Making the "invisible" visible: Inclusive higher education policies for students with disabilities in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

The right to education is reflected in the essential safeguards of 1966 International Covenant on economic, social, and cultural rights, 1989 convention on the rights of the child as well as emphasized as a tool for individual facilitation in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Until now, achieving inclusive education seems to be a farfetched concept for many, especially in the developing country like Bangladesh. Access to higher education is vital for a safe and enhanced standard of living, yet in Bangladesh, it remains largely inaccessible to marginalized groups, predominantly students with disabilities, notably limiting their life prospects. This qualitative study, based on 20 interviews with higher education authorities, faculty members, and students with disabilities at the University of Dhaka adopts a holistic approach to evaluate the institution's policies and practices of inclusive education system. The findings revealed that heightened enrolment of disable students in Bangladesh's public universities is hindered by the absence of a national inclusive education policy and integrated strategies. Moreover, students with disabilities face uneven support, infrastructural and bureaucratic blockades, and limited supportive services, though peer and faculty member's sympathy help to ease their experience. Hence, this paper recommends the vitality of a well formulated inclusive education policy and its prompt implementation drawing upon the lived experiences of students with disabilities and analysis of existing policy architecture. Thus, students with disabilities must be made "visible" to bring about visible changes in the policy and practice in Bangladesh.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Disabilities, Higher Education, Education Policy, Developing Country

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INTRODUCTION

Education is a fundamental right of every human being (Kioupi et al. 2023). The right to education is reflected in the essential safeguards of 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, 1989 convention on the rights of the child as well as emphasized as a tool for individual facilitation in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Agbedahin 2019). Achieving an inclusive education that is accessible to everyone and fostering equal opportunities for continuous learning are the central tenets of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Giangrande et al. 2019). The vitality of providing equitable higher education opportunities is not simply confined to an individual's benefit and betterment, rather ensures broader social and national benefit through decreased unemployment rates, increased tax revenue collection, enhanced intergenerational mobility, lesser reliance on social service and profound civic participation (Salmi 2017).

In 2020, almost 90% of the global population had their primary education, 66% had secondary level education but only 40% had completed their tertiary education or some form of university education, which indicates there is still a considerably lower rate of access in tertiary level education (Statista 2022). Despite the overall positive picture of the average increase in enrolment levels worldwide, not all segments of society are equally able to benefit from university higher education (Tobbell et al. 2020). In the absence of deliberate inclusive policies to assist the marginalized students, disparities worsen (Kioupi et al. 2023). Unfortunately, access to education is a farfetched dream for student with disabilities. In this research, an all-encompassing view has been set on the access to tertiary education of students with disabilities. This research has attempted to draw a holistic picture using an ontological approach to understanding the practice of inclusion as a contributory aspect in the educational trajectory by combining the institutional policy approaches as well as the voice of students. The University of Dhaka has been selected as a case for the study, because it is the largest and oldest public university in Bangladesh. The country is a good case for the research as in the recent years, Bangladesh has achieved great strikes in education attainment and is dedicated to the provision of quality education at all levels. Compared to only a meagre 31,000 in 1972, an impressive 3.2 million students were enrolled in tertiary level education of the country in 2017 (Mannan 2017). Unfortunately, the number is not shockingly less in the case of differently abled students. In 2020, there were only 86 physically challenged students studying at Dhaka University, 110 at Chittagong University, 75 at Jahangirnagar University, 75 at Jagannath University, and 368 at Rajshahi University, according to statistics provided by Physically- disabled foundation (PDF) (Sakib 2020).

The article takes a two-pronged approach by exploring the institutional policies and practices of the University of Dhaka. The objective of this study is to explore the policy architecture and existing facilities offered to the students with disabilities at the University of Dhaka in order to ensure inclusive education. The study also attempts to identify and assess the discrepancies between policies and existing practices for differently abled students at the University of Dhaka. By exploring and evaluating the access to higher education of persons with disabilities (PWD) in Bangladesh will add to the exiting literature by identifying the unique yet generalizable barriers and aspect of inclusion in developing country context.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Inclusive Education Student with Disability

The concept of "inclusive education" was coined by human rights groups and international movements in an effort to separate segregated special education programmes from mainstream education reforms that would allow all students to thrive in the educational setting (Tomlinson 2019; Blanton et al. 2018; Imray & Colley 2017; Slee & Tomlinson 2018). Renowned International organizations such as the UNICEF, UNESCO, the council of Europe, the United Nations and the EU, all have some commonality in their conceptualization of inclusion in education, which directly emphasises, the right to education for all students (Haug 2017). Rather from being a static concept, inclusive education is a constantly evolving movement (UNESCO 2009). The United Nations (1998) defines inclusive education as an approach to education that welcomes and supports all students, regardless of their background, ability, or disability, and that prioritises the creation of welcoming and safe learning environments while maintaining a focus on student achievement and diversity (Kioupi et al. 2023).

