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Structural Barriers to Inclusive Education: Students' Perspectives and Institutional Policy Analysis of Physical and Digital Infrastructure in a Sri Lankan State University

by

Hirosha Lakmali Kalupe
Postgraduate student
Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Stavanger
Norway
E-mail: hiroshilakmali@gmail.com

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Abstract

Inclusive education is recognized in global and national frameworks as a fundamental right. However, students with disabilities in Sri Lankan higher education institutions continue to encounter structural barriers in their everyday life at the university. This qualitative case study examines how students with and without disabilities perceive accessibility across physical and digital environments at a Sri Lankan state university and how institutional policies conceptualize and operationalize accessibility within this context. Guided by the Social Model of Disability, the study examines how physical and digital infrastructure, together with policy implementation, shape structural conditions of inclusion and exclusion.

Data were collected through an open-ended online questionnaire completed by 15 students, voluntary follow-up semi-structured interviews with five of those students, observations of physical and digital infrastructure (the university website and Learning Management System) within the university environment, and analysis of two institutional disability policies from the same university. Thematic analysis showed that physical accessibility is selectively retrofitted rather than embedded by design; that digital systems are technically available but not integrated into inclusive teaching, producing access without participation; that teaching is organized around a hearing, speaking “standard” learner, with no provision of sign language; and that, in the absence of formal support, students with disabilities depend on peers and family to move around campus, follow lectures, and voice grievances. Policy analysis showed that although institutional documents set out commitments and procedures, these are not consistently communicated to students or implemented in practice, producing a gap between policy and students’ lived experiences.

By triangulating student perspectives with observational and policy analysis, this study illustrates how structural exclusion emerges through the interaction of architectural design, pedagogical practice, and policy implementation within a publicly funded rural university context. The findings point to the need to move beyond rhetorical commitments toward accountable, system-level approaches to inclusive education in Sri Lanka and similar developing higher education systems.

Keywords: inclusive education, students with disabilities, accessibility, digital inclusion, higher education, social model of disability, Sri Lanka

Introduction

Inclusive education is widely recognized as a fundamental human right, embedded in international frameworks that emphasize participation, equality, and non-discrimination in education systems worldwide (UNESCO, 1994; UNESCO, 2020; United Nations, 2006). However, for many students with disabilities (SWDs) in developing-country contexts, access to higher education remains constrained by structural and institutional barriers rather than individual impairments (Mpu & Adu, 2019; Samanmala, 2023; Singal, 2006; Subramaniam, 2023). Although policy commitments to inclusion have expanded globally, the lived reality of accessibility within universities remains limited.

Sri Lanka has several formal commitments that support disability inclusion, including the Protection of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act No. 28 (1996), the National Policy on Disability (2003), the National Action Plan on Disability (2014), and its ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). Together, these frameworks show that disability inclusion is recognized at both national and international policy levels (Ministry of Social Welfare, 2003; Parliament of Sri Lanka, 1996; Secretariat for Persons with Disabilities, 2014; United Nations, 2006). These frameworks intend to include persons with disabilities and provide them with legal security. Furthermore, to secure access to higher education, the University Grants Commission has provided a 5% special admission quota for students with disabilities (University Grants Commission, 2025). Despite these formal commitments, research suggests that the implementation of inclusive education within higher education institutions remains uneven and fragmented (Samanmala, 2023; Subramaniam, 2023).

Existing studies in the Sri Lankan context have identified infrastructural barriers affecting students with disabilities, particularly in relation to physical accessibility and digital systems (Hettiarachchi et al., 2021; Jayasinghe et al., 2023; Wedasinghe, 2023). This work highlights challenges such as inaccessible campus design, limited adaptive technologies, and digital platforms that are not fully compatible with assistive tools (Jayasinghe et al., 2023; Samanmala, 2023). However, much of the existing literature focuses on either specific impairment groups, isolated technological

issues, or policy frameworks in abstraction. There remains limited empirical research that brings together students' lived experiences, analysis of both physical and digital infrastructure, and examination of institutional policy commitments within a single case study, particularly in rural university contexts (Samanmala, 2023).

This gap is significant because higher education institutions are spaces where independent mobility, digital participation, and academic engagement are assumed norms. When infrastructure is not designed inclusively, exclusion becomes embedded in the institutional environment. Moreover, understanding how both students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers perceive accessibility offers insight into whether barriers are experienced as individual challenges or recognized as structural issues within the university community. Such inclusion of both perspectives remains underexplored in the Sri Lankan context.

Accessibility in this setting must also be understood in relation to its particular context: a free public university system that admits only small numbers of students with disabilities; a built environment shaped by hilly terrain and heritage architecture; and a society in which disability has historically been approached through charity and welfare, with care often falling largely to families within a culture informed by Buddhist understandings of merit and obligation (Emmanuel & Saroor, 2022; Liyanage, 2017).

