

Developing a framework for an inclusive learning environment under resource constraints in State Universities in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This qualitative study develops a framework for an inclusive learning environment under resource constraints in state universities in Zimbabwe. The study began by understanding the challenges, critical success factors and strategies lecturers employ to strive for inclusivity. Data were collected through twenty face-to-face interviews. Thematic analysis was employed using NVivo version 14. Study results show that lecturers know the importance of inclusivity and are eager to foster an inclusive learning environment throughout the education value chain, but resource constraints hinder them. Drawing on the analysis of participants' responses, the study offers a framework that may be applied to foster an inclusive learning environment during resource constraints.

Keywords: diverse students, inclusive learning environment, resource constraints, state university

Introduction

The mandate of universities in Zimbabwe is to develop graduates who are ready to make an impact in their chosen industry. Their student population is increasingly diverse, with greater variety than in the past in terms of gender, culture, religious beliefs and disability (Pasara and Mhlanga, 2022, Mpofu *et al.*, 2024), resulting in the need for inclusive learning and teaching practices. A major challenge for state universities in Zimbabwe (Aribino, 2023) is that inclusive practices are often costly. African governments have been accused of providing insufficient budgets for universities for activities such as research and innovation (Pasara and Mhlanga, 2022) and resource constraints are evident; for example, lecturers are paid salaries below the poverty line (ZimEye, 2023; ZimEye, 2024).

The focus of the current study was to develop a framework for creating an inclusive learning environment under resource constraints. To work towards this aim, the study investigated the following sub-objectives:

- To examine the challenges that lecturers face as they seek to establish an inclusive learning and teaching environment among diverse student populations.
- To identify critical success factors that contribute to inclusivity in the learning and teaching environment, as perceived by lecturers.
- To explore strategies that lecturers employ to overcome resource constraints and promote inclusivity in the learning and teaching process among diverse students.

Literature review

This study falls within the theoretical frameworks of social constructivism, resource dependence and critical pedagogy. Social constructivism, as proposed by Vygotsky in the 1970s, emphasises that learning is a social process as it involves the interaction between learner(s) and facilitator(s) (Shah, 2022). This framework is therefore suitable for guiding the current study because of the peer-peer and student-lecturer interactions that take place in the university learning environment.

In the context of education, ‘diversity’ refers to the existence of different learner backgrounds, experiences and identities in the school environment. These differences encompass such dimensions as race, gender, ethnicity, disability and socioeconomic status (Moreu *et al.*, 2021). On the other hand, ‘inclusion’ involves creating a learning environment where all students are welcomed and enabled to participate fully in academic and social activities (Honkasilta and Koutsoklenis, 2024; Kefallinou *et al.*, 2020). Diversity and inclusion work together to ensure the provision of equitable access to education and opportunities for all students.

Universities embracing diversity and inclusion offer rich learning experiences for students, who feel welcome and valued no matter where they come from or what their capabilities may be; their environment fosters critical thinking, empathy and collaboration – vital skills in an interconnected world (Gurin *et al.*, 2002). However, inclusivity is not easily attained, as universities face many challenges (Svendby, 2024). Extant literature has documented the many barriers to inclusive teaching and learning in higher education (HE) institutions: lack of infrastructure and funding (Lintangsari and Emaliana, 2020; Wibowo and Muin, 2018); lack of knowledge (Ristad *et al.*, 2024); lack of training of instructors (Rasmitadila *et al.*, 2021; Ahsan and Sharma, 2018); teacher shortages (Ainscow *et al.*, 2006); negative attitudes towards students who are differently abled (McHatton and Parker, 2013).

In addition, HE lecturers often multi-task and manage many very large classes; their high workloads are likely to limit their capacity to enable students to reach their potential (Skaalvik and Skaalvik, 2017). As a result, without adequate resources, they may struggle to address special needs or to foster inclusivity (Efendi, 2018; Langørgen *et al.*, 2020).

Agius (2023) proposed that getting to know the student is the first step towards successful inclusion; HE management should therefore develop a student-centred culture. If students feel valued, included and empowered regardless of their background, learning style, abilities, motivation or potential, they are more likely to be creative and learn well (Ghanizadeh, 2017),

especially those with special needs. (Goodall *et al.*, 2023; Saloviita, 2015; Schwab and Alnahdi, 2020; Svendby, 2020).