The United Nations reports that one-third of people with disabilities face discrimination due to widespread misconceptions and preconceptions (The United Nations 2022). For centuries, schools have been built on the idea of "survival of the fittest," which led to a prejudiced view of students with disabilities (Abosi 2007). In practically every nation on the globe, students who have disabilities (SWD) are guaranteed the right to receive equal treatment in accordance to constitutional safeguards. In its Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (1994), the UNESCO emphasises the need for nations to include inclusive education within their policies. As stated by Byrne (2022), the above mandate demonstrates how educational policies, goals, and practices are evolving, with an emphasis on inclusive education for the differently abled. In

order to provide an illustration, Rodríguez Herrero et al. (2020) uses the Equality Act (2010) of the United Kingdom, the Disability Standards for Education (2005) of Australia, and the Higher Education Opportunity Act (2008) of the United States as examples of laws that seek at cultivating inclusive education. In higher education institutions (HEIs), the concept of disability encompasses the complex relationship between disabilities, societal attitudes, and environmental limitations. The harrowing combinations of these hurdles substantially affects the capacity of differently abled students to participate in every other aspect of society (Ntombela 2022).

In developed countries like the United States of America, higher education system has made remarkable progress in ensuring a competency- based learning environment for differently abled students which have consequently added to creation of more employable human resources in the country (Rodríguez Herrero et al. 2020). However, the same cannot be said in the case of developing and least developed countries. A holistic approach for inclusive education, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is still missing in the higher education institution of many developing countries (Carballo et al. 2021; Lopez-Gavira et al. 2021; Ntombela 2022).

Higher Education Scenario for students with disability in Bangladesh

The Constitution of Bangladesh specifies unequivocally that all of its citizens, shall have equal access to adequate educational opportunities. This premise is a constitutional obligation, as mentioned in Articles 17 and 28, which declare that an equal opportunity to receive a public education must be provided to all citizens without any kind of discrimination. Article 28 (3) of the constitution of the country prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, religion, gender, and place of birth. On the other hand, Article 17 (a) seeks to create a uniform, inclusive, and extensive system of education, guaranteeing that all children receive free and mandatory education up to a level that is authorised by law (The Constitution of the people's Republic of Bangladesh, n.d.). In addition to being a signatory to all applicable international treaties, Bangladesh is a signatory to international treaties that promise to include inclusive education in its existing educational architecture and supports international education frameworks and declarations such as Education for All (UNESCO 1990), Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (UNESCO 1994), Dakar Framework for Action (UNESCO 2000), and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD).

The country adopted National Education Policy (NEP) in 2010 which also complies with the mandate for an inclusive education system where children from all walks of life have access to quality education, including differently abled students (Ministry of Education 2010). The differently abled students are specifically guaranteed equal access to all basic facilities in accordance with the Disability Rights Act (2013), amidst which education is a pivotal one (Nuri et al. 2022). The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) conducted a survey in 2021 called the National Survey on Persons with Disabilities, which revealed that there are around 4.5 million people in Bangladesh who are physically or mentally disabled. According to Kamruzzaman et al. (2023), this substantial population continues to be largely excluded from having access to different educational opportunities. Based on the census completed in 2011, it was found that disabled individuals, both male and female, did not have sufficient access to educational opportunities. The findings of a study conducted by Hasan et al. (2017) indicated that existing policies, attitudes and physical constraints combinedly work against the participation of individuals with disabilities both in educational and vocational training programs. Zulfiqar et al. (2018) in his study found out that female impaired students in higher education have more challenges to being successful in their academic pursuits compared to male SWDs. These studies hint towards the necessity of a holistic policy measure to be taken by the state. According to Ahsan and Mullick (2013), the government has taken policy steps to encourage inclusive education. Nuri et al 2021 in their study conducted a thorough policy analysis of the Persons with Disabilities Act of 2013. This act establishes the basic fundamental rights of all persons with disability. However, literature focusing solely on SWDs is sparse. In 2020, Haque et al (2020) explored the conditions of the physically challenged students of Rajshahi University in Bangladesh with a special focus on library use only. Soon after, in 2021, Mahfuz, Sakib and Husain (2021) conducted a study on the visually impaired students in Bangladesh during the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2022, another study by Nishat and Das 2022 looked into the residential experiences of the SWDs in Higher Education Institutions: Case of University of Dhaka While the previous studies were confined to a certain issue or aspect of higher education experience, the study by Rahman and Akhter (2021) used a holistic lens to understand the condition of inclusivity of Jahangirnagar University. This article takes a similar approach of assessing the provision of inclusive education policy for SWDs in the University of Dhaka. However, what sets this research apart is the selection of the case of Dhaka University and is considered a trendsetter for the rest of the public and

