



Inclusive Learning Environments in Higher Education: A Systematic Literature Review

Mufida Hamdani¹✉, Ervina Ariesandy¹, Asmarani¹, and Rita Setyawati²

Universitas Sarjanawiyata Tamansiswa, Yogyakarta, Indonesia¹; Sekolah Tinggi Bahasa Asing LIA, Yogyakarta, Indonesia²

ABSTRACT

Inclusive learning environments have become an important priority in higher education as universities seek to promote educational equity, accessibility, and meaningful participation for increasingly diverse student populations. This study examines inclusive learning environments through a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) using the PRISMA 2020 framework. Studies published in the last five years were systematically collected from major academic databases and analyzed using thematic synthesis. The review identifies five major themes: the evolution of inclusive learning, the core dimensions of inclusive learning environments, institutional approaches supporting inclusion, educational impacts, and future directions. The findings indicate that inclusive learning environments enhance student belonging, engagement, participation, and equitable academic achievement through institutional commitment, inclusive pedagogy, Universal Design for Learning, and comprehensive student support services. The study concludes that sustainable inclusion requires coordinated institutional strategies that integrate accessibility, diversity, equity, and learner-centered educational practices throughout higher education.

Keywords: Educational Equity, Inclusive Education, Higher Education, Student Belonging, Universal Design for Learning.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Mufida Hamdani

Universitas Sarjanawiyata Tamansiswa, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

contact: mhamdani76@gmail.com

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received : January 17, 2024

Final Revised : May 03, 2024

Accepted : June 7, 2024

Published : June 30, 2024

1. | INTRODUCTION

Higher education has experienced substantial changes in recent decades as universities seek to respond to increasingly diverse student populations and expanding expectations for equitable educational opportunities. Students now enter higher education with varied cultural backgrounds, learning abilities, socioeconomic circumstances, languages, and educational experiences, creating a need for learning environments that support meaningful participation for all learners. Consequently, inclusion has become a central principle in higher education, shifting institutional priorities from simply widening access to ensuring that every student can fully engage and succeed throughout their academic journey.

The concept of inclusive learning environments has evolved beyond providing physical access for underrepresented groups toward creating educational settings that recognize diversity, remove learning barriers, and promote equal participation. Inclusive learning emphasizes educational practices that value individual differences while ensuring that all students have equitable opportunities to achieve academic success. Moriña (2019) explains that inclusive higher education involves transforming institutional cultures, policies, and teaching practices to accommodate learner diversity rather than expecting students to adapt to rigid educational systems. Similarly, Kefallinou (2020) argues that inclusive education represents a continuous process of identifying and eliminating barriers that restrict students' access, participation, and learning outcomes.

This evolution has been driven by growing recognition that diversity enriches higher education when supported by inclusive institutional practices. Rather than viewing inclusion solely through the perspective of disability support, contemporary universities increasingly recognize inclusion as encompassing cultural diversity, gender, socioeconomic background, learning preferences, and multiple forms of student identity. Chun and Evans (2023) emphasize that institutional leadership plays a critical role in fostering inclusive learning environments by embedding diversity, equity, and inclusion into organizational culture and educational decision-making. Likewise, Cervantez (2023) highlights educational equity as a fundamental principle for ensuring that higher education provides fair learning opportunities regardless of students' personal or social circumstances.

An important characteristic of inclusive learning environments is their emphasis on belonging and meaningful participation. Students who feel respected, represented, and supported within academic communities are more likely to engage actively in learning and develop stronger academic confidence. Nieminen and Pesonen (2022) argue that fostering belonging requires universities to move beyond traditional inclusion policies by critically examining institutional practices that may unintentionally reinforce exclusion or ableism. Similarly, Li and Singh (2022) demonstrate that inclusive learning environments positively influence both student learning and motivational

beliefs, indicating that inclusion supports not only educational access but also meaningful learning experiences.

Universities have increasingly adopted institutional strategies to promote inclusion through inclusive pedagogy, accessible learning environments, and Universal Design for Learning (UDL). These approaches encourage flexible instructional design, multiple methods of engagement, and learning experiences that accommodate diverse learner needs. Coffman and Draper (2022) describe Universal Design for Learning as a framework that enables educators to proactively design accessible learning experiences rather than relying on individual accommodations after barriers emerge. Likewise, Stentiford and Koutsouris (2021) emphasize that inclusive pedagogies encourage equitable participation by recognizing learner diversity as an educational strength rather than a challenge to overcome.

