

Practices and Prospects of Inclusive Education for Lifelong Learning in Ethiopian Higher Education: A Comparative Case Study of Arsi and Madawalabu Universities

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Abstract

The global commitment to inclusive education (IE), enshrined in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4) and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), posits equitable access to quality lifelong learning (LLL) for all. Ethiopia's policy landscape, through its Education Sector Development Plans (ESDPs) and Higher Education Proclamations, echoes this commitment. However, the translation of these policies into sustainable practices within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) remains a critical challenge. This study investigates the practices, challenges, and prospects of implementing IE as a foundation for LLL in Ethiopian HE, employing a comparative case study of Arsi University and Madawalabu University. Grounded in a transformative-social justice framework, the research utilized a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design. Quantitative data were collected via structured questionnaires from 380 academic staff and final-year students (selected through stratified random sampling), while qualitative data came from 24 semi-structured interviews with leaders, disability unit officers, and students with disabilities, supplemented by document analysis. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics (ANOVA, t-tests), and qualitative data underwent thematic analysis. Findings reveal that both universities have established foundational policies and Disability Resource Units (DRUs), but implementation is fragmented and non-systemic. Key challenges include severe deficits in physical and digital infrastructure, limited academic staff training in inclusive pedagogies, pervasive attitudinal barriers, and a critical disconnect between IE initiatives and LLL objectives. Madawalabu University demonstrated marginally more coordinated outreach, while Arsi University showed stronger internal advocacy networks. The study concludes that the operationalization of IE for LLL is nascent, characterized by a compliance-oriented approach. It recommends a systemic overhaul encompassing: mandatory capacity building in Universal Design for Learning (UDL) for all staff, strategic investment in accessible ICT, the development of explicit policies linking IE and LLL, and fostering robust community-HEI partnerships to build inclusive lifelong learning ecosystems. This research contributes empirical evidence to the limited literature on IE in Ethiopian HE and provides actionable insights for policy and practice.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Lifelong Learning, Higher Education, Ethiopia, Universal Design for Learning, Comparative Case Study, Disability, Access.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background of the Study

The confluence of Inclusive Education (IE) and Lifelong Learning (LLL) represents a paradigm shift in global educational philosophy, moving from selective, time-bound instruction to a holistic, continuous, and equitable learning ecosystem [39]. IE, rooted in the Salamanca Statement (1994) and the [37], advocates for the accommodation of all learners' diverse needs within mainstream settings. When integrated with LLL—a process of continuous learning throughout life for personal, civic, social, and employment-related purposes [12] IE becomes the foundational principle for ensuring equitable learning opportunities across the lifespan.

Globally, frameworks like SDG 4 mandate inclusive, equitable, quality education and promote LLL opportunities for all. In higher education (HE), this translates to creating institutions that are physically, pedagogically, and attitudinally accessible, serving traditional students, adult learners, professionals, and marginalized groups [24]. However, a persistent policy-practice gap exists, particularly in low-resource contexts [4]. In Africa, challenges include colonial legacies of exclusion, resource constraints, and attitudinal barriers, though promising practices are emerging [25].

Ethiopia's commitment is evident in national policies like the ESDPs and the 2019 Higher Education Proclamation.

Despite this, its HEIs face profound challenges: rapid massification, limited resources, rigid curricula, and deeply ingrained pedagogical traditions [31]. The inclusion of students with disabilities, those from pastoralist communities, ethnic minorities, and adult learners remains precarious. While studies have examined LLL [5] or IE [20] in isolation, there is a critical paucity of research investigating how Ethiopian HEIs operationalize IE as a mechanism for enabling LLL. This study seeks to fill this gap by interrogating the practices, challenges, and prospects at two emerging universities.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Ethiopian higher education expansion has not been met with proportional advances in inclusivity and lifelong learning capacity. Despite progressive policies, universities like Arsi and Madawalabu struggle to translate inclusion mandates into daily practice, thereby failing to fully actualize their role as hubs for LLL. The problem is manifested in: 1) Physical and pedagogical barriers that exclude learners with disabilities; 2) Inflexible academic programs that do not cater to working professionals or non-traditional entrants; 3) Limited staff preparedness to handle diverse classrooms; and 4) a siloed approach where disability units operate in isolation from broader LLL and curriculum development initiatives. This disconnect undermines social equity, human capital development, and the national ambition to harness education for sustainable development. A comparative investigation is needed to uncover context-specific impediments and identify transferable promising practices.

