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Students With Disabilities in the Eyes of Teaching and Non-Teaching Staff in Sri Lankan Universities

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Abstract

Inclusion is frequently associated with persons with disabilities; however, it encompasses a broader scope. It represents an attitude, an intention, and a policy framework designed to apply to all individuals. The need for inclusion arises from the exclusion of certain individuals or groups within society, a phenomenon that is largely rooted in social inequality. Inclusive education, at all levels including higher education, entails recognising and addressing the diverse needs and aspirations of each individual, while ensuring that all learners are able to participate and achieve together. According to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs [UN DESA] Disability and Development Report (2019), adults with disabilities aged 25 and older are only half as likely to have completed higher education compared to their peers without disabilities—12% versus 24% across 41 countries. Nevertheless, reliable global statistics on students with disabilities in higher education remain scarce due to significant variations in data collection and reporting practices among countries. The article deals with inclusive education in Sri Lankan universities and presents the results of a qualitative study conducted as part of an EU-funded project at four Sri Lankan universities in partnership with four European universities. The main objective of the study is to explore the attitudes of teaching and non-teaching university staff, knowledge about students with disabilities, perceived difficulties, needs and possible solutions to create equal opportunities for students with disabilities. Three focus group discussions were held with teaching and non-teaching university staff and the data analysed thematically. The findings show that the inclusion of students with disabilities in Sri Lankan higher education is hindered by structural, attitudinal and skill-related barriers. At the same time, there are opportunities for improvement through staff professional development, increased institutional support and coordinated stakeholder engagement. However, significant efforts are still required to create a university environment that fully supports inclusive education and ensures a fulfilling experience for students.

Keywords: Inclusive Higher Education, Qualitative research, Students with Disabilities

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INTRODUCTION

Although the term inclusion is usually associated with people with disabilities, it has a much broader meaning and it is at the same time an attitude, intension as well as a policy of inclusion of everyone (Kiš-Glavaš, 2023). Inclusion is not a question of equalisation, but of respect for diversity. Inclusion is understood as a continuous process that enables all individuals, regardless of age, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, ability, or other characteristics, to participate fully and equally in society. It involves not only access to education and employment but also meaningful participation in everyday social life, which is essential for well-being and belonging (Ainscow et al., 2006; UNESCO, 2017; United Nations, 2006).

Inclusion in the context of education, including higher education, refers to the process of removing barriers to access, participation, and successful completion of education and thus forms the basis for achieving equity in education (UNESCO, 2017). Equity, on the other hand, refers to the principle that all students are considered equally important in education, considering their diversity, their personal characteristics, and the circumstances in which they find themselves, which may put some of them at a disadvantage compared to others (Farnell et al., 2023). A fair and inclusive higher education must ensure, using various measures, that admission, successful studies, and the obtaining of a degree depend mostly on student competencies and not on personal characteristics and living circumstances which students cannot control (Institute for the Development of Education, n.d.). The inclusivity of the education system is the basis for achieving equity in education (UNESCO, 2017).

One of the key pathways to achieving equity, including in education, is through the provision of equal opportunities for all students. Importantly, equality of opportunity does not imply uniform conditions; rather, it requires adapting the learning environment, expectations, communication, teaching techniques, and methods to the needs of each individual through an individualised approach (Kiš-Glavaš, 2023). When discussing equal opportunities, it is worth noting that equal opportunities are one of the general principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006). Relatedly, the Convention promotes an attitude of respect for the rights of persons with disabilities at all levels of the education system, including higher education. To realise this right without discrimination and based on equal opportunity, States Parties should ensure an inclusive education system at all levels.

Persons with disabilities must not be excluded from the general education system based on disability. They

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should receive the necessary support within mainstream education to enable effective learning. Individualised support measures should also be provided in settings that promote both academic and social development, in line with the principle of full inclusion. To achieve this, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006) obliges signatory states to strengthen the training of professionals and staff working with persons with disabilities, including both teaching and non-teaching staff in higher education. Such training is intended to improve the quality of support and services available to students with disabilities.

