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Inclusive Education in Higher Education Institutions: A Conceptual Framework for Implementation in Support of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

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ABSTRACT

The global commitment to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 on Quality Education, underscores the urgency for higher education institutions (HEIs) to advance inclusive education. In the Philippines, while legislative reforms such as RA 11650 have strengthened inclusivity in basic education, HEIs continue to face systemic gaps in readiness and implementation. This paper proposes a conceptual framework grounded in philosophical, legal, and psychological domains, integrated with curriculum development processes. The framework identifies seven critical areas: policy and governance, curriculum and pedagogy, physical inclusion, technological accessibility, support services and resources, training and professional development, and assessment with continuous improvement. Central to the model is the active participation of learners with disabilities in decision-making, ensuring policies and practices address their needs. By aligning institutional strategies with inclusive principles and SDG 4 targets, HEIs can create equitable, accessible, and supportive learning environments, ensuring sustained progress toward educational inclusion for all.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The UNESCO 48th Session of the International Conference on Education developed a guideline for inclusion, defining inclusive education as a method of acknowledging and responding to the diverse needs of all students by promoting their participation in learning, cultures, and communities, while minimizing exclusion from education. This process involves adapting content, methods, organization, and strategies, guided by a shared vision that encompasses all children within the suitable age group and is grounded in the belief that the mainstream education system has a responsibility to educate every student. That is why many reports regarding inclusive education have been well-documented (Prasetyo *et al.*, 2025; Glushchenko, 2025; Azizah *et al.*, 2022; Faddillah *et al.*, 2022; Musayaroh *et al.*, 2023; Adesokan & Bajuwoye, 2023; Baxtiyor & Sardor, 2024; Oktamovna & Ruslanovna, 2024; Khudayshukurovna *et al.*, 2024; Yunusovna *et al.*, 2024).

In the Philippine context, the Inclusive Education Act (RA 11650) legally defines inclusive education as “the process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners by moving towards the end-goal of full participation, presence, and achievement in learning cultures and communities, which involves accommodation, modification, adaptation, and individualization in content, approaches, structures, and strategies.” It guarantees equitable opportunities for learners with disabilities to access educational services, as well as the necessary support, alongside their age-appropriate peers and, as far as practicable, in schools or Inclusive Learning Resource Centers nearest their homes. This aims to prepare them to become fully functional members of society.

Inclusive education, therefore, requires adjustments to the learning environment to allow learners to participate fully in their education. It involves identifying accountable individuals to take actions such as passing legislation to promote inclusive practices, leading institutions in implementing inclusive curricula, instruction, and policies, and advocating for the rights of persons with disabilities. Educational adjustments refer to the accommodations and modifications that remove barriers, providing learners with equal opportunities as their peers. The concept of a least restrictive environment means placing learners with disabilities in an environment where they can fully participate in lessons, supported by appropriate services.

The current state of inclusive education in higher education is characterized by growing awareness of the importance of providing equitable opportunities for students with disabilities. However, significant barriers still hinder full inclusion. Research indicates that university staff often hold favorable attitudes toward the inclusion of students with disabilities, yet more needs to be done to ensure that these students receive the necessary opportunities for academic advancement, social participation, and personal growth.

Internationally, various challenges persist. In Indonesia, although there is a formal commitment to inclusive education in higher education, students with disabilities still face limited opportunities for admission, and many universities lack the administrative structures and infrastructure to ensure accessibility (Riswari *et al.*, 2022). In Portugal, implementation is also limited, with a need for more proactive measures such as awareness-raising and targeted staff training to better engage students with disabilities. In both contexts, socially responsive pedagogies and adequate institutional support are essential.

In the Philippine higher education system, there is a lack of comprehensive studies examining the status of inclusive education implementation in higher education institutions (HEIs). Barriers identified in global literature also resonate in the local context, including insufficient institutional readiness (Myronova *et al.*, 2021), the need to respond to diverse

student needs, architectural barriers, inaccessible information and technology, negative faculty attitudes, and higher dropout risks among students with disabilities due to inadequate support (Moriña, 2016).

