



Promoting Inclusive Education for Students with Sensory Disabilities in Higher Education in Zimbabwe

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Abstract: This study investigates the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) in promoting inclusive education for students with hearing and visual impairment in Zimbabwe's higher education institutions. While both national and international policies advocate for inclusive education, students with sensory disabilities continue to face significant barriers to accessing and fully participating in higher education. The research addresses the gap between policy commitments and actual practices by exploring the challenges and opportunities in creating inclusive learning environments within Zimbabwe's universities. The study specifically focuses on the effectiveness of institutional policies, availability of disability support services, and the integration of assistive technologies. The study adopts a constructivist research paradigm. A qualitative case study design provides an in-depth analysis of the lived social experiences of students with disabilities. Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions are conducted with students with sensory disabilities, university administrators, and disability support staff at selected institutions. Additionally, document analysis is used to review policies and frameworks related to inclusive education in Zimbabwe. Guided by the Social Model of Disability the study reveals a significant gap between Zimbabwe's policy commitments and the practical challenges faced by students with disabilities in higher education. Whilst the situation is slightly better at the private institution, the state institution presents a different story. The study highlights the need for more targeted interventions, such as better teacher training, improved accessibility, and stronger support systems.

Keywords: Inclusive education, Sustainable Development Goal 4, Students with hearing impairment, Higher education, Students with visual impairment

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1. Introduction

Education is universally recognized as a fundamental human right and a pivotal element for sustainable development. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) aims to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (United Nations, n.d.). Despite this global commitment, students with disabilities in low- and middle-income countries, including Zimbabwe, continue to encounter substantial

barriers in accessing and participating in higher education.

Zimbabwe has ratified international conventions such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and has enacted national policies advocating for inclusive education. The Amended Education Act of 2020 mandates inclusive education for all students, including children with disabilities (Global Partnership for Education, 2024). However, structural and systemic challenges persist, including inadequate infrastructure, limited availability of assistive technologies, and insufficient training for

educators, which impede the full inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education (Chataika, 2010).

Research indicates that while policies exist, their implementation is often inconsistent, leading to a gap between policy and practice. For instance, a study by Chataika (2010) highlighted that institutional barriers, such as physical inaccessibility and lack of support services, significantly hinder the participation of disabled students in Zimbabwean higher education. Similarly, Mutanga and Walker (2017) found that students with disabilities face challenges related to accessibility, discrimination, and inadequate support within higher education institutions. These findings are contrary to the tenets of SDG4, which advocates for equitable quality education. The current study will alert policy makers and legislators on how far they are in terms of achieving SDG4.

Focusing on students with hearing and visual impairment, the study explored the effectiveness of institutional policies, the availability and adequacy of disability support services, and the integration of assistive technologies in creating inclusive learning environments.

Guided by the Social Model of Disability, which conceptualizes disability as a product of societal barriers rather than individual impairments, this research adopts a qualitative case study approach to examine the lived experiences of students with disabilities. The constructivist paradigm underscores the importance of these experiences, providing critical insights into how social realities are shaped by institutional practices and cultural attitudes.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Despite global and national commitments to inclusive education, students with disabilities in Zimbabwe continue to face significant barriers in accessing and participating fully in higher education. While global objectives such as the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) advocate for equitable and inclusive education, the practical implementation of these policies remains inconsistent.

Research has shown that many universities lack adequate infrastructure, assistive technologies, and trained personnel to support students with disabilities (Chataika, 2010; Mutanga & Walker, 2017). Moreover, the lived experiences of these students are often overlooked, resulting in a lack of insight into the structural and social barriers they face. Despite the existence of disability support services in some institutions, their effectiveness in promoting inclusive learning environments remains underexplored.

This research seeks to address these gaps by examining the challenges and opportunities in implementing inclusive education policies in Zimbabwean universities. By focusing on the lived experiences of students with disabilities and the perspectives of university administrators and disability support staff, this study aims to uncover the systemic and institutional factors hindering progress toward achieving SDG 4.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

The study sought to:

1. Identify the major challenges faced by university students with hearing and visual impairment to realise their goals
2. Suggest mitigatory measures to overcome challenges.

2. Literature Review

"Inclusive education is a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures, and communities, and reducing exclusion within and from education." UNESCO (2009)

This literature review examines the key concepts underpinning inclusive education, the challenges and successes observed in various geographical contexts, and the specific dynamics within Zimbabwe's higher education system.