Inclusive learning strategies date back: Dewey and Dewey (1915) noted that experiential and interactive learning strategies may be used to address individual needs. Researchers such as Moriña (2017), Moriña and Orozco (2021) and Ristad *et al.* (2024) advocated mandatory 'inclusion training' and policies designed to make diversity and inclusion intrinsic to teaching, which is thereby accessible to all and, with truly listening faculty, enriching (Abulibdeh *et al.*, 2024). Barriers to learning are further overcome by provision of adequate infrastructure, relevant learning materials and a needs-targeted curriculum (Ristad *et al.*, 2024).

Aims and method of the current study

This study took a qualitative approach to explore how lecturers improvise in a resource-constrained environment to achieve inclusive learning and, in accordance with Muchowe, Mubango and Chingwaro (2023), followed the interpretivist paradigm to understand the perceptions and attitudes of participants, with data derived from in-depth interviews.

The study population (half female; half male) included all lecturers at Zimbabwe State University, all with more than fifteen years of experience; they came from diverse backgrounds and all faculties (Arts, Social Science, Natural Science, Technology, Engineering, and Law). Questions covered the topics related to the sub-objectives set out above: challenges and the sources of those challenges, factors governing success, strategies. Data saturation was achieved at the twentieth interview and, throughout the research, participants were treated autonomously and were alerted to their rights.

The study adopted a thematic analysis in three stages:

- Initial coding, in which the researchers identified an initial set of codes, with a focus on verbs – to identify what actions and processes were taking place, who was carrying out the action or process and how the actions related to one another. Verbs represent actions, processes or conditions, these central to an understanding of the dynamics of a given situation (Fitriani and Johan, 2023).
- The generation of themes.
- Selective coding, where similar themes were combined.

To achieve data trustworthiness, participants were asked to verify the initial research report before it was disseminated. They all confirmed that the research results represented what was obtained in their context.

Findings and discussion

The study's first objective was to identify challenges faced by lecturers in implementing inclusive learning.

Some challenges emanate from the external environment, viz. factors that the universities cannot control, as identified by Islam and Alam (2024). In this study, participants identified the country's financial crisis as a key challenge: inflation has reduced universities' ability to pay for resources; students themselves are worse off and universities are less able to offer them financial support.

"Our university has an inclusive learning policy, and for that policy to be effective, the institution should have resources. The university can no longer afford to buy these resources because its cash reserves were wiped out through inflation."

Participant III

"Students come from different backgrounds, the economic challenges in Zimbabwe. Those from poor backgrounds were affected the most. Before you even consider implementing inclusive learning, these students struggle to pay tuition fees and accommodation and do not have money for their upkeep on campus."

Participant XI

"the economic environment is not being helpful. The university, in most cases, is operating at break even. As you know, some students would want support from the universities, those who are living with disabilities, or those from poor backgrounds. The university cannot afford them tuition exemptions or loans because of financial challenges."

Participant V

A second external challenge to inclusive learning was identified as the frequent electrical power cuts. Ali *et al.* (2024) recognised that inclusive learning incorporates electronic media, but an electricity crisis severely limits access, as these comments show:

"At times, we would want to use online learning to become inclusive to students who fail to come for physical lectures. However, excessive load shedding frequently disrupts our lectures, resulting in students abandoning the lessons"

Participant II

“When teaching a large class, I use mega-phones so every learner can hear me. This is usually affected by lack of electricity. This also affects my teaching methods. In some cases where I want to use a PowerPoint presentation, I cannot do that due to load-shedding.”

Participant VII

Apart from external factors, the investigation showed internal challenges to state universities consistent with the findings of Mpofu and Mpofu (2023). One subcategory of internal challenge was infrastructure that did not support inclusive practices. Infrastructure is fundamental to inclusive learning (Adewumi, 2019) and, if it is inappropriate, lecturers have a limited choice of inclusive learning strategies to adopt (Abulibdeh *et al.*, 2024):

“Our university does not have the capacity for inclusive learning in terms of infrastructure. The way campuses were designed its rigid, and hard for people living with disabilities to move freely. The other challenge if you want to use internet as a strategy for inclusive learning, the internet is extremely slow, and the gadgets we use for teaching are outdated, and not compatible with new software.”