1.3. Research Questions

1. How are policies and practices of Inclusive Education implemented at Arsi and Madawalabu Universities, and what are the perceived barriers and enablers?
2. What are the perceptions of academic staff and students regarding the readiness of institutional infrastructure, pedagogy, and assessment to support inclusive lifelong learning?
3. How do the universities conceptualize and facilitate the linkage between inclusive education and lifelong learning opportunities for diverse learner groups?
4. What comparative differences and similarities exist between the two universities in their approach to IE for LLL, and what factors account for these variations?

1.4. Objectives of the Study

1. To analyze the implementation status of IE policies and support systems at Arsi and Madawalabu Universities.
2. To assess the perceptions of key stakeholders on institutional readiness for inclusive pedagogy and accessible learning environments.
3. To explore the existing and potential linkages between IE frameworks and LLL initiatives within the universities.
4. To compare and contrast the strategies, challenges, and prospects of both universities in promoting IE for LLL.

1.5. Significance of the Study

This study holds significance for multiple stakeholders. For policymakers (MoE, HERQA), it provides evidence for refining national IE and LLL frameworks. For university leaders, it offers a diagnostic tool for institutional self-assessment and strategic planning. For academic staff, it highlights professional development needs in inclusive pedagogy. For students, particularly those from marginalized groups, it amplifies their voices and experiences. For the academic community, it contributes a comparative, context-rich case study to the global literature on inclusive higher education in the Global South.

1.6. Definition of Important Terms

- **Inclusive Education (IE):** A process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning and reducing exclusion within and from education. In IE, it involves structural, curricular, and pedagogical transformation [38].
- **Lifelong Learning (LLL):** All learning activities undertaken throughout life, to improve knowledge, skills, competencies, and/or qualifications for personal, social, civic, or employment-related reasons [12].
- **Universal Design for Learning (UDL):** A framework to improve and optimize teaching and learning for all people based on scientific insights, offering multiple means of engagement, representation, and action/expression [9].
- **Reasonable Accommodation:** Necessary and appropriate modifications and adjustments not imposing a disproportionate burden, to ensure persons with disabilities can enjoy and exercise rights on an equal basis with others [42].

1.7. Limitations of the Study

The study is limited to two universities, limiting generalizability to all Ethiopian HEIs. Social desirability bias may affect interview and survey responses. The cross-sectional design provides a snapshot (2018-2025) rather than a longitudinal trajectory. The focus is primarily on inclusion related to disability and learner diversity, with less emphasis on gender and socio-economic inclusion, though these intersect.

1.8. Delimitation of the Study

The study is delimited to Arsi and Madawalabu Universities as comparative public institutions. It focuses on institutional practices, stakeholder perceptions, and policy-practice gaps. It prioritizes the intersection of IE and LLL, not treating them as separate domains. Data collection is confined to academic staff, students, and institutional leaders directly involved in or affected by IE and LLL initiatives.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on IE in HE has evolved from a focus on legal compliance and disability services to a broader concept of diversity [24].

Globally, frameworks like UDL have gained traction as proactive approaches to inclusion [9]. Concurrently, LLL discourse has shifted from economic upskilling to a rights-based, holistic view of learning across the lifespan [42]. The synergy between IE and LLL is clear: an inclusive system is a prerequisite for true lifelong learning [40] Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2022).

In Africa, challenges include resource constraints and attitudinal barriers [27]. Promising practices are emerging, such as flexible learning pathways in South Africa [28]. Research in Ethiopia has identified barriers like inaccessible infrastructure, lack of assistive technologies, and negative attitudes [2]; [33]. Studies on LLL highlight policy-practice disconnects and rigid curriculum structures (Assefa et al., 2024). However, a critical gap persists: no study has systematically investigated how Ethiopian HEIs leverage IE principles to build a culture and infrastructure for LLL. This study addresses this gap by employing a comparative case study to uncover the nuanced realities of two institutions.