private universities of the country. Moreover, this research has used a globally recognized best practice framework to evaluate the existing policies and the lack thereof to explore the current scenario of inclusion in higher education for the SWDs.
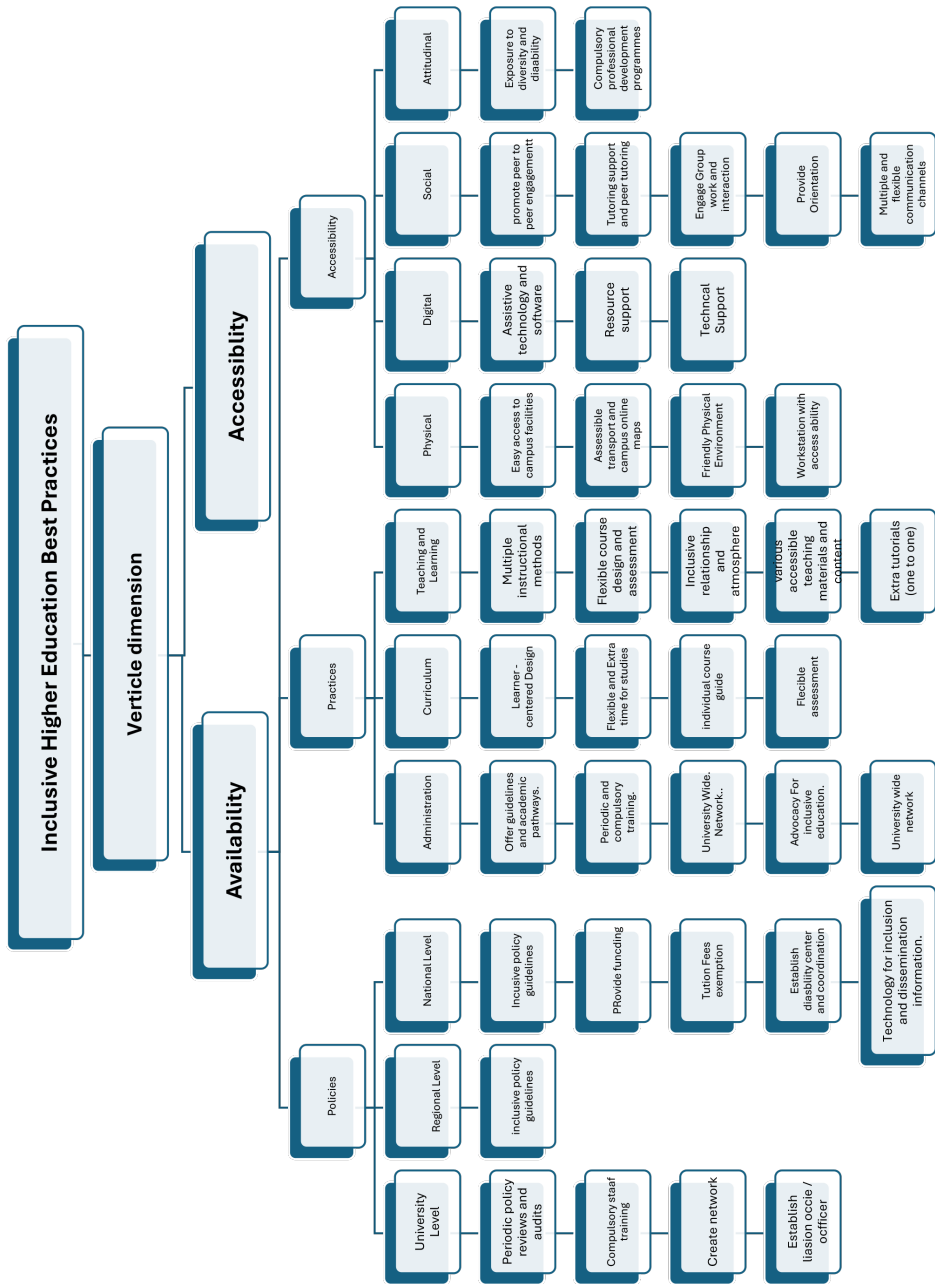
Theoretical framework

In the process of conceptualising "inclusive education," two models, namely the individual-medical model and the social model, have garnered a significant amount of attention (Collins et al. 2018). The social model takes a broader approach and asserts that people are affected by the restrictions that are present in society (Collins et al. 2018). This is in contrast to the medical model, which has a very antiquated and limited perspective on disability, considering it as a "individualised problem." Stanovich and Jordan (1998) asserts that, educators who are inspired by the "social model" are more likely to create inclusive classrooms and successful students, compared to those who believe in the "medical model". The "social model" of inclusive education aims to fully integrate liberal perspective while embracing a more comprehensive approach. this is the appropriate model to employ in a study which not only focuses on the case of disability but also the case of invisibility.