2.1 Global Perspectives on Inclusive Education

The global commitment to inclusive education is enshrined in international frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which aims to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (United Nations, n.d.). These frameworks advocate for the removal of barriers that hinder the participation of students with disabilities in educational settings.

Despite these commitments, the implementation of inclusive education varies widely across countries. In many contexts, students with disabilities continue to face challenges such as inaccessible infrastructure, a lack of assistive technologies, and insufficiently trained educators. For instance, a study by the Global Partnership for Education (2024) highlighted that in several low- and middle-income countries, educational institutions often lack the necessary resources to support students with disabilities effectively. This underscores

the need for substantial investment in resources and training to bridge the gap between policy and practice.

In the Sub-Saharan African context, efforts toward inclusive education have been met with both progress and persistent challenges. A report by UNESCO (2021) emphasised that while policies promoting inclusive education exist in many countries within the region, their implementation is often hampered by limited financial resources, cultural attitudes, and inadequate teacher preparation. The report also noted that societal perceptions of disability can significantly influence the effectiveness of inclusive education initiatives.

Furthermore, research indicates that community involvement plays a crucial role in the success of inclusive education programs. Engaging local communities in the development and implementation of these programs can lead to more sustainable and contextually relevant solutions. For example, initiatives that involve parents, local leaders, and organizations of persons with disabilities have been shown to enhance the acceptance and effectiveness of inclusive education strategies (UNESCO, 2021). Zimbabwe has demonstrated a commitment to inclusive education through the ratification of international conventions and the development of national policies. The Amended Education Act of 2020 mandates inclusive education for all students, including those with disabilities (Global Partnership for Education, 2024). However, the translation of these policies into practice presents ongoing challenges and the experiences of university students living within disabilities have remained skirted around

A study by Chataika (2010) revealed that Zimbabwean higher education institutions often lack adequate infrastructure and support services for students with disabilities. Physical inaccessibility, limited availability of assistive technologies, and insufficient training for educators were identified as significant barriers. These findings suggest a disconnection between policy intentions and the realities experienced by students with disabilities.

Further research by Hlatywayo and Mapolisa (2020) examined the enrolment of students with disabilities in Zimbabwean teachers' colleges. While these institutions do enrol such students as part of inclusive practices, the study found that the inflexible curriculum did not accommodate individual needs, negatively impacting inclusive practices. The authors concluded that there is a need for consistency in how inclusive education is planned and conducted in higher learning institutions.

Additionally, a study by Mutanga and Walker (2017) explored the participation of students with disabilities in a Zimbabwean university. The findings indicated that these students faced challenges related to accessibility,

discrimination, and inadequate support within the institution. The authors emphasised the importance of creating an inclusive institutional culture and providing adequate support services to enhance the participation of students with disabilities. The aforementioned studies, however, skirted around how students with disabilities feel and experience in the varied institutions cited.

2.2 Challenges and Opportunities

The literature highlights several challenges in implementing inclusive education in Zimbabwe. These include limited financial resources that hinder the provision of necessary infrastructure, assistive technologies, and specialized personnel to support students with disabilities. Standardized curricula often fail to address diverse learning needs, disadvantaging students with disabilities. Negative societal attitudes and misconceptions about disability can lead to discrimination and exclusion within educational settings. Despite supportive policies, there is often a lack of effective implementation and monitoring mechanisms to ensure these policies turn into practice. Negative societal attitudes and misconceptions about disability can lead to discrimination and exclusion within educational settings. Shakespeare (2013) highlights how societal prejudices contribute to the marginalization of individuals with disabilities, reinforcing barriers to education and inclusion. Similarly, Barnes and Mercer (2010) argue that societal attitudes create systemic obstacles that hinder effective participation in educational environments.

Despite supportive policies, there is often a lack of effective implementation and monitoring mechanisms to ensure these policies are put into practice. Ainscow and Miles (2008) emphasize that while inclusive education policies exist, their implementation remains inconsistent due to weak enforcement and limited resources. Additionally, the World Health Organization (2011) reports that many educational institutions worldwide struggle to bridge the gap between policy and practice, leaving students with disabilities inadequately supported.

