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Including the Excluded: Lived Learning Experiences of Students with Disabilities in Higher Learning Institutions in Tanzania

by

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Abstract

The current study assessed the lived learning experiences of students with disabilities in higher learning institutions (HLIs), taking two HLIs as case studies. Specifically, the study examined the psychosocial support available for students with disabilities in four areas: general support, academic support, peer support, and counseling and mental support. A mixed research approach informed by explanatory sequential design was used in the study. A sample size of 82 participants including students with disabilities, a coordinator of inclusive education, a head of counseling unit, and sign language interpreters were involved in this study. Simple random and purposive sampling strategies were used to select the representatives. The data collection methods were questionnaires and interviews. To ensure the validity of the study, expert and peer reviews were considered. Cronbach alpha was established to maintain internal consistency. Findings revealed that general support (Mean=18.9), academic support (Mean=17.97), peer support (Mean=20.55), and counseling and mental support ($\bar{x}=18.84$) were the forms of psychosocial support experienced by students with disabilities. Therefore, based on these findings, it is clearly observed that peer support was the form of psychosocial support that was most received by students with disabilities. The study recommends that higher learning institutions should continue offering psychosocial support across the various areas identified in this study.

Keywords: inclusiveness, psychosocial support, learning experiences, disabilities, higher learning institutions

Introduction

Globally, the topic of education for persons with disabilities has received strong attention in recent decades (Possi & Millinga, 2017). The United Nations (UN) Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 stipulates that the provision of education is mandatory for all people, and it should be free of charge (UN, 2022). The subsequent United Nations declarations and their associated statements have concretized the UN Conventions for Human Rights of 1948 (UNESCO, 1994, 2000). The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action, for example, states that inclusive education is the practicable way for eradicating all forms of discrimination and stigmatization. This means that through inclusion, children and teachers develop a sense of value and acceptance (UNESCO, 1994). The Dakar Framework for Action and Education for All emphasizes that education should be provided to all persons regardless of their ethnic differences or disabilities (UNESCO, 2000).

In recent years, the necessity for provision of education for children with disabilities (CWD) has been given greater prominence. The reason for this is that people with disabilities have long been left behind in terms of access to quality education (Kokkala, 2005; Macleod & Cebula, 2009; Madriaga, 2007; Mutasa et al., 2013; Possi & Millinga, 2017; UNESCO, 2018). In the same vein, higher education is regarded as a great predictor for employment in meaningful occupations, which in turn opens opportunities for career development and hence for good quality of life (Dutta et al., 2009; Getzel et al., 2001; Sachs & Schreuer, 2011).

The provision of education to persons with disabilities in higher learning institutions has begun to receive greater attention. Many countries have moved beyond the provision of basic education to higher learning education to enable them to access higher skills and employment (Hussain. & Shahzadi, 2020; Mgumba & Kija, 2023; Semunyu & Rushahu, 2023). Recent evidence indicates that many students with disabilities are enrolled in university education in Pakistan (Hussain & Shahzadi, 2020). The International Islamic University, for example, provides fitted ramps to help their students to be able to attend lecture rooms (Economist Intelligence Unit Limited, 2014). However, there is ample evidence that university teacher educators lack in-service training to address the wide-ranging education challenges (Mahmoud et al.,

2011). Other challenges that students with disabilities encounter include inadequate infrastructure, lack of clinical services, and improper learning materials that cater for diverse learning needs (Mahmoud et al., 2011; Yasmeen et al., 2010). These issues result in challenges for students with disabilities, which in turn leads to low enrolment and high dropout (Hussain & Shahzadi, 2020).