To date, 187 countries and the European Union have ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, thereby committing to its full implementation. The countries from which the authors of this paper come have also ratified it: the Republic of Croatia ratified the Convention in 2007, and Sri Lanka in 2016 (United Nations Treaty Collection, n.d.).

The principles of equity and inclusion are an integral part of the concept of the social dimension of higher education (London Communique, 2007, p. 5), as well as a "social, economic and moral imperative" (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2022, p 3.). However, truly inclusive and equitable higher education is still more just a noble idea more than it is a functioning practice (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2022), which indicates that immediate steps must be taken to implement it more effectively.

In the context of this topic, one of the aspects worth looking into are teachers' attitudes towards students with disabilities, as their attitudes are the precursors to their actions and teachers' willingness to provide reasonable accommodations and adhere to the principles of inclusive education has a significant influence on student success (Baker et al, 2012). Across the world, teachers in higher education have varying attitudes towards inclusion of students with disabilities, with some positive attitudes focusing on the view of inclusion as an essential aspect of higher education, while some negative ones refer to the negative effect on quality of teaching and viewing accessibility as a burden (Korthals Altes et al., 2024). As a literature review of studies conducted in 17 countries across the Global North and South, some of the challenges teachers encounter in implementing inclusion in higher education include lack of knowledge, experience, skills, resources, support, information, and training, as well as their insecurity and perception of students' competence (Korthals Altes et al., 2024).

The focus of studies looking at inclusive education in a cross-national context still tends to focus more on the Global North than the Global South (Kamenopoulou, 2018, according to Kamenopoulou & Karisa, 2023) and

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there is a lack of data on inclusive education from the Global South (Kamenopoulou & Karisa, 2023). Some authors even argue that educational inclusion itself, in its current format, is a "Global North concept transported to the Global South without overt preparation among teachers and educational personnel" (Hettiaarachi & Das, 2018, p. 428). Respecting the local contexts and deferring to local experts rather than imposing a Global North lens and practices onto a local setting in the Global South is thus crucial (Kamenopoulou & Karisa, 2023).

Research on the attitudes of university teachers toward students with disabilities in the Global South, and more specifically SE Asia shows that, e.g., university teaching staff in the Philippines valued egalitarianism (believing in the equality of all students and acting accordingly), were sensitive to the needs of students with disabilities in class, and the readiness to take accountability in the process of inclusive higher education (Ignacio & Allit, 2023).

More specifically focusing on Sri Lanka, The Constitution of Sri Lanka states that education must be available to all citizens without discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, religion, language, caste, gender, political opinion, or place of birth (The Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, 1978). However, it does not explicitly mention inclusive education or guarantee the rights of persons with disabilities. To address this gap, the Government of Sri Lanka introduced the Protection of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act No. 28 in 1996, which stipulates that "no person with a disability shall be discriminated against in recruitment for employment or office or in admission to any educational institution on the grounds of such disability." In 2007, Sri Lanka signed the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and subsequently established the National Secretariat for Persons with Disabilities to improve rights, security, and services for persons with disabilities through coordination and policy implementation.

Educational opportunities for children with disabilities in Sri Lanka have historically taken four main forms: specialised schools, special education units within regular schools, inclusive regular education schools, and special resource centres attached to regular schools (Hettiarachchi & Das, 2014). The roots of special education can be traced back to the British colonial era, when the Church of England established the first residential school for deaf and blind children in 1912. By 2020, approximately 30 special schools were in operation (National Education Commission, 2022). However, these schools were largely organised by type of disability, which reinforced segregation both from mainstream peers and within the community of children with disabilities. In 1969, the Ministry of Education assumed

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responsibility for special education and introduced integrated programmes for children with hearing, cognitive, and learning difficulties, as well as for students categorised as "slow learners" (Piyasena, 2002). These integrated approaches, however, continued to separate students into specialised units.

Several studies emphasise that the experience, knowledge, and attitudes of teachers, school leaders, and other professionals are crucial for the successful implementation of inclusive education (Abeywickrama et al., 2013; Alwis, 2005; Ellepola, 2016; Hettiarachchi & Das, 2014). While policy frameworks and legal instruments have been developed to support equity and inclusion in primary and secondary education, higher education has not benefited from equivalent national strategies or mechanisms, apart from some donor-funded projects.

