

# Inclusion as Innovation: Disability Justice, Digital Transformation, and the Capability to Be an Academic in African Higher Education

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## Abstract

Digital transformation now shapes how students and staff access teaching, assessment, library systems, and academic work in universities. Yet accessibility is still often treated as an after-the-fact accommodation rather than as a design and quality principle. This article offers a critical narrative synthesis of recent literature on disability inclusion and digital accessibility in higher education, with a particular focus on African higher education and clear relevance to East Africa. The main review corpus comprised 23 sources published between 2021 and 2026, supplemented by three foundational texts used for conceptual framing. We define the capability to be an academic as the substantive freedom to access, produce, communicate, and have one's academic work recognised within teaching, learning, research, and institutional life. Framed in this way, the concept is not a relabelling of inclusion. It links disability justice's concern with power, collective access, and disabled leadership to the capability approach's concern with whether resources become real opportunities. Five recurring mechanisms emerged from the synthesis: structurally inaccessible digital ecosystems; staff capability gaps in producing accessible educational materials; governance and quality assurance arrangements that treat accessibility as peripheral; compliance-driven accommodation processes that reproduce dependency and academic ableism; and institution-level practices that recast inclusion as innovation through disability-led governance, universal design, and coordinated accessibility workflows. The discussion shows that it is not the presence of a platform, but the outcome of increased access to real opportunities by universities to permit disabled students and personnel to become full-functioning academics that should measure digital transformation. The article ends with some implications on the procurement, staff development, quality

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assurance, and disability led institutional governance in African universities.

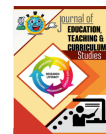
## Introduction

Digital transformation is an integral part of modern higher education. Learning management systems, digital libraries, remote evaluation systems, student information systems, and, most recently, generative AI systems are now used to structure teaching, learning, and research in universities (Zongozzi & Ngubane, 2025). In most institutions, the rapid transition to online and blended delivery during and following the COVID-19 period spurred these developments (Harwell et al., 2024; Ndlovu, 2026). The offer was broader engagement and increased flexibility. This promise has, in practice, been inconsistent. Where digital systems were not designed with accessibility in mind, historical exclusions manifest anew in inaccessible documents, incompatible interfaces, and unequal access to assistive technologies (Harwell et al., 2024; Zongozzi & Ngubane, 2025). When accessibility is not considered in the design of digital systems, existing exclusions manifest in new ways, such as inaccessible documentation, incompatible interfaces, and unequal access to assistive technologies (Harwell et al., 2024; Zongozzi & Ngubane, 2025).

Failing to consider accessibility in the design of digital systems is an important issue, since digital routines play a significant role in mediating higher education, unlike physical campuses. Being part of academic life involves downloading readings, handing in assignments, using library databases, participating in discussion forums, attending online courses, and, for staff members, creating course materials, providing feedback, and preparing deliverables in electronic form. Research conducted in African and non-African contexts reveals that, lacking such everyday systems, students and staff with disabilities have to rely on temporary workarounds, peer support, or slow remediation (Beyene et al., 2023; Cherotche et al., 2024; Munjanja & Hendricks, 2025). What should function as a right can then become a negotiated privilege.

We have used the term "students and staff with disabilities" as the default term in this article because this terminology still prevails in higher education policy and research, but identity-first language is also applicable in disability justice scholarship. Digital engagement is not just a function of platform design; it is also influenced by access, affordability, connectivity, availability of assistive technology, staff support, and institutional policy capacity (Kiambati et al., 2024; Manase, 2024; Ndlovu, 2026). Accordingly, digital transformation should not be considered a non-partisan modernisation project. It recapitulates academic opportunity.

Some frameworks already address disability inclusion in higher education, but from other perspectives. Rights-based approaches create institutional requirements and indicate that the notions of accessibility and reasonable accommodation are not additional benefits (International Finance Corporation, 2024; United Nations, 2006). UDL and accessible web design guidelines, such as WCAG, guide designers in making platforms, curricula, and other materials more accessible (World Wide Web Consortium [W3C], 2023; Quirke & Galvin, 2025). Scholarship and disability justice approach this one step further and demonstrate how academic norms, power relations, and designers' authority determine who should be where and whose needs should be addressed as deviations from the norm (Goodall, 2024; Nieminen, 2023; Sum et al., 2024).



