

Global Challenges to Inclusive Education in Higher Education: Barriers and Institutional Responses: A Narrow Literature Review

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Abstract: *The present study focuses on the challenges of inclusive education across the globe which are confronting with higher education (HE), especially in developing countries. To highlight the key pertinent issues, published articles were scrutinized from Google Scholar between 2019 and 2024. The review shows gender disparity, low socio-economic status of the students, no internet facility for online or e-learning, financial constraints, dissimilarity in curriculum and contents, settlement for refugees, and immigrant students in developed countries. This study offers suggestions to policy makers, curriculum developers, and stakeholders to align their practices and policies with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Moreover, findings indicate that digital soft skills courses for students are mandatory for the global employability. More future studies are needed to find innovative solutions for these challenges.*

Keywords: Global Challenges, Inclusive Education, Higher Education, Barriers, Institutional Responses, Literature Review

Introduction

In the recent years, inclusive education which aims to facilitate equal opportunities to all the students regardless of their ethnicity, culture, competences, and background gained a significant attention. Bindhani and Gopinath (2024) stated that numerous challenges exist in achieving inclusive education due to complexes in inadequate societal resources, obstacles, and negative attitudes. Lack of funding and financial support also poses significant barriers in comprehensive implementation of quality higher education. Furthermore, additional barriers for instance, biases and misconceptions about students with physical disabilities often result in separation and discrimination (Bindhani & Gopinath, 2024). Florian (2014) concluded that access to quality inclusive education is a basic right of all students, irrespective of their culture, ethnicity, and family background. Moreover, it characterizes a paradigm shift from isolated approaches to HE towards one which accepts diversity and promotes a complete participation of every learner within educational system. Similarly, according to UNESCO report of (2009), over the past decades, inclusive education has achieved a great drive as an international imperative concerning for the well-being of deprived or marginalized individuals with disabilities.

Higher education (HE) plays a crucial role in shaping the pathways of individuals and societies on a global scale. It fosters intellectual development and critical thinking, while equipping individuals with the knowledge and skills necessary to navigate an increasingly complex and interconnected world (Tsou, 2024). Beyond personal benefits, HE contributes significantly to societal advancement by promoting research, innovation, and technological progress. Indeed, countries with highly educated populations often experience socio-economic development and greater social stability. From a global perspective, HE also enhances cultural diversity and mutual understanding among learners from diverse backgrounds in academic settings (Tsou, 2024).

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Methodology

The current study aimed on the crucial global challenges facing HEIs considering quality, access, and equity. It comprises apposite academic databases from published articles of Google Scholar between 2019 and 2024, from various states, societies, cultures, and academic disciplines to ensure the inclusion of relevant and recent studies. In the process of literature review, the research paradigms, methodologies, employed in the chosen literature, for instance, quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods were analyzed and evaluated the research precision.

This study explored the crucial global challenges confronting higher education institutions (HEIs), with particular emphasis on issues of quality, access, and equity. To achieve this objective, a systematic review of the literature was conducted, focusing on peer-reviewed journal articles and scholarly publications. In addition, each selected study was sensibly reviewed to pinpoint its research methodology, paradigm, and key findings.

Disparities, Inequality, and Accessibility Challenges

Mainly the access to HE in various low-income countries around the world is gender disparity. At a global level, female students' participation in HE is below the average as compared to male students, with institutions admitted just 88 males for every 100 females (UNESCO IESALC, 2023). In particular disciplines, a significant variation exists between the enrolment of male and female students, especially in science, engineering, technology, and mathematics, while female participation is satisfactory in social science and humanity related subjects (Bothwell et al. 2022).

Sit (2024) concluded that inequalities in HE impedes justifiable access and success of the students which outlines the diverse plan and policy initiatives applied by governments across the world in their endeavor to handle this global issue. Moreover, the inclusion of HE in the United Nations' (2015) SDGs mark 4.3 and its stress on ensuring equivalent access to affordable and quality HE across the board by 2030 focuses the significances of HE to each individual around the world, but unfortunately, the right to HE is yet far from universal. The available data shows that inequalities in HE contribution exist in 90% of the countries across the world (Atherton et al., 2016). Indeed, access to HE and the support provided to permit learners to benefit from HE continues deeply unequal within and across countries (Sit, 2024).

Pineda and Mishra (2022) reviewed and analyzed 2378 publications and did not find a proof that diversity is worldwide universally accepted, they are doubtful about the global impact of divergent cultural values and common standardized of academic knowledge which stresses collective and individual differences. Moreover, Kuzmanic et al.'s (2023) findings specify high and determined exclusion for learners of great socioeconomic status, but average and decreasing segregation stages are seen in Chilean HE low and middle socioeconomic clusters.