Although there is growing recognition of the need for inclusive education in HEIs, achieving full inclusion requires addressing institutional culture, administrative systems, and infrastructural accessibility. This entails developing strategic policies, ensuring adequate resources, and fostering inclusive teaching practices that accommodate the needs of all learners.

The purpose of this paper is to propose a conceptual framework that serves as a practical and adaptable model for HEIs (public or private) in implementing inclusive education. The framework is anchored in philosophical, legal, and psychological domains, operationalized through seven critical areas: policy and governance, curriculum and pedagogy, physical inclusion, technological accessibility, support services and resources, training and professional development, and assessment with continuous improvement. The novelty of this framework lies in its central focus on involving learners with disabilities in every phase of planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation, while systematically aligning institutional practices with national legislation, international standards, and curriculum development processes to create a holistic, context-responsive approach to higher education inclusivity in the Philippines.

This calling for inclusive education also aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4, which seeks to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.” Within higher education, this entails creating institutional structures, policies, and practices that actively remove barriers to participation for learners with disabilities while ensuring their full engagement in academic, cultural, and social life. By integrating inclusive education into strategic planning, HEIs not only address local legislative mandates but also contribute to global targets on equity, accessibility, and quality education. Such alignment reinforces the role of HEIs as key drivers in achieving educational sustainability and social justice, ensuring that no learner is left behind in the pursuit of academic and professional opportunities.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The UNESCO SDGs emphasize the necessity of inclusive and quality education for all nations to prepare learners for future challenges. Goal 4 specifically mandates that countries must address the needs of all learners by enforcing inclusive policies and practices across educational institutions.

In the Philippines, inclusive education is anchored in a strong legal framework that ensures equal educational opportunities for all learners, including those with special needs. The 1987 Philippine Constitution mandates the protection and promotion of the right of all citizens to quality education at all levels. Republic Act (RA) 10533, the Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013, requires programs that address learners’ physical, psychosocial, and cultural needs. More recently, RA 11650 (An Act Instituting a Policy of Inclusion and Services for Learners with Disabilities) reinforces government action toward inclusivity by guaranteeing free and appropriate public education, support, and related services tailored to individual needs. Both public and private educational institutions are therefore compelled to provide appropriate education for all learners with disabilities.

Before implementing inclusive policies and practices, institutions must be guided by a well-defined philosophy that establishes the values, principles, and attitudes necessary for transformative change. A clear philosophical stance helps overcome resistance rooted in

entrenched beliefs and systemic barriers. Inclusion as a philosophy seeks to accommodate all individuals, regardless of differences, within a single system to ensure successful, equitable, and quality participation in real-life experiences from birth to adulthood. The goal of an inclusive education system is to provide all students with the most appropriate learning environments and opportunities for them to best achieve their potential.

From a social justice perspective, inclusive education removes barriers to learning and ensures the participation of all learners, particularly those vulnerable to exclusion and marginalization (Pandit, 2016). This frames inclusion as a means to uphold the fundamental right to education, address diversity, and reduce or eradicate exclusion. Instruction in inclusive classrooms should actively challenge the marginalization of learners with special needs, ensuring that all learners (regardless of abilities, disabilities, or differences) have access to quality education in a supportive environment that maximizes their potential.

Psychology plays an important role in shaping effective, inclusive programs and practices. In this context, psychological considerations refer to developmentally appropriate practices that align with learners' developmental milestones and special needs. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) promotes Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) as a guiding framework for designing inclusive learning environments and experiences suited to learners' developmental stages. DAP supports the principle that children learn best when instruction is paced according to their needs, creating meaningful, relevant, and engaging experiences that foster social, emotional, cognitive, and physical growth (Lee, 2024). Teachers should apply DAP when planning curriculum and instruction to ensure learner-centered approaches, while transformative educational leaders should promote DAP institution-wide to address diverse characteristics, developmental stages, and cultural contexts (Temple & Ylitalo, 2009).