The term "capability to become an academic" has been inserted here to connect these discussions, without replacing them. This article refers to the substantive freedom to access academic resources, participate in teaching and learning, demonstrate knowledge, build scholarly relationships, and be recognised as a legitimate member of academic life across the student-staff continuum. Operationally, the construct has five linked dimensions: independent access to academic materials and platforms; meaningful participation in teaching, learning, assessment, and research; access to academic relationships and support infrastructures; recognition, credibility, and belonging within academic communities; and progression into, within, and beyond academic roles. Table 1 sets out this operationalisation. The value of the concept lies in asking whether institutional resources actually become real opportunities. A university may, on paper, own an accessible platform, yet still fail to expand its capability if staff cannot produce accessible materials, if procurement is fragmented, or if participation still depends on repeated disclosure and negotiation.

*Table 1: Operationalising the Capability to be an Academic*

Dimension	What it means in this article	Illustrative indicators in the review
Independent access to resources and platforms	Whether students and staff with disabilities can reach and use digital systems, library resources, assessments, and academic tools without ad hoc mediation.	Accessible formats; captions; screen-reader compatibility; reliable access to assistive technology; timely provision of materials.
Participation in teaching, learning, assessment, and research	Whether they can engage, communicate, submit work, teach, supervise, and demonstrate knowledge on equitable terms.	Multiple means of engagement and assessment; timely submission and feedback; independent use of digital platforms.
Academic relationships and support infrastructures	Whether the institution provides accessible support systems and social or scholarly infrastructures needed for academic work.	Accessible library help, IT support, disability services, clear workflows, and reduced reliance on informal peer mediation.
Recognition, credibility, and belonging	Whether disabled people are treated as legitimate knowers, colleagues, and participants rather than administrative exceptions.	Safe disclosure, reduced stigma, credibility in assessment and employment, and a stronger sense of belonging.
Progression across the student-staff continuum	Whether the institution supports movement into, through, and beyond academic roles.	Accessible recruitment, inclusive employment conditions, career progression, and participation in leadership and governance.

The specific contribution of this article is therefore synthetic rather than merely descriptive. Individual studies have examined digital access, support services, curriculum design, disability policy, assessment ableism, or academic employment barriers in relative isolation (Kim & Crowley, 2021; Levitt et al., 2023; Papadopoulos et al., 2025; Zongozzi & Ngubane, 2025). What remains less developed is an integrative account of how these strands interact in digitally mediated universities, especially in ways that matter for African higher education. This review addresses that gap through a critical narrative synthesis guided by three questions:

(1) What recurring mechanisms shape the capability of students and staff with disabilities to participate in academic life in digitally mediated universities?



- (2) How do governance and quality assurance arrangements influence whether accessibility is embedded as a design principle or treated as remedial compliance?
- (3) What institution-level design propositions emerge for repositioning inclusion as innovation in African higher education, with particular relevance to East Africa?

## **Materials and Methods**

### ***Research Design and Epistemic Position***

This article uses a critical narrative synthesis to integrate empirical, conceptual, and policy-oriented scholarship on disability inclusion, digital transformation, and academic participation in higher education. Narrative synthesis is appropriate when the evidence base is heterogeneous in design and purpose, as is the case here. The corpus includes qualitative studies, systematic reviews, policy guidance, conceptual arguments, and studies of technology, teaching, assessment, employment, and institutional practice. The aim is not to estimate a pooled effect size. It is to identify recurring mechanisms, tensions, and institutional design implications across different kinds of evidence.