Therefore, across different socioeconomic factors, various regions, gender disparities, and geography restrictions contribute to a broad gap in educational access. It can be possible when global efforts minimize these gaps and reveal the potential of its talented populace.

Technology and E-Learning

In the modern world education, technological innovations have revolutionized academic sector, for instance, the E-Learning broadly offering a global and borderless system of education as massive open online courses (MOOCs) are established into a substitute arrangement of HE (Tsou, 2024). However, the value of content, methodology, lack of feedback, learning results, evaluation, and reliability of online courses have been called into various questions (Atiaja & Guerrero-Proenza, 2016). Moreover, the inception of new teaching technologies dramatically disordered the functioning and association of HE in the Republic of Macedonia (Neshkovska, 2018).

According to the study of Andrews and Hu's (2021), indicated that while professional development programs and orientation are normally accessible, resources and programs for asynchronous education are restricted, clearly addressing online instruction, pedagogy, teaching strategies, assessment and evaluation. Additionally, learners may be at jeopardy of withdrawing from an online course without

determination; not all students are matched to online learning (Francl, 2014). Learners' determination in an online program is generally connected with academic needs, organizational skills, personal circumstances, and course satisfaction. However, it is right for the independent, self-motivated student, the online platform would consistently be shaping and reshaping future HE (Tsou, 2024).

Coffey (2023) stated that artificial intelligence (AI) in academic cannot be a future technology presently used in classrooms and courses across the world. Unluckily, using AI brings new demands to the job-market, but Dutch academic institutions still require to appropriately prepare university graduates to do work in AI work environment (Abdelwahab et al., 2022). Rudolph et al. (2023) concluded that the existing versions of AI chatbots such as ChatGPT, Emi, and Bard may only begin a long and zigzagging road towards progressively powerful generative AI tools in HE and beyond. Though, applying AI in HE gives different challenges and barriers, containing lack of skilled personnel, digital device, ethical concerns, security issues, data privacy, cost and budget restrictions, incorporation with existing systems, regulatory, lack of standardization, and policy challenges, and intricacy of AI systems (Tsou, 2023).

In addition, such an influential change agent offering the education segment with unprecedented ethical, academic, and legal challenges, comprising unfairness and discrimination, and asserting the limitations of human intelligence, making the future of vocational and tertiary education intimately intertwined with AI (Abdous, 2023).

Marsevani (2022) stated that lecturers' constraint consist of lack of time to prepare the e-learning content, problems in lecture-learner collaboration, inability to optimally employ e-learning features, poor internet connectivity, and lack of student motivation. Moreover, the learners' challenges contain the deficiency of tools to access e-learning, technical problems, lack of motivation, and obstacles to e-learning features. Similarly, both the lecturers and learners face technical and non-technical challenges in using E-Learning (Marsevani, 2022). The most pertinent e-learning related challenge mentioned in a study was learners' technical issue, which consisted of devices, internet connectivity, tools, and process (Al-Balas et al., 2020; Wan Hassan et al., 2020; Zulkefli et al., 2020). Furthermore, Almaiah et al. (2020) analyzed that the usage and adoption of e-learning among consumers can be a difficult problem for many HEIs, both in developed and developing countries. Though, given the essential advancement which has already been made, for instance, it is likely that challenges connected with e-learning acceptance are less prominent in the developed Global North. According to the study of Alqahtani & Rajkhan (2020), e-learning could be expending at a rate of 15.4% yearly in academic institutions across the world before the COVID-19 pandemic, without pressure placed on either on the students or the institutions. However, after the pandemic, a plenty has changed, and e-learning has extended added importance. In addition, Maphosa (2021) stated that internet connectivity could be a major obstacle in poor countries, where approximately 35% of people have access to internet, as compared to 80% in the developed countries.

Refugee Crisis in Higher Education

Several scholars argue that higher education institutions have a social and moral obligation to provide learning opportunities for refugee students (Abamosa et al., 2019; Lenette, 2016), highlighting education as a fundamental human right (Naylor et al., 2019). Access to higher education for refugees is viewed as beneficial not only at the individual level but also for institutions and society as a whole. In the long run, educated refugees are seen as potential contributors who can support their displaced communities and play an active role in the development of their home countries upon return (Avery & Said, 2017).

Research further indicates that refugee learners face mental health and well-being challenges during both pre- and post-migration stages (Jack et al., 2019), which often lead to increased vulnerability, instability, and hindered academic performance (Edogan & Erdogan, 2018; Sheikh et al., 2019).