This study is guided by the Social Model of Disability, which conceptualizes disability not as an individual deficit but as a product of environmental, structural, and attitudinal barriers (Oliver, 1996). From this perspective, exclusion arises when institutions fail to anticipate and accommodate diverse bodies, communication needs, and learning practices. Applying this framework allows the study to analyze how physical design, digital systems, and institutional policies may reproduce or mitigate structural barriers within higher education. The study focuses on a rural public university in Sri Lanka, where geographical terrain and architectural design present additional challenges to accessibility.

The study addresses the following research questions:

- RQ1: How do students with and without disabilities perceive the accessibility of physical and digital infrastructure within higher education?
- RQ2: How are issues of accessibility infrastructure conceptualized and addressed within institutional policy frameworks?

To answer these questions, the study employs a qualitative case study design drawing on an open-ended online questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, observation of campus and digital environments, and analysis of institutional disability policies. The study makes three contributions. First, it brings together two perspectives that are usually examined separately—lived experience and institutional policy—and foregrounds the informal support of peers and families as the university's *de facto*, and unacknowledged, accessibility infrastructure. Second, it examines physical and digital infrastructure together rather than separately. Third, it does so from the perspective of a rural, lower-resourced state university in the Global South—a setting that is under-represented in a body of literature that is still dominated by high-income contexts.

Background

Research from global and regional contexts demonstrates that physical accessibility remains a persistent barrier within universities. Many institutions lack basic infrastructural features such as elevators, accessible pathways, handrails, and adaptive seating (Agbabiaka et al., 2024). Even where accessibility standards exist, compliance is often partial or inconsistently implemented, thereby limiting full participation in academic and social life (Mubiru, 2022).

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) can make teaching and learning more flexible and inclusive (Black et al., 2015). In practice, however, students cannot benefit from these reforms unless universities also provide accessible classrooms, learning materials, digital platforms, and support services. Batty and Reilly (2023) note that UDL implementation is frequently constrained by limited resources, inadequate staff training, and weak institutional coordination. Without accessible buildings and coherent planning, pedagogical innovations cannot fully address structural exclusion.

In developing-country contexts, these challenges are often intensified by resource constraints, aging infrastructure, and reactive retrofitting rather than inclusive design from the outset (Ferguson et al., 2019). Although physical barriers are often recognized, there is still limited research on how students themselves experience these barriers within their own institutions. This matters because the same infrastructural problem may affect students differently, depending on the university setting, available support, and everyday learning environment.

Digital Accessibility and Emerging Forms of Exclusion

As higher education increasingly relies on digital systems for teaching, assessment, and administration, digital accessibility has become central to inclusion (UNESCO, 2020). Digital tools and platforms such as Learning Management Systems (LMS), university websites, and online resources can make learning more accessible. However, they can also exclude students when they are not designed with accessibility in mind (Selwyn, 2016).

Wedasinghe and Wickramarachchi (2015) highlight a disability-related digital divide in Sri Lanka, pointing to inaccessible ICT services, limited adaptive technologies, and insufficient institutional awareness. They further demonstrate that web systems often lack compatibility with screen readers and fail to support local languages, disproportionately affecting visually impaired students. Wedasinghe (2023) proposes inclusive design guidelines to address such barriers, emphasizing the importance of involving users with disabilities in system development.

Despite growing recognition of digital accessibility, empirical research examining how students experience both physical and digital infrastructure together remains limited. Digital technologies are frequently presented as solutions to physical accessibility challenges, yet their own limitations and implementation gaps are less systematically examined in the Sri Lankan higher education context.

Policy–Practice Gaps

Across developing contexts, higher education institutions often adopt inclusive language within formal policy frameworks while struggling with implementation in practice (May & Bridger, 2010). Policies may articulate rights, reasonable accommodations, and equality commitments but lack clear accountability mechanisms, assigned responsibilities, and resource allocation. When responsibility for accessibility is not clearly defined, inclusion becomes diffuse and weakly implemented.

Sri Lanka has introduced several laws and policy measures to support disability inclusion, including the Protection of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act No. 28 (1996) and the National Action Plan on Disability (2014). However, research indicates that many universities continue to operate with physical, digital, and attitudinal barriers despite these commitments (Hettiarachchi et al., 2019; Wedasinghe & Wickramarachchi, 2015). Hettiarachchi et al. (2019) reveal the absence of institutional provision for students using Sri Lankan Sign Language, while Udugama et al. (2023) estimate large-scale structural exclusion of Deaf and Hard of Hearing populations. These findings suggest that policy commitments have not consistently translated into accessible infrastructure or inclusive teaching practices.

Taken together, the existing literature demonstrates that physical barriers, digital exclusion, and policy–practice gaps persist within higher education. However, three limitations remain evident. First, much of the existing research in Sri Lanka focuses on specific impairment groups or isolated technological challenges, rather than examining physical and digital infrastructure together within a single institutional case. Second, there is limited research on the perspectives of students with and without disabilities, despite the importance of understanding whether accessibility is recognized as a structural issue within the broader student community. Third, rural university contexts remain underexplored, even though geographical terrain and infrastructural constraints may intensify accessibility challenges.