The synthesis is informed by a critical-interpretive epistemic position. It treats disability exclusion not as an individual deficit, but as an outcome produced through institutional design, governance, and academic norms. Disability justice provides the normative and political orientation by foregrounding collective access, power, intersectionality, and disabled leadership (Sum et al., 2024; Harpur & Stafford, 2025). The capability approach offers assessive terminology that helps differentiate resources and the circumstances that translate them into practical opportunities (Sebaggala et al., 2025; Sen, 1999). The two frameworks combine to enable one not just to ask whether universities are supportive, but whether their systems broaden substantive academic freedom.

### ***Search Strategy and Source Identification***

The sources referred to in the review were published between 2021 and 2026 to reflect contemporary post-pandemic shifts in the digital transformation of higher education, contemporary accessibility practices, and the initial literature on generative AI in academia. Searches were conducted on Google Scholar, DOAJ, ERIC, PubMed Central, and specialised searches on publisher or repository sites where relevant full texts were available. Four concept clusters were generated using representative search strings, including disability, higher education, digital accessibility, and governance or participation. Further searches were conducted on available learning literature, UDL, assessment, educational job opportunities, and AI. The search strings used are illustrated in Table 2. Table 2 uses capitalised Boolean operators where they replicate database syntax.

The final review corpus consisted of 23 materials that satisfied the synthesis substantive criteria. Three other textual foundations were retained within the conceptual framing: Sen (1999) on ability, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006), and WCAG 2.2 (W3C, 2023). Since the review is a narrative synthesis and not a fully logged systematic review, the initial draft failed to maintain a phase-by-phase screening ledger. To enhance transparency and avoid creating such data retrospectively, Figure 1 final, presents a reconstructed PRISMA-like pathway, reporting the proven verified corpus and the primary phases of selection.



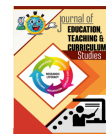
*Table 2: Search Domains and Illustrative Search Strings*

Search domain	Illustrative search strings
Digital accessibility in higher education	"digital accessibility" AND "higher education" AND disability; "accessible educational materials" AND university; "learning management system" AND accessibility AND university.
Governance, quality assurance, and inclusion	"accessibility" AND procurement AND university; disability AND quality assurance AND higher education; digital inclusion AND governance AND university.
Curriculum, pedagogy, and academic participation	"universal design" AND higher education AND accessibility; disability AND assessment AND higher education; academic ableism AND university.
African higher education contexts	(South Africa OR Kenya OR Ethiopia OR "sub-Saharan Africa") AND disability AND (digital OR online learning) AND university.
Emerging AI and inclusion	"generative AI" AND students with disabilities AND higher education; AI AND accessibility AND university assessment.

**Eligibility Criteria and Screening Logic**

The sources were included provided they met four criteria. The first selection criterion was sources that covered disability inclusion, digital accessibility, assistive technology, inclusive pedagogy, governance, assessment, or educational participation in higher education. Sources that included empirical evidence, a systematic or interpretive review, a conceptual framework containing clear argumentative value, or an institutional guidance document containing identifiable provenance were also included. Moreover, sources that provided sufficient methodological or conceptual description to facilitate interpretation were included. The authors also included sources that were available in full text to allow direct checking of claims.

The exclusion criteria included sources that dealt with primary or secondary education, clinical rehabilitation not within the context of higher education, or commentary with no visible evidentiary value. The screening process occurred in two phases. Topical relevance was initially assessed by reading titles and abstracts. Conceptual fit, setting, contribution to the evidence, usefulness to the framework, and the capability to be academic were then assessed based on full-text reviews. The synthesis focused on relevance and explanatory contribution, although all sources were considered equally, as shown in Table 3. Better arguments in the argument rely on arguments that are repeated in a series of studies, reviews, and contexts.