Placing learners with disabilities at the center of all educational decisions ensures that philosophical, legal, and psychological domains remain aligned with practical measures. These three core domains serve as the foundation for inclusive education in higher education, informing program design, curriculum adaptation, and the creation of accessible learning environments.

The conceptual framework in this paper addresses three guiding questions:

- (i) What major domains must serve as the basis for developing inclusive practices and programs in HEIs?
- (ii) What specific areas should HEIs prioritize to address inclusivity?
- (iii) How should key stakeholders plan, implement, monitor, and evaluate inclusive practices and programs?.

3. METHODS

This paper employed a conceptual analysis approach to develop a proposed framework for implementing inclusive education in higher education institutions (HEIs) in the Philippines. The framework was grounded in the philosophical, legal, and psychological domains that shape inclusive practices and is structured to align with the stages of curriculum development.

The process began with an extensive review of relevant literature, including international guidelines such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), as well as national legal instruments including the 1987 Philippine Constitution, RA 10533 (Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013), and RA 11650 (Inclusive Education Act). Studies from various contexts, including Portugal, Indonesia, and the Philippines, were analyzed to identify barriers, best practices, and institutional readiness factors for inclusive education.

The conceptual framework was designed to place learners with disabilities (LWDs) at the center of decision-making, ensuring that their perspectives inform all stages of planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. The framework is organized into seven key areas (policy and governance, curriculum and pedagogy, physical inclusion, technological accessibility, support services and resources, training and professional development, and assessment with continuous improvement), reflecting international standards, national mandates, and institutional realities.

By synthesizing legal provisions, philosophical principles, psychological considerations, and empirical findings, the proposed model aims to guide HEIs in developing comprehensive, context-specific strategies for achieving educational inclusion in alignment with SDGs.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The proposed conceptual framework for implementing inclusive education in HEIs was developed to address the critical need for comprehensive, systematic, and sustainable strategies that align with both national legislative mandates and international commitments, such as the United Nations SDGs. This section presents and discusses the framework in detail, emphasizing how each domain and area is intended to operate in practice and how these elements collectively contribute to achieving an inclusive higher education environment.

The framework is grounded in three foundational domains (philosophical, legal, and psychological), which provide the guiding principles for all institutional actions. These domains serve as the lens through which seven critical areas are addressed:

- (i) policy and governance,
- (ii) curriculum and pedagogy,
- (iii) physical inclusion,
- (iv) technological accessibility,
- (v) support services and resources,
- (vi) training and professional development, and
- (vii) Assessment with continuous improvement.

The arrangement reflects a holistic approach, ensuring that inclusive practices are embedded not as isolated initiatives but as integrated components of institutional systems and culture.

A key feature of the framework is the central positioning of learners with disabilities (LWDs) in every phase of planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. This principle is consistent with participatory approaches in inclusive education, which argue that the voices of those most affected by policies and practices must be integral to their design and execution. In higher education, such involvement not only improves the relevance and responsiveness of programs but also empowers students with disabilities as active agents in their educational journeys.

The proposed model is illustrated in **Figure 1**, which outlines the interrelationship between the central role of the LWD, the three guiding domains (philosophical, legal, and psychological), and the seven implementation areas. The figure visually represents the flow from foundational principles to practical strategies, demonstrating how these elements converge to foster an inclusive learning environment in HEIs. This visual guide informs the structure of the discussion that follows, where each area is examined in depth, linking theoretical underpinnings to actionable strategies and identifying potential challenges alongside possible solutions.

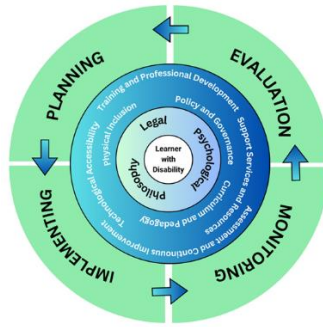


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework for HEIs in Implementing Inclusive Practices and Policies.