Findings from some Canadian universities reveal that although enrolment of students with disabilities has increased in recent years, the proportion among the total student population is still low. In 1995, for example, only 0.25% of the student population in 47 Canadian universities had a disability (Fichten et al., 2003). It is reported that the proportion of students in Canadian provincial higher learning institutions who were registered with disabilities ranged from 1.92% to 5.67%. Eight percent of post-secondary institutions reported not having any students with disabilities (Fichten et al., 2003). Of all students with disabilities in post-secondary education, students with learning disabilities comprised the largest group (Hart et al., 2004). The low number of students with disabilities enrolled in higher learning in Canada is attributed to provincial policy practices and the bilingual language system (Fichten et al., 2003). Correspondingly, a recent study conducted by Erten (2011) reports that the challenges facing students with disabilities in Canada emanate from the poor support that is provided to them, including accommodation strategies such as simplification of lectures, module adaptations, and learning facilities. Hidden attitudinal barriers from lecturers, including stigma, low expectation, and discrimination, also contribute to low enrolment expansion (Erten, 2011).

Similar experiences are evident in Sub-Saharan Africa, although the magnitude of the challenges differs according to cultural, economic, and educational settings. In Zimbabwe, for example, students with disabilities experience challenges of environment in terms of complicated arrangement of university infrastructure, lack of accommodation, and inadequate library facilities, rooms, and support services (Chataika, 2010; Redpath et al., 2013). Other challenges include stigma from students without disabilities, negative attitudes, and inadequate awareness on the part of teachers (Chikwature et al., 2016; Majoko, 2013, 2018). A recent study by Majoko (2018) reveals that lecturers in Zimbabwe treat students with disabilities in the view of medical model and perceive them as intrinsically 'abnormal.' The

provision of support for this category of students is also inadequate (Mortimore, 2013). Evidence also indicates that students with disabilities in higher learning institutions are inadequately provided with lecture handouts and notes prior to presentations (Majoko, 2018). Other examples from Ghana, South Africa, and Ethiopia show that limited financial support and university services, inaccessible spaces, and harmful attitudes were all barriers that hindered students with disabilities' access to education and inclusion, thereby compromising their active participation in learning (Abrahams et al., 2023).

Tanzania, like other countries, has signed and ratified United Nations protocols on the provision of education, including the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action, the Dakar Framework and Education for All, and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children with Disabilities (UNCRC) (UNESCO, 1994, 2000). These protocols encourage nations to develop inclusive policies to ensure that schools provide quality education for all students and promote the acceptance of diversity. To implement the provision of education for persons with disabilities, Tanzania has formulated the National Strategy for Inclusive Education 2022–2026 (NSIE). This strategy is built on five values that form the foundation for the provision of holistic education: equity, right to non-discriminatory education, respect for diversity, access to quality education, and collaboration with education stakeholders (URT, 2021). The NSIE, especially in higher learning institutions, envisions the participation and retention of learners with disabilities as key (URT, 2021). Further, the NSIE aims to ensure that quality assurance mechanisms in terms of inclusive education are in place to accommodate the learning of students with special needs.

In 2023, Tanzania launched the Education and Training Policy, which categorically stipulates the expansion of education opportunities for all citizens, capitalizing on the provision of knowledge and practical skills in communication, cooperation, innovation, critical thinking, problem solving, and digital knowledge, and instilling a sense of patriotism (URT, 2023). The policy also emphasizes the provision of education in inclusive settings, especially to those with and without disabilities. Despite this policy promise, lack of assistive devices such as hearing aids and talking computers, which

facilitate the learning of students with disabilities, and society's negative attitudes towards persons with disabilities continue to be challenging hurdles (URT, 2023). In Tanzania, there is a growing number of students with disabilities being enrolled in higher learning institutions (Kisanga, 2019, 2020; Philip, 2024; Semunyu & Rushahu, 2023), although studies also indicate that students with hearing impairment lack sign language interpreters and assistive devices such as hearing aids (Kisanga, 2019, 2020; Philip, 2024; Philip & Juma, 2023; Semunyu & Rushahu, 2023). In the same vein, inclusive schools lack skilled teachers and specialists who are committed to managing academic and administrative duties (Mgumba & Kija, 2023).