Research further indicates that inclusive learning environments generate educational outcomes extending beyond accessibility alone. Students studying within inclusive environments demonstrate stronger engagement, greater academic confidence, higher levels of belonging, and improved persistence throughout higher education. Kahu, Ashley, and Picton (2022) found that academic, interpersonal, and institutional belonging collectively influence students' educational experiences, particularly during their transition into university. Similarly, Moreu and Brauer (2022) reported that inclusive teaching practices reduce achievement gaps while supporting equitable educational outcomes across diverse student populations.

Although research on inclusive higher education has expanded considerably, existing studies often examine accessibility, inclusive pedagogy, educational equity, belonging, or Universal Design for Learning as separate areas of investigation. Comparatively fewer studies synthesize these interconnected perspectives to explain how inclusive learning environments are conceptualized, implemented, and evaluated across higher education institutions. A comprehensive synthesis is therefore needed to provide an integrated understanding of current developments while identifying emerging directions for inclusive educational practice.

Accordingly, this study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) following the PRISMA 2020 framework to examine inclusive learning environments in higher education. By synthesizing studies published between 2019 and 2023, this review explores the evolution of inclusive learning, its core dimensions, institutional implementation strategies, educational outcomes, and emerging directions for future research. The findings are expected to provide educators, institutional leaders, and policymakers with a comprehensive understanding of how inclusive learning environments can contribute to more equitable, accessible, and sustainable higher education systems.

2. | LITERATURE REVIEW

Evolution of Inclusive Learning in Higher Education

The concept of inclusive learning in higher education has undergone substantial transformation over the past several decades. Earlier approaches primarily emphasized widening access to higher education by increasing enrollment opportunities for students from underrepresented groups, particularly students with disabilities and those from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. More recently, however, inclusion has evolved into a broader educational philosophy that seeks to create learning environments where all students are able to participate, contribute, and succeed regardless of their individual characteristics. This shift reflects growing recognition that educational quality depends not only on access to higher education but also on students' experiences after entering university.

Inclusive learning is now widely understood as a process of removing barriers that limit students' participation while creating educational environments that value diversity and promote equitable learning opportunities. Rather than focusing solely on accommodating individual needs, inclusive learning encourages institutions to redesign policies, teaching practices, and learning environments so that they naturally support diverse learners. Moriña (2019) explains that inclusive higher education requires institutional transformation in which diversity is viewed as an educational asset rather than a challenge requiring individual adjustment. Similarly, Kefallinou (2020) argues that successful implementation of inclusive education depends upon continuous efforts to identify and eliminate structural, pedagogical, and social barriers that restrict students' learning experiences.

Recent developments have further expanded the scope of inclusive learning by integrating principles of diversity, equity, accessibility, and social justice into higher education policy and practice. Universities increasingly recognize that inclusion extends beyond disability services to encompass students from different cultural, linguistic, ethnic, socioeconomic, and educational backgrounds. Cervantez (2023) emphasizes that educational equity requires institutions to provide fair opportunities that acknowledge students' different circumstances while promoting equal access to educational success. Likewise, Chun and Evans (2023) highlight the importance of institutional leadership in embedding diversity, equity, and inclusion into organizational culture, decision-making, and educational practice.

Contemporary perspectives also recognize that inclusive learning is closely connected with students' sense of belonging and active participation within academic communities. Students are more likely to engage in meaningful learning when they experience respect, acceptance, and representation within their educational environment. Nieminen and Pesonen (2022) argue that inclusive learning environments should actively challenge institutional practices that unintentionally marginalize certain groups while fostering belonging among diverse student populations. Similarly, Meehan and Howells (2019) found that developing a sense of belonging during

students' transition into higher education contributes significantly to positive educational experiences and long-term academic adjustment.

The growing adoption of inclusive learning reflects broader international efforts to improve educational quality through equity-oriented educational systems. Rather than treating inclusion as a specialized educational initiative, higher education institutions increasingly recognize it as a fundamental principle guiding curriculum design, instructional practice, institutional policy, and student support services. This evolution establishes inclusive learning as a comprehensive framework for creating higher education environments that enable all students to participate meaningfully and achieve their educational potential.