4.1. Policy and Governance

Policy and governance form the structural backbone of inclusive education in HEIs. Without coherent, well-enforced policies, inclusion remains fragmented and dependent on individual champions rather than institutional commitment. The framework emphasizes that inclusive education policies must be clearly articulated in institutional vision, mission, goals, and objectives, reflecting a philosophical commitment to equity, diversity, and the dignity of all learners.

In developing this framework, governance structures in various HEIs were reviewed to identify common strengths and weaknesses. Institutions that successfully implemented inclusive programs often had formal policy documents explicitly addressing inclusion, governance committees responsible for overseeing implementation, and specific budget allocations for inclusion-related initiatives. These features align with a previous report (Wise *et al.*, 2020) that effective inclusive governance requires deliberate planning, stakeholder engagement, and resource allocation.

In the Philippine context, alignment with RA 11650 and related legal instruments is crucial. This law mandates that all educational institutions provide equitable opportunities for learners with disabilities, but operationalizing this mandate requires translating legal requirements into concrete institutional policies. For example, HEIs can establish dedicated inclusion offices tasked with coordinating accessibility audits, advising faculty on accommodations, and liaising with student organizations representing LWDs.

Challenges in policy and governance often include resistance due to perceived high costs, lack of awareness among decision-makers, or competing institutional priorities. Addressing these barriers requires persistent advocacy, emphasizing not only the legal obligations but also the broader benefits of inclusion (such as enhanced institutional reputation, improved student satisfaction, and alignment with SDG 4.5, which calls for the elimination of disparities in education). Moreover, adopting a “Universal Design in governance” approach ensures that policies and procedures are inherently inclusive from the outset, rather than retrofitted after problems arise.

Governance must also be dynamic, incorporating continuous review and adaptation. Policies should include mechanisms for regular assessment, with input from students, faculty, administrators, and external advocacy groups. By institutionalizing these feedback loops, HEIs can ensure that inclusion evolves with changing student demographics, technological advancements, and pedagogical innovations.

4.2. Curriculum and Pedagogy

Curriculum and pedagogy are the primary channels through which inclusive education principles are translated into the everyday learning experiences of students. The framework

underscores that an inclusive curriculum must be anticipatory, flexible, accountable, collaborative, transparent, and equitable. Anticipatory design involves planning from the outset to accommodate diverse learning needs, rather than reacting after barriers emerge. Flexibility allows curricula to adapt to evolving learner profiles, incorporating various instructional methods, resources, and assessment strategies.

In examining effective practices, many successful HEIs integrate Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles, which advocate for providing multiple means of engagement, representation, and action/expression. For instance, offering lecture videos alongside transcripts benefits not only students with hearing or visual impairments but also those who require repeated exposure for mastery.

Inclusive pedagogy requires instructors to employ diverse, active, and participatory teaching strategies, such as group projects, peer tutoring, and case-based discussions, which foster collaboration and mutual respect between students with and without disabilities. However, faculty readiness remains a key challenge; many instructors lack sufficient training in differentiated instruction or in modifying assessments to meet varied needs. Addressing this gap involves embedding inclusive teaching competencies into faculty development programs and offering sustained support through mentoring, workshops, and resource centers.

Institutional culture significantly shapes pedagogical practice. Where inclusivity is embedded in institutional values, faculty are more willing to innovate and adapt, actively seeking student feedback on accessibility. Conversely, if inclusion is perceived as an administrative burden, teaching approaches tend to remain rigid. This underscores the importance of leadership commitment, transparent expectations, and recognition for inclusive teaching excellence.

Regular curriculum reviews should incorporate accessibility audits, ensuring that learning outcomes, content, and delivery methods are aligned with inclusive principles. Involving students with disabilities in curriculum committees can help identify and address barriers early in the design process. Such practices not only satisfy compliance requirements but also fulfill SDG 4.7's call for education that promotes inclusion, equity, and respect for diversity.