In higher education, the disparity that "disables" students, whether consciously or accidentally, causing exclusion and contributing to further marginalisation can be understood from two dimensions: vertical inequalities and horizontal inequalities (Salmi & D'Addio 2020). The vertical dimension focuses on the entirety of the higher education commencing with the transition from secondary to tertiary education (admission and enrolment), continuing with the progression of students during their studies, and culminating with the conclusion of their studies at graduation. In the vertical dimension, both individuals who enrol in higher education and those who graduate from postsecondary institutions are taken into consideration. According to Salmi and D'Addio's research from 2020, vertical dimensions investigate the "who" in relation to the process of entering and graduating from higher education (Salmi & D'Addio 2020). On the other hand, Horizontal dimensions broaden the scope of the "who does what" component, which, according to Salmi and D'Addio (2020), incorporates the potential outcomes and opportunities that may be available to individuals after they have completed their higher education. Most research on inclusive education focuses on vertical dimension, especially the admission to higher education gets more attention in research.

According to Mc Cowan (2015), there are three dimensions that can be used to evaluate the degree to which university policies support equal access to higher education namely- availability, accessibility, and horizontality (McCowan, 2015). McCowan (2015) makes it abundantly clear that in the context of tertiary level education, the term "availability" refers to the provision of sufficient spaces to ensure that all members of society who have the desire to engage in higher education and who have a minimal level of preparation are able to do so.

This study focuses on the vertical dimension of inclusion from the model given by Salmi & D'Addio (2020) and highlights only two dimensions - availability and accessibility from McCowan (2015). This is because, this study takes the case of one educational institution, namely the University of Since, the university is a public educational institution therefore, there is no aspect of horizontality which would require comparison between institutions of different educational qualities. Lastly, in order to chalk out the best practices in inclusive higher education, this study takes inspiration from a model co funded by the Erasmus and the program of the European Union which was developed in compilation of all the best practices for inclusive higher education. Since this study is based in a developing country context, a similar model has been adapted in this study to project possible and potential inclusive practices in higher education institutions in Bangladesh. The figure below has been adapted drawing upon the work of Salmi & D'Addio (2020), Lambrechts (2020) and McCowan (2015).

Inclusive Higher Education Best Practices

Verticle dimension

Accessiblity

- Accessibility
  - Physical
    - Easy access to campus facilities
    - Assessible transport and campus online maps
    - Friendly Physical Environment
    - Workstation with access ability
  - Digital
    - Assistive technology and software
    - Resource support
    - Techncal Support
  - Social
    - promote peer to peer engagementt
    - Tutoring support and peer tutoring
    - Engage Group work and interaction
    - Provide Orientation
    - Multiple and flexible communication channels
  - Attitudinal
    - Exposure to diversity and diasbility
    - Compulsory professional development programmes

Availability

- Practices
  - Teaching and Learning
    - Multiple instructional methods
    - Flexible course design and assessment
    - Inclusive relationship and atmosphere
    - various accessible teaching materials and content
    - Extra tutorials (one to one)
  - Curriculum
    - Learner - centered Design
    - Flexible and Extra time for studies
    - individual course guide
    - Flecible assessment
  - Administration
    - Offer guidelines and academic pathways.
    - Periodic and compulsory training.
    - University Wide. Network..
    - Advocacy For inclusive education.
    - University wide network
- Policies
  - National Level
    - Incusive policy guidelines
    - PRovide funcding
    - Tution Fees exemption
    - Establish diasbility center and coordination
    - Technology for inclusion and dissemination information.
  - Regional Level
    - inclusive policy guidelines
  - University Level
    - Periodic policy reviews and audits
    - Compulsory staaf training
    - Create network
    - Establish liasion occie / ocfficer

Source: Adapted by author from EU, 2020

METHODOLOGY

The study applied a qualitative research design. A phenomenological research approach was used in conducting this study. This method determines the nature of the problem, contributes to a deeper understanding of the issue at hand, and investigates the research subject in varying degrees of depth. The location for this research University of Dhaka through purposive sampling. Both primary and secondary sources were used to collect the data. The primary data was collected using In-depth Interviews (IDI) and Key Informant Interviews (KII). An interview is a very organized way for someone to deeply explore the lives of even a stranger and get the data and information they need for their research. All the interviews were taken at the respondent's own university campus premises or hall accommodation at their convenient time. Trained and experienced data collectors, who are students of the same university had built rapport with the respondents before starting to the main questions. This ensured a certain comfort and ease for the IDI respondents. These IDIs were taken within two months from January-February, 2024. Participants were chosen using purposive sampling techniques.