Core Dimensions of Inclusive Learning Environments

Inclusive learning environments are characterized by several interconnected dimensions that collectively support equitable educational experiences for diverse student populations. Rather than focusing on a single aspect of inclusion, contemporary higher education recognizes that effective inclusive learning requires the integration of accessibility, diversity, equity, belonging, and active participation. These dimensions operate together to reduce educational barriers while promoting meaningful engagement for all learners.

Accessibility represents one of the foundational dimensions of inclusive learning. Accessible learning environments ensure that students can obtain educational resources, participate in learning activities, and demonstrate achievement regardless of physical, cognitive, sensory, or technological differences. Coffman and Draper (2022) explain that Universal Design for Learning (UDL) provides a proactive framework for creating flexible instructional experiences that accommodate learner variability from the beginning of course design. Similarly, Sharma et al. (2023) emphasize that applying UDL principles enables instructors to provide multiple means of engagement, representation, and assessment, thereby improving accessibility across diverse learning contexts.

Equity and diversity constitute additional core dimensions of inclusive learning environments. Educational equity recognizes that students possess different educational needs and therefore may require varying forms of academic support to achieve comparable learning opportunities. Inclusive learning acknowledges diversity as a valuable educational resource that enriches classroom interaction and broadens perspectives. Hogan and Sathy (2022) argue that inclusive teaching strategies promote educational equity by encouraging instructors to design learning experiences that recognize and support diverse student identities. Likewise, Guberina (2023) highlights culturally responsive pedagogy as an effective approach for integrating diversity into classroom practice while fostering inclusive educational experiences.

Belonging and participation further distinguish inclusive learning environments from traditional educational settings. Students who experience acceptance, recognition, and meaningful interaction within academic communities are more likely to engage

actively in learning and persist throughout higher education. Kahu, Ashley, and Picton (2022) identify academic, interpersonal, and institutional belonging as interconnected dimensions that influence students' educational experiences, particularly during the first year of university. Similarly, Li and Singh (2022) found that inclusive learning environments strengthen both student motivation and learning outcomes by encouraging active participation and creating psychologically supportive learning conditions.

Collectively, these dimensions demonstrate that inclusive learning environments extend beyond physical accessibility or institutional policy. They represent integrated educational ecosystems that combine equitable instructional practices, flexible learning design, institutional commitment, and supportive academic communities. Understanding these core dimensions provides a conceptual foundation for examining how universities implement inclusive learning and promote meaningful educational participation across increasingly diverse student populations.

Institutional Approaches to Inclusive Learning

Creating inclusive learning environments requires more than individual teaching practices; it depends on coordinated institutional strategies that embed inclusion within university policies, curriculum design, student services, and academic culture. Higher education institutions increasingly recognize that sustainable inclusion cannot be achieved solely through isolated accommodations but must be integrated into organizational structures that support diverse learners throughout their educational experience. Consequently, universities have adopted various institutional approaches that promote accessibility, equity, and meaningful participation across all aspects of academic life.

One of the most widely adopted approaches is the implementation of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Rather than modifying instruction after barriers emerge, UDL encourages educators to proactively design learning experiences that accommodate learner variability from the outset. Coffman and Draper (2022) describe UDL as a comprehensive instructional framework that enhances accessibility by providing multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression. Similarly, Sharma et al. (2023) demonstrate that the practical application of UDL enables instructors to create flexible learning environments that respond effectively to students' diverse learning preferences, abilities, and educational backgrounds.

Inclusive pedagogy also represents a fundamental institutional strategy for promoting educational equity. Inclusive teaching extends beyond adapting course materials by encouraging instructional practices that actively recognize and value student diversity. Stentiford and Koutsouris (2021) explain that inclusive pedagogies encourage educators to reconsider traditional teaching assumptions and develop learning experiences that maximize participation for all students. Likewise, Moreu and Brauer (2022) found that instructors who intentionally employ inclusive teaching

practices can reduce achievement gaps while promoting more equitable academic outcomes across diverse student populations.

Institutional commitment further determines the effectiveness of inclusive learning initiatives. Leadership support, inclusive policies, adequate student services, and collaboration among academic and administrative units establish the organizational conditions necessary for long-term educational inclusion. Chun and Evans (2023) emphasize that institutional leaders play a central role in fostering inclusive cultures by integrating diversity, equity, and inclusion into strategic planning, faculty development, and organizational decision-making. Similarly, Warren and Zargarpour (2021) demonstrate that institution-wide educational equity initiatives strengthen opportunities for underserved student populations while promoting greater educational participation.