These studies, however, have failed to address the plight of university students with disabilities, particularly the hearing-impaired. Marschark et al. (2015) highlight that Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing students face unique challenges in academic settings, including communication barriers and a lack of specialised support services. This reinforces the need for targeted interventions to ensure their full inclusion in higher education. However, literature also identifies opportunities to enhance inclusive education. Existing policies provide a foundation upon which to build more effective inclusive education practice. Involving local communities in the design and implementation of inclusive education initiatives can lead to more contextually appropriate and sustainable solutions.

Investing in the training of educators and administrative staff can improve their ability to support students with disabilities effectively. Raising awareness about the rights and potential of students with disabilities can help shift negative attitudes and promote a more inclusive culture within educational institutions.

The pursuit of inclusive education in Zimbabwe reflects a broader global commitment to equity and quality in education. While significant challenges persist, particularly in bridging the gap between policy and practice, there are also considerable opportunities to enhance the inclusivity of Zimbabwe's higher education system. By addressing resource constraints, fostering positive attitudes, and engaging communities, Zimbabwe can make meaningful strides toward realising the goal of inclusive education for all students.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

This study is underpinned by two primary theoretical frameworks: the Social Model of Disability and Constructivist Learning Theory.

The Social Model of Disability posits that disability arises from societal barriers rather than individual impairments. It emphasizes the need to identify and remove these barriers to achieve true inclusion. By applying this model, the study examines how institutional policies, physical infrastructures, and cultural attitudes within Zimbabwe's higher education institutions contribute to the exclusion or inclusion of students with disabilities. This perspective shifts the focus from "fixing" the individual to transforming societal structures, aligning with the goals of inclusive education as advocated by SDG 4 (Taylor & Francis Online).

Mike Oliver, a prominent scholar in disability studies, has extensively discussed the Social Model of Disability. In his 2013 article, "The social model of disability: thirty years on," Oliver reflects on the model's impact and its emphasis on societal barriers as the primary contributors to disability (Oliver, 2013). (tandfonline.com). Additionally, Barnes (2012) has explored the evolution and significance of the Social Model of Disability. In his work, "Understanding the social model of disability: past, present and future," Barnes delves into the model's historical context and its application in contemporary society (Barnes, 2012) (Taylor & Francis.com). The research is grounded in the Social Model of Disability, which posits that disability arises from societal barriers rather than individual impairments. This model shifts the focus from a medicalized view of disability to an examination of the environmental, attitudinal, and institutional obstacles that hinder individuals with disabilities from full participation in society. The model, introduced by the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) in 1975, emphasizes that

"disability is something imposed on top of our impairments by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society" (UPIAS, 1975). Mike Oliver further developed this concept, coining the term "social model of disability" and highlighting the societal barriers that disable individuals (Oliver, 1990). The Social Model of disability is a framework that views disability as a result of societal barriers rather than an individual's physical or mental impairment (Shakespeare, 2013). It contrasts with the medical model, which sees disability as a personal deficit that needs to be fixed or cured. The following are the tenets of the Social Model: Disability is Socially Constructed: -disability arises due to external barriers created by society, such as inaccessible buildings, lack of accommodations, and discriminatory attitudes, rather than a person's impairment itself (Barnes & Mercer, 2010). Next is the distinction between Impairment and Disability:

Impairment refers to a physical, sensory, or cognitive difference, while *disability* is the disadvantage caused by societal barriers that restrict participation (Shakespeare, 2013). There is also, focus on removing barriers:

Instead of trying to "fix" individuals, the model emphasizes changing the environment, policies, and attitudes to promote full inclusion and accessibility (Ainscow & Miles, 2008). The emphasis on Rights and Inclusion:

People with disabilities should have equal rights, opportunities, and autonomy, with society taking responsibility for ensuring accessibility and inclusion (World Health Organization, 2011).

As for the empowerment of disabled individuals:

The model promotes self-advocacy and the involvement of people with disabilities in decision-making about policies and services that affect them. (Barnes & Mercer, 2010).

Lastly, is the tenet on challenges discriminatory attitudes:

The social model seeks to eliminate stigma and challenge negative perceptions that lead to exclusion and discrimination (Shakespeare, 2013).

This model has been widely used in disability activism, policy-making, and inclusive education to advocate for a

more accessible and equitable society. By adopting this perspective, the study aims to identify and analyse the systemic factors within higher education that impede or facilitate inclusivity.