Addressing these gaps is significant not only from a rights-based perspective but also because exclusion in higher education limits the educational, economic, and social

contributions of students with disabilities to society. Without systematic infrastructural accessibility, higher education institutions risk reinforcing inequality rather than promoting social mobility. This study responds to these gaps by applying the Social Model of Disability to examine how physical and digital infrastructure, together with institutional policy frameworks, shape students' lived experiences within a rural Sri Lankan university.

The Social Model of Disability

This study is guided by the Social Model of Disability, which understands disability not as an individual limitation but as something produced through social, structural, and environmental barriers (Oliver, 1996; Shakespeare, 2006). In this view, people are not disabled simply because of an impairment; they become disabled when institutions, systems, and everyday environments are designed in ways that do not consider human diversity. This framing is important for higher education because universities are not only places of learning but also environments that depend on mobility, communication, independent access to services, and participation in academic and social life.

The Social Model is often discussed in contrast to the Medical Model of Disability, which tends to locate the “problem” within the individual and treats disability as something to be managed, corrected, or adjusted through personal intervention (Brisenden, 1998; Oliver, 1990). In university settings, medical-model thinking can appear in subtle but powerful ways—for example, when students must repeatedly prove their disability to receive basic support, or when accessibility is treated as a personal issue rather than an institutional responsibility.

This study uses the Social Model as a practical lens through which to examine how the university's environment enables or restricts participation, including not only the built environment but also digital systems and academic practices. From a social-model perspective, barriers such as inaccessible lecture halls, toilets, or campus pathways are structural issues, not personal shortcomings. Similarly, digital platforms that are not designed with accessibility in mind can create exclusion even when students are technically registered and present in the system.

Because the study focuses on physical and digital infrastructure, the Social Model is especially useful: it directs attention to how design choices and institutional priorities shape everyday participation, and it makes visible the link between infrastructure and power: who is expected to adjust, who receives support automatically, and who is left to depend on informal solutions. The model also supports the policy analysis, as policies matter not only for what they promise but for whether they provide clear responsibility, procedures, accountability, and practical guidance that can change everyday conditions.

Although the Social Model provides a strong framework for analyzing structural exclusion, it has been criticized for oversimplifying the relationship between impairment and disability. Shakespeare (2014) argues that the model separates impairment and disability too sharply, focusing heavily on social barriers while overlooking the lived realities of pain, physical limitation, and embodied challenge. Thomas (2007) notes that not all difficulties experienced by disabled people are externally imposed. Reindal (2008) points out that the model applies more easily to visible physical impairments than to intellectual or psychosocial disabilities, and Morris (1991) and Watson (2012) caution that rejecting “tragedy” narratives too strongly may silence the emotional dimensions of living with impairment. Despite these critiques, the Social Model remains valuable for this study because the main barriers identified were infrastructural, pedagogical, and policy-related. It helps shift the focus from individual deficit to institutional responsibility, while still acknowledging that disability is shaped through the interaction between bodies and environments.

Methods Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive case study design to understand how students make sense of accessibility in their everyday university experience, recognizing that meanings are shaped through interaction with physical spaces, digital systems, and institutional structures. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the research questions focus on lived experiences, perceptions, and everyday barriers rather than on measuring compliance or counting facilities. The Social Model of Disability guided the design and analysis: reported difficulties were

treated not as individual limitations but as indicators of how infrastructure, digital systems, teaching practices, and policies might create or reinforce barriers. The aim was not to assess individual capability but to evaluate institutional responsibility.

Study Area

The study was conducted at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of a Sri Lankan state university located in a rural and geographically hilly region. The physical terrain of the campus, including steep pathways and extensive staircases, makes mobility an important part of everyday university life. This faculty was selected for three reasons. First, it admits students with disabilities both through general admission and through the national 5% special quota administered by the University Grants Commission. Second, both university-level and faculty-level disability policies exist, which allowed examination of whether formal commitments align with lived experiences. Third, the faculty had recently participated in an Erasmus+-funded capacity-building project on inclusive education for students with disabilities in Sri Lankan universities, which aimed to strengthen inclusive education practices. Because inclusion had already been formally recognized through policy and project involvement, it was important to examine whether these initiatives translated into everyday accessibility.

Data Sources

To gain a comprehensive understanding of accessibility, four qualitative data sources were combined: an open-ended online questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, structured physical and digital observations, and analysis of two institutional policy documents. These were not treated as separate methods addressing unrelated issues; rather, they were used to examine the same phenomenon from different angles, allowing comparison of what students reported, what was observed, and what policies promised. This triangulation strengthened the credibility of the analysis and helped identify gaps between institutional commitments and lived realities. Observation of physical infrastructure was conducted on site, while the digital environment was reviewed via the public websites and corroborated through student reports, as the LMS was not externally accessible.

Open-Ended Questionnaire

The open-ended questionnaire was administered through Microsoft Forms. It served primarily as a means of reaching students across the faculty and inviting participation, rather than as a survey instrument aimed at representativeness. The online format allowed students to respond at their own pace, in Sinhala or English, and without the pressure of face-to-face interaction. This flexibility was particularly important for students with disabilities who may need additional time or adaptive communication methods. The questionnaire included 22 open-ended questions on physical infrastructure, digital systems (including LMS and website use), institutional support, and awareness of disability-related policies.