A total of 10 KIIs from different administrative officials of the university admin building, current student advisors and hall tutors were conducted in order to gain a holistic idea of the existing policies for differently abled students at the university of Dhaka. The researcher used a mix of purposive and convenient sampling to select KII respondents. Administrative officers of relevant sections and faculties who are actively involved in out of class student-teacher roles were only approach. The reason behind choosing them was they had possessed a clear idea of the general student's medication practice as well as they knew the general physician's perspective on prescribing antibiotics. Both IDIs and KIIs were conducted using a semi-structured questionnaire. Semi structured questionnaire enables the researcher to obtain open-ended data, dive deeply into personal and often sensitive themes, and explore participant thoughts, feelings, and opinions about a specific topic. Interview questions were designed after conducting extensive literature review on this topic. Face and content validity tests were conducted before finalizing the questionnaire for the interview. The IDI questionnaire was basically focused on the experience and expectations of differently abled students whereas KII questionnaire focused on the existing policy architecture in practice for the differently abled students at the university of Dhaka. Before starting the interview, the questionnaire was displayed to the interviewee and their responses were noted accordingly by a professional data transcriber. Each interview lasted between 30 to 40 minutes.

Table 1: List of Respondents

List of Respondents – Provider End	List of Respondents – Receiver End
Deputy Registrar	Visually Impaired Student, Male
Deputy Librarian	Physically Impaired Student, Male
Provost, Hall Accommodation	Physically Impaired Student, Male
Deputy Registrar, Academic 5	Physically Impaired Student, Female
Deputy Registrar, Academic 3	Physically Impaired Student, Female
House Tutor	Visually Impaired Student, Male
Student Advisor	Physically Impaired Student, Male
PDF Secretary	Visually Impaired Student, Male
Ex- PDF Secretary	Physically Impaired Student, male
Student Advisor	Physically Impaired Student, Female

Books, journal papers, and material from websites were used to compile secondary data obtained from the available sources. After the data were collected, they were processed according to how relevant they were to the study topic. Following this, the data were organized and coded in accordance with the concepts and themes that were being investigated. The responses in the data set and the material that was gathered are related to the research issue, and these themes offer some degree of responses. A conclusive interpretation of the most important findings was arrived at by the application of this inductive thematic analysis, which involved the transformation of textual material into emergent themes. The research was reviewed and granted ethical review and approval in order to guarantee its quality. All of the participants were given a thorough explanation of the purpose and scope of the research project, and after receiving their written/ verbal consent, interviews were conducted with them for the purpose of the study.

FINDINGS

In almost all public university of Bangladesh, differently abled students are admitted each year as per separate university enrolment policies. While in the past the numbers were meagre, in current times, the numbers are encouraging. This further necessitates a well-defined and well formulated inclusive education policy nationwide.

POLICIES

National and Regional Level

As the sole governing body of all public private and international universities of Bangladesh, the University Grants Commission (UGC) works to ensure that all tertiary education institution in the country uphold the highest standards of academic integrity in their pursuit of knowledge-based economic growth, social and sustainable development, and institutional excellence in administration and policymaking. However, as of now, there is no policy adopted by the UGC for all public and private universities, neither are there any guidelines or instructions. Therefore, there is no obligation for the universities to formulate policies of their own or implement inclusive education practices. Most public and private universities have their separate scattered initiatives and facilities to aid the differently abled students, but a coherent national policy is still missing.

University Level

The University of Dhaka sets the standard for most other public universities; therefore, it is imperative to investigate and evaluate its policy framework with respect to the inclusion for differently abled students. This research found out that the university of Dhaka has taken multifarious measures and aids to assist the differently abled students which are separately initiated by different sections of the administrative branch. However, there is no unified and consolidated policy that is centrally circulated to different sections of the registrar office, or faculties, institutes and departments.

Periodic policy reviews and audits

According to the Dhaka University General Admission Committee Guidelines (05/12/2023), in regard to admission in the 2023-2024 session undergraduate program in different disability quota, such as (visual impairment, deaf, mute, physical and neuro – developmental disorders) quota, 1% seat of the total number of seats is allocated. For Students applying under the disability (visual impairment, deaf, mute, physical and neuro – developmental disorders) quota, the lowest pass marks is 40%, which means 40 marks out of a 100 marks examination. The students availing this quota will have to fulfil the requirements as per the department policies which he/she is willing to study in order to enrol in the subject. This policy is strictly followed by all faculties of the university, during their admission examination.

From its own fund, the university fund provides an amount of BDT13,500 each year at the undergraduate level and BDT 18,000 each year at the graduate

level to all applicants. In addition, there are few government stipends which are provided to 10-25 differently abled students based on applications dropped every year. From the Social Welfare Ministry, on the basis of selection criteria, BDT12,000 is provided per annum based on application.