The existing literature on inclusion in Sri Lankan higher education is limited and tends to focus either on structural obstacles (Wathtuwa-Durayalage, 2025) or on student attitudes towards diversity and inclusion more broadly, without addressing disability explicitly (Gunathilake, 2023). Research on teachers' attitudes towards disability inclusion has primarily concentrated on school-level educators. Findings indicate a range of challenges, including inconsistent understandings of inclusive education, lack of agreed terminology, limited training opportunities, feelings of incompetence, absence of incentives, pressure to ensure examination success, and low awareness of policy frameworks (Hettiaarachi & Das, 2018).

The scarce research on university teachers' attitudes towards disability inclusion suggests that, although teachers were generally willing to accept students with disabilities, they lacked clarity about different types of disabilities and the specific support each requires. Students were often excluded from full participation due to inaccessible physical environments and teaching materials (Wickramasinghe, 2019).

Overall, there is a paucity of literature critically examining higher education inclusion in Sri Lanka through a culturally informed lens, and very limited attention has been given to the attitudes of university teachers. This paper seeks to address this gap by exploring the attitudes of teaching and non-teaching staff in Sri Lankan higher education towards students with disabilities, with the aim of providing a foundation for further research and informing the development of strategies to strengthen inclusion.

Project Background

The project titled *Developing Inclusive Education for Students with Disabilities in Sri Lankan Universities* (IncEdu)[1] was

[1] https://arts.pdn.ac.lk/incedu/index.html

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implemented under the Erasmus+ joint program. The program was hosted by the University of Peradeniya. Three other Sri Lankan universities were also involved in the project: University of Ruhuna, Eastern University of Sri Lanka and the Sri Lanka Technology Campus. The aim of the project was to develop a sustainable support system for students with disabilities in Sri Lankan universities and to include students with disabilities in Sri Lanka's higher education institutions by establishing and adapting a suitable environment for them. The specific objectives of the project included creating a conducive learning environment for students with disabilities, raising awareness among the community, and enhancing the competence of university staff to better support the inclusion of students with disabilities in Sri Lanka. The Sri Lankan universities were supported by European partners in achieving these goals: Uppsala University (Uppsala, Sweden), University of Transylvania (Brasov, Romania), Masaryk University (Brno, Czech Republic), and the University of Zagreb (Zagreb, Croatia).

The development of staff competence was realised, in part, through a work package provided by the University of Zagreb, aimed at the education of educators and the education of teaching and non-teaching staff. The project developed the educational program 'Inclusive Approach to Students with Disabilities in Academic Settings' for teaching and non-teaching staff, complete with dissemination materials. Twelve certified educators from partner universities in Sri Lanka now provide the human resources needed to train additional staff. Implementing this program represents an investment in enhancing the competence of university staff, thereby contributing to more inclusive higher education across Sri Lankan universities

The topics of the education were related to the modern approach to persons with disabilities, the needs of and support for students with disabilities in the higher education system, teaching students with disabilities, universal design, advocacy, diversity and inclusion in higher education, strategies for overcoming resistance to change, equity and inclusion in higher education, and international mobility in the context of youth participation.

The first step in developing the educational program *'Inclusive Approach to Students with Disabilities in Academic Settings'* was to conduct focus groups with teaching and non-teaching staff from all four participating Sri Lankan universities. The aim was to define the scope and content of the program, select workshop topics, and tailor the program to fit the Sri Lankan cultural context.