Tsou (2023) noted that while refugee students in host countries such as the United States and Canada receive some assistance from governmental and non-governmental organizations, the outcomes remain uncertain. Similarly, Rizzolatti (2023) emphasized that refugees in the U.S. encounter significant barriers to accessing higher education due to the fragmented and complex nature of refugee and higher education laws. Although many higher education institutions aim to support refugee learners, the lack of awareness

and absence of standardized procedures to address their specific needs continue to obstruct access and limit their academic success (Steitwieser, 2020).

Financial Sustainability and Governing Policy

Research studies highlighted that insufficient institutional support and funding are bigger world-wide constraints in the way of HEIs (Alhamzmi et al. 2023). In Pakistani perspectives, a study by Saqib et al. (2020) revealed that less awareness among learners and faculty regarding sustainable understanding, attached with inadequate financial resources, is creating major issues for the integration of viable development into HE. It also shows that structural barriers exist within HEIs in Pakistan, containing a need for specific strategies which can address these issues and challenges. Abokhalil (2024) stated that in context of UAE, insufficient institutional policies, financial crunch, awareness among faculty, lack of administrative support create hindrances in HE.

Similarly, Ulmer and Wydra (2020) analyzed that in African HEIs challenges in inclusive education comprising of lack of funding, inadequate infrastructure, poor resources, over-crowded classrooms and high students teacher ratio.

Moreover, the impact of neoliberalism, “corporatization” of Canadian universities, and reduced government funding has led to a mounting reliance on contingent or non-permanent faculty, establishing a vulnerable pool of destitute and marginalized academic workers (Rose, 2020). Similarly, American HE has been within stormy debates for over two decades about its outcomes, costs, and value, with condemnations from decision-makers, elected officials, and within the academy concentrating on mission idea, questionable practices, and leadership failures (Kinders et al., 2020). Though, these explanations often need to be reviewed because the faculty's service status directly impacts student success (Rogers, 2015).

Globalization and Internationalization

According to Thondhlana et al. (2021), internationalization of HE endures to accumulate momentum as proved by the improved awareness of the requisite not only to routine a strategic attitude to it but also be directed by the use of circumstantial lenses, in precise decolonialization. Moreover, they determine, the drift towards augmenting regionalization and south-south cooperation, highlights a shift from the copy and paste of the western standard and the strong tendency to vertical internationalization (Jones & De, 2014). In addition, the internationalization of HE has extended with commercialization and complexity in Canada but has exposed the essences of mobility, diversity, educational and intellectual values, international impact and global awareness (Taskoh et al. 2020). To increase enrolment of students or gain a status at an international level, the academic internationalization of HE has increased to prominence, but without appropriate global leadership, it may lead to a non-execution of activities, failure to fulfill with agreement by means of international partners, not obtain the established goals (Stallivieri, 2017). Leask and de Gayardon (2021) recommended that it is the high time to rethink, redefine, reassess, and recreate how we look at the internationalization of HE and to focus on the potential and real impact of internationalization activities on native and global communities.

Yousefi and Binary (2021) concluded that the influence of internationalization and globalization on the action, identity, and practice of the HE realm has become the subject of discussion for the academic organizations. At one side the intensification in the international competition amongst the academic institutions is due to instant globalization, while on the other side, the impact of COVID-19 magnitudes recently pushes universities towards formulating novel approaches, re-evaluation, and frameworks that permit them to speed up the international and global activities (Yousefi & Binary, 2021).

Conclusion

The current study highlights the global challenges of higher education, focusing on differences, similarities, current trends, strategies, and potential solutions. A major concern is gender disparity in access to quality education, particularly in developing countries. Another critical issue is economic

hardship: rising inflation and unemployment limit opportunities for students, many of whom lack internet access or the necessary tools for e-learning.

In addition, artificial intelligence (AI) presents a significant challenge for institutions, requiring them to integrate technology into their curricula so that students are equipped with both technical and soft skills essential for the modern workforce. By contrast, developed countries benefit from well-established institutions, abundant resources, and sufficient funding to sustain quality higher education.

Globalization of education is also a pressing concern, making it essential for curriculum developers to design programs that reflect diverse perspectives and prepare students for global competition. Moreover, migration and the movement of refugees to developed countries further emphasize the inevitability of globalization in higher education.

To address these issues, both public and private higher education institutions worldwide must demonstrate strong commitment to fostering innovation, inclusivity, and adaptability within their systems. Finally, future research is recommended to explore sustainable, equitable, and long-term solutions that ensure universal access to quality higher education.

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