Inclusive Education in Higher Education Institutions: A Comprehensive Review of Key Components and Framework for Implementation

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Abstract

'Inclusion' in education, central to Sustainable Development Goal 4 within Agenda 2030, has gained global prominence. However, its meaning varies widely due to diverse local interpretations, leading to inconsistent practices. The complexity and lack of comprehensive global documentation of the concept often results in confusion, with different stakeholders assigning different meanings to it. This ambiguity challenges the effective implementation of inclusive education policies worldwide.

This paper aims to outline the various components of inclusive education, drawing on a comprehensive review of the literature on this concept. The resulting framework is designed to guide educational institutions in implementing effective inclusive practices.

Initially, inclusive education was mainly associated with catering for students with disabilities and bridging the gap between special education and mainstream education. However, the concept of inclusion is much wider in scope.

The right to inclusive education is now defined as a process that shapes culture, practice and policy within the educational setting. Inclusive education aims to address the diverse needs of individual students, and to remove barriers that hinders the presence, participation and achievement of learners. An inclusive approach places emphasis on providing support to groups of learners who may underachieve or be marginalized or excluded.

This paper identifies key core features of inclusive education through an extensive analysis of literature and studies focusing on its practical implementation and monitoring. These features cover various aspects, including the education and learning environment, teacher support, a whole person approach, respect for value of diversity, stakeholder consultation and collaboration, partnerships, financing, monitoring and sharing of expertise and resources. The latter components form a comprehensive framework for understanding and implementing inclusive education practices.

Implementing inclusive education effectively requires a shared understanding of its meaning. This paper addresses this challenge by presenting a structured framework of inclusive education components. By providing this practical guide, the paper aims to facilitate the implementation of inclusive practices across diverse learning environments. The proposed framework serves as a valuable tool for institutions seeking to enhance their inclusivity, thus supporting the realization of Sustainable Development Goal 4.

Keywords

Inclusion, inclusive education, SDG 4, Educational institutions, Educational policy

Introduction

Inclusion in education, is a fundamental issue core to the principle that 'Everyone has the right to Education, as stated in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in Paris in December 1948 (United Nations, 2024). 'Inclusion' in education, which figures prominently in Agenda 2030 under Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, has gained importance internationally and is imperative for equality and human rights, with educational, social, and economic benefits (UNESCO, 2017).

However, 'Inclusion' in education is a term that has been subject to local interpretation and inconsistency in practice. It remains a complex and multi-faceted concept that has not been comprehensively documented globally and that can lead to confusion, with different meanings to different people (Ainscow, 2020b; Antoninis et al., 2020; UNESCO, 2020b). Ainscow (2020) further posits that development will be challenging if there is no agreement on the planned direction and consensus on the meaning of the notion of inclusion. He further highlights the importance of contextual factors in understanding and shaping inclusive education policies and practices (Ainscow, 2020a). Recent international policy documents advocate that inclusion and equity are fundamental concepts that should guide all facets of educational policy (UNESCO, 2020b).

Through an extensive analysis of literature and studies which focus on the practical implementation and monitoring of inclusive education, this paper aims to identify the key features which are pertinent to its effective implementation.

Inclusive education: a brief history

Inclusive education has generally been connected to the requirements of people with disabilities and the interaction between special education and mainstream education. Since the 1990s, the struggles of those with disabilities have impacted the world's view of inclusion in education, through measures taken in The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the World Declaration on Education for All (1990), and the United Nations Standard Rules on Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities (1993) and the Salamanca Declaration and Framework for Action (1994) (Ainscow, 2020b; United Nations, 2016).

This has resulted in Article 24 (the right to inclusive education) in the 2006 UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which acknowledges the rights of the disabled to inclusive education, thus producing a legally binding instrument with reference to the concept of quality inclusive education (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2023).

Inclusion is however wider in scope and although it was referred to in Article 24, it was not defined therein, thus leading to the release of General Comment No.4 in the Article 24 in 2016 (United Nations, 2016). Therein, the mutual link between quality and inclusion is highlighted, with an inclusive ethos being an enabler for quality education, and for fostering more inclusive societies

characterized by tolerance, peace social justice with the fulfilment of basic needs and rights of all individuals (United Nations, 2016).