Vygotsky's Constructivist Learning Theory suggests that learners construct knowledge through experiences and reflections, emphasizing the active role of learners in the learning process. In the context of inclusive education, constructivist approaches encourage the adaptation of teaching methods to accommodate diverse learning needs, promoting an environment where all students can actively engage and construct understanding. This framework supports the study's focus on the lived experiences of students with disabilities, recognising them as active agents in their educational journeys (University of San Diego). Recent scholarly works have explored the application of constructivist approaches in inclusive education. For instance, Akpan and Beard (2016) discuss the use of constructivist teaching strategies to enhance academic outcomes for students with special needs, highlighting the importance of adapting instruction to meet diverse learning requirements (files.eric.ed.gov). Furthermore, Algahtani (2017) examines the effectiveness of constructivist versus behaviourist approaches in teaching students with intellectual disabilities, emphasising the role of active engagement and personalised learning experiences in fostering inclusion (files.eric.ed.gov).

Employing these frameworks allows for a comprehensive analysis of the systemic and experiential factors affecting the inclusion of students with disabilities in Zimbabwe's higher education. The Social Model of Disability provides a lens to critically assess and advocate for necessary institutional changes, while Constructivist Learning Theory offers insights into effective pedagogical strategies that honour and leverage the diverse experiences of learners. Together, they guide the study in identifying both the barriers to and facilitators of inclusive education, ensuring a holistic understanding of the challenges and opportunities present. Over and above this, the two theories espouse qualitative methodologies.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

To comprehensively explore the experiences of those living with sensory disabilities in tertiary institutions, the study employed a qualitative case study design approach within a constructivist research paradigm. Constructivists emphasize the importance of understanding the subjective meanings and experiences of individuals and recognize that reality is socially constructed. Charmaz (2006) asserts that reality is socially constructed hence there is need to understand

the subjective meanings and experiences of individuals. The study adopted the qualitative approach to capture the nuanced experiences of students with disabilities and the perspectives of university administrators and disability support staff. The need for an in-depth exploration of a particular group or category of students with Hearing Impairment led the study to employ a case study design with a view to unravel how universities promote inclusive education with particular attention to students with HI. By looking at this category of students with disability the study would get the lived experiences of those who are living with disabilities and their counterparts. We sought to confine our study to this small group so that we have an in-depth study of their experiences. Qualitative case studies do not seek to generalise since each case is unique.

3.2 Sampling

The study purposively sampled 8 hearing and visual impaired students, 2 lecturers, 2 -Deans of students from two universities, a state and private all purposively selected. The idea to use purposive sampling was to get information from relevant rich data sources.

3.3 Data Collection Tools

Data collection methods included semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews with lecturers and deans provided in-depth insights into personal experiences and perceptions, allowing participants to express their views in their own words. Focus group discussions with students facilitated the exploration of shared experiences and collective perspectives, highlighting common challenges and potential solutions. Document analysis involves a systematic review of institutional policies, strategic plans, and relevant legislative frameworks to assess their alignment with inclusive education principles and SDG 4 objectives.

3.4 Data Collection Procedure

We initially obtained clearance from the Ministry of Higher of Higher Education to carry out research. Thereafter, consent was sought from participants and institutional management to carry out the interviews, focus discussions and documentary analysis respectively. Interviews which lasted for not more than an hour each were held with lecturers and deans on how inclusivity policies were implemented at their institutions, the challenges encountered by both students and institutions. Focus group discussions were held to try to get the views of those students living with disabilities.

3.5 Data Analysis

The analytical process involved thematic analysis, wherein data was coded and categorized to identify recurring patterns and themes. Thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke, allowed the researchers to identify recurring patterns and themes within data, facilitating an examination of how institutional policies, support services, and assistive technologies impact the educational experiences of students with sensory disabilities (Braun & Clarke, 2006). By situating these findings within the broader context of the Social Model of Disability, the study aimed at elucidating the complex interplay between individual experiences and systemic structures, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of the factors that promote or hinder inclusive education in Zimbabwe's higher education sector.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

We tried to be as ethical as possible. The issue of confidentiality was key as we guaranteed that whatever information we obtained was not to be divulged to anyone else other than the intended beneficiaries. And no names were mentioned of universities and participants were mentioned. Where the names were mentioned, these were pseudonyms. We also ensured that we obtained consent from all the participants who participated in the study. No participant was coerced into participating and they were free to withdraw any time they wished so. We also ensured that participants were protected from any form of harm.