Accountability in curriculum and pedagogy is vital. Monitoring mechanisms should track student performance, retention, and satisfaction, with disaggregated data for students with disabilities to assess equity in outcomes. Linking these findings to institutional improvement plans embeds inclusion within the academic mission of HEIs, ensuring that it remains a sustained priority rather than a temporary initiative.

4.3. Physical Inclusion

Physical inclusion refers to the degree to which higher education institutions (HEIs) provide accessible, safe, and navigable physical environments for all learners, particularly learners with disabilities (LWDs). The proposed framework emphasizes that infrastructure accessibility is not merely a matter of compliance but a prerequisite for enabling equitable participation in academic and social life. A physically inclusive campus fosters independence, enhances safety, and removes mobility-related barriers that might otherwise prevent students from fully engaging in their educational experience.

In reviewing practices across institutions, those that demonstrate high levels of physical inclusion typically conduct regular accessibility audits of facilities, including classrooms, laboratories, libraries, dormitories, and recreational spaces. These audits identify structural barriers such as narrow doorways, steep staircases without ramps, and inaccessible

restrooms. The findings often guide renovation priorities, ensuring resources are allocated to areas with the greatest impact on student mobility and comfort.

Applying universal design principles is central to physical inclusion. This includes integrating ramps, elevators, tactile pathways for the visually impaired, accessible parking, automatic doors, and marked signage in multiple formats (visual, tactile, and auditory). Lecture halls and classrooms should be designed or modified to accommodate assistive devices, ensure adequate space for wheelchair maneuverability, and provide optimal acoustics for students using hearing aids.

Another element is the creation of specialized spaces such as sensory rooms for students with autism spectrum disorder, which can serve as calming environments during periods of overstimulation. Similarly, resource rooms equipped with adaptive technology allow LWDs to complete coursework in an environment suited to their needs.

Cultural attitudes also shape the success of physical inclusion. Even when facilities meet technical accessibility standards, negative perceptions from peers or faculty can create psychological barriers that discourage LWDs from using certain spaces. Therefore, physical modifications should be accompanied by awareness campaigns to promote respect, empathy, and inclusion within the campus community.

In the Philippine context, RA 7277 (The Magna Carta for Persons with Disabilities) and RA 11650 mandate physical accessibility in educational settings. However, enforcement is uneven, and some HEIs lack the resources or technical expertise to comply fully. The framework addresses this by recommending partnerships with government agencies, disability rights organizations, and private donors to secure funding and technical assistance for infrastructure improvements.

Ensuring physical inclusion directly contributes to SDG 4A, which calls for education facilities that are “child, disability, and gender sensitive” and provide safe, inclusive, and effective learning environments. By embedding physical accessibility into institutional planning and budgeting processes, HEIs can create campuses that not only comply with regulations but also signal a genuine commitment to inclusion.

4.4. Technological Accessibility

In the era of digital transformation, technological accessibility has become an equally important pillar of inclusive education. The framework recognizes that technology can be both an enabler and a barrier; its potential benefits depend on whether it is designed and implemented with accessibility in mind. For LWDs, access to adaptive technologies, accessible digital content, and inclusive learning management systems (LMS) can significantly enhance academic engagement, while inaccessible technologies can exacerbate exclusion.

Technological accessibility begins with ensuring that all institutional platforms, including websites, LMS, online portals, and digital libraries, comply with international accessibility standards such as the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1. Compliance ensures that students using screen readers, alternative input devices, or text-to-speech software can fully navigate and interact with online resources. Additionally, all instructional materials (PowerPoint presentations, PDFs, videos) should be provided in formats that are compatible with assistive technologies and include features such as captions, transcripts, and image descriptions.

The integration of technology in inclusive education also involves providing students with access to specialized assistive devices. Examples include refreshable braille displays, speech recognition software, screen magnification tools, and alternative communication devices for

non-verbal learners. HEIs should maintain an inventory of such tools, along with technical support to assist students in their use.

Faculty and staff competence in leveraging technology for inclusion is equally critical. Even the most advanced accessibility tools will remain underutilized if educators are unaware of their existence or unsure of how to integrate them into their teaching. Therefore, the framework recommends regular training sessions for academic and administrative staff on technological accessibility, instructional design for diverse learners, and troubleshooting common issues.