3. METHODS AND MATERIALS

3.1. Research Design

A sequential explanatory mixed-methods design within a comparative case study framework was employed [10]. The comparative case study approach [6] allowed for an in-depth, contextualized analysis of practices across Arsi and Madawalabu Universities.

3.2. Population and Sampling Techniques

The study targeted three groups: academic staff, final-year undergraduates, and administrative leaders. Quantitatively, 380 participants (190 per university) were selected via stratified random sampling. Strata were based on college/faculty and role (staff/student), with purposeful oversampling of students with disabilities.

Qualitatively, 24 participants were purposively chosen to provide depth: 4 university leaders, 4 Disability Resource Unit officers, 8 academic staff, and 8 students with a range of disabilities. This mixed approach ensured both broad representation and detailed, insightful perspectives.

3.3. Data Collection Tools

A 5-point Likert scale questionnaire ($\alpha=0.87$) assessed key areas and perceptions. Semi-structured interview guides were tailored for leaders, staff, and students. A checklist systematically analyzed policy documents, strategic plans, and disability unit reports from 2018–2025.

3.4. Validity and Reliability

Content validity was ensured by expert review. For qualitative trustworthiness, triangulation, member checking, and thick description were used. Inter-coder reliability for thematic analysis was established (Cohen's Kappa > 0.80).

3.5. Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS v.26 (descriptive statistics, t-tests, ANOVA).

Qualitative data were transcribed and analyzed thematically using NVivo 12, following Braun and Clarke's (2021) approach. Integration occurred during interpretation, where quantitative trends were explained by qualitative narratives.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 1 shows the survey respondents' demographic profile (N=380), evenly split between two Ethiopian universities. Each university's sample comprised 95 academic staff and 95 students. Within the student groups, 15.8% and 18.9% reported having disabilities, respectively. Male respondents represented 68% and 65% of each university's sample.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Survey Respondents (N=380)

Characteristic	Arsi University (n=190)	Madawalabu University (n=190)
Academic Staff	95 (50%)	95 (50%)
Students	95 (50%)	95 (50%)
Students with Disabilities	15 (15.8% of student sample)	18 (18.9% of student sample)
Gender (Male)	68%	65%

4.2. Implementation of IE Policies and Support Systems

While 70% of surveyed staff were aware of an institutional Inclusive Education (IE) policy, only 35% felt "very familiar" with its specific contents, indicating a gap between awareness and practical understanding.

A significant divergence was observed in staff perceptions of the Disability Resource Unit (DRU), the primary support system. As shown in Table 2, mean effectiveness scores (on a 1-5 scale) were consistently and significantly higher at Madawalabu University compared to Arsi University across all measured service aspects.

Table 2: Perceived Effectiveness of Disability Resource Unit Services (Mean Scores, 1-5 scale)

Service Aspect	Arsi Univ. Mean (SD)	Madawalabu Univ. Mean (SD)	t-test p-value
Accessibility of DRU Office	3.1 (1.12)	3.8 (0.98)	0.001*
Timeliness of Support	2.8 (1.05)	3.5 (1.01)	0.000*
Provision of Assistive Tech	2.5 (1.20)	3.2 (1.15)	0.002*

*Statistically significant ($p<0.05$)

Qualitative findings explained this disparity. A leader at Madawalabu noted: "Our DRU reports directly to the VP and has a dedicated budget line... Arsi's unit is buried under the Dean of Students." An Arsi student with visual impairment shared: "I registered with the unit, but they said they have no braille paper. I rely on friends." This aligns with global findings that institutional commitment, reflected in structure and funding, is critical (Moriña, 2017).

4.3. Institutional Readiness: Infrastructure, Pedagogy, and Assessment

Respondents gave low ratings to physical infrastructure at both institutions (Mean=2.4/5). However, digital accessibility was a more critical concern: over 80% reported that online platforms and e-resources were incompatible with screen readers. This digital divide significantly worsens exclusion, a widespread challenge across Sub-Saharan Africa [7].

Regarding pedagogy, Table 3 shows a gap between staff values and practice. While supportive of inclusion, implementation was inconsistent.