Inclusive education: a definition

Prior to defining the concept of inclusive education, the differences between the terms 'segregation', 'integration' and 'inclusion' should be highlighted. As defined in General Comment No.4 in the Article 24 in 2016 (United Nations, 2016), segregation is the practice of educating students with disabilities in distinct environments, isolated from their counterparts without disabilities, frequently in response to specific impairments. Integration is when students are placed into mainstream education and are expected to adapt to existing set-ups and structures, without providing the requisite support. Inclusion however goes beyond physical placement in mainstream institutions in order to serve all students of a given age range, and entails modifications in strategy, content, methods and structures (United Nations, 2016).

The right to inclusive education is defined as a process that shapes culture, practice and policy within the educational setting in order to meet the diverse requirements of individual students, whilst ensuring removal of barriers that limit the presence, participation and achievement of learners (UNESCO, 2017). It emphasizes all students' attendance, involvement, and academic success, but particularly those who are excluded or at risk of exclusion for several reasons. Without any form of prejudice, both inside and outside the school system, inclusion entails having access to high-quality education as well as maintaining it and making progress in doing so (United Nations, 2016). Ainscow (2020) sums up inclusive education as a process of identification and removal of all barriers so as to ensure the presence, participation and achievement of all students, with a particular emphasis on those groups of learners who may underachieve or be marginalized or excluded. Thus, none should be discriminated upon in education based upon their age, gender, location, poverty, disability, special needs, ethnicity, race, religion, indigeneity, language, religion, migration or displacement status, sexual orientation, HIV or AIDS status, poor health, gender identity and expression (Ainscow, 2020a; Antoninis et al., 2020; UNESCO, 2009). Exclusion can be of different nature, pertaining to physical, social, psychological and systemic issues and can take different forms, from the albinos in Sub-Saharan Africa , to refugees and/or exiles in different nations, to the stateless in Arab countries (Antoninis et al., 2020)

Inclusive education should also involve collaboration amongst all stakeholders, including students, teachers/lecturers, families, and communities in order to foster a supportive and inclusive learning environment. The aim is to allow learners to actualise their full potential to serve society (United Nations, 2016).

Core features of Inclusion in Education- its evolution

General Comment No.4 on Article 24 attributes seven core features related to inclusive education, namely whole educational environment, whole person approach, supported teachers, respect for and value for diversity, learning friendly environment, recognition of partnerships and monitoring (United Nations, 2016).
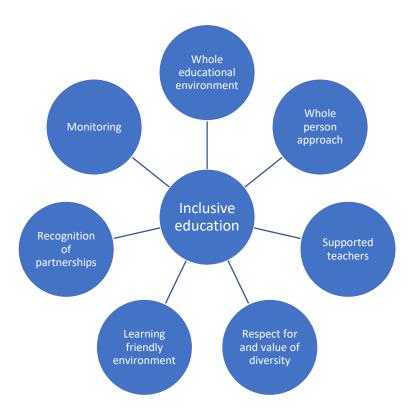
Figure 1- Core Features of inclusive education adapted by the author from General Comment No 4 (United Nations, 2016)

This is further extrapolated in the Global Education Monitoring Report 2020, where ten recommendations are made for achievement of inclusive education targets by 2030. Taking into account General Comment No.4 as well as the recommendations of the Global Education Monitoring Report, the author provides below an adjusted rendition of the core features pertinent to inclusive education. In the author's depiction, modifications are made to the original depiction under General Comment No.4 by incorporating three additional features (Meaningful consultation with stakeholders (including communities and parents), financing to those left behind, and sharing of expertise and resources), and by modification of two features (Supported teachers, empowered and motivated staff, and Learning friendly environment through Universal Design). The section below elaborates on the features.
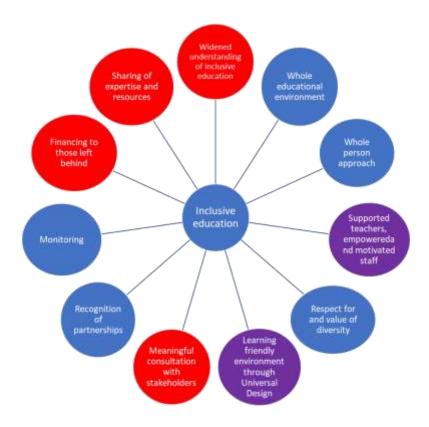
Figure 2 - Core features for successful implementation of inclusive education (author's rendition - adapted from United Nations (2016) and UNESCO (2020))