An important aspect is digital literacy among students with disabilities. Institutions should offer orientation programs and workshops to familiarize students with available technologies, ensuring they can make full use of institutional resources. Peer mentoring programs, where technologically proficient students support others in learning new tools, can further enhance adoption and confidence.

Funding is often a major obstacle to achieving full technological accessibility. The framework suggests exploring multiple funding streams, including government grants, corporate sponsorships, and partnerships with technology providers. Collaborative procurement strategies, where several HEIs pool resources to purchase assistive technologies, can also reduce costs.

Moreover, technological accessibility should be approached as an evolving goal rather than a one-time project. As new tools emerge and student needs change, regular evaluations should be conducted to assess the relevance, usability, and effectiveness of available technologies. This aligns with SDG 4B, which encourages the expansion of scholarships and technological support for students in need, ensuring equitable access to quality education.

By prioritizing technological accessibility, HEIs not only fulfill legal and ethical obligations but also expand learning opportunities for all students. Inclusive technology design benefits a wide range of learners, including those with temporary impairments, language barriers, or learning preferences that differ from traditional norms, thereby reinforcing the universal nature of inclusive education.

4.5. Support Services and Resources

Support services and resources form a critical component of the proposed framework, ensuring that learners with disabilities (LWDs) receive the necessary academic, social, and emotional support to succeed in higher education institutions (HEIs). While policy, curriculum, and infrastructure establish the structural foundation for inclusion, support services address the individualized needs of students and bridge the gap between formal accessibility provisions and actual participation.

Effective HEIs typically implement a multi-tiered support system. At the universal level, services are designed for all students, such as counseling centers, academic advising, and health services. At the targeted level, programs address the needs of specific groups, including LWDs. This may include individualized education plans (IEPs), specialized tutoring, and mentorship programs. At the intensive level, support is tailored for students requiring significant accommodations, such as one-on-one assistance, specialized equipment, or modified course loads.

Key academic support services include tutoring programs staffed by trained peer tutors or professionals with expertise in special and inclusive education. These programs help LWDs master course content while also providing strategies for time management, note-taking, and exam preparation. Specialized workshops on topics like stress management, adaptive study techniques, and assistive technology usage can further enhance academic performance.

Non-academic services are equally important. Access to licensed counselors, psychologists, and occupational or physical therapists supports students' mental health, physical well-being, and social integration. For students with sensory impairments, orientation and mobility training can increase independence and safety on campus.

HEIs should also maintain resource rooms or learning support centers equipped with adaptive devices, specialized instructional materials, and quiet study areas. Resource centers should serve as both service hubs and advocacy spaces, fostering community among LWDs and connecting them with relevant on- and off-campus resources. Collaboration with external organizations (such as disability advocacy groups, rehabilitation centers, and government agencies) can further expand the scope and quality of services.

One challenge frequently reported is the underutilization of available services, often due to a lack of awareness or fear of stigma. Addressing this requires proactive outreach, integrating information on available services into student orientation programs, and promoting them through multiple communication channels. Importantly, services must be delivered in a manner that safeguards confidentiality and respects the dignity of students.

The provision of comprehensive support services directly supports SDG 4.5 to eliminate disparities in education and ensure equal access for persons with disabilities. By creating a supportive ecosystem, HEIs can not only enhance academic outcomes but also promote social inclusion, self-advocacy, and lifelong learning skills among LWDs.

4.6. Training and Professional Development

The success of inclusive education initiatives in HEIs depends heavily on the capacity of faculty, staff, and administrators to implement inclusive practices effectively. Training and professional development ensure that all personnel possess the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to foster an inclusive learning environment.

Professional development should be continuous rather than limited to one-off workshops. Ongoing training programs can include regular seminars, peer learning sessions, and collaborative research opportunities focusing on inclusive pedagogy, disability awareness, and universal design principles. Embedding these competencies into faculty evaluation and promotion criteria can further incentivize participation and application of inclusive practices.