Although a number of studies have been conducted to assess the provision of education for students with disabilities in higher learning institutions in Tanzania (Kisanga, 2019, 2020; Mgumba, 2018; Philip & Juma, 2023; Semunyu & Rushahu, 2023), these have only focused on a small area of study. They have been limited to a small group of students—for example, concentrating on certain types of disabilities—and cannot provide comprehensive information regarding the learning experiences of a wide range of students with multiple disabilities in higher learning institutions. In recognition of this research lacuna, the intention of this study was to examine the lived learning experiences of students with disabilities in higher learning institutions, specifically focusing on the availability of psychosocial support. The findings were expected to shed light on the learning of students with disabilities in higher learning institutions in Tanzania, thus giving insights into how to address the challenges that these students now face.

Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by critical disability theory (CDT), which is grounded in the critical social theory that was first outlined by Max Horkheimer in 1937. It has since become a diverse family of critical theories that offer various approaches to social inquiry (Horkheimer, 1972). The critical trend in sociology is based on the anti-functionalist, the social conflict theory (Turner, 2004).

Critical disability studies view disability as a lived reality in which the experiences of people with disabilities are central to interpreting their place in the world (Hosking,

2008). Essentially, CDT attempts to explain the new approach in defining the socio-economic situation of persons with disabilities and their abilities in various aspects of social life (Bohman, 2005; Hosking, 2008). It attempts to expose what is wrong in current social reality, identify the actors that can change the barriers to disabilities, and introduce specific standards into social debate about disability in order bring about social change (Bohman, 2005). CDT assumes that disability is a social construct and not an unescapable consequence disease or dysfunction of the body. According to CTD, disability is defined as a system of inter-relationships between a disorder, an individual response to this disorder, and the environment (Horkheimer, 1972). Therefore, the negative social effects experienced by people with disabilities are caused by the physical and institutional environment as well as by the attitudes within the environment toward people with disabilities who do not meet the social expectation of 'normality' (Hosking, 2008; Richard & Pothier, 2006).

The CDT model of disability is therefore a 'biopsychosocial' theory in the sense that it is a combination of social and biological factors (Sztobryn-Giercuskiewicz, 2017). Hence, when dealing with disability, public policies must combine both biomedical and social models. Critical disability theory examines the social construction of disability and the concept of 'normality,' the fundamental value of human dignity, and the right to respect in democratic societies (Hosking, 2008; Sztobryn-Giercuskiewicz, 2017).

Critical disability theory views diversity as a strength depending on the context of equality rights of respecting human differences and that diversity may be dealt positively through responding to these differences (Dair & Bakış, 2024; Hosking, 2008). The lived experience of disability provides people and communities with multiple opportunities for expression, creativity, resourcefulness, relationships, and flourishing (Kashikar, 2021). The strength of CDT is therefore based on the understanding that the role of society and education institutions is to respond positively to this diversity and to maximize the potential of persons with disabilities to enable them to access education with equality.

Methodology

The present study assessed the lived learning experiences of students with disabilities in higher learning institutions. It selected two universities that offer the program of Bachelor of Education in Special Needs Education comprehensively. Specifically, the study examined the psychosocial support available for students with disabilities in four areas: general support, academic support, peer support, and counseling and mental support. To respond to the research question, the following sections were employed as follows:

Research Approach

The study utilized a mixed-methods approach to validate the findings through both quantitative and qualitative data, thereby enhancing the reliability and credibility of the results. By integrating both methods, the study sought to provide a holistic perspective, with in-depth information on the lived learning experiences of the participants. The study employed an explanatory, sequential mixed-method design, whereby researchers collect quantitative data supplemented by qualitative data to obtain in-depth information (Creswell, 2014). The key assumption was that, once combined, the two datasets would provide comprehensive information about the problem under study (Creswell, 2014).

Participants and Sampling Procedure

The participants in this study included all students with disabilities, coordinators of students with disabilities, heads of counseling unit, and sign language interpreters from two universities. The study used simple random and purposive sampling techniques. Simple random sampling technique was used to ensure a larger number of representatives of students with disabilities. Lists of students with disabilities were collected from the coordinating unit to determine the total number of students. Yamane's formula for known population was used to determine the actual number of students who could be used as a sample for the study. Moreover, purposive sampling was chosen based on the researchers' knowledge and experience of the group, which could provide the specific information required in the study (Gay & Airasian, 2012). In the context of this study, purposive sampling was used to select students with disabilities, coordinator of students with disabilities, and head of counseling unit.