Whole educational environment

A widened understanding of inclusive education, coupled with commitment from leadership, is important in order to create the right environment to achieve inclusive education at all levels, by building the right culture and through the set-up of appropriate policies and practices. This should permeate in teaching and relationships, board meetings, teacher supervision, school trips, budget planning, and any interactions with the local community or general public (UNESCO, 2020a; United Nations, 2016).

Whole person approach

Inclusive education also recognizes the capacity of each and everyone to learn, irrespective of the nature or extent of impairment that a student may have. Flexible curricula and adapted teaching and learning techniques should be available in order to cater for individual student strengths, needs and learning styles. Educational institutions should thus provide for early identification and support for persons with disabilities (United Nations, 2016). Such approaches commit to ending segregation by providing personalized educational responses, instead of placing the onus on the student to fit the system.

Supported teachers, empowered and motivated staff

Inclusive education can only be achieved through the empowerment and support (both institutional and emotional) of those who are on the frontline (Magotra & Vidya, 2024). Through appropriate training and professional development focusing on inclusive pedagogies, staff of educational institutions must be provided with the core competencies to implement inclusive learning environments, with collaboration and problem-solving at the forefront of teacher-student interactions (United Nations, 2016). This enables teachers and instructors to use teaching methods that reaches out to all students.

Respect and value of diversity

An effective inclusive educational environment not only acknowledges but also celebrates diversity in its multiple forms (Antoninis et al., 2020). Diversity amongst students and staff should be in-built within the core of educational systems and valued in institutions, with respect to differences in age, gender, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, location, ethnicity or race, indigeneity, language, health status, incarceration, economic status, religion, migration or displacement status, disability, and lifestyle (GUNi, 2019; UNESCO, 2020a). Diversity in institutions goes beyond simply tolerance and needs an institutional commitment to equity and embracing the notion that diversity contributes to enriching the learning experience, encouraging a sense of belonging and enhancing educational outcomes for all (Antoninis et al., 2020).

Learning friendly environment through Universal Design for Learning

Inclusive and accessible learning environments is further promoted through Universal Design for Learning (UDL) approach. This is a framework for curriculum development, improvement, optimization of Learning and Teaching , based on scientific principles on how humans learn, in order to give all individuals equal opportunities to learn (CAST, 2023; UNESCO, 2023). UDL should aim to foster flexible and supportive learning environments through student engagement, where every learner potential is addressed by paying attention to their needs, preferences and backgrounds (CAST, 2023; UNESCO, 2020a). A range of strategies is used for strengthening achievement of all students, with the emphasis on supporting vulnerable students whilst not hindering the progress of all (Ainscow, 2020b). Flexible learning environments and different instructional methods, including accessible technology and assistive devices, are hence used in order to accommodate the different needs of different learners, instead of retrofit of lessons for particular groups after they have been designed (UNESCO, 2023).

Meaningful consultation with stakeholders

Inclusive education, fundamental to the concept of social inclusion, depends on the collaboration of multiple stakeholders. It is crucial to understand the connection between the learning environment and the larger community so as to build inclusive societies (Ainscow, 2020b). This necessitates a dialogue between both internal and external stakeholders, including but not restricted to, University staff, students, government departments, policy makers, the private sector, non-governmental organisations and the community at large (Ainscow, 2005; Ali et al., 2021; Ayala-Rodríguez et al., 2019). Furthermore, the understanding and knowledge of disability should be promoted via different associations, including teaching associations, student

associations, and organizations of people with disabilities, and other operating school support groups.