This paper presents the findings of the focus group interviews with teaching and non-teaching staff from four Sri Lankan universities. The main aim of

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the study is to explore the attitudes of teaching and non-teaching university staff, knowledge about students with disabilities, perceived difficulties, needs, and possible solutions to create equal opportunities for students with disabilities. The sub-objective of the research was to find out how the responsibilities of the different stakeholders are seen in relation to their contribution to an inclusive approach for people with disabilities in the academic environment.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The data for this study was collected through focus group discussions conducted as described below. The participants in the focus group were selected by the respective universities, considering their involvement in the project. The partner universities were asked to ensure the participation of teaching and non-teaching staff in the focus group. The sampling method used to select the participants was therefore a purposive sample, which falls into the category of non-random sampling. Based on the analysis of the document "Developing Inclusive Education for Students with Disabilities in Sri Lankan Universities: Need Assessment Survey Report" (Yatigammana et al., 2021), which was also produced as part of this project, the methods for the focus groups were agreed on and the guidelines for both focus groups were developed. An introductory presentation and an infographic of need assessment results for conducting the focus groups were also created as an introduction to the focus groups process.

Focus groups were conducted on 24–25 February 2022 at the Eastern University of Sri Lanka. On the first day, a focus group with non-teaching staff was held, comprising seven participants representing all partner universities in Sri Lanka. On the second day, two focus groups with teaching staff were conducted, involving a total of 20 participants from the same partner universities.

All participants gave their informed consent to participate before taking part in the focus group. Informed consent included the aim of the project, the purpose and aim of the research (focus groups), the ethical aspect of the research, and the rights of the participants. Each focus group lasted approximately 90 minutes and was led by two researchers from the University of Zagreb Faculty of Education and Rehabilitation Sciences, Croatia.

The focus group guideline questions were developed based on the findings of the project's quantitative needs assessment and aligned with the project's objective of enhancing university staff competence to better support the inclusion of students with disabilities in Sri Lanka. To further develop the competence of teaching and non-teaching staff in supporting an inclusive approach for students with disabilities, it was important to gather information on staff attitudes and

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knowledge, perceived challenges, and their views on needs and potential solutions to ensure equal opportunities for students with disabilities. Table 1. contains the questions for both types of focus groups.

Table 1. Focus group questions for non-teaching staff and teaching staff

Participants	Non-teaching staff	Teaching staff
Focus group questions	Q1: In your opinion, who are students with disabilities (SWDs)? Q2: What is your interpretation of the term "equal opportunities"? Q3: How do you see your own responsibilities and students' responsibility in studying process in the context of equal opportunities? Q4: What kind of support do you need to provide a quality support to SWDs? Q5: What challenges do you face in your daily work with SWDs? Q6: In your opinion, which aspects of students' academic experience should be improved? Q7: If a *Staff Development Program on Equal Opportunities* would be available in your university, what content would you be interested?	Q1: In your opinion, who are students with disabilities (SWDs)? Q2: What is your interpretation of the term "equal opportunities"? Q3: How do you see your own responsibilities in teaching process and students' responsibility in studying process in the context of equal opportunities? Q4: What kind of support do you need to provide a quality support to SWDs? Q5: What challenges do you face in inclusion of SWDs in your teaching process? Q6: In your opinion, which aspects of students' academic experience should be improved? Q7: If a *Staff Development Program on Equal Opportunities* would be available in your university, what content would you be interested?

An inductive thematic analysis was conducted to explore the perspectives of teaching and non-teaching staff regarding students with disabilities (SWDs) in Sri Lankan universities. This approach allowed the study to achieve its objectives without being constrained by a pre-existing theoretical framework, enabling insights and patterns to emerge directly from the data—a method particularly suitable for exploratory research (Joffe, 2011). The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-step procedure: familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Coding was conducted iteratively, and themes were refined through discussion among the research team to ensure consistency and representativeness, allowing themes to emerge organically from participants' responses.

The focus group transcripts were coded line by line, generating a set of initial codes reflecting participants' statements. These codes were then

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grouped into code families—categories of related codes capturing recurring patterns or concepts. Finally, themes and subthemes were developed from these code families to reflect the key domains of knowledge, responsibilities, challenges, support needs, and opportunities for inclusion.

Coding was conducted iteratively by the research team. Conflicting or ambiguous codes were discussed and resolved, ensuring consistency and representativeness. Themes were refined by comparing them with the original transcripts and the literature on inclusive higher education to validate their relevance and accuracy.