The selected samples had important data required in this study. Tables 1 and 2 illustrate the sample characteristics of the respondents prior to the data collection.

Table 1: University A Respondents

Type of Disability	Quantity	Other respondents	Quantity
Hearing impairment	23	Coordinators	2
Blindness	4	Counselor	1
Physical disability	2		
Low vision	1		
Albinism	4		
Total	34		3

Source: University A Centre for Inclusive Education

Using Yamane's formula for known population in University A:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

$$n = \frac{34}{1 + 34(0.05)^2}$$

$$n = \frac{34}{1 + 0.085} = 34 / 1.085 = 31.3 \approx 31$$

Student sample size=31. Total sample size in University A=34.

Table 2: University B Respondents

Type of Disability	Quantity	Other respondents	Quantity
Hearing impairment	60	Sign language interpreter	1
Blindness	9	Counselor	1
Physical disability	45	Coordinator	1
Low vision	17		
Albinism	17		
Total	148		3

Using Yamane's formula for known population in University B:

$$n = \frac{148}{1+148(0.05)^2} = \frac{148}{1+0.37} = \frac{148}{1.37} = 108.03 = 108$$

Student sample size=108. Total sample size of the respondents in University B=112. The total sample size in both universities was 146.

Data Collection

Two data collection methods were employed in this study: questionnaires and interviews. The questionnaire checklist and the interview guide were used as the study instruments. The questionnaires were administered to students with disabilities to collect data on the four established dimensions of psychosocial support that they were receiving: academic support, peer support, general support, and counseling and mental health support. According to Kothari (2012), a questionnaire is a useful instrument for collecting large data and provides a respondent adequate time to respond to it.

An interview guide is an instrument of collecting data by asking oral questions. In-depth interviews are less formal and less structured, in that the wording and questions are not predetermined. The use of interviews is therefore more appropriate when collecting complex information with a higher proportion of opinion-based information (Cohen & Manion, 2018; Creswell & Creswell, 2022). Canals (2017) contends that interviews are a useful tool for collecting detailed information that provide greater understanding. The interview guide aimed to explore in-depth information about the peer support and the counseling and mental health support provided to students with disabilities by the university. The participants included coordinators from the Centre for Inclusive Education (CIE), counselors, and students with disabilities. Students with disabilities were specifically chosen for interviews because they face the greatest challenges in learning due to limited language input, including poor peer interaction, inadequate vocabulary in the target language, and a lack of trained teachers to teach language and adapt the curriculum in the classroom setting (Mpofu & Chimhenga, 2013; Naik & Sharma, 2013).

Validity and Reliability

Creswell (2014) contends that the validity of research instruments is concerned with their ability to measure what is supposed to be measured. Validity and reliability are important aspects to consider in research as they contribute to the accuracy and consistency of the research findings (Gay et al., 2012; Creswell, 2014). The validity and reliability of this study were ensured through triangulation of the instruments—in this case, the use of interviews and questionnaires. Similarly, member check involved research experts who scrutinized the research instruments and gave inputs. Additionally, interview respondents were given an opportunity to verify their responses before they were coded.

Data Analysis Procedures

Two types of data were analyzed—namely, quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative data were analyzed through descriptive statistics including mean and standard deviation. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software (version 26) assisted in running the data. Data were presented in terms of tables and figures. The qualitative data were analyzed thematically using quotes (Best & Khan, 2006; Patton, 2002). The analysis involved three stages of data categorization: preparing, organizing, and reporting (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Ethical Considerations

Scholars including Denzin and Lincoln (2011), Cohen et al. (2007), and Emanuel et al. (2006) emphasize the importance of adherence to ethical principles when collecting data, including obtaining informed consent, protecting the participants from harm, and respecting their rights. In line with research ethics, the researchers ensured that respondents were well-informed about the study's purpose and that confidentiality was maintained throughout the research process. Measures were taken to ensure security during interviews and that participants were treated with respect. The researcher assured the respondents that the information collected from them would only be used for research purposes and that their anonymity would be ensured. Participants involved in the study were required to sign a consent form. Permission for data collection was sought from the directors of postgraduate studies

at the University of Dodoma and Archbishop Mihayo University College of Tabora, respectively.

