who demonstrate that receipt of postsecondary accommodations varies among students with disabilities. It also reinforces the broader literature's distinction between the existence of institutional support and its effective implementation. An FGD participant explained:

I have heard that there are support services, but no one has ever clearly explained to us how we can access them (Respondent 2.7, 1 July 2025).

The finding suggests that awareness, accessibility and institutional procedures influence whether students benefit from available opportunities.

4.2.8 Relationship Between Educational Sponsorship and Access to Opportunities

The study further examined whether educational sponsorship was associated with access to opportunities. The analysis showed a statistically significant association between educational sponsorship and access to opportunities, $\chi^2(66) = 164.097$, $p < .001$. The finding suggests that students' sources of educational funding are associated with their access to different forms of support. This is consistent with Chiwandire and Vincent (2019), who demonstrate that funding mechanisms influence participation, retention and equality of outcomes for students with disabilities. Ngonyani et al. (2021) similarly show that disability-related financial support can assist students in meeting additional educational costs.

The findings therefore support the Social Model of Disability (Oliver, 2013), which views disability-related exclusion as substantially shaped by environmental, institutional and social barriers. The study demonstrates that improving academic experiences for SWDs requires more than admission or physical access. Universities need to ensure timely access to resources, flexible academic practices, effective implementation of disability policies, positive social environments and appropriate support services.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

The study concludes that resource-related challenges, particularly inadequate assistive technologies, limited funding and insufficient support services, are the most significant barriers to the inclusion of students with disabilities (SWDs). These are followed by curriculum limitations, gaps in policy implementation, negative attitudes and administrative challenges. The findings also indicate that gender influences students' experiences and perceptions of disability-related barriers, suggesting the need for gender-responsive inclusion strategies.

Despite these challenges, universities provide SWDs with social and academic support, transportation assistance and financial aid. However, these opportunities remain uneven and inadequately resourced. Overall, meaningful inclusion requires universities to improve physical and digital accessibility, strengthen policy implementation, provide adequate support services and promote positive attitudes towards disability. This would enable SWDs to participate more fully and equitably in university life.

5.2 Recommendations

The study recommends that universities should promote an inclusive culture through regular disability awareness programmes, staff capacity building and sensitization of students on disability inclusion. Universities should also strengthen disability support services, improve physical and digital accessibility, enforce inclusive policies, and involve students with disabilities in decisions affecting their education. These measures would promote greater acceptance, participation and equitable academic opportunities for SWDs.

Declaration of Interest

The authors declare that they do not have any known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Funding Declaration

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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