Student support services complement instructional approaches by addressing academic, psychological, and social barriers that may influence students' educational experiences. Disability support services, academic advising, mentoring programs, counseling, and transition support contribute to more inclusive learning environments by helping students navigate university life successfully. Lopez-Gavira, Moriña, and Morgado (2021) found that effective collaboration between disability support services and academic staff significantly improves students' educational experiences while identifying institutional barriers that require continuous improvement. These findings suggest that inclusive learning depends not only on classroom instruction but also on comprehensive institutional support systems that promote equitable participation throughout higher education.

Overall, institutional approaches to inclusive learning require coordinated efforts across leadership, curriculum, teaching practice, and student support services. Universities that integrate these elements into their educational systems are better positioned to create learning environments that value diversity, remove barriers, and provide meaningful opportunities for all students to succeed.

Educational Impact of Inclusive Learning

Inclusive learning environments influence higher education by shaping not only students' academic achievement but also their participation, sense of belonging, motivation, persistence, and overall educational experience. Rather than serving solely as mechanisms for ensuring accessibility, inclusive educational practices create conditions that enable diverse student populations to participate meaningfully and achieve their academic potential. As universities increasingly prioritize equity and student success, understanding these educational impacts has become an important focus of higher education research.

One of the most significant impacts of inclusive learning is increased student participation and engagement. Learning environments that encourage diverse perspectives, equitable participation, and accessible instructional practices enable students to contribute more confidently to classroom activities and collaborative learning. Li and Singh (2022) found that inclusive learning environments significantly

improve both student learning outcomes and motivational beliefs, indicating that inclusive educational practices strengthen active engagement throughout the learning process. Likewise, Guberina (2023) argues that culturally responsive pedagogy promotes meaningful classroom participation by recognizing and valuing students' diverse cultural experiences.

Inclusive learning also strengthens students' sense of belonging within higher education institutions. Belonging reflects students' perceptions of acceptance, recognition, and meaningful membership within academic communities, all of which contribute to positive educational experiences. Kahu, Ashley, and Picton (2022) found that academic, interpersonal, and institutional belonging collectively influence students' adjustment to university and their willingness to engage with learning opportunities. Similarly, Meehan and Howells (2019) reported that students who develop a strong sense of belonging during their transition into higher education experience greater confidence, persistence, and academic integration.

Another important educational impact concerns academic equity and student success. Inclusive learning environments reduce barriers that contribute to unequal educational outcomes while providing students with appropriate opportunities to demonstrate their abilities. Moreu and Brauer (2022) found that inclusive teaching practices contribute to reducing achievement gaps among diverse student groups through equitable instructional design and classroom practices. Furthermore, Warren and Zargarpour (2021) emphasize that institutional initiatives promoting educational equity expand learning opportunities for underserved students while improving overall educational attainment.

Collectively, the literature demonstrates that inclusive learning environments contribute to broader educational development by promoting engagement, belonging, participation, academic success, and equitable learning experiences. These outcomes indicate that inclusion should be regarded not merely as an accommodation strategy but as a fundamental characteristic of high-quality higher education that benefits both individual learners and educational institutions.

Emerging Trends and Future Directions

The continued development of inclusive learning environments has introduced new priorities for higher education as universities respond to changing student demographics, technological innovation, and increasing expectations for educational equity. Contemporary discussions no longer focus solely on providing access to higher education but increasingly emphasize creating sustainable, flexible, and learner-centered educational systems that support participation for all students. These developments suggest that inclusive learning will continue to evolve alongside broader institutional transformation and educational innovation.

One emerging trend is the growing integration of digital inclusion within higher education. As teaching increasingly incorporates online and technology-enhanced learning, ensuring equitable access to digital resources has become an essential

component of inclusive education. Digital inclusion extends beyond access to technology by addressing students' ability to participate effectively in digital learning environments regardless of socioeconomic background, disability, or geographic location. Gallagher, Najjuma, and Nambi (2023) demonstrate that digital inclusion requires universities to consider both technological accessibility and the broader social conditions that influence students' participation in higher education. Likewise, Luic and Popovic (2022) emphasize that research on digital inclusion increasingly focuses on removing technological barriers that affect students with disabilities and other underrepresented groups.