Participant XII

The other institutional challenge relates to human capital. Two participants commented:

“Our university has been affected by brain drain. Lecturers have left for greener pastures. This has resulted in overload. For example, I teach 10 courses instead of three. This has resulted in pressure and lack of time to plan and implement inclusive learning.”

Participant VI

“As a result of high labour turnover in universities, the new lecturers that have been appointed lack skills of accommodating diverse group of learners. I have been a peer reviewer for other lecturers and observed them deliver lectures. They do not even use gender neutral language when teaching. They need extra training on inclusive learning.”

Participant XI

The lecturer is a focal point of inclusive university learning (Bovill *et al.*, 2016). If there are sufficient lecturers with the necessary skills (Ali *et al.*, 2024), inclusive learning may be achieved.

Three themes emerged from the investigation into critical success factors: inclusive learning policies, recognition of lecturers and leadership support. Participants identified the formulation and implementation of inclusive learning policies as a factor critical to success:

“The parent ministry should revamp policies and incorporate inclusive learning. This will make it mandatory for our institutions to implement inclusive learning. The institutions should also make their internal inclusive policies based on what the parent ministry would have provided. It is important that these policies are not only formulated, but they should be implemented.”

Participant I

Participants defined inclusive learning policies as frameworks and practices designed to ensure that educational environments are accessible, equitable and supportive of all, regardless of background or ability. Findings relating to the formulation and implementation of inclusive learning policies are consistent with those of Sari *et al.* (2022). To formulate policies confirms the authorities' seriousness about implementing inclusive learning (Ali *et al.*, 2024), but implementation must follow (Mpofu and Mpofu, 2023).

Another theme that emerged as critical to success was recognition of lecturers. Lecturers are not necessarily motivated to implement inclusive learning:

“Lecturers are not happy with the salaries and benefits they get from state universities. They are not moved to create time to research and implement inclusive learning strategies. Once work conditions are improved, they may have the will and desire to implement inclusive learning strategies, but skills should support this. In other words, universities should adequately equip their staff with inclusive learning skills.”

Participant VIII

According to Bovill *et al.* (2016), a lack of motivation among lecturers has thwarted the implementation of inclusive learning. This study supports the view that inclusive education is more likely to come about once lecturers are recognised. Jeannis *et al.* (2020) concluded that inclusive learning can be complex and more accessible if a motivated lecturer implements it.

Finally, the other critical support factor is leadership support. The participants lamented the lack of leadership to support inclusive learning programmes:

“Our leadership, which includes the vice chancellor, registrar, bursar, information technologist, and librarian, should be passionate about inclusive learning. Once they are passionate about this, it will be easier to gate support in terms of policies and funds, as these are decision markers.”

Participant X

This finding echoes those of 1) Efendi (2018), viz. that inclusive learning can be implemented only with leadership support and 2) Bovill *et al.* (2016), viz. that the people at the top should be hands-on with the policies and funding for inclusive learning.

The study also revealed some inclusive teaching and learning strategies that participants used despite the resource constraints previously discussed. For example:

“Where there are no resources, I have to use low-cost methods. For example, in the classroom, I use gender-neutral language. I also instruct those with hearing and visual problems to sit at the front so they do not miss out.”

Participant IV

Sari *et al.* (2022) also averred that lecturers need not use expensive techniques for inclusive learning, while (Adewumi, 2019) said that knowing the background of your learners is key to adopting low-cost instructional methods.

“I have realized that students differ in access to online platforms. For example, some can afford to access Google Classroom, but some do not frequently visit this site. So I record my lectures, share them on YouTube, and turn the lecture into an audio so I can share them on the WhatsApp group created for my classes. I do this to accommodate every learner.”

Participant IX

Jeannis *et al.* (2020) also found that lecturers are effective in supporting inclusive learning when they use diverse, cost-effective online learning platforms and Efendi *et al.* (2018) share the view that social media can enable low-cost online learning.