PRACTICES
Administration

The university encourages differently abled students to pursue their desired subjects and therefore, their opinions are taken into consideration during the subject choice process during the admission phase.

In the words of a differently abled female student:

Our passing mark is 40 in our admission test. But the physically challenged student quota is one percent. I was the only student who got admission in B unit from quota. If more than one percent passes from among the handicapped, then the person with the higher number is admitted.

In most universities globally, there is practice of trainings which exclusively imbue empathy, good practice, inclusive norm amongst faculties and administrative staffs of the university. This makes the faculties and administrative staff aware about the different struggles and vulnerabilities of differently abled students and prepares the faculties and staff to handle such students with more care, concern and cooperation. So far, there is no such training provided by the University authorities to spread awareness and empathy amongst the faculties and staff.

In the words of a female student of 4ᵗʰ semester who uses a wheelchair

During the admission times, I noticed that, there were differently abled students like me who couldn't easily understand the paperwork and the admission staff were not being cooperative and was also rude.

There is a widespread awareness and empathy visible towards the differently abled students and both students and faculties are found to advocate for the rights of the differently abled students. In the absence of defined policies, it is difficult to take concrete measures, but faculties and students are found to be aware, empathetic and active in advocacy for inclusion in higher education.

In the words of a visually impaired male student:

During my admission paperwork, I had to face a lot of troubles. I am a 20-year-old boy now, who had submitted all the medical documents from 17 years of my life during the admission time, along with the disability certificate from

Ministry of Social Welfare, yet I was told to take medical documents from the medical camp in front of Shaheed Minar. I had to face many obstacles to come to Dhaka University. Administrative procedures badly discourage me, hurt me mentally, and make me reluctant to study. That's why I couldn't prepare well for the entrance exam.

CURRICULUM

The paperwork during the admission examination is a cumbersome and lengthy one and often they face difficulties in the paperwork processing. During the admission examination, if a differently abled student with visual impairment wants to avail the service of a stenographer, he/she has to take permission from the faculty office first. This requires a lot of paperwork and a whole lot of convincing the officials in order to get the permission.

In the words of a student who used the help of a stenographer during his admission examination

In my class 5 (Junior School Certificate), class 10 (Secondary school certificate examination) a class 12 (higher secondary school certificate examination) national examinations, I had taken the assistance of a stenographer. I was required to show a certificate issued by the Ministry of Social Welfare. During my admission examination at the University, I wanted to apply similarly. Despite submitting my disability certificate, staffs from a unit were uncooperative and told me that I did not look blind! They also told me that, if any other faculty office gives me the permission for a stenographer, then only, they will too. I then took permission from another unit. And used that permission to receive clearance from the other. I felt that, in case of disability, there is a politics of "visibility of disability".

The paperwork and administrative formalities while taking admission at the university is also a lengthy procedure which requires several days. There are several steps in the entire admission process, which involves following a number of strictly followed instructions. It is a frenetic and physically taxing task for any student who has to rush from one office to another.

In the words of a female student of who uses a wheelchair:

When I was taking admission, my father was with me so, I did not have to do any of the paperwork alone. However, I noticed that there were differently abled students who couldn't easily understand the paperwork.

Though there is provision for extra timing for visually impaired students, in practice, this is not generally implemented unless absolutely obvious impairment

is noticed. There are students who have partial vision who do not generally get this support, unless they ask for it. Most importantly, the lack of any policy for students with physical limitations in their upper body especially hands require some form of assistive support which is missing both in policy and practices.

In the words of a student with mobility issues in his hands,

Since I have some problem with my hand limbs, it is a struggle for me to write continuously at a stretch. After every 20 minutes of writing, I have to take a pause to relax my arms and my fingers. But since there is no assistive policy for my kind of disability, therefore, I do not receive any extra time during examinations, though, getting a few minutes extra would have helped me tremendously.

Teaching and Learning

In the current practice of pedagogy at the university of Dhaka, different types of instructional methods are being employed to give students a multidimensional learning experience. Previously classes were taken in a top-down, extempore approach. At present, the university encourages interactive classroom, where student centred approach is taken through assignment based, project based, thesis-based learning is in practice. Audio visual teaching, use of presentations, use of cases, activity enriched methods are used as instructional methods at present by different department as deemed necessary. In the words of a female student who uses wheelchair:

TSC (Teachers Students centre) is an active and vibrant place for all students where all the clubs hold their sessions. I also wanted to be a part of these clubs. I decided to join the Quiz Society and all the senior students encouraged me a lot. But the club room was on 3rd floor and every time I went there, two or more students would come down and carry me all the way to the 3rd floor and also bring me down once the sessions were over. I went their couple of days but later decided to discontinue as I felt awkward and uncomfortable to put them through so much trouble.