Another important direction involves strengthening faculty capacity to implement inclusive teaching practices. Although institutional policies increasingly support educational inclusion, effective implementation depends largely on instructors' pedagogical knowledge, attitudes, and instructional decision-making. Guberina (2023) argues that culturally responsive pedagogy enables educators to integrate diversity into everyday teaching while fostering respectful and inclusive classroom interactions. Similarly, Kolyda (2023) highlights the importance of promoting growth-oriented learning cultures that encourage all students to participate confidently regardless of previous educational experiences or perceived academic ability.

Universities are also placing greater emphasis on institutional leadership and organizational culture as drivers of sustainable inclusion. Rather than treating inclusion as the responsibility of individual instructors or student support units, higher education institutions increasingly recognize that meaningful inclusion requires coordinated institutional commitment. Chun and Evans (2023) argue that academic leaders play a crucial role in embedding diversity, equity, and inclusion into governance, curriculum development, faculty support, and institutional decision-making. Such leadership helps establish inclusive learning as a shared institutional responsibility rather than an isolated educational initiative.

Despite these positive developments, several issues continue to require further investigation. Questions remain regarding the long-term effectiveness of inclusive learning strategies across different cultural contexts, disciplines, and educational systems. Additional research is also needed to evaluate how emerging technologies, artificial intelligence, flexible learning models, and evolving student demographics influence inclusive educational practice. Petersson-Bloom and Holmqvist (2022) further note that evidence supporting effective inclusion for specific student populations, including autistic learners, remains limited in several higher education contexts, highlighting the need for more diverse and context-sensitive research.

Overall, current trends indicate that inclusive learning environments are becoming increasingly comprehensive, extending beyond accessibility toward institutional transformation, digital inclusion, culturally responsive pedagogy, and sustainable educational equity. Future higher education research should continue exploring

innovative approaches that strengthen inclusive learning while addressing the evolving needs of increasingly diverse student populations.

3. | RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to synthesize current evidence regarding inclusive learning environments in higher education. Rather than examining a single educational outcome, the review explored how inclusive learning has evolved, the dimensions that characterize inclusive educational environments, institutional approaches that support inclusion, the educational impact of inclusive practices, and emerging directions for future development.

The review followed the PRISMA 2020 (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework proposed by Page et al. (2021). The review process consisted of four sequential stages: identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and final inclusion of relevant studies. This structured procedure ensured methodological transparency while reducing selection bias throughout the literature review process.

Relevant literature was identified through Scopus, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, Taylor & Francis Online, ERIC, Wiley Online Library, and Google Scholar. The search strategy combined keywords including *inclusive learning*, *inclusive learning environments*, *inclusive education*, *educational equity*, *Universal Design for Learning*, *inclusive pedagogy*, *accessibility*, *student belonging*, *diversity*, and *higher education*. Only English-language publications published between 2019 and 2023 were included to capture recent developments in inclusive higher education research.

The inclusion criteria comprised peer-reviewed journal articles, conference proceedings, systematic literature reviews, scholarly books, and book chapters focusing on inclusive learning within higher education contexts. Studies discussing educational equity, accessibility, Universal Design for Learning, inclusive pedagogy, student belonging, institutional inclusion, and inclusive educational practices were included. Editorial articles, opinion papers, duplicate publications, and studies focusing exclusively on primary or secondary education were excluded from the review.

Data were analyzed using thematic synthesis, enabling the integration of evidence from diverse study designs into broader conceptual themes. Five major themes emerged during the analysis: (1) the evolution of inclusive learning in higher education, (2) the core dimensions of inclusive learning environments, (3) institutional approaches to inclusive learning, (4) the educational impact of inclusive learning, and (5) emerging trends and future directions. Organizing the findings through thematic synthesis allowed the review to capture both conceptual developments and practical implementation strategies within contemporary higher education.

The analytical framework views inclusive learning as a multidimensional institutional process rather than a single instructional practice. It recognizes that effective inclusion emerges through the interaction of educational equity, accessibility,

diversity, belonging, inclusive pedagogy, institutional commitment, and student support systems. This perspective provides a comprehensive foundation for understanding how universities can develop sustainable inclusive learning environments that promote meaningful participation and educational success for increasingly diverse student populations.