The investigation also found examples where lecturers deployed low-cost, diversified assessment methods:

“I use cheap and diverse assessment methods to accommodate all the learners. I use an online quiz, complemented by an in-class group presentation to cater to participatory learners, and an individual assignment to cater to individual learners.”

Participant X

Quraishi *et al.* (2024) likewise say that diverse assessment methods may be used to accommodate different learners and Schreiber and Torabian (2023) point out that the more assessment methods the lecturer uses, the easier it can be to identify student talents.

Framework for an inclusive learning environment under resource constraints

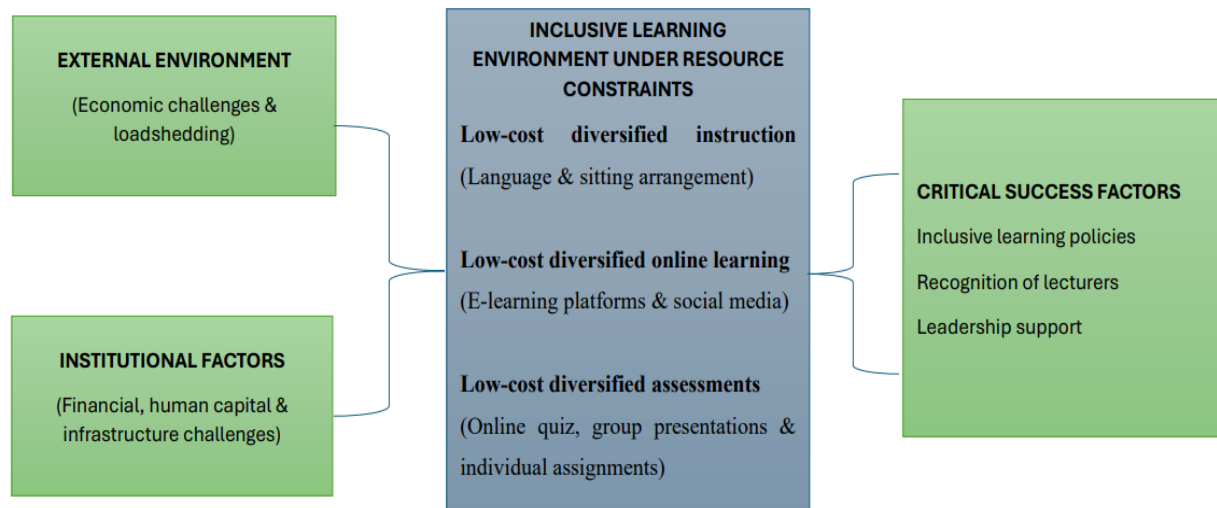


Figure 1. Framework for an inclusive learning environment under resource constraints

The findings of this study reveal that state universities in Zimbabwe face multiple external and internal challenges, most owing to resource constraints. However, the analysis has also identified low-cost strategies and actions that can contribute to inclusive teaching methods in the face of these challenges. On the basis of these results, the framework proposes the following solutions and recommendations to achieve inclusive learning:

- low-cost diversified instruction (e.g. use of inclusive language)
- low-cost, diversified online learning (e.g. use of social media as well as online teaching platforms)
- low-cost, diversified assessments (e.g. online quizzes, group presentations, and individual assignments.)

Conclusion

The study concludes that external and institutional factors challenge inclusive learning in state universities in Zimbabwe. These challenges include limited financial resources, inadequate infrastructure and prejudiced societal attitudes toward educational accessibility. Such barriers prevent institutions from implementing inclusive practices effectively, leading to disparities in educational outcomes among students. Our investigation strongly suggests that the implementation of inclusive learning policies, recognition of lecturers and the support of leadership are critical success factors in fostering academic inclusivity. By addressing these key areas,

universities can create a more equitable system responsive to the diverse needs of their student populations.

Furthermore, the study demonstrates that low-cost inclusive strategies for instruction, guidance and assessment are essential when funding is short, helping educators to cater for various learning needs and styles and to improve engagement to the benefit of all learners. We thus recommend that state higher education institutions consider our research as one catalyst for positive change in Zimbabwe and beyond, wherever resources are severely limited.

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