Table 2. Thems, code family and example of code structure

Theme	Code Family	Code Structure (Examples)
Knowledge	Understanding of SWDs	Physical disability, mental/learning disability, slow learners, autism
Knowledge	Equal opportunities	Equality, fairness, access, social participation
Responsibilities	Staff roles	Mentoring, academic support, advocacy, regulation compliance
Responsibilities	SWD roles	Engage with support, self-advocate, disclose disability
Challenges	Structural barriers	University regulations, environmental inaccessibility, lack of collaboration
Challenges	Attitudinal barriers	Stigma, low awareness, negative attitudes, resistance to inclusion
Support Needed	Staff skill development	Teaching methods adaptation, assessment, psychological support, technology, advocacy
Support Needed	Institutional support	Resources, funding, policy, inter-staff collaboration
Opportunities	Policy & initiatives	National laws, IncEdu project, accessible infrastructure, centres for SWDs

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The thematic analysis of the focus group data from teaching and non-teaching staff revealed several interrelated themes and sub-themes that reflect the experiences, perceptions and needs of staff in relation to the inclusion of students with disabilities (SWDs) in higher education in Sri Lanka. Table 3 provides an integrated overview of the themes and sub-themes for both groups. In the following discussion, each theme is interpreted in the light of the existing literature.

Table 3. Integrated Themes and Subthemes from Focus Groups with Teaching and Non-Teaching Staff

Theme	Subthemes Non-Teaching Staff	Subthemes Teaching Staff
Knowledge	Student with disabilities (SWDs); Equal opportunities	Student with disabilities (SWDs); Equal opportunities

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Responsibilities	Non-teaching staff responsibilities; SWDs' responsibilities	Teaching staff responsibilities; SWDs' responsibilities
Challenges and Barriers	University regulations; Lack of collaboration among staff and students; Environmental accessibility	Unfavourable attitudes toward inclusion; Accessibility of courses and facilities; Lack of knowledge and skills of teaching staff
Support Needed	Institutional support; Non-teaching staff skill development	Teaching staff skill development; Wider support (institutional and systemic)
Equality / Attitudes	/	Equality in society; Equality in higher education; Abilities of SWDs; Society's attitude towards people with disabilities
Opportunities	/	National regulations; Participation in IncEdu project; New resources, technologies, and support centers

Theme 1. Knowledge

Both teaching and non-teaching staff defined SWDs as students who need additional support to participate fully in higher education. Non-teaching staff focussed primarily on physical disabilities, while teaching staff also identified students with mental, intellectual and learning disabilities. Both groups recognised the importance of equal opportunities but emphasised that social inequalities and differing abilities make it difficult to achieve.

"Equal opportunity means that all students have the same rights." (Non-teaching staff)
"Equal opportunities mean everyone is equal…we need to remember to give everyone what they need." (Teaching staff)

The results show that SWDs are defined as students who require additional support due to their disability. Non-teaching staff indicated that universities generally only recognise students with physical disabilities as SWDs, while other types of disabilities are often not categorised in this way. Teaching staff, on the other hand, recognised a wider range of disabilities, including intellectual, psychological and learning disabilities. Both groups understood "equal opportunities" primarily as having the same chances; however, teachers emphasised that there is no true equality in society, making it difficult to fully implement this concept in higher education. They pointed out that people have different abilities and that the social stigmatisation of people with disabilities in Sri Lanka is reflected not only in higher education policies but also in the recruitment of students. Despite these challenges, teaching staff generally felt that people with disabilities are able to participate successfully in higher education if given appropriate support.

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These findings are consistent with previous research showing that staff understanding of disability categories significantly influences the implementation of inclusive practises (Yatigammana et al., 2021; Lourens & Swartz, 2016). Similarly, global studies show that staff perceptions of equality and disability influence decisions about adjustments, allocation of resources and provision of support (Moswela & Mukhopadhyay, 2011; Márquez & Melero-Aguilar, 2022). Lack of awareness and unfavourable attitudes among stakeholders - teaching staff, lecturers, administrators, governing bodies and students - remain a major barrier to inclusion, both in Sri Lanka and internationally (Darrow, 2009; Mullins & Preyde, 2013; Lourens & Swartz, 2016; Mamboleo et al., 2020).