Table 3: Staff Self-Report on Inclusive Pedagogical Practices (% , N=190)

Practice	Arsi Staff (n=95)	Madawalabu Staff (n=95)
Often/Very Often use varied teaching methods	45%	52%
Provide lecture materials in advance	30%	41%
Modify assessment methods for diverse needs	22%	35%
Received formal training on IE/UDL (last 3 yrs)	25%	38%

On pedagogy, Table 3 reveals that while staff valued inclusion, their practice lagged.

Interview data highlighted a training deficit. A lecturer from Arsi confessed: "My job is to deliver the content. I don't know how to teach a deaf student in a class of 100." This reflects a global need for systemic professional development [41].

4.4. Linkages between IE and LLL

This area revealed the largest gap. Only 15% of all respondents could describe any university program explicitly linking inclusion and LLL. Document analysis showed strategic plans treated "inclusion" and "community lifelong learning" as separate pillars. However, promising fragments existed. Madawalabu's DRU had partnered with the Continuing Education Directorate on a sign language course, a nascent example of inclusive LLL outreach. This aligns with the [39] vision of HEIs as inclusive LLL hubs.

4.5. Comparative Analysis: Arsi vs. Madawalabu

Table 4: Comparative Summary of IE for LLL Practices

Dimension	Arsi University	Madawalabu University
Policy & Structure	Policy exists; DRU is under-staffed and lower in hierarchy.	Policy exists; DRU has clearer mandate and reporting line.
Infrastructure	Major gaps in physical and digital accessibility.	Slightly better physical access; similar digital gaps.
Pedagogy & Staff	Lower reported training and practice of UDL. Strong informal advocacy networks.	Higher levels of staff training reported. More structured but less organic advocacy.
IE-LLL Linkage	Conceptual understanding among leaders; limited programmatic links.	Emerging practical links through community-oriented short courses.
Key Challenge	Translating advocacy into systemic resource allocation.	Moving from disability-specific support to whole-institution UDL adoption.

Institutional lineage and leadership partly explain these differences. This comparison underscores that context shapes strategy [6]. While both universities have foundational policies, Arsi's strength lies in informal advocacy, whereas Madawalabu demonstrates more formalized structures and training. Each faces the distinct challenge of scaling its unique advantages into systemic, institutional transformation for genuine inclusive LLL.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. Conclusion

This comparative study concludes that both Arsi and Madawalabu Universities have embarked on the journey towards inclusive education, but remain in the early stages of realizing their full potential as a foundation for lifelong learning. While policy frameworks exist, implementation is hampered by: 1) Systemic Barriers: Inadequate funding, siloed structures, and lack of enforceable accountability; 2) Capacity Gaps: Insufficient training for staff in UDL; 3) Infrastructural Deficits: Critical shortcomings in physical and digital accessibility; 4) Conceptual Disconnect: A pronounced gap between IE initiatives

and LLL strategies. Neither institution has successfully mainstreamed inclusion as a core, transformative principle guiding all activities.

5.2. Recommendations

For National Policymakers (MoE): The Ministry should develop Binding National Guidelines for Inclusive Higher Education, integrating Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and clear Lifelong Learning (LLL) pathways. To incentivize action, a portion of university block grants should be linked to performance on inclusion metrics and the creation of inclusive LLL outreach strategies.

For University Leadership: Inclusion requires structural commitment. Disability/Inclusion Units must report directly to the President/Vice-Chancellor, supported by ring-fenced budgets. Mandatory, ongoing UDL training for all academic staff should be a promotion prerequisite. Furthermore, institutions must launch at least one interdisciplinary micro-credential pilot, designed with UDL to serve non-traditional learners flexibly.

For Academic Staff: Proactive engagement is crucial. Staff should participate fully in UDL training and form communities of practice to share inclusive resources. They must also advocate within curriculum reviews to embed flexible engagement and assessment methods.

For Future Research: A robust evidence base is needed. Longitudinal studies must track students with disabilities through graduation and into careers. Additionally, action research projects, co-designed with students with disabilities, should develop context-sensitive assistive technologies and pedagogical models.

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