Results and Discussions

The study examined the psychosocial support that was available to students with disabilities. The findings are categorized into various sections, as follows.

Demographic Characteristics

To determine the relevance of the study, demographic characteristics of the studied sample were obtained. Of the 146 targeted participants from the two universities, 82 were able to volunteer in the study. The decrease in the number of participants was primarily due to the fact that many students (University A=6, University B=35) withdrew from the study, even after having been informed about the importance of their responses. Four students from University A and 19 from University B also returned incomplete questionnaires. Thus, the study yielded a response rate of 55%. Studies indicate that the response rate for face-to-face surveys is between 30% and 60% (Siegle, 2024) and 40% and 75% (Sataloff & Vontela, 2021), which shows an acceptable level for the institutional survey. Therefore, based on these scholars' views, the return rate and completeness of the questionnaires of the current study were acceptable for determining the suitability of the data. Furthermore, the data obtained from the questionnaires were supported by the semi-structured interviews to minimize the non-response bias. Thus, the current study concludes that these findings are considered credible for generalization. Table 3 shows various demographic characteristics of the respondents.

Table 3: Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

Demographic Characteristic (n=76)	Item	Frequency	Percent
University	A	22	28.9
	B	54	71.1
Gender	Male	47	61.8
	Female	29	38.2
Age	18–22 years	34	44.7
	23–27 years	23	30.3
	28–32 years	10	13.2
	33–37 years	5	6.6
	38 years or above	4	5.3
Type of disability	Visual impairment	10	13.2
	Hearing impairment	28	36.8
	Albinism	22	28.9
	Physical disability	13	17.1
	Blindness	3	3.9
Age at which student acquired disability	Childhood	23	30.3
	At birth	31	40.8
	Adolescence	19	25.0
	Adulthood	3	3.9

Source: Field data (May 2024)

Table 3 shows that both males (61.8%) and females (38.2%) were included in the study, with a noticeable difference between the proportion of the respective genders across the two universities. This was the case despite the universities' initiatives to provide equal enrolment opportunities.

The findings reveal that the largest proportion of students with disabilities were those aged between 18 and 22 years (44.7%) and the smallest was those aged 38 and above (5.3%). With regard to the types of disability, the largest proportion were those students with hearing impairment (36.8%), followed by albinism (28.9%), visual impairment (13.3%), physical disability (17.1%), and blindness (3.9%). The study was also interested in establishing the time of the onset of the students' disabilities, and found that the most common category was at birth (congenital) (40.8%), with the smallest proportion of students acquiring their disability in adulthood (3.9%).

General Psychosocial Support

Access to psychosocial support is important for the learning of students with disabilities, and helps by promoting social skills and improving self-esteem. Students with disabilities were asked to rate the general psychosocial support that they had

received at the universities with the cut-off point of 4. The findings are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: General Psychosocial Support ($\bar{x}=18.9$)

Statement	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
The university provides information about psychosocial support services that are available to students with disabilities	76	3.78	.918
As a student with disabilities, I feel comfortable seeking psychosocial support.	76	4.14	.795
The university actively promotes a supportive and inclusive environment for students with disabilities.	76	3.91	.897
There are accessible and well-publicized channels for students with disabilities to access psychosocial support.	76	3.49	1.064
I am aware of the various psychosocial support resources that are available on campus.	76	3.58	.997

Source: Field data (May 2024)