*Table 3: Eligibility Criteria and Evidence-Weighting Logic*

Criterion	Operationalisation	How it affected interpretation
Publication window	Main focus on 2021-2026 to capture post-pandemic digital transformation and current accessibility practice.	Helped keep the review focused on contemporary institutional conditions.
Substantive scope	Higher education, disability inclusion, digital accessibility, assistive technology, governance, assessment, employment, or academic participation.	Sources outside tertiary education or outside the substantive scope were excluded.
Document type	Empirical studies, reviews, conceptual articles with clear argumentative value, and institutional guidance with identifiable provenance.	Allowed heterogeneous evidence while excluding unsupported opinion.
Full-text availability and provenance	Stable and verifiable full text was required.	Improved transparency and reduced reliance on inaccessible or poorly sourced claims.
Evidence strength	Systematic reviews and multi-site studies were weighted more heavily; conceptual and single-site studies were used to deepen or qualify interpretation.	Themes were judged strongest where different source types converged.

**Quality Appraisal, Data Extraction, and Analytic Procedure**

This corpus could not have been assessed using a single checklist, as the review included an amalgamation of qualitative studies, conceptual papers, systematic reviews, and institutional guidance. Rather, the sources were particularly evaluated on a fit-for-purpose basis. To conduct empirical research, the review assumed the clarity of the research question, the suitability of the design, the clarity of the analysis, and the captivity of the statements. In the case of reviews and conceptual sources, it took into account the coherence of the argument, the adequacy of source use, and the specificity of implications for higher education practice. The weighting accorded greater weight to a systematic review and multi-site empirical studies when judging the extent to which a pattern was supported. Deepening of interpretation, assumption-busting, or identification of emerging problems was done through a conceptual or single-site source rather than around a theme.

The review of all the included sources is based on the extraction of the institutional setting, population, digital systems involved, the barriers and enablers identified, and the implications for teaching, governance, procurement, quality assurance, academic culture, or employment. Analysis combined inductive coding with a deductive organising frame. First, recurring barriers and enablers were coded across the corpus. Second, codes were clustered into higher-order themes through constant comparison. Third, those themes were interpreted through capability concepts such as resources, conversion factors, capabilities, and functionings, as well as disability justice concepts such as collective access, participation in decision-making, and redistribution of design authority. Contradictions were treated as analytically meaningful. For example, some studies presented UDL and AI as promising innovations, while others showed that such tools remain ineffective when governance, affordability, and staff support are weak.

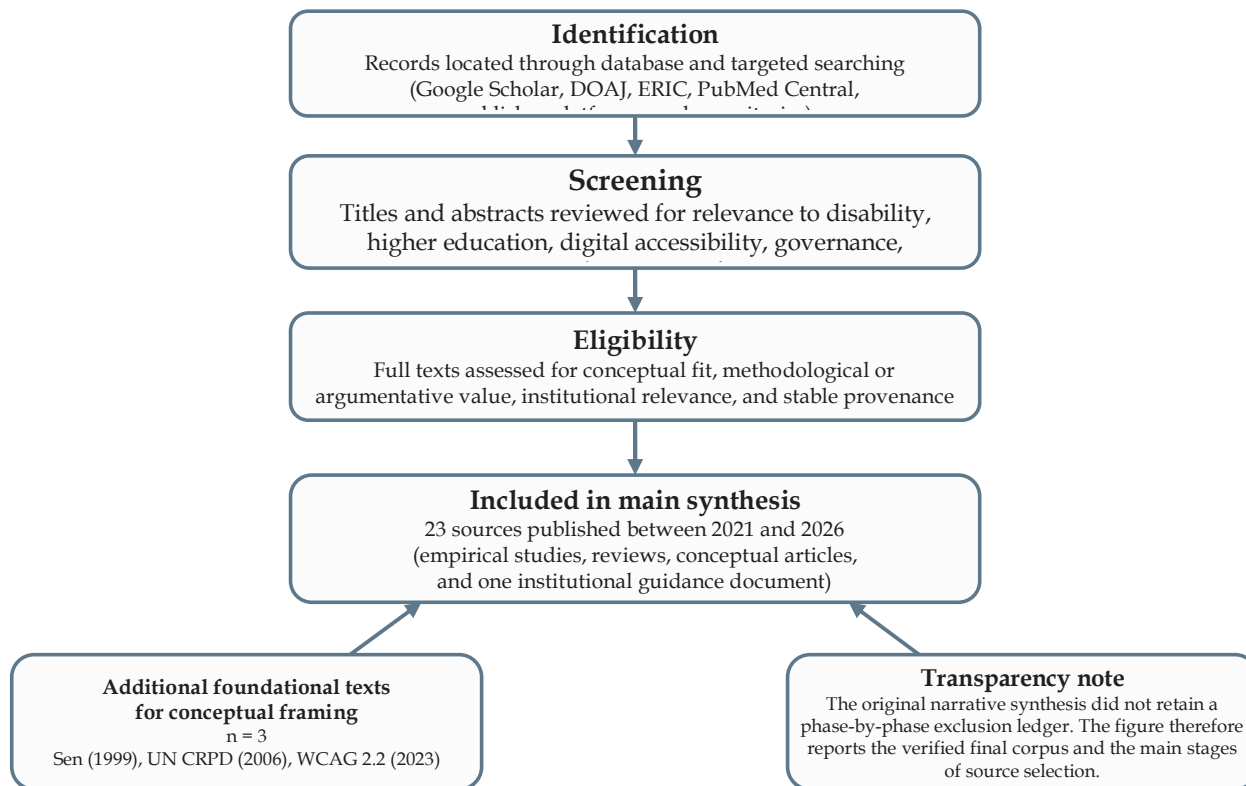
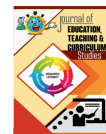
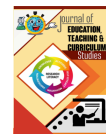