ACCESSIBILITY
Physical

The university is situated at the heart of the capital and is therefore easily communicable from different corners of the city. The university is within convenient walking distance of public highway and pathways and is within the comfortable distance of public transport. Recently, the Metro Rail station has made communication to and from the university even easier for differently abled

students. The roads adjacent to the academic buildings and the overall campus area is spacious with enough space for car/ transport parking and manoeuvring. Therefore, students with mobility problems face troubles in accessing the services at the registrar building. In this case too, these students have to depend on someone else to do their work.

The registrar building rooms are over stuffed with furniture and the entrance is blocked, which makes it inaccessible for me with my wheelchair.

Old buildings either don't have elevators or don't have generator. Hence, in the case of a load shedding students with mobility problem who have classes in the higher floors of the building remain trapped as long as the electricity does not come back or comes down with the help of friends.

In my academic building, there is no generator. Once it happened that, there was load shedding and therefore, I got stuck on 4th floor. On that day, some of my friends waited for me until the electricity came back. Another day, there was no electricity, so the lifts were not working, but we had exams, so my friend carried me all the way to the fourth-floor examination hall.

Restroom problems in the campus beggar's description for the differently abled students. Although there are restrooms in close proximity to the classroom in every department, the entrance doors to the restrooms are not wide enough for a person using wheelchair to get through. There are no sperate washroom for the physically vulnerable students, neither are there any handrails for them to support on. There was a time, when washroom only had only low pans, but currently, most washrooms have high commode. However, the sink is not low enough (74cm) for a person using a wheelchair or of short stature to reach. In the words of another disable student:

Washroom is a dire need. With my wheelchair I cannot access the washrooms in the girl's common room. There is a washroom for differently abled which remains locked. Since I cannot use the washroom, I would always consume little to no liquid during my class hours. As a consequence, I had urine infection and got severely sick.

Digital
Though the University of Dhaka is gradually shifting to a more technology based smart classroom and introducing several online facilities for the students, the university still has a lot to achieve in terms of assistive technology and software for the differently abled students.

In the words of a students with mobility difficulties:

I have not applied anywhere, and I don't get any scholarships because I have to face a lot of problems to get a scholarship from Dhaka University. From the administration, they only give to whomever they like. And most of the scholarships given by Dhaka University to the disabled are given only to the visually impaired. Because they think visually impaired students are the main group of physically challenged students. I applied for several scholarships in my first year but was not selected for any of them.

Social

Though there is no separate tutoring support for differently abled students, but every department has designated student advisors who provide one on one tutoring support to students who face difficulties. The student advisors have separate office hours during which students can approach them with any problem and get advised accordingly. In the current curriculum, all departments at the University of Dhaka engage students in group assignments and tasks, which improve their ability to work in team, as well as engage and interact with fellow classmates.

In the words of a differently abled female student:

I enjoy taking part in team assignments and group work. In almost all my courses, we have assignments, some of which are group works which I absolutely love working on. Engaging in group works and assignments have helped me to gain confidence and improved my communication and interaction skills.

There is a Student Guidance Unit established at the TSC where students are provided with counselling and guidance support to all students inclusive of differently abled students. Apart from that, every department at the University of Dhaka has faculties appointed as student advisors who provide guidance to the students. Students communicate with their respective department student advisors regarding any issue they face at the campus or any difficulty they experience.

In the words of a female student advisor,

Often differently abled students approach us with their campus experiences. We try to help them by listening to their plights and suggesting them how to overcomes some of the challenges I for one have always tried to give especial effort to make my differently abled students feel welcomed and at ease while communicating with me.

Attitudinal

Students from different backgrounds, religions, ethnicity pursue their education under the same roof to pursue their education at the University of Dhaka. Since majority of the students come from outside the the capital, they avail the hall accommodation provided by the university authorities. Hence, they develop a bonding of brotherhood and belongingness amongst themselves, which naturally converts the surrounding into an inclusive one. Differently abled students have expressed their gratitude to their classmates and friends who constantly support them in their everyday lives making their academic and campus journey smoother. In the words of a male students with visual impairment:

I have to face many problems while moving around the campus. I think I am able to continue studying here only because I have friends. I have one when I get off the bus; I have one when I walk around campus; and I have one when I enter class. I never had to move alone.

DISCUSSION

Although inclusion and equity are at the centre of Agenda 2020 and Sustainable Development Goal 4 on Education, there remains a visible dominance of exclusion, as the Global Education Monitoring Report 2020 has demonstrated. This exclusion is most vividly visible for those who are almost "invisible" in our societies. Studies show that the marginalization and perpetual poverty experienced by individuals with disabilities may not be solely attributed to their impairments, but rather to the devaluation they face at every phase of their life, from childhood to adulthood (Karanja et al. 2021; Ntombela 2022).