Recognition of partnerships

Partnerships are key to successful implementation of inclusive education, as they enable the development of coherent strategies and coordinated efforts across multiple sectors and between different players. This includes government departments, regulatory authorities, policy makers, educational institutions, researchers, employers, members of the community, civic groups, the private sector, NGOs, as well as members of minority groups at risk of exclusion (Ainscow, 2020a). Through such partnerships, governments can mobilize human and financial resources that are required to implement inclusive educational objectives (UNESCO, 2017).

Monitoring

In order to prevent occurrence of formal or informal segregation and ensure successful implementation of inclusive education, monitoring through open and accountable systems is important (United Nations, 2016). Collaboration between Ministries of Education, statistical agencies and other ministries is required for collection of coherent population-level data so as to allow for an understanding of the needs of marginalized groups (UNESCO, 2009). In addition to the gathering of data for planning and budget purposes, educational institutions should also gather data related to the actual experience of inclusion within their compounds, whilst ensuring no stigmatization nor harm to learners (UNESCO, 2020a). Ainscow (2020b) accentuates on the importance of ensuring that the right indicators are measured and proposes a framework for inclusive dialogues within educational institutions, through the 'Index for Inclusion', an instrument originally developed for England but now available in several countries.

Financing for the needy

Inclusion cannot be achieved while millions remain without access to education, emphasizing the critical need of financial support to those left behind (UNESCO, 2020a). In addition to legal measures to address barriers to inclusion on aspects like child labour, child marriage, teenage pregnancy, Governments need to take a two-pronged approach to promote inclusion in education (UNESCO, 2020a). General funding must be provided to build an inclusive environment for all learners and targeted funding should also be allocated in order to allow those who lag behind to catch up as soon as possible. Early interventions at school should also be promoted so as to lessen the influence of disability on the learner's progression (Antoninis et al., 2020).

Sharing of expertise and resources

The achievement of inclusion in education is subject to management challenges, especially with regards to the equitable deployment of human and material resources which are required to meet the diverse learning requirements. In that regard, benchmarking, sharing of expertise and resources are another powerful way of building inclusiveness in education (UNESCO, 2020a). Mechanisms and incentives must be developed to allow for flexible resource transfer, in order to ensure that specialist expertise is available in both mainstream educational institutions and non-formal education settings, thus promoting an inclusive educational environment (Antoninis et al., 2020).

Conclusion

The urgency of addressing 'inclusion' in education is emphasized by the statement of the Director General of UNESCO, Audrey Azoulay, in the Global Education Monitoring report of 2020: "*To rise to the challenges of our time, a move towards more inclusive education is non-negotiable- failure to act is not an option*" (UNESCO, 2020b). This statement sums up the crucial importance of inclusive education in order to foster progress through equity, equality and social justice. However, inclusive education remains subject to diverse local interpretations, thus resulting in inconsistent practices and the continued existence of exclusion within educational settings.

Inclusive education was originally associated with addressing the requirements of students with disabilities. Inclusion, however, is a concept that is much broader in scope and aims to cater for the diverse needs of individual students while eradicating all impediments to the presence, participation and achievement of all learners.

Through a comprehensive review of the literature on the subject of inclusion in education, this paper identifies the core components relevant to inclusive education. This study proposes four additional features relevant to inclusive education, besides the original seven features outlined in General Comment No. 4 in Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. These eleven key features, crucial for the robust implementation of inclusive education, are presented in this paper. In addition to advocating a broader understanding of inclusive education, principal components listed as relevant to its effective implementation relate to the whole educational environment, a whole person approach, supported and empowered staff and teachers, respect for diversity, a learning friendly environment, stakeholder consultation and participation, partnerships, monitoring, financing for the needy and the need for sharing of expertise and resources.

Achieving SDG 4 hinges on the provision of inclusive education world-wide. As we inch closer to the 2030 deadline for Agenda 2030, this paper provides a guide that can be used by educational institutions to achieve SDG 4, through the provision of a robust framework that addresses inclusion in education.

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