4. Results and Discussion

To explore the dynamics of inclusion for students with hearing and visual impairments in Zimbabwean higher education, this study employed a qualitative case study approach informed by constructivist principles, which foreground the meanings individuals assign to their experiences. A total of 14 participants were interviewed, including eight students with HI, two lecturers, the Dean of Students, and two non-disabled students, alongside insights from one student support officer and one interpreter. Pseudonyms were used for anonymity and confidentiality purposes. The two universities were also allocated pseudonyms, Mushuku and Mumvee, for state and private universities, respectively. Data were presented in themes, namely: Policy implementation; Inaccessible Infrastructure and Learning Environments; Limited Assistive Technologies and Digital Divide; Inadequately Trained Personnel and Support Services; and Social and Attitudinal Barriers. The details of these are hereunder.

4.1 Policy-Implementation Gap

Data from the documents reviewed indicated that both universities cited inclusive education in their mission statements and strategic documents. Mumvee University's mission statement was very clear about the issue of inclusivity. We also established that it had some university-wide modules on Diversity and inclusivity and Christian ethics. However, how these modules were taught was not part of the study. The situation was slightly different from the other university-Mushuku where such modules were not part of the curriculum. A strong message from Mushuku University was that although some policies on inclusivity were there, the translation of these policy pronouncements into practice proved symbolic, with little evidence of consistent implementation as is presented in these interview precepts

"They say inclusion is a priority, but we don't see that in practice. There's no communication in formats we can access," said Comedia a student with visual impairment, a first-year Commerce student.

"For us, inclusivity is the university's niche; however, there is more that needs to be done," echoed Jamela from Mumvee University

Lecturer's voice:

"I try to accommodate all students, but there are no clear guidelines or training on what inclusion for hearing-impaired students actually requires. I'm left to improvise," admitted Dr.Zezai, a senior lecturer in Commercials.

Support staff's voice:

"The University has policies on paper, but the disability unit has no authority to enforce them. We mostly respond to crises rather than plan proactively," explained Ms.Taruva, a student welfare officer.

Participants, especially from the state university, expressed frustration with a disconnect between policy intentions and lived experiences, highlighting a need for systemic accountability.

4.2 Inaccessible Infrastructure and Learning Environments

Students reported serious accessibility issues in classrooms, libraries, and administrative buildings.

"In some lecture rooms, I can't even see the lecturer clearly, let alone lip-read. There are no screens or captioned slides," said Takudzwa, a student with a hearing impairment, a final-year social science student.

During orientation, they just gave out a handbook. There was no interpreter, no alternative format—how were we

supposed to understand anything?” asked Gamuchirai, a hard-of-hearing, a block student.

“Our library has qualified personnel to assist us. We don’t have any problem at all.” Said Sipho, who is hard of hearing.

“We experience some challenges with a few lecturers who sometimes forget that there are some blind students. If they refer to something written on the board without describing it, how do they expect us to know?” Contemplated Mazodze, a blind student.

Interpreter’s voice:

“Sometimes I have to interpret three classes in a row with no break. There’s no scheduling support, and I’m the only interpreter for over 15 students,” said Mr. Mavunga, a freelance sign language interpreter employed on a part-time basis.

These experiences reflect the invisibility of sensory accessibility in mainstream academic spaces and the absence of infrastructure designed with diverse needs in mind.

4.3 Limited Assistive Technologies and Digital Divide

Lack of assistive technologies and reliable internet access disproportionately affects students with hearing and visual impairment, especially during blended or remote learning.

“The online learning platforms are not accessible. Most videos have no captions, and there’s no transcript option,” noted Tanatswa, a student with a hearing impairment, a second-year Social Work Studies student.

“I tried to use speech-to-text apps, but they need a stable internet connection, which I don’t have off campus,” explained Tinashe, a commerce student.

Dean of Students’ voice:

“We are aware that assistive technology is lacking, but we rely heavily on donor support. There’s no dedicated institutional budget for inclusive tech,” acknowledged Mr. Sibanda.

The issue of assistive devices is a challenge. We don’t have much of the required devices. Our library, however, is disability sensitive. We have computers with JAWs and trained librarians to assist. Efforts are underway to acquire devices for visual and hearing impaired. We rely on borrowing especially the embosser for printing exams.

This technological shortfall creates a double exclusion from content and from broader academic participation thereby reinforcing educational inequity.

4.4 Inadequately Trained Personnel and Support Services

Findings revealed that universities lacked specialised staff, and existing academic personnel were untrained in inclusive pedagogical approaches.