The questionnaire link was circulated by a senior batch leader—a former student of the researcher—through the WhatsApp groups in which almost all students participate. Reflecting the seniority-based organization of Sri Lankan campus culture, batch leaders are widely known and trusted across cohorts and act as natural gatekeepers. The link was posted to several batch groups with a combined membership of roughly 1,000 students; because membership in these groups is open and fluid, and an unknown proportion are inactive, the number who actually saw the invitation cannot be determined, and a precise response rate cannot be calculated. As the researcher was no longer teaching these students, potential power dynamics were minimized by ensuring that participation was voluntary and anonymous.

Fifteen students completed the questionnaire, and five of them volunteered for and took part in follow-up interviews. The numbers reflect who chose to take part rather than a predetermined sample, consistent with the study's qualitative, depth-oriented aims. Later questionnaire responses largely echoed the experiences already described, indicating that thematic saturation had been reached. Participants were drawn from three cohorts—recent graduates (2024), fourth-year students (entered 2021), and third-year students (entered 2022)—chosen because they experienced both pandemic-related digital learning and post-pandemic campus engagement. Five participants identified as students with disabilities.

Semi-Structured Interviews

At the end of the questionnaire, participants were invited to volunteer for an online interview. Five students agreed to participate in semi-structured interviews conducted via Microsoft Teams. Interviews explored themes that emerged in the questionnaire in greater depth, allowing participants to explain specific incidents, clarify barriers, and reflect on institutional responses, structured around physical access, digital access, teaching practices, communication barriers, peer support, and policy awareness, with flexibility for participants to emphasize what mattered most to them. Conducting interviews online ensured accessibility and geographic feasibility; although online interaction limited some forms of observation, it reduced logistical barriers and enabled participation from students who might otherwise have been excluded.

The study deliberately sought the perspectives of students both with and without disabilities. There are few students with disabilities at the university, and some could not readily participate in spoken interviews, including students with hearing and speech disabilities, for whom a written, self-paced questionnaire was a more accessible mode. The questionnaire's anonymity was also a methodological strength: because the researcher did not know the respondents personally and did not observe their disabilities directly, the risk of interviewer influence, and of interpreting participants through their impairments, was reduced. Non-disabled students were included not as a control group but because, as the principal everyday support system for their disabled peers, they had directly witnessed the barriers that their classmates faced.

Observations

Formal observation consisted of a single full-day visit to the campus in June 2024, focused particularly on the physical infrastructure (lecture halls, pathways, staircases, toilets, transport access, ramps, signage, and hostel facilities), with systematic field notes recorded throughout. Observation of the digital environment was more limited: the researcher reviewed the publicly accessible faculty and university websites, but, as an external researcher, could not access the Learning Management System (LMS) directly. Evidence on the LMS therefore came from students' accounts in the

questionnaire and interviews, in which its accessibility was specifically asked about, rather than from direct observation. These formal observations were complemented by the researcher's prolonged prior engagement with the setting as a former student and lecturer, which afforded sustained familiarity with the campus over time; this familiarity was treated reflexively, as a potential source of interpretive bias as well as insight, and only data recorded during the June 2024 observation period were treated as formal observational evidence.

Document Analysis

Two formal policy documents were selected for their pertinence to disability education: the University Policy on Disabilities and the Faculty Policy on Students with Disabilities (dating from 2021). These represent the two primary institutional frameworks governing disability inclusion. Using directed qualitative content analysis, each document was analyzed in full and examined for how it framed disability (charity/medical versus social/rights-based), whether it addressed physical and digital infrastructure explicitly, how it assigned responsibility, and whether it provided implementation mechanisms, timelines, resources, and accountability structures.

Analysis

All qualitative data (questionnaire responses, interview transcripts, observation notes, and policy documents) were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: familiarization, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Coding was conducted manually and followed Saldaña (2013). An initial inductive pass stayed close to the data, using In Vivo Coding to preserve participants' own words, Process Coding to identify institutional actions or inaction, Values Coding to capture beliefs about responsibility and fairness, and Descriptive Coding to summarize key infrastructure-related concerns. Codes were grouped into candidate themes, reviewed against the data, defined, and combined into a coherent narrative connecting students' experiences, observational findings, and policy analysis. An abductive approach was therefore adopted: the themes were generated inductively from the data, while the Social Model of Disability served as an interpretive lens for

making sense of those patterns. The theory informed how the findings were understood, not which themes were produced.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was pursued through reflexivity, transparency, and triangulation rather than claims of objective replicability. Following Cho and Trent (2006), the study attended to transactional validity (iteratively checking interpretations against participants' own words, triangulating across four data sources, and maintaining a reflexive journal) and to transformational validity, given its orientation toward identifying and challenging the structural conditions of disablement. Preliminary interpretations were shared with participants for verification via WhatsApp, with reminders relayed through the batch leader; uptake was limited, which is acknowledged as a constraint.