Figure 1: PRISMA-style Flow of Source Selection

The figure reports the verified final corpus used in the narrative synthesis and makes explicit that phase-by-phase exclusion counts were not retained in the original draft.

### Results

Five cross-cutting themes emerged from the synthesis. Table 4 summarises the themes, the general strength of support in the corpus, and the main institutional implications of each.



*Table 4: Summary of themes, strength of support, and main institutional implication*

Theme	Evidence pattern	Main implication
Structural inaccessibility of digital ecosystems	Strong support across reviews and studies from South Africa, Kenya, Ethiopia, and wider higher education settings.	Accessibility must be built into platforms, content workflows, and library systems from the outset.
Staff capability gaps and AEM bottlenecks	Strong support across staff studies, accessibility frameworks, and curriculum analyses.	Accessibility depends on training, support, templates, and time, not only on goodwill.
Governance and quality assurance marginalise accessibility	Strong support across institutional guidance and policy-oriented studies.	Procurement, QA, and accountability systems need explicit accessibility indicators and responsibility lines.
Compliance-driven accommodation reproduces dependency and ableism	Moderate-to-strong support across assessment, support-service, and employment literature.	Formal support is insufficient when access still relies on repeated disclosure and negotiation.
Inclusion becomes innovation when collective access is designed in	Moderate but consistent support; strongest in governance and universal-design scholarship, more tentative in AI literature.	Inclusion becomes transformative when design authority, resources, and accountability shift institutionally.

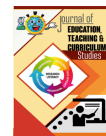
### **Digital Ecosystems Remain Structurally Inaccessible**

The convergence of the strongest point in the corpus is the unending inaccessibility of digital ecosystems. In South Africa, Kenya, Ethiopia, and broader higher education environments, inaccessible learning material, poorly constructed PDFs, uncaptioned videos, incompatible interfaces, or library or assessment systems that do not reliably support assistive technologies have been described (Beyene et al., 2023; Cherotiche et al., 2024; Kiambati et al., 2024; Zongozzi and Ngubane, 2025; Ndlovu, 2026). These obstacles are not presented as specific technical errors. They are repeated in platforms, processes, and within institutions.

One recurring practical issue is the lack of available educational materials (AEM). Papadopoulos et al. (2025) indicated that most staff members embrace the idea of inclusion without understanding the existing formats or having much experience in creating them. Kenyan university library students who are visually impaired also report relying on sighted students, a lack of adaptive technology, and limited autonomy in accessing digital information (Cherotich et al., 2024). Viewed through a capability lens, the problem is simple: having formal access to a platform or course is not yet a practical learning experience when the learning resources in place cannot be accessed independently, reliably, and at the right time.