“Most of our lecturers don’t even face us when they speak. It’s hard to lip-read, and they use technical terms without writing them down,” shared Sindile, an information and technology student.

Lecturer’s voice:

“I wish I had training in inclusive teaching. Sometimes I just don’t know how to help without seeming patronising,” said Ms. Mawere, a senior lecturer.

“...I have found the basic lessons on sign language so helpful to teaching in an inclusive environment, otherwise the situation would be difficult”, echoed Mr. Tom, a lecturer at Mumvee University.

Support staff’s voice:

“Requests for additional interpreters or note-takers are usually denied because of funding. We’re overwhelmed and under-resourced,” noted Mr. Tomu, again highlighting the gap between student needs and institutional capacity.

Whilst there are some qualified lecturers at the university to lecture in an inclusive environment, the majority need more training. Yes, we have some lessons in basic sign language, but a lot needs to be done.”

This lack of human capital in disability support compromises the quality and consistency of academic engagement for students with hearing impairments.

4.5 Social and Attitudinal Barriers

Beyond structural limitations, half of the students reported facing social exclusion, stereotyping, and discriminatory attitudes from peers and staff.

“Some classmates avoid group work with me. They say I slow down the team,” disclosed Tanatswa, a student in Business Studies.

“One lecturer told me to withdraw because the subject was too ‘verbal’ for someone like me,” said Gamuchirai, who described feeling humiliated and unsupported.

The story was slightly different from Ross (student), who intimated that "... we don't suffer much about exclusion. It seems the other students have accommodated us. Maybe it could be because we are a Christian institution, and also the Christian ethics modules we are taught. Very few cases when I feel neglected. I am blind, but each time I need help I get it either from students or staff members".

Non-disabled student's voice:

"To be honest, we don't know how to interact with them. We're afraid of saying the wrong thing, so we just stay away," admitted Tatenda, a fellow student, illustrating a lack of disability awareness training.

The other student from a private university weighed in to say that;

"... the policy of inclusion has given us the chance to interact with those with visual and hearing disabilities. We interact so well, but there are situations where they face challenges, especially in class. Some lecturers are not conversant with sign language and whenever they lecture our counterparts are a little bit disadvantaged. The University has made it a policy that there are basic sign language lessons every week, and these assist a lot."

Rutendo, a visually impaired student, shared her experience, stating:

"At our institution, we don't face difficulties interacting with fellow students; we feel at home. I never feel completely stuck; whenever I need help, my peers support and accompany me, even during activities like sprinting. However, the situation changes drastically once I leave the campus."

The findings highlight that it is often the prevailing institutional cultures rather than the impairments themselves that pose the greatest obstacles to genuine inclusion. At one private university, there appeared to be a relatively strong embrace of inclusive practices, although occasional gaps in access to assistive technologies were noted. In contrast, the barriers encountered at public universities mirror patterns widely documented in both global and regional scholarship on disability in higher education. However, this study contributes a unique perspective by shedding light on the symbolic nature of inclusion in the Zimbabwean university context. Despite the presence of inclusive policy frameworks and strategic commitments, a significant disconnect persists between institutional discourse and the lived realities of students. This discrepancy indicates that the core issue is not a lack of policy but rather the stagnation in policy implementation and the tendency toward performative inclusion. It is this persistent gap between the rhetoric of inclusion and its actual practice that continues to marginalize students with hearing and visual impairments. The study, therefore, advocates for a shift from merely drafting inclusive policies to undertaking meaningful institutional

reforms, underpinned by long-term investment, dedicated leadership, and a genuine commitment to disability inclusion across all levels of the higher education system.

4.6 Discussion

The findings of this study offer compelling support for the Social Model of Disability, which asserts that disability arises not from individual impairments but from the structural and attitudinal barriers embedded within society (Oliver, 1990). The study revealed that although institutional policies advocating for inclusive education were in place, they were inconsistently applied and poorly enforced. Whilst the story was a little bit different from the private university, this disconnect between policy and practice illustrates how systemic shortcomings, rather than the students' hearing impairments, are the principal obstacles to meaningful inclusion.