Theme 2. Responsibilities

The sub-objective of the research was to explore how the different stakeholders perceive their responsibilities in promoting an inclusive approach to people with disabilities in the academic environment. Non-teaching staff saw their role as supporting and mentoring SWDs in different areas of academic life, excluding learning and developing capacity for their inclusion. They also pointed to a particular responsibility: increasing the number of students with disabilities enrolled at universities. Teaching staff, on the other hand, emphasised that they should try to understand each individual student, support SWDs to learn and work in different ways and be familiar with university regulations. Both groups agreed that SWDs themselves are responsible for actively participating in their studies and taking advantage of available supports, including disclosing their disabilities to access accommodations.

"Our role is to develop capacity and increase the number of SWDs enrolled at the university." (Non-teaching staff)
"SWDs need to say what they need… they need to be present and engaged." (Teaching staff)

A developed and organised support system for SWDs can improve inclusion and success, and administrative staff play an important role in this process. Universities and faculties are responsible for providing training, ensuring appropriate communication with students with disabilities, and adapting procedures, information, and materials to meet students' needs. However, teaching staff have the greatest influence on the implementation of inclusion strategies (Nigam & Kumar, 2023). A positive attitude of teaching staff towards inclusion, a willingness to adapt teaching methods and materials, and the inclusion of SWDs in all course activities create a supportive and safe learning environment for all students. At the same time, teaching staff must ensure that academic standards are met by making necessary adjustments to teaching, examinations and assessments without compromising quality (Fajdetić et al., 2013).

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SWDs in higher education must take the initiative to disclose their disabilities and request adjustments in order to receive legitimate support (Magnus & Tøssebro, 2014). This includes actively working with teachers or support staff to select the most effective academic adjustments. Despite the benefits of accommodations, the number of requests remains low, often due to negative reactions from peers and faculty or lack of knowledge of available resources (Dong & Lucas, 2016; Toutain, 2019; Mamboleo et al., 2020; Barnar-Brak et al., 2010).

These findings echo previous research indicating that both staff responsibility and student initiative are essential for inclusive higher education (Nigam & Kumar, 2023; Magnus & Tøssebro, 2014; Dong & Lucas, 2016). Faculty engagement has a direct impact on the academic success and social inclusion of people with disabilities and emphasises the importance of well-prepared and responsive staff in promoting an inclusive learning environment (Fajdetić et al., 2013; Toutain, 2019).

Theme 3. Challenges and Barriers

Challenges for the inclusion of students with disabilities (SWDs) in higher education were identified at structural, attitudinal and knowledge-based levels, with a different focus between non-teaching and teaching staff. Non-teaching staff primarily pointed to institutional and structural barriers, including unfavourable university regulations, insufficient collaboration between staff and students, and inaccessible environmental conditions such as physically inaccessible classrooms and facilities. In addition to these structural issues, teachers also pointed to attitudinal barriers, including low awareness among faculty, staff and students of the rights, needs and potential of people with disabilities, as well as insufficient knowledge and skills to adapt teaching methods, materials and assessments. Accessibility in this context related not only to physical space, but also to academic content, course design and learning resources, reflecting a complex interplay of challenges that affect the full participation of SWDs in higher education.

"Many rooms are inaccessible for blind students." (Non-teaching staff)
"SWDs do not have access to all courses." (Teaching staff)
"It's not so much a problem of lack of resources, but an issue of attitude…many do not realise that SWDs can be successful if they are given support." (Teaching staff)

These findings are consistent with previous research showing that attitudinal, structural and knowledge-based barriers are the biggest obstacles to inclusive higher education worldwide (Ainscow et al., 2019; Lourens & Swartz, 2016; Korthals Altes et al., 2024; Mamboleo et al., 2020). The attitudes of stakeholders, including faculty, administrators, governing

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bodies and peers, play an important role in facilitating or hindering inclusion (Darrow, 2009; Mullins & Preyde, 2013; Lourens & Swartz, 2016). Similarly, international studies show that insufficient knowledge among teaching staff about teaching adaptations and disability-specific provisions contribute to the marginalisation of SWDs in higher education (Hong, 2015; Toutain, 2019).