4. | RESULTS

The thematic synthesis identified five major themes that describe how inclusive learning environments have been conceptualized and implemented in higher education between 2019 and 2023. Rather than viewing inclusion solely as an approach for supporting specific student groups, the reviewed studies consistently present inclusive learning as a comprehensive institutional strategy that promotes educational equity, accessibility, belonging, and meaningful participation across diverse student populations. The findings further demonstrate that successful inclusion requires coordinated efforts involving institutional leadership, inclusive pedagogy, flexible curriculum design, and student support systems.

The Evolution of Inclusive Learning in Higher Education

The reviewed literature demonstrates a clear shift in how inclusion is understood within higher education. Earlier studies primarily associated inclusion with providing access for students with disabilities or historically underrepresented groups. More recent research, however, conceptualizes inclusion as an institutional commitment to creating learning environments where diversity is recognized, educational barriers are minimized, and all students are supported in achieving their academic potential. This transition reflects the growing recognition that educational quality depends not only on enrollment opportunities but also on equitable learning experiences throughout students' academic journeys.

Moriña (2019) describes inclusive higher education as an ongoing institutional transformation involving curriculum, teaching practices, student support services, and organizational culture. Similarly, Kefallinou (2020) emphasizes that inclusive education requires continuous efforts to identify and remove structural and pedagogical barriers that restrict participation. Chun and Evans (2023) further highlight the role of institutional leadership in embedding diversity, equity, and inclusion into strategic planning and organizational decision-making, indicating that inclusive learning has become a core institutional responsibility rather than an isolated educational initiative.

The findings therefore suggest that contemporary higher education increasingly views inclusion as a multidimensional educational philosophy that integrates accessibility, equity, diversity, and student participation into institutional practice.

Core Characteristics of Effective Inclusive Learning Environments

The reviewed studies consistently identify several characteristics that distinguish effective inclusive learning environments. Accessibility, educational equity, learner diversity, sense of belonging, and active participation emerge as interconnected

dimensions that collectively create supportive educational experiences. Rather than functioning independently, these dimensions reinforce one another to establish learning environments where students are encouraged to participate confidently regardless of their personal backgrounds or learning characteristics.

Li and Singh (2022) found that inclusive learning environments positively influence both student learning outcomes and motivational beliefs, demonstrating that inclusive classroom practices strengthen educational engagement beyond improving accessibility alone. Nieminen and Pesonen (2022) argue that fostering belonging requires universities to critically examine institutional practices that may unintentionally reproduce exclusion while promoting equal participation for all learners. Likewise, Hogan and Sathy (2022) emphasize that inclusive teaching strategies support educational equity by recognizing diverse student identities and designing learning experiences that accommodate multiple perspectives and learning needs.

These findings indicate that effective inclusive learning environments are characterized not merely by physical accessibility but by institutional cultures that value diversity, encourage participation, and promote equitable learning opportunities.

Institutional Practices Supporting Inclusive Learning

Another prominent theme concerns the institutional strategies used to implement inclusive learning across higher education. The reviewed literature demonstrates that successful inclusion depends on coordinated institutional practices involving curriculum design, instructional methods, faculty development, student support services, and organizational leadership. These approaches enable universities to establish educational systems that proactively address learner diversity rather than relying solely on individual accommodations.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is consistently identified as one of the most influential institutional approaches supporting inclusion. Coffman and Draper (2022) describe UDL as an instructional framework that promotes flexible course design capable of accommodating diverse learner characteristics through multiple means of engagement, representation, and assessment. Similarly, Sharma et al. (2023) demonstrate that applying UDL principles enables instructors to improve educational accessibility while maintaining academic quality. Stentiford and Koutsouris (2021) further emphasize that inclusive pedagogy encourages instructors to redesign teaching practices that maximize participation across increasingly diverse classrooms.

The reviewed studies also highlight the importance of institutional leadership and student support services in sustaining inclusive educational environments. Disability support units, mentoring programs, academic advising, and inclusive institutional policies collectively strengthen students' educational experiences while supporting long-term institutional commitment to educational equity. These findings demonstrate that inclusive learning is most effective when embedded throughout institutional systems rather than implemented solely within individual classrooms.

Educational Impact of Inclusive Learning Environments

The reviewed literature consistently demonstrates that inclusive learning environments generate educational outcomes that extend beyond improving accessibility. Inclusive educational practices contribute to stronger student engagement, enhanced academic confidence, increased persistence, and improved learning experiences by creating environments where students feel respected, supported, and able to participate fully in academic life. These outcomes suggest that inclusion functions as an important contributor to educational quality rather than solely as a mechanism for addressing educational inequality.