Reflexivity

As a former student and lecturer at the faculty and a participant in the inclusive-education project, the researcher's insider position gave contextual knowledge and facilitated trust, while also representing a potential influence on interpretation. Interviews were approached in a non-evaluative capacity, and a reflexive journal was maintained throughout the analysis, with assumptions continuously questioned and interpretations grounded in participants' words rather than prior expectations.

Ethics

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences (approval no. REC/FHSS-R/2025/35). Informed consent was obtained from all participants before they completed the questionnaire or interview. Participation was voluntary, participants could withdraw at any stage, and all responses were anonymized and stored securely. Because discussing experiences of disability and exclusion can be sensitive, participants were invited to share only what they felt comfortable disclosing, and were made aware of the university's student counseling and welfare services.

Participant Overview

The questionnaire did not collect demographic data on gender or age. Because the number of students with disabilities at the faculty is small, sample details are reported in aggregate to protect participant anonymity. Students with disabilities enter the faculty either through standard admission or through the national special-intake scheme, and the disabilities represented included physical disabilities and hearing and speech disability. No central institutional figure for the number of registered students with disabilities was available to the researcher; when asked, students estimated fewer than ten students with disabilities per batch, although estimates varied. From the 15 questionnaire respondents, five identified as students with disabilities. Five students took part in interviews, two of whom were students with disabilities and three without, while the remaining participants with disabilities contributed through the questionnaire. To avoid identifying individuals, gender is reported only generally (participants were predominantly female) and age is not reported, as the questionnaire did not collect this.

Table 1. Overview of participation

Participation	Detail
Questionnaire respondents	15
Identified as students with disabilities	5 (within the 15)
Interview participants	5, drawn from the questionnaire respondents
Student with disabilities	2
without disabilities	3
Disabilities represented	Physical; hearing and speech
Students with disabilities per batch	Fewer than 10 (student-reported estimate; varied)
Faculty	Humanities and Social Sciences
Gender	Predominantly female (reported generally for anonymity)
Age	Not collected

Findings

This section presents findings from students with and without disabilities at the selected state university, together with observations and analysis of two institutional policy documents. All data sources were analyzed thematically and organized under five themes that emerged across questionnaire responses, interviews, observations, and policy texts. Across the five themes, inclusion at the university exists as principle but not as structure: Themes 1–4 address how accessibility is perceived (RQ1) and

Theme 5 how it is conceptualized in policy (RQ2). Participants are identified by a brief descriptor.

Physical Access as Reactive Retrofit

Across participants and observation, physical access emerged not simply as “lacking” but as selectively and reactively provided within an environment whose design privileges esthetic and heritage value over usability. Students with disabilities described the campus as only partially accessible. Although the library was relatively accessible, lecture halls, toilets, pathways, and canteen areas were difficult to navigate; accessibility depended on particular spaces rather than being systematic. One participant explained that although certain buildings had ramps, other essential spaces required the climbing of stairs without alternative access. Another noted that hostel arrangements were somewhat manageable, but attending lectures remained physically exhausting due to the terrain and staircase design.

Non-disabled students confirmed these observations, describing the campus as physically challenging even for able-bodied students. As one participant noted:

Since university naturally comprises heights and most of the cases, staircases are required to enter a lecture room, I think it would be really hard for someone with disabilities to access. Elevators are not practiced inside the university and neither is there any developed system for students with disabilities. (*Male student, non-disabled, recent graduate*)

Toilets were repeatedly described as not disability-friendly, and several students mentioned the absence of elevators and insufficient ramps. Observations during the June 2024 visit confirmed these accounts: large sections of the campus required stair-based access, ramps were inconsistent, and pathways were uneven. The university is situated on elevated terrain and is organized around stone staircases connecting major buildings. Although esthetically distinctive, this design encodes a mobility norm that does not accommodate diverse bodies, and its very distinctiveness appears to operate as a tacit justification for inaction, framing accessibility modifications as encroachments on a valued architectural heritage rather than as obligations. The design is thus both the obstacle preventing change and the alibi for this lack of action.

Accessibility challenges extended beyond academic buildings: residential facilities also lacked lifts and accessible pathways. Across both disabled and non-disabled participants, there was clear agreement that physical infrastructure remains insufficient, strengthening the argument that the issue is structural rather than individual. Both policy documents promise improvements to physical infrastructure, but they are largely worded in the future tense and do not include timelines, budget allocation, or implementation mechanisms.

Access Without Participation

Digital infrastructure was generally described as accessible at a basic technical level. All disabled participants reported that they could log into the university website and the LMS, and non-disabled students viewed digital platforms as comparatively more accessible than the physical infrastructure. Yet accessibility of the platform did not amount to participation in learning.

Students with disabilities reported inconsistent access to lecture recordings, reading materials, and online resources. Some were unaware of what digital features were available; others described materials that were incomplete or not adapted for screen readers. Two participants explained that without lecture recordings or transcripts, keeping up with fast-paced teaching was extremely difficult. The clearest illustration came from the student with hearing and speech disabilities, who could use the website and LMS but for whom lecture recordings and examination systems were not accessible, because recordings carried no captions and content assumed a hearing user. Non-disabled students also recognized this gap, noting that captioning, screen-reader compatibility, and alternative formats were not standardized.