### **Staff Capability Gaps Create an Accessibility Backlog**

The second theme relates to the staff capacity. In the literature, issues of accessibility tend to remain unresolved due to staff unwillingness to include individuals with disabilities and a lack of equipping them to engage in accessibility as a normal practice in institutions. Research into lecturers and teaching personnel shows an unequal knowledge base regarding AEM, low awareness of assistive technologies, and a lack of understanding of how to redesign materials without affecting the pedagogical intent (Arias-Badia & Hermosa-Ramirez, 2025; Papadopoulos et al., 2025). Curriculum studies also indicate that both



accessibility and universal design are often described in disparaging terms, which implies that the problem is yet to become a regular part of programme design and review (Mavrou et al., 2025).

An accessibility backlog is the institutional effect. It is not the case that materials are fixed because an accessible workflow exists; rather, a student requires assistance. According to Harwell et al. (2024), this reactive model generates delays, discrepancies, and unnecessary repetition. What appears as one person's accommodation issue is also a workforce and workflow issue. Availability lies in training, templates, time, technical assistance, and a clear understanding of expectations.

### **Governance and Quality Assurance Often Treat Accessibility as Peripheral**

The third theme is fragmentation of governance. Accessibility is often found in disability support services and not embedded in procurement, quality assurance, curriculum control, platform governance, and performance management. Consequently, institutions might buy or implement systems and only attempt to correct them afterwards, once it is too late, as prices are rising sharply and the damage has been done (Harwell et al., 2024; International Finance Corporation, 2024). South African scholarship also indicates policy and capacity gaps that place accessibility in online learning contexts at a weakly institutionalised level (Zongozzi & Ngubane, 2025; Ndlovu, 2026).

This theme is also visible in institutional data practices. Several sources suggest that universities rarely track accessibility systematically, whether through procurement standards, course-material audits, turnaround times for accessible formats, or user experience data from disabled students and staff (Harwell et al., 2024; Harpur & Stafford, 2025). Without such information, accessibility remains easy to praise in policy and difficult to govern in practice. The more promising counter-example in the literature is a disability-led strategy in which institutions define measurable goals, assign responsibility, and involve disabled people in monitoring and decision-making (Harpur & Stafford, 2025).

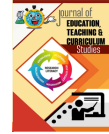
### **Compliance-driven Accommodation Reproduces Dependency and Academic Ableism**

The fourth theme is the limit of compliance-based inclusion. Some studies indicate that even when institutions position themselves as friendly, access remains organised through individual disclosure, documentation, and repetition, despite attempts at negotiation (Kim & Crowley, 2021; Nieminen, 2023; Goodall, 2024; Marquez-Gonzalez et al., 2025). In assessment, this logic may reinforce ableist norms by presenting disabled people as needing to be eligible to receive adjustments, rather than redesigning tasks to acknowledge diverse ways of demonstrating learning (Nieminen, 2023; Goodall, 2024). Support can be there, though it is usually offered through a gatekeeping process which imposes time, emotional labour, and administrative overhead on the individual requesting access.

This pattern extends beyond student experience. Research on academic employment identifies inaccessible recruitment processes, narrow norms of productivity, and institutional cultures that read disability through a deficit lens rather than as a contribution (Levitt et al., 2023). The capability to be an academic must therefore be understood across the whole academic lifecycle. It concerns not only studying at a university but also teaching, conducting research, being recognised as credible, and progressing in academic work.

### **Inclusion Becomes Innovation When Collective Access is Designed in**

The most constructive strand in the corpus shows that inclusion becomes institutionally generative when accessibility is designed into mainstream systems rather than attached at the margins. This is most



evident in work on disability-led governance, coordinated accessibility workflows, procurement standards, and universal design in curriculum and assessment (Harwell et al., 2024; Harpur & Stafford, 2025; Quirke & Galvin, 2025). In this strand of the literature, accessibility is not framed as an extra burden. It is treated as part of educational quality, organisational learning, and institutional legitimacy.