The findings revealed that students with disabilities gave the highest rating to the statement that they felt comfortable seeking psychosocial support (4.14), with the statement that there were accessible and well-publicized channels for students with disabilities to access psychosocial support given the lowest rating (3.49). It is clear from these findings that universities have limited accessible and well-publicized channels for students with disabilities to access psychosocial support. Despite this apparent low level of awareness of the existence of such channels, one of the counselors stated that new students with disabilities were always invited to visit their offices, and they also held meetings with the students in order to raise awareness. To complement this, one of the counselors had this to say:

If you take a quick look, it might seem that students with special needs are being left out. But the university has set up different ways for them to communicate. These include the counseling unit, the coordinating unit, and special positions in the student organization for students with special needs. Also, within the student organization, there are special positions reserved for students with special needs, who represent their peers in meetings ranging from the classroom level to the university council.
(Interview, C1UA, June 2024)

This was also confirmed by the coordinator of the special needs unit, who said that:

There are many communication channels available at the university premises—for example, their class leaders, the leadership structure for students with special needs, their sign language interpreters, and lecturers in general are all at the forefront in ensuring that every student with special needs receives equal services as others.
(Interview, CSpNUA, June 2024)

The coordinator added that *'the college had established these communication channels to make it easier for students to live well on campus, learn effectively, and support other aspects of their welfare.'*

Academic Support and Understanding

Academic support, as a key component of psychosocial support, plays a vital role in fostering students' academic success and overall well-being. Table 5 presents the results.

Table 5: Academic Support and Understanding (x=17.97)

Statement	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Faculty members demonstrate an understanding of the psychosocial needs of students with disabilities.	76	3.53	1.125
Academic advisors are knowledgeable about the academic challenges faced by students with disabilities.	76	3.40	1.182
The university offers flexible academic accommodations to address psychosocial needs.	76	3.64	.976
Lecturers are open to discussing and implementing personalised psychosocial support strategies for students with disabilities.	76	3.30	1.038
The university encourages open communication between faculty and students with disabilities regarding psychosocial concerns.	76	4.10	1.058

Source: Field data (May 2024)

As shown in Table 5, students with disabilities gave the highest ratings to the claim that their university encourages open communication between faculty and students with disabilities regarding psychosocial concerns (4.10). However, the low mean score regarding lecturers being open to discussing and implementing personalized psychosocial support strategies for students with disabilities (3.30) demonstrates the important need for improvements in this area. This will help to improve the holistic development of students with disabilities in terms of both social and emotional well-being.

Availability of Peer Support

Peer support for students with disabilities is crucial to improve their level of confidence, social skills, and, ultimately, academic success. The study therefore

aimed to understand the extent to which peer support is available among students at the universities. The findings are shown in Table 6.

Table 6: Availability of Peer Support ($\bar{x}$ = 20.55)

Statement	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
There are opportunities for students with disabilities to participate in social and extracurricular activities.	76	4.08	.813
The university promotes programmes or initiatives that foster peer support for students with disabilities.	76	3.80	.851
I feel socially included and accepted by my peers at the university.	76	4.18	.795
The university actively discourages discrimination and promotes a culture of inclusivity among students.	76	4.21	.805
Peer support groups specifically for students with disabilities are available on campus.	76	4.28	.741

Source: Field Data (May, 2024)

The findings revealed that students with disabilities gave a high mean score to the claim that their university actively discourages discrimination and promotes a culture of inclusivity among students (4.21). A lower mean score was observed for the claim that the university promotes programs or initiatives that foster peer support for students with disabilities (3.80). Universities are encouraged to promote and initiate various programs and avenues that could support interaction between students with and without disabilities. If these programs are well-conducted and avenues are successfully opened, they can enable students with disabilities to refine social skills, actively participate in peer activities, and build positive relationships.

With regards to peer support, the findings reported good cooperation from peers especially those who knew sign language interpretation. On this regard, one respondent with visual impairment reported:

Our fellow students, especially those who can use sign language, are very supportive. We collaborate closely with them during group discussions, and their help in communication makes it easier for us to participate and learn effectively as a team (Interview, SSpNUA, May, 2024).