Furthermore, the lack of collaboration between teaching staff, non-teaching staff and students has been cited as a key barrier. Effective inclusion requires coordinated efforts from all stakeholders, as poor communication or lack of awareness can prevent SWDs from receiving appropriate support (Nigam & Kumar, 2023). Structural and environmental barriers, including inaccessible facilities and limited access to courses, are consistent with global evidence on the challenges of higher education for SWDs (Lourens & Swartz, 2016; Márquez & Melero-Aguilar, 2022). Removing these barriers requires comprehensive institutional strategies, staff training and policy improvements to create a truly inclusive learning environment.

Theme 4. Support Needed

Both non-teaching and teaching staff emphasised the need for additional support to improve the inclusion of students with disabilities (SWDs) in higher education, although the groups had slightly different priorities. Staff skills development was identified as crucial: Non-teaching staff prioritised training in psychological support, needs assessment, advocacy and the use of technology, while teaching staff emphasised adapting teaching methods and materials, assessment practises, understanding disability rights and terminology, and learning international best practices to apply in the Sri Lankan context. Both groups emphasised the importance of a shared understanding of equal opportunities in higher education. In addition to staff development, participants emphasised the need for institutional support, including adequate resources, funding, legal frameworks and collaboration between university staff to create an inclusive learning environment.

"Most of the time, plans are created based on the needs of average students." (Non-teaching staff)

"The government provides few resources, so it is important that we know how to best utilise the resources we do have." (Teaching staff)

These findings echo previous research showing that faculty and staff competence - including knowledge, skills and attitudes - is critical to fostering an inclusive higher education environment (Blinov et al., 2018; Collins, Azmat & Rentschler, 2019; Lalor, Madaus & Dukes, 2020). Lack of staff knowledge and training can directly limit the accessibility and effectiveness of accommodations for SWDs (Mamboleo et al., 2020; Hong, 2015). Furthermore, coordinated

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institutional support, including resources, strategies and cross-departmental collaboration, has been shown to be essential for the equal participation of persons with disabilities (United Nations, 2019). Peer support, student unions and cultural networks have also been identified as essential social capital that can facilitate inclusive practises (Pannilage, 2012). Developing both the individual competences of staff and the institutional framework is therefore a key strategy for improving inclusion and ensuring equal opportunities in higher education.

Theme 5. Equality and Attitudes

Teaching staff emphasised both the social and educational inequalities that impact on students with disabilities (SWDs). They pointed to the pervasive stigmatisation and limited awareness that influence university policies, teaching practises and interactions with peers. Despite these challenges, the staff recognised that SWDs are capable of achieving academic success if given appropriate support.

"No one in the world has the same opportunities." (Teaching staff)
"SWDs are different from others, but they are capable and with support they can achieve." (Teaching staff)

These findings are consistent with previous research showing that faculty and community attitudes play a critical role in shaping an inclusive higher education environment (Darrow, 2009; Mullins & Preyde, 2013; Lourens & Swartz, 2016; Mamboleo et al., 2020). Studies suggest that positive faculty attitudes are strongly associated with increased engagement, participation and academic success among SWDs (Nigam & Kumar, 2023), emphasising the importance of attitudinal change alongside structural and pedagogical support for meaningful inclusion.

Theme 6. Opportunities

Ways to improve the inclusion of SWDs were emphasised mainly by teaching staff. Two types of opportunities were mentioned: legal frameworks and project-based initiatives. Teaching staff pointed out that recent national legislation in Sri Lanka mandates accessibility in newly constructed buildings and requires participation in mandatory staff development programmes, which could include topics such as SWDs' rights, classroom adaptations and the promotion of equal opportunities. These legal and regulatory measures were seen as the basis for improving inclusive practices at universities.

"There is a mandatory staff development programme that could include topics such as SWDs rights and teaching methods and materials adaptation." (Teaching staff)

Participation in the IncEdu project also offered opportunities as the initiative provided supporting technologies and software and established support

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centres at partner universities that facilitated inclusive teaching and learning practices. These resources were seen as essential to enable SWDs to participate fully in academic activities and to prepare faculty and staff to implement inclusive strategies from enrolment onwards.