This reality aligns with earlier research conducted in sub-Saharan Africa, where universities often promote inclusion rhetorically but fall short in operationalising these commitments (Mutanga & Walker, 2015). The continued absence of accessible learning environments, inadequate provision of assistive technologies, and limited availability of sign language interpreters echo regional patterns identified in previous scholarship. Such conditions reaffirm Shakespeare's (2006) critique of "pretend policies"—frameworks that present a façade of inclusivity but are not matched by effective institutional change.

The findings also lend empirical weight to constructivist perspectives on disability, particularly those advanced by Charmaz (2006), which emphasise the significance of individual meaning-making and the social construction of experience. The subjective accounts of students with hearing impairments in this study highlight social exclusion, stigma, and marginalisation, illustrating the lived reality of exclusion and how social environments shape disability. This lends credence to the argument that understanding the voices and perspectives of disabled individuals, particularly those with sensory disabilities, is essential to designing effective interventions. The picture portrayed in the findings shows that most people are not conversant with sign language, meaning that the deaf are somehow excluded from the public domain. Communication pattern.

Moreover, the reactive nature of support services, as exhibited in some instances, tends to respond only after problems arise, further illustrating institutional passivity. Such an approach contradicts the proactive, rights-based orientation envisioned in Sustainable Development Goal 4, which calls for inclusive and equitable quality education for all. The reliance on donor funding and the

under-resourcing of support centres reinforce this reactive tendency and reflect broader systemic neglect.

These challenges are not unique to Zimbabwe but resonate with studies conducted in other low- and middle-income contexts where structural inequities, technological limitations, and undertrained staff significantly hinder the advancement of inclusive education (Emong & Eron, 2016). Collectively, the findings demonstrate a critical gap between policy ambitions and operational realities, underscoring the need for a coordinated institutional effort that includes funding, capacity-building, and cultural transformation.

In summary, the study corroborates existing theoretical and empirical literature, while also providing context-specific insights into the barriers faced by students with hearing impairments in Zimbabwean higher education. Bridging the divide between intention and implementation requires a shift from symbolic policy adoption to concrete, sustained, and participatory action.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusions

This study aimed to explore how Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which advocates for inclusive and equitable quality education, is being implemented in Zimbabwe's higher education institutions, particularly with regard to students with sensory disabilities. Drawing on the Social Model of Disability and informed by a constructivist paradigm, the research focused on the lived experiences of these students, as well as the role of institutional policies, support services, and assistive technologies in shaping those experiences.

The findings point to a persistent gap between policy commitments and the practical realities faced by students with disabilities. While inclusive education policies are present at both the national and institutional levels, they are not consistently or effectively applied. Students continue to encounter significant barriers, including limited access to assistive technologies, poorly resourced disability support services, and an overall lack of institutional readiness. Attitudinal challenges, such as stigma and exclusion from both peers and faculty, further compound the problem, undermining the inclusive education agenda set out in SDG 4.

5.2 Recommendations

To address these shortcomings, the study puts forward several recommendations targeted at different levels of the education system.

1. At the national level, the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education should take a more active role in enforcing the implementation of inclusive education policies across all universities. This includes setting clear standards for accessibility and allocating resources specifically earmarked for inclusive infrastructure and technologies. The idea of having sign language in the school curriculum is laudable; however, it should translate into reality.
2. At the institutional level, university leadership must prioritise inclusion by establishing well-resourced disability support centres, employing trained sign language interpreters, and ensuring that staff are adequately equipped to teach students with diverse needs. Inclusion should not be treated as an optional add-on but as a core element of institutional policy and practice.
3. For academic staff, ongoing training in inclusive teaching strategies and disability awareness is essential. Educators must be supported in adapting teaching materials and methods to accommodate diverse learners, and institutional cultures must shift toward valuing difference rather than perceiving it as a burden.
4. Institutions should embrace inclusive curriculum practices. This can be done by adding university-wide modules on inclusivity and diversity to ensure that all students are exposed to this, and inclusive cultures are adopted. This can be done by accessing free lessons in basic sign language. By doing so, this cuts down the communication barriers that exclude those with hearing impairment.
5. Finally, development partners and donor agencies have an important role to play in bridging resource gaps, offering technical assistance, and supporting pilot projects that promote the use of assistive technologies and inclusive pedagogies.
6. In conclusion, the study reinforces that realising the goals of SDG 4 requires more than policy declarations. It demands a coherent strategy that integrates funding, training, infrastructure development, and cultural change. Only through such sustained and collaborative efforts can Zimbabwe's higher education system become genuinely inclusive for students with hearing impairments and others living with disabilities.

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