These findings underscore the importance of collaboration among peers, as emphasized in the skills required in the 21st-century, whereby students with disabilities may explore various learning opportunities and improve both intra- and inter-personal communication skills (Okpala & Tikwa, 2026; Sarita & Wisudawati, 2024). Additionally, the National Strategy for Inclusive Education 2022–2026's

emphasizes the importance of equity and equality for every individual, whereby students with disabilities have to be taken into consideration (URT, 2021).

Counseling and Mental Health Services

The need for counseling and mental health services is important in order to ensure positive social and emotional well-being. This study therefore asked students to rate the extent to which their university promoted counseling and mental health services. The findings are shown in Table 7.

Table 7: Availability of Counselling and mental health Services [$\bar{x}=18.84$]

Statement	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
As a student with disabilities, I feel comfortable seeking mental health support on campus.	76	3.62	.938
The university actively promotes mental health awareness and destigmatization for students with disabilities	76	3.66	.793
There is a clear process for students with disabilities to access mental health support on campus.	76	3.67	1.025
The university provides accessible and confidential counselling services for students with disabilities.	76	3.99	.882
Counsellors are trained to address the unique psychosocial challenges faced by students with disabilities.	76	3.90	.841

Source: Field Data (May, 2024)

The findings revealed that the claim that universities provided accessible and confidential counseling services for students with disabilities received the highest mean score (3.99), but students with disabilities did not generally feel comfortable seeking counseling and mental health support (3.62). This might be due to there being limited clear processes for the students to access counseling and mental health support on campus, although the availability of such services on university premises may reduce the probability of students with disabilities experiencing anxiety or academic distress, or even committing suicide.

Furthermore, in line with the findings obtained in Table 5 about guidance and counseling services, many respondents agreed that they were aware of the services

that were offered at the university. One of the respondents with hearing impairment remarked:

We are aware of the services provided by the guidance and counselling office. However, many students with disabilities are hesitant to disclose their challenges, as they often feel uncomfortable sharing personal issues with others. Instead, they tend to confide only in their closest peers, whom they trust most (**Interview, SSpNUB, May, 2024**).

The findings suggest that students' reluctance to seek help makes it more difficult for them to fully benefit from the support that is available at the university.

University Commitment to Improving Psychosocial Support

The study aimed to understand the general views of students with disabilities regarding their university's commitments to improving psychosocial support. The findings are shown in Figure 1.

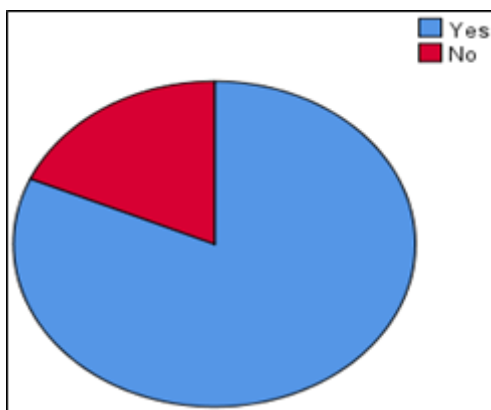


Figure 1: University's commitment to improve psychosocial support
Source: Field Data (**May, 2024**).

The findings revealed that the universities were committed to improving the psychosocial support provided to students with disabilities. One of the sign language interpreters said the following:

To tell the truth, the university is currently committed to investing in services for students with special needs. We have some learning aids and equipment such as Wheelchairs and Adaptive seating, Sign language interpreters, Hearing aids, Audiometers, CCTV Handheld Device, Screen readers, Braille Books and Printers, etc; although they are limited, they significantly support students during lessons and classroom instruction. Other devices like Tuk-Tuk (three-Wheeler) are used to transport students from various places of the university. In addition, lecturers collaborate with students by giving them notes and various teaching and learning resources (**Interview, SLIUB, June, 2024**).

The findings demonstrate the need for universities to continue offering psychosocial support to students with special needs to nurture and promote inclusivity in all aspects of their well-being. This will enable students with special needs to develop holistically.