"Centres at the university could facilitate the process between SWDs and professors…this process should start with the enrolment of SWDs at the university so that professors (and other services at the university) can be prepared." (Teaching staff)

Findings are consistent with previous studies indicating that both legal frameworks and project-based initiatives can significantly improve the inclusion of people with disabilities in higher education (Chiwandire & Vincent, 2019; Lourens & Swartz, 2016). Publicly funded programmes and accessible infrastructure increase participation rates of students with disabilities, although sustainability depends on continued institutional commitment and resourcing (Chiwandire & Vincent, 2019). Similarly, research emphasises the critical role of project-based initiatives in building institutional capacity, providing training and creating an inclusive environment that promotes equal participation for all students (Márquez & Melero-Aguilar, 2022; Moswela & Mukhopadhyay, 2011).

Overall, the findings suggest that the inclusion of students with disabilities (SWDs) in higher education in Sri Lanka is hindered by structural barriers, attitudinal challenges and limited staff capacity. These findings are consistent with other research showing that teaching and non-teaching staff recognise the potential of people with disabilities but face societal stigma, limited awareness, inaccessible infrastructure and inadequate professional training (Yatigammana et al., 2021; Lourens & Swartz, 2016). Positive faculty attitudes and institutional support are key to promoting SWD engagement and academic success (Nigam & Kumar, 2023; Fajdetić et al., 2013). The study emphasises the shared responsibility of staff and students, the need for targeted skills development and the importance of supportive policies and initiatives. Coordinated efforts in teaching, practise and policy are essential for sustainable inclusive higher education.

This study has several limitations. The data was collected from teaching and non-teaching staff at a limited number of universities in Sri Lanka, which may limit its generalisability to other institutions or cultural contexts. The qualitative, self-reported nature of the data may be subject to social desirability and does not allow quantification of the prevalence of attitudes or barriers. In addition, the study focussed on the views of teaching and non-teaching staff and did not include students with disabilities or

other stakeholders, which limits the validity of the findings. Finally, the context-specific regulatory, cultural and institutional factors in Sri Lanka may affect the transferability of the results to other settings.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the knowledge, attitudes and practises of teaching and non-teaching staff at universities in Sri Lanka in relation to students with disabilities to identify strategies to promote inclusive higher education. The findings show that inclusion is influenced by structural, attitudinal and procedural factors and are consistent with other research (Yatigammana et al., 2021; Lourens & Swartz, 2016; Márquez & Melero-Aguilar, 2022). Teaching and non-teaching staff showed a generally positive attitude towards people with disabilities and emphasised that they are an important resource for promoting inclusion, but further investment in professional development, accessible resources and institutional support is needed. It is important to emphasise that teaching and non-teaching staff play complementary roles: non-teaching staff provide mentoring, administrative support and facilitate enrolment, while teaching staff adapt teaching methods, support learning and ensure academic standards (Nigam & Kumar, 2023; Fajdetić et al., 2013). Furthermore, SWDs themselves are responsible for disclosing their needs and utilising the support available (Nigam & Kumar, 202). This underlines the shared responsibility of all stakeholders - including peers, administrators, non-governmental organisations and government agencies - to create an equitable learning environment (Magnus & Tøssebro, 2014; Dong & Lucas, 2016; Toutain, 2019). There are opportunities through national policies and initiatives such as IncEdu, but persistent regulatory and procedural gaps need to be addressed to achieve sustainable inclusion.

Overall, effective inclusion in Sri Lanka's higher education requires coordinated efforts that include attitudinal change, staff training, accessible infrastructure, institutional support and active student participation. The implementation of these measures not only improves the academic success of students with disabilities, but also promotes societal equity in a broader sense and is in line with international frameworks such as the European Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (European Union, 2021). These findings provide actionable guidance for higher education institutions and policy makers to drive inclusive policies, improve staff capacity and create a sustainable, equitable higher education environment.

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