Students with disabilities are not a homogeneous group. People with different impairments encounter different barriers, and some digital difficulties, such as connectivity, are shared with non-disabled peers. The point is not that digital systems failed everyone equally but that for students with sensory disabilities in particular, platform availability did not translate into accessible participation, which also explains why a single, uniform institutional solution is inadequate. Policy documents largely overlook digital accessibility: whilst both refer to inclusion and assistive technology in

general terms, neither provides guidance on accessible LMS design, captioning standards, or digital content adaptation.

Teaching for a Standard Learner

Teaching practices and communication emerged as another significant theme. For the student with hearing and speech disabilities, the absence of sign-language interpretation, transcripts, and adapted materials was the central barrier to his education. He explained:

The main problem we face is not being able to properly understand lectures inside the lecture halls. We do not have the same ability as other students to understand the content in the same way. As a result, it becomes extremely difficult to complete semester examinations and assignments successfully. Because of my speech and hearing impairment, and the failure of the university system to provide lectures through sign language, I experience significant hardship. *(Male student, disabled)*

He attributed this directly to the university's failure to deliver lectures through sign language. The university's own Policy on Disabilities states:

The University will ensure that in all policies, procedures, regulations, functions and activities, including strategic planning and resource allocation, special attention is paid to reasonable means of enabling full participation of differently abled students in all aspects of the academic and social life of the institution. This intends to ensure equality and equity towards differently abled students. *(University Policy on Disabilities, n.d., p. 4)*

The contrast between this formal commitment and the lived experience of this student reveals a gap between policy intention and implementation. That academics across Sri Lankan universities overwhelmingly report using no special teaching mechanism for students with disabilities (Yatigammana et al., 2021) indicates a systemic norm rather than an individual lapse. Non-disabled students echoed these concerns, criticizing inflexible teaching and suggesting lecture recordings and alternative formats. The consequence of this exclusion can be severe. One participant recounted a hearing-impaired friend who left the university after informing the Dean and lecturers, with no action taken:

The university is somewhat disability-friendly, but due to lack of attention towards certain students, some have left their degree. A friend I know left his degree. He was hearing impaired, and although the Dean and relevant lecturers were informed, no attention was given. Because of his disability, he was unable to continue his studies. *(Female student, non-disabled)*

Peers and Families as the University's Missing Infrastructure

Across the accounts of students with and without disabilities, support from peers and family was the principal means by which disabled students managed university life, far more than an occasional kindness. With no formal support system in place, peers and relatives were effectively conscripted into roles that the institution had left vacant. Peer support appeared not only as practical assistance but as an essential communication and advocacy bridge. As one student explained:

My fellow students help me to understand lectures and also to seek fairness on my behalf. They accompany me to meet heads of departments to raise my concerns. However, those actions have not been successful. (*Male student, disabled*)

In the absence of a formal support system, students with disabilities relied on peers even to claim their rights; access to justice itself became mediated through informal networks. Yet peers are not trained in sign language or disability communication, so the responsibility of interpretation and advocacy fell on untrained students rather than structured services. The arrangement also extended to families. As one non-disabled student reflected:

As there's no noticeable physical infrastructure made for students with disabilities, I think that would impact on their learning as it's very difficult even to reach the lecture rooms. I have seen a mother of a female student with a disability waiting morning until evening in the university as she has to help her to move. (*Male student, non-disabled, recent graduate*)

The mother who spends each day on campus is herself displaced from her own working and personal life, reflecting a transfer of disability's costs onto carers that echoes patterns documented elsewhere (Raknes et al., 2024). From a Social Model perspective, this reliance reflects not individual dependence but an environment that fails to enable independence: an institution that presumes autonomy while providing no accessible route, no interpretation, and no formal support shifts responsibility for inclusion onto students and families. Inclusion here is privately financed through relationships rather than institutionally guaranteed.

Inclusion on Paper, Not in Practice

The institution's policy texts answer the second research question, but not in the way that an absence of policy would. The University Policy on Disabilities is, in fact, reasonably detailed: it assigns responsibility to a faculty technical committee (Dean, Assistant Registrar, Deputy Senior Student Counsellor, and departmental

representatives), sets out a disclosure and application procedure, lists specific reasonable adjustments (alternative examination arrangements, scribes and readers, assistive technology, accessible formats, and specially designed furniture), and provides a grievance route for students who feel they have been discriminated against. The problem identified in this study is therefore not the absence of policy language, but the failure of this language to become visible, communicated, and enforceable in students' everyday academic lives.

The evidence for this gap is in the students' accounts. The student with hearing and speech disabilities received none of the accessible teaching that the policy promises, and his attempts at redress "have not been successful," despite the policy's formal grievance mechanism. Other students reported not knowing that support committees existed, and one hearing-impaired student discontinued his degree after the Dean and lecturers had been informed but no action followed. Students described having to argue with the administration to obtain entitlements that the policy already grants, and frequently failing.