Discussion of Findings

This study examined the availability of psychosocial support for students with disabilities and resulted in several findings.

First, students with disabilities reported that their university encouraged open communication between faculty and students with disabilities regarding psychosocial concerns. However, our data revealed that there was no openness on the part of lecturers in discussing and implementing personalized psychosocial support strategies for students with disabilities. These findings correspond to those of the study conducted by Mahmoud et al. (2011), which found that university teacher educators had limited in-service training to deal with the wide-ranging education challenges.

Secondly, data from this study found that the universities generally discouraged discrimination and promoted a culture of embracing inclusivity. Conversely, although the universities' general policies relied on this inclusivity, respondents reported that there were no concrete plans for implementation. The study conducted in Canada by Erten (2011) reported similar experiences, whereby students with disabilities reported that there was poor support available to them, including accommodation strategies such as simplification of lectures and module adaptations, and covert attitudinal barriers from lecturers including stigma, low expectation, and discrimination. Correspondingly, challenges of stigma on the part of students without disabilities, negative attitudes, and inadequate awareness on the part of teachers were reported in Zimbabwe, whereby lecturers treated students with disabilities in the medical model perspective, perceiving them as intrinsically 'abnormal' (Majoko, 2013, 2018).

Thirdly, it was found that the universities provided accessible and confidential counseling services for students with disabilities. However, students with disabilities

reported that they did not feel comfortable seeking mental health support on campus. These findings are contrary to the findings by Getachew (2019), which revealed that the majority of male students (67.8%) were not aware of the psychological counseling services, and 24.3% of female students were not comfortable with the service. The same study by Getachew (2019) also found that more than 60% of the study participants put top priority for psychological counseling service in higher education institutions.

Fourthly, the majority of the students with disabilities stated that they were satisfied with the psychosocial support offered by their university. These findings align with those of McNicholl et al. (2020), who demonstrated that access to adequate assistive technology improves academic self-efficacy and well-being for students with disabilities, enabling them to engage in learning alongside their peers. The findings are also supported by Max Horkheimer's critical disability theory, which views diversity as a strength in the context of equality, rights, and respect for human differences and diversity (Dair & Bakış, 2024; Hosking, 2008). Therefore, in formulating policies and designing curriculum, higher learning institutions are required to take students with multiple disabilities into consideration to enhance their psychosocial well-being and make sure that all students can demonstrate their potentialities.

The fifth finding shows that the universities in the study were committed to improving the psychosocial support provided to students with disabilities at the policy level. The results of this study align with those of Teferra's study (2017), which revealed that 70% of the students with motor disabilities at Addis Ababa University reported their satisfaction with the psychosocial support provided, although 56% of the students with visual disabilities indicated their dissatisfaction. These explanations show that there is a mismatch between the policy and the actual psychosocial support provided to students with disabilities in higher learning institutions, leading to dissatisfaction with the support provided at universities. With regard to the support provided to students with disabilities, this study therefore acts as a call for educational stakeholders to consider their needs accordingly.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the findings regarding the availability of psychosocial support for students with disabilities in higher learning institutions, it is clear that the universities involved in this study had good policy and understanding about the need for the provision of such psychosocial support. However, the universities experienced challenges of implementation with regard to the policy of inclusivity for students with disabilities, including poor accommodation and modification of teaching strategies on the part of lecturers, and inflexible provision of guidance and counseling services, which did not contribute to the students feeling comfortable to seek the services.

The study recommends that training be provided to the university-wide community, including lecturers, to understand the psychosocial needs of students with disabilities not only to foster an inclusive learning environment but also to create a sense of belonging. It is also recommended that students with disabilities be given training on the importance of seeking support from the guidance and counseling unit for their personal and academic growth.

Declarations

Author contribution statement

The authors conceived, designed, and conducted the research, analysed and interpreted the results, drafted the manuscript, and reviewed and approved the final version.

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Data Availability Statement

Data will be made available on request.

Declaration of Interest's Statement

The authors declare no interest

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