The same caution applies to newer technologies. Evidence on generative AI suggests that some students with disabilities use such tools to manage writing and communication barriers, but the benefits remain conditional. Accuracy problems, subscription costs, and academic integrity concerns mean that AI cannot be treated as an automatic accessibility solution (Zhao et al., 2025). Its significance is analytical only when read as part of a broader accessibility-by-design agenda.

### **Convergence, Tension, and Strength of Evidence**

The corpus exhibits high convergence on three aspects. Closed materials and platforms are still prevalent. Second, technical standards are not as important as staff capability and institutional workflow. Third, governance fragmentation facilitates accessibility, which is peripheral even when policy commitments are present. These assertions have been supported by systematic reviews, multi-site studies, and several national contexts, and thus bear the most evidentiary weight in this review (Harwell et al., 2024; Murillo-Jimenez et al., 2025; Papadopoulos et al., 2025; Zongozzi & Ngubane, 2025).

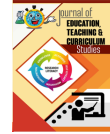
There are two more issues that are more tentative in the corpus. UDL and collective-access models are consistently presented as promising, although the literature has less to say about their long-term institutional implementation in African contexts. Similarly, the evidence on generative AI remains relatively new and should not be overestimated. Such fields can be thought of more as conditional possibilities than as settled answers.

## **Discussion**

### **The Analytical Value of the Capability to be an Academic**

This discussion proceeds from a critical-interpretive and normative position. Majorly, digitally mediated exclusion in higher education is created by design, governance, and academic norms, rather than by personal impairment or singular technical failure. Disability justice offers the political and ethical orientation within that post, and the capability approach that offers the evaluative question: do the institutional arrangements enlarge real opportunities so that students and staff with disabilities can act, contribute, and be recognised as academics?

As perceived, academic ability does not imply a relabelling of inclusion. Rights-based models inform us about what universities owe. UDL and WCAG assist in defining how accessible systems can be designed and implemented. Disability justice demonstrates the importance of power, voice, and shared access. The capability construct complements this argument by identifying the consequences of these frameworks, which are frequently implied but not realised. It questions whether a university, in fact, enables one to gain access to resources, become a meaningful part of it, share knowledge, establish relationships with scholars, become part of it, and advance through academic roles. Therefore, the construct is analytically helpful, as it links design, governance, recognition, and progression within a single frame of evaluation.



### **Digital Exclusion Should be Read as Institutional Failure, Not Incidental Breakdown**

The strong evidence in this review implies that digital exclusion is institutional rather than individual in origin. The recurrence of inaccessible content, poor workflow support, sluggish remediation, and partial accountability among studies shows that inaccessibility cannot be addressed as a set of unplanned failures. Lessons learned as a predictable issue of digital transformation will continue without accessibility as a design issue, demonstrating the capability approach. The existence of any resource is important only if it can be transformed into an actual opportunity. A resource that cannot be navigated, a PDF file that cannot be read using a screen reader, a lecture video without captions, and so on, is not a neutral resource waiting to be used. Rather, it is a liquid asset whose conversion terms have already failed.

Digital exclusion as an institutional failure also clarifies why policy adoption alone is rarely enough to overcome it. Universities can also include policies, support offices, or vendor contracts for people with disabilities; however, they can still recreate exclusion when procurement, course production, library systems, and assessment design are managed independently. Therefore, digital inclusion is not just technical compliance, but institutional coherence. Accessibility is not discussed as a specialist service but as a fundamental quality issue in digital transformation, which the review does not oppose changing.

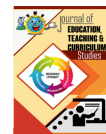
### **Compliance can improve functioning without expanding capability**

The review also demonstrates that the concept of formal accommodation cannot be conflated with that of inclusive participation. Immediate response to accommodation: a student might complete an assignment, take an exam, or receive a different format due to an accommodation request. These gains, however, are weak when the conversion factors underlying them are held constant. Where access continues to be conditional on recurring disclosure, bureaucratic slowness, or staff decisions, participation is neither independent nor safe. In terms of capability, this is the difference between a temporary workaround and substantive freedom.