Two features compound this. First, the policy qualifies the faculty's duty with the phrase that it will act "within its limitations"—a discretionary hedge that allows resource constraints to override entitlement. Second, neither document sets timelines, budgets, monitoring, or any digital-accessibility standards, and the faculty policy is available only in English, limiting access for Sinhala and Tamil-speaking students. The Faculty Policy on Students with Disabilities (2021) references the UNCRPD and national legislation and commits to accessibility, but inclusion is articulated at the level of principle while remaining underdeveloped at the level of operational practice.

Discussion

This study set out to understand how students with and without disabilities perceive the physical and digital infrastructure of a rural Sri Lankan state university (RQ1) and how institutional policy conceptualizes and addresses accessibility (RQ2). What the study uncovers is that, in this rural Sri Lankan setting, both disabled and non-disabled students are acutely aware of the gap between policy aspiration and reality

across physical and digital access; that inaccessible teaching hinders learning in ways that may affect all students, not only those with disabilities; and that students with disabilities are forced to rely on the social capital of their peers and families—a reliance that can deplete those support networks in turn. The contribution of this paper is to show how these elements cohere into a charity-and-welfare logic of disability, in which support operates as private benevolence rather than institutional obligation, and it does so from a rural, lower-resourced, Global-South setting that is largely missing from the inclusive-higher-education literature.

These findings directly address the three gaps identified earlier. By examining physical and digital infrastructure together, the study shows that the two domains share a single logic of access without participation, rather than being separate problems. By including students with and without disabilities, it shows that barriers are socially recognized across the student body, not private complaints. And by focusing on a rural university, it shows how terrain, heritage architecture, and constrained public funding intensify exclusion in ways that urban-centered studies can miss.

Accessibility at the university is uneven and space-dependent, indicating improvements that are selective and reactive rather than guided by a university-wide strategy grounded in universal design. This implication—that exclusion is engineered into the campus rather than incidental—resonates with comparable contexts: studies of African universities document the same inaccessible buildings and accessibility treated as an afterthought (Agbabiaka et al., 2024; Mubiru, 2022), while work from South Africa shows retrofitting lagging behind universal design (Ferguson et al., 2019). The recommendation is that accessibility be embedded at the design and planning stage, with universal-design standards, assigned responsibility, and explicit timelines.

Digital infrastructure reflects a similar contradiction between technical access and pedagogical integration, reinforcing what Wedasinghe and Wickramarachchi (2015) describe as the disability digital divide: access alone does not equal inclusion (Batty & Reilly, 2023; Black et al., 2015; W3C, 2018). The recommendation is to build accessibility into everyday teaching (captioned and recorded lectures, accessible

documents, and consistent use of the LMS's accessibility features), supported by staff training rather than left to individual lecturers' discretion.

Teaching practices emerged as a central site of exclusion, with the absence of sign-language provision excluding a deaf participant; this reflects broader patterns in Sri Lankan higher education (Hettiarachchi et al., 2019). This is the barrier with the gravest consequence. Disabled students are already at elevated risk of leaving higher education: a Germany-wide survey found this group to be substantially more likely to intend to drop out (Rußmann et al., 2023), and a half-century review of UK data places them among those most at risk of withdrawing (Shaw, 2021). The risk is sharpest in lower-resourced settings, where far fewer disabled people enter or complete higher education at all (Vélez et al., 2025). The account here of a student who left after his communicational needs went unmet is thus a local instance of a global, structurally produced attrition.

Peer support functioned as both solidarity and compensation for institutional gaps. When access depends on friendship networks rather than institutional guarantees, inclusion becomes precarious. The recommendation is to replace ad hoc goodwill with formal, institutionally funded support, including structured peer-mentoring schemes, which improve disabled students' belonging, engagement, and empowerment (Cardinot & Flynn, 2022), and are specifically called for by visually impaired students in Sri Lankan universities (Jayasena et al., 2024), while attending to carers' well-being rather than presuming upon it.

These patterns of reliance are also shaped by Sri Lanka's socio-cultural context. Responsibility for the care of disabled family members falls largely on the household, and within a patriarchal gender order it falls disproportionately on women (Emmanuel & Saroor, 2022). In rural Sinhala Buddhist settings, such caregiving is often framed as merit-making (Udalagama, 2024), which helps to explain why support is configured as familial and charitable rather than institutional and rights-based (Liyanage, 2017). These framings must be read critically: Campbell (2005) cautions against collapsing Buddhism and disability into simplistic karma narratives, and Kim (2019) shows that Buddhist ethics can equally ground a rights-and-dignity view, so

the charity-framing is a contingent interpretation rather than a doctrinal necessity. This reading draws on the cultural literature rather than on the study's data.