Differently abled people are victims of exclusion in almost every aspect of their lives and this exclusion is added in layers of their socio-economic status gender ethnicity alongside their ability. The solution to battling this exclusion is only through inclusion, starting at the core of their fundamental rights, one of which is education. Higher education opens up opportunities to a better life for an individual. Therefore, it is imperative to ensure inclusion in its truest sense for the differently abled students. Such inclusion or inclusive policies should therefore not only be limited to a mere quota assuring their enrolment, rather, additional facilities, affirmative actions, assistive policies and an inclusive higher education atmosphere where they will thrive just like every other student around them. In order to make a higher education institution a safe haven for learning, knowledge sharing, developing new skills and exploring potentials, it is important to have a single cohesive policy, both at the national and regional

level. A coherent policy approach will only be possible if the state formulates a policy to ensure inclusive education for the differently abled and pass it down to all higher education institutions in the country to practice and preach. Dhaka University can play a pivotal role in this regard, as the university is the largest and oldest public university in the country. Whatever policies and practices that the University of Dhaka adopts acts as a guideline for the rest of the public and private universities of the country. Hence, in case of ensuring inclusive education, the University of Dhaka can play be a torchbearer. Byrne (2022) states that an inclusive higher education program ought to have the goal to help individuals enhance their mental health, creativity, personality, and talents, allowing them to have a more significant impact on society. The university already has some remarkable facilities and initiative adopted for the differently abled students but there is still scope for including more. The university lacks a compilation of all its existing policies which must get priority, as a unified compilation of existing policies makes it easy to monitor and evaluate the implementation. Like most other public offices, the administration of the University of Dhaka has its own bureaucracy. Being a magnanimous higher education institution, the complexity of its administrative functions is enormous. However, the university can play an assistive role in reducing the trouble and distress of the differently abled students by reducing the bureaucracy of paperwork, guidelines, prerequisites, documentations and red tapesm which plagues the administrative practices at the registrar building. Lopez-Gavira et al. (2021) claims that higher education institutions are places where SWDs encounter the most stigma and unfavourable environment. Some of these challenges include students' and instructors' lack of empathy, which is particularly problematic when trying to provide sufficient resources for support programs in universities. Though Agbenyega (2006) found that many regular teachers experience anger, irritation, and unfavourable attitudes. In the case of the University of Dhaka, students and teachers seem to be mutually aware and faculties are empathetic and assistive. However, there is ample scope of improving the behaviour pattern of administrative staff of the universities who often lack awareness and empathy. The excessive adherence of by the book approach makes administrative staff inflexible and incompatible to the needs and ease of the SWDs. There is a dire need for the proper trainings of all staffs at the administrative building and also occasional trainings for educators to imbue empathy and leniency in day to day dealing with the SWDs. Despite having resource constraints, the University of Dhaka has lately made significant progress in terms of physical accessibility for the differently abled students. These

renovations have helped the students undoubtedly, yet, there is scope to undertake more renovation measures, especially for the old buildings which are dated more than 50 years ago. The policies that are currently practiced at the university are commendable, yet it is high time to reform these policies and explore the necessity of integrating new policies to ensure inclusive education. The university has to understand the depth of the disability being different for different groups and therefore, how a holistic policy approach which is customised for few but generalized enough for all should be the target of the university. The university should also overcome the tendency to judge by "seeing is believing". There are disabilities which are subtle, and there is a certain sensitiveness in sharing disabilities, any of which does not necessarily negate the reality of the issue. Thus, the system has to be able to change and evolve with the needs of the educational community. Recognising and appreciating the unique identities, cultural origins, and personal protected features of each student is crucial. Most importantly, there is still no provision to create a competency- based learning environment for the SWDs in order to prepare them for the job market and consequently create more employable human resources in the country.

CONCLUSION

A nation that aims for sustainable social and economic development has to invest religiously in creating capable and qualified human resources, an endeavor which is only possible through equitable opportunities for access in higher. Lack of equitable opportunities in education restrict the options and possibilities of life itself. Thus, it might be stated that, while education can promote inclusion and social change, the lack of it thereof, can equally widen the social and economic divides (Patrinos, 2019). Thus, inclusive education policies are imperative to ensure equal access to all students irrespective of their socio-economic status, gender, ethnicity and ability. For student with disabilities the struggle is extensive, as their numbers are not truly representative in higher education institutions. Because of their "invisibility" in and around the campus, often authorities sideline their necessities. Being out of sight, there are often out of mind of the policy makers. In order to create a just society, SWDs should be provided with an inclusive environment in higher education institutions not just in terms of physical accessibility, but also from a holistic policy and practice approach.

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