Initial training programs should cover foundational knowledge about disability types, legal obligations, and best practices for accommodations. For example, faculty can learn how to design accessible syllabi, adapt assessment methods, and use assistive technologies in the classroom. Administrative staff should be trained on inclusive admissions processes, accessible communication, and the coordination of support services. Security and facilities personnel also benefit from training on interacting respectfully and effectively with LWDs, ensuring safety without compromising dignity.

Peer learning and communities of practice are powerful tools for professional growth. Faculty members can share strategies, resources, and case studies, fostering a culture of collaboration and continuous improvement. HEIs can also partner with other institutions, NGOs, or international organizations to provide specialized training modules and access to global best practices.

In addition to content-focused training, programs should address attitudes and beliefs about inclusion. Research shows that faculty and staff who hold positive attitudes toward diversity are more likely to engage in inclusive practices. Activities such as empathy-building exercises, simulations, and direct interaction with LWDs can help shift perceptions and reduce unconscious biases.

Professional development is not limited to teaching staff. Leadership training for administrators ensures that decision-makers understand the strategic importance of inclusion, are skilled in change management, and can allocate resources effectively. Training programs should also be responsive to emerging trends, such as the integration of artificial intelligence in accessibility tools or evolving legal frameworks affecting disability rights in education.

Funding and time constraints often limit professional development efforts. The framework suggests integrating training into existing institutional schedules, such as faculty in-service days, and securing external funding from government grants or private foundations. Leveraging online platforms can also expand access to training while minimizing costs.

By investing in professional development, HEIs not only comply with legal mandates but also build internal capacity for sustainable inclusion. This aligns with SDG 4. C, which emphasizes increasing the supply of qualified teachers and education personnel through relevant training. Ultimately, trained and empowered staff are the linchpin for translating inclusive policies and plans into everyday practice, ensuring that inclusion is embedded in the institutional culture.

4.7. Assessment and Continuous Improvement

Assessment and continuous improvement are essential to ensuring that inclusive education initiatives in higher education institutions (HEIs) remain effective, relevant, and responsive to the evolving needs of learners with disabilities (LWDs). Without systematic evaluation, even well-intentioned policies and programs risk becoming outdated or misaligned with student realities.

The proposed framework positions assessment not as a one-time activity but as a cyclical process integrated into the institutional culture. This process involves setting clear inclusion-related goals, developing measurable indicators, collecting and analyzing data, and using the results to inform decisions and refinements. The cyclical nature of this process ensures that inclusive education is not static but dynamic, capable of adapting to legislative changes, technological innovations, and shifts in student demographics.

Effective assessment begins with defining specific metrics. These can include quantitative indicators—such as enrollment and retention rates of LWDs, participation in extracurricular activities, utilization rates of support services, and academic performance comparisons—as well as qualitative measures like student satisfaction surveys, focus group discussions, and individual interviews. Disaggregating data by disability type, gender, and socioeconomic background enables a more nuanced understanding of equity gaps and intersectional barriers.

The framework also recommends adopting mixed-methods evaluation to capture both breadth and depth. Quantitative data provides measurable trends and benchmarks, while qualitative insights reveal lived experiences, contextual challenges, and perceptions that numbers alone cannot convey. For example, a rise in LWD enrollment may indicate progress, but qualitative interviews might uncover ongoing issues with inaccessible facilities or negative peer attitudes that affect the student experience.

Institutional self-assessment tools can be complemented by external audits conducted by independent bodies or accreditation agencies. External evaluation offers an unbiased perspective, helps identify blind spots, and strengthens credibility with stakeholders. Such assessments can also benchmark institutional practices against national and international standards, ensuring alignment with legal requirements and SDG 4 targets.

A key component of continuous improvement is feedback integration. Institutions should establish clear channels for students, faculty, and staff to provide ongoing feedback about the inclusivity of programs, facilities, and teaching practices. Mechanisms such as suggestion portals, regular town hall meetings, and structured stakeholder consultations help ensure that feedback is systematically collected, analyzed, and acted upon. Importantly, communicating back to stakeholders about how their input has been used fosters trust and encourages continued engagement.