Both policies reference the UNCRPD and national legislation, and articulate inclusion as a commitment. The policy gap is therefore one of implementation, communication, and enforcement rather than absence: the documents set out responsible parties, procedures, adjustments, and a grievance route, yet students were often unaware that these existed and had to press the administration for entitlements that had already been granted. What the documents genuinely lack are timelines, budgets, monitoring, and digital-accessibility standards. The recommendation is to make the existing policy operational by communicating it to students, assigning timelines and budgets, monitoring against UNCRPD standards, and translating the faculty policy into Sinhala and Tamil.

The findings must also be situated within the economic realities of Sri Lanka's publicly funded higher education system, which operates under limited allocations while maintaining free education. However, economic constraints do not fully explain the observed gaps. Many barriers, such as communication, staff training, digital design, and policy clarity, require coordination and prioritization rather than major capital expenditure. These case-study findings align closely with a baseline survey across several Sri Lankan universities (Yatigammana et al., 2021), which found that family was the principal source of support for disabled students, most academics used no specific teaching adaptations, and mobility was the greatest barrier, indicating that the patterns documented here are systemic across the sector rather than peculiar to one campus.

Limitations

This study focuses on one faculty within a single Sri Lankan state university, and participation was modest; the findings cannot be statistically generalized to all Sri Lankan universities. Rather than a weakness alone, the small number of participating students with disabilities reflects the field itself: this group is already under-represented in the university, and some students may understandably choose not to self-disclose, so the depth of these accounts is of value precisely because such

voices are seldom heard. The questionnaire did not collect demographic data such as gender or age, and staff or administrative perspectives were not included.

Some students with hearing, speech, or visual impairments found synchronous online interviews difficult; for these participants, the open-ended questionnaire was a more accessible format. This points to a striking parallel: the same students who are excluded from digital education offerings can also be excluded from digital research methods, so studies relying on online interviews may under-represent the very group they seek to understand. Acknowledging this is itself a contribution, and the questionnaire's flexibility was a deliberate means of widening access. These constraints are mitigated by triangulation across four data sources, and the aim is analytical rather than statistical generalization: the patterns identified here are likely transferable to comparable resource-constrained universities in Sri Lanka and other low and middle-income settings.

Relevance to Social Work

Although situated in higher education, this study speaks directly to social work's commitment to social justice, human rights, and structural change. Higher education institutions are key sites of social mobility; when access within them is structurally restricted, exclusion becomes institutionalized rather than incidental. By foregrounding a rural public university in the Global South, the research contributes a perspective that is under-represented in international scholarship, which draws disproportionately on well-resourced Western contexts.

The role that social work can play must be read against the Sri Lankan context, where professional social work is still emergent: formal training began in 1952 but has grown slowly and remains concentrated in a single national institution (Attanayake, 2016), with the profession oriented toward community and social development and reliant on the non-governmental sector. In this setting, disability has historically been approached through charity and welfare rather than rights, with rights-based approaches advanced largely by activists and civil society (Emmanuel & Saroor, 2022; Liyanage, 2017; Peiris-John et al., 2014).

International scholarship positions social work as a profession that advances self-determination, person-centered planning, and the dismantling of ableist barriers (Presnell & Keesler, 2022; Roets et al., 2019). Translated to this context, social workers could move support for disabled students beyond the informal, family- and peer-based compensation documented here, acting as advocates where students' needs are ignored, as brokers of accommodations between students and faculty, and as designers of the formal, institutionally funded peer-mentoring schemes the evidence supports (Cardinot & Flynn, 2022). Equally, social work's structural orientation directs attention to the carers—the mothers and peers currently absorbing the cost of exclusion—whose own participation and well-being a rights-based system would protect rather than presume upon. This study therefore invites further cross-national comparison on how economic conditions, architectural design, governance, and policy implementation shape disability inclusion differently across contexts, strengthening social work's global commitment to equity, participation, and institutional accountability.

Conclusion

This study examined how students with and without disabilities experience the physical and digital infrastructure of a rural Sri Lankan state university, and how institutional policy addresses accessibility. Read through the Social Model of Disability, the central message is clear: the exclusion that these students encounter is produced by the environment and its governance, not by their impairments. Inclusion exists at the level of principle but not of structure.

On a hilly, stair-bound campus built around an able-bodied norm, within a free but resource-constrained public system that admits only a few students with disabilities each year, accessibility is selective and reactive rather than incorporated into the design. Physical and, most acutely, communicational barriers, including the absence of sign-language teaching, leave some students unable to follow lectures and, in at least one case here, unable to remain enrolled. Digital systems are technically available but not built into inclusive teaching, so logging in does not become participating. In the gap left by weak formal provision, students rely on peers and family not only to move and learn but to claim their rights—a solidarity that is real but

precarious, that quietly relieves the institution of responsibility, and that depletes the supporters themselves.

For higher education institutions, inclusion must be embedded from the design stage of infrastructure, curriculum, and governance, with responsibility clearly assigned; many of the necessary changes depend on prioritization rather than major capital. For social work, the study points to a concrete role: acting as a bridge between students and institutions, advocating where students' needs are ignored, supporting the families who currently absorb the cost of exclusion, and pressing at the structural level for accountable, rights-based inclusion. Equitable participation in higher education cannot rest on goodwill; it requires institutional responsibility.

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