Disability justice adds another angle to this by posing the question of who performs the work of access and who has the right to decide what access means as reasonable participation. The variance in assessment ableism and academic employment barriers indicates that compliance may preserve the substructure of academic merit. Hotness, lack of interruption, parsimony in communication conventions, and administrative demonstrations of validity still organise who qualifies as competent. The outcome is not just an inaccessible procedure, but a range of established academic institutions and practices. Therefore, the review considers accommodation dependency a political and institutional issue rather than an unintended after-effect.

### **Inclusion Becomes Innovation Only When Design Authority Shifts**

The term inclusion as innovation refers to a transformation of institutional logic. It is not to be understood as celebratory rhetoric. According to the review, inclusion is innovative when it enhances the quality of teaching, procurement, platform governance, and academic participation by embedding accessibility into regular systems. This change can be reflected in coordinated AEM processes, available procurement needs, staff growth, disability-informed quality indicators, and participatory governance (Harwell et al., 2024; Harpur & Stafford, 2025). Their importance lies in reducing dependence on individual negotiation and making access more predictable, timely, and collective.



This is also the right place to be cautious about technological solutionism. UDL, platform redesign, and AI-assisted tools can be helpful, although none of them alone is significant. Inequity can still be reproduced through innovation when affordability is low, staff support is poor, or disabled persons are excluded from the design process. The analytical argument is thus straightforward: new tools are important when they expand capability. They are not included in the category of innovation just because they are novel.

### **Implications for African Higher Education**

The findings indicate that the African higher education context should prioritise procurement and platform governance. Expanding universities ought to regard accessibility testing, vendor compliance, and compatibility with assistive technology as part of the implementation, not remedial. Second, employees' capabilities must be regarded as infrastructure. Accessible document creation, captioning, alternative assessment design, and inclusive digital communication training need to be included as a standard academic complement, rather than optional accommodations.

Third, accessibility must improve visibility into quality assurance. Accessibility must be found in programme review, course approval, digital strategy, and institutional monitoring. Lastly, the review highly recommends disability-led governance. Accessibility is too susceptible to benevolence, divisiveness, and procrastination without disabled people in power. This is crucial, particularly in East African economies where digital growth is occurring amid actual resource scarcity. In these circumstances, governance decisions prove even more decisive in determining whether academic futures are the actual beneficiaries of digital transformation.

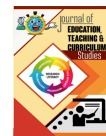
### **Limitations and Future Directions**

This review has limitations. It is a narrative synthesis rather than a systematic review, and the original corpus was not managed through a fully logged screening ledger. The study reports the verified final corpus and a reconstructed PRISMA-style selection pathway, but it does not claim exhaustive coverage. The evidence base is also uneven across regions, disability categories, and institutional types. South Africa is more visible than many other African settings, and evidence on generative AI remains comparatively thin.

Future studies should consider institution-level mixed-methods studies that integrate technical accessibility audits, usability testing with disabled users, and governance and workflow. Capability-based indicators to move beyond access numbers and monitor timeliness, independence, belonging, and progression among students and staff with disabilities are also needed. It would be particularly valuable to compare work across African systems to differentiate infrastructural constraints from organisational choices.

### **Conclusion**

This study has argued that the central question in digitally mediated higher education is not whether universities have implemented platforms, policies, or support services. The complex question to address is whether these arrangements broaden the actual freedom of students and staff with disabilities to attend, contribute and be acknowledged as academics. That is what the ability to become an academic is supposed to represent.



In the literature synthesised, structural inaccessibility, weak staff support, poor governance, and accommodation based on compliance significantly undermine capability. The findings show that capability can, in turn, be enhanced by disability-led governance, universal design, coordinated accessibility workflows, and greater institutional accountability. In the case of African higher education, this implies that the concept of inclusion must not be viewed as a marginal offering, but as a fundamental trial of how digital transformation is crafted, managed, and assessed.

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