Technology can play a vital role in streamlining assessment processes. Learning management systems (LMS) with built-in analytics, survey platforms, and data visualization tools enable real-time monitoring of participation and performance trends. These tools can be customized to flag potential issues early, allowing for proactive intervention rather than reactive problem-solving.

Institutional commitment to continuous improvement also requires dedicated governance structures. A standing committee on inclusion—comprising administrators, faculty, LWD representatives, and external experts—can oversee assessment activities, ensure that findings inform decision-making, and track the implementation of recommended changes. Such committees serve as institutional memory, maintaining focus on inclusion despite changes in leadership or staff turnover.

Challenges to effective assessment often include limited expertise in inclusive evaluation methods, reluctance to collect disability-related data due to privacy concerns, and insufficient resources for follow-up action. Addressing these requires capacity-building for staff, establishing clear data protection protocols, and securing budget allocations specifically for inclusion-related assessment and improvement projects.

Ultimately, assessment and continuous improvement close the loop of the inclusive education cycle. They transform inclusion from an aspirational goal into a measurable, evidence-based practice that evolves with the needs of students and the demands of society. This directly supports SDG 4.5 by ensuring that disparities in education are systematically identified and addressed, moving institutions closer to the vision of equitable, quality education for all.

4.8. Synthesis of Results and Discussion

The proposed conceptual framework integrates philosophical, legal, and psychological foundations with seven operational areas: policy and governance, curriculum and pedagogy, physical inclusion, technological accessibility, support services and resources, training and professional development, and assessment with continuous improvement. Placing LWDs at the center of this framework ensures that inclusion is not merely about compliance but about active participation and empowerment.

The discussion of each area reveals that successful implementation requires a multi-dimensional approach. Policy and governance set the institutional mandate and allocate resources; curriculum and pedagogy operationalize inclusion in the learning process; physical and technological accessibility remove structural and digital barriers; support services and professional development provide the human capacity to respond to diverse needs; and assessment with continuous improvement ensures that the system remains responsive, accountable, and aligned with evolving standards.

Linkages to the SDGs, particularly SDG 4, highlight the global relevance of this framework. Policy and governance connect to SDG 4.5 by promoting equitable access; curriculum and pedagogy advance SDG 4.7 through education that fosters inclusivity and respect for diversity; physical and technological accessibility align with SDG 4A by creating safe and

inclusive environments; support services and training respond to SDG 4C by building institutional capacity; and assessment mechanisms maintain progress toward all SDG 4 targets through evidence-based monitoring.

The integration of international best practices with local legislative mandates makes the framework adaptable across diverse HEI contexts in the Philippines. However, implementation requires institutional commitment, adequate funding, stakeholder collaboration, and a willingness to challenge entrenched attitudes and systems. Resistance may arise from perceived cost burdens, lack of awareness, or competing priorities, but these can be mitigated through sustained advocacy, capacity-building, and demonstrating the broader benefits of inclusion for all students.

In sum, the framework provides a comprehensive, adaptable, and sustainable model for advancing inclusive education in HEIs. By embedding inclusivity into every aspect of institutional functioning, HEIs can fulfill both their legal obligations and their ethical responsibility to ensure that no learner is left behind, thereby contributing meaningfully to national development and the global pursuit of equitable, quality education for all.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper presented a conceptual framework for implementing inclusive education in higher education institutions (HEIs) in the Philippines, grounded in philosophical, legal, and psychological domains, and operationalized through seven key areas. Placing learners with disabilities at the center ensures that policies, curricula, infrastructure, and services are responsive to their needs. By aligning with national legislation and SDG 4, the framework offers a practical, adaptable model for fostering equitable access, participation, and achievement. Consistent monitoring and continuous improvement are essential to sustaining progress and ensuring that no learner is left behind.

6. AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. Authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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