One of the most frequently reported outcomes is the development of students' sense of belonging. Students who perceive themselves as valued members of academic communities are more likely to participate actively in learning, establish positive relationships with peers and instructors, and remain committed to their educational goals. Kahu, Ashley, and Picton (2022) found that academic, interpersonal, and institutional belonging collectively influence students' adjustment to university and their willingness to engage in educational activities. Similarly, Meehan and Howells (2019) reported that developing a sense of belonging during the transition into higher education positively influences students' confidence, academic integration, and persistence throughout their university experience.

Inclusive learning environments also contribute to more equitable academic outcomes by reducing barriers that disproportionately affect underrepresented student populations. Moreu and Brauer (2022) found that inclusive teaching practices help reduce achievement gaps by creating learning experiences that accommodate diverse learner characteristics while maintaining high academic expectations. Likewise, Warren and Zargarpour (2021) demonstrated that educational equity initiatives provide underserved students with greater opportunities for academic participation and long-term educational attainment, highlighting the institutional value of inclusive educational strategies.

Beyond academic achievement, inclusive learning promotes positive psychological and social development among students. Learning environments characterized by accessibility, diversity, and respectful interaction encourage students to develop greater confidence, motivation, and willingness to engage with challenging learning activities. Li and Singh (2022) demonstrated that inclusive classroom environments positively influence both learning performance and motivational beliefs, suggesting that inclusive educational practices strengthen students' capacity to participate successfully in higher education. Collectively, these findings indicate that inclusive learning environments support holistic student development by integrating academic success with psychological well-being and social inclusion.

Future Directions for Inclusive Higher Education

The reviewed studies indicate that inclusive learning in higher education continues to evolve in response to technological innovation, changing student demographics, and

expanding institutional commitments to diversity and educational equity. Future developments increasingly emphasize the creation of sustainable and flexible educational systems capable of supporting diverse learners across both physical and digital learning environments. Rather than focusing solely on individual accommodations, current research advocates systemic approaches that integrate inclusion into institutional governance, curriculum design, and educational policy.

Digital inclusion has emerged as one of the most significant priorities for future inclusive higher education. As universities expand online, hybrid, and technology-supported learning, ensuring equitable access to digital resources and learning opportunities has become increasingly important. Gallagher, Najjuma, and Nambi (2023) highlight that meaningful digital inclusion requires attention to technological accessibility as well as broader social and institutional conditions influencing student participation. Similarly, Luic and Popovic (2022) found that research increasingly focuses on improving digital accessibility for students with disabilities through inclusive technological design and accessible educational resources.

Another emerging direction involves strengthening institutional capacity through leadership, faculty development, and inclusive organizational culture. The reviewed studies consistently emphasize that long-term educational inclusion depends upon institutional commitment rather than isolated instructional initiatives. Chun and Evans (2023) argue that higher education leaders play a critical role in establishing inclusive institutional cultures by integrating diversity, equity, and inclusion into strategic planning and educational governance. Likewise, Guberina (2023) suggests that culturally responsive pedagogy should become an integral component of faculty development to support increasingly diverse student populations.

The literature also identifies several areas requiring further investigation. Additional research is needed to evaluate the long-term effectiveness of inclusive learning across different cultural contexts, academic disciplines, and institutional settings. Furthermore, limited evidence currently exists regarding the influence of emerging technologies, artificial intelligence, and rapidly changing learning environments on inclusive educational practice. Petersson-Bloom and Holmqvist (2022) further note that more research is needed to identify effective institutional strategies for supporting specific student populations while maintaining educational quality and equity across diverse higher education systems.

Overall, the thematic synthesis demonstrates that inclusive learning has evolved into a comprehensive institutional framework that extends beyond accessibility toward sustainable educational transformation. Future progress will depend on universities' ability to integrate inclusive pedagogy, institutional leadership, technological innovation, and evidence-based educational policy into cohesive strategies that promote equitable participation and meaningful learning for all students.

5. | DISCUSSION

The findings of this review illustrate that inclusive learning environments have become an essential component of contemporary higher education. Rather than functioning solely as mechanisms for accommodating students with specific educational needs, inclusive learning environments represent a comprehensive institutional approach that promotes educational equity, accessibility, diversity, and meaningful participation. The thematic synthesis demonstrates that universities increasingly recognize inclusion as a strategic element of educational quality that supports both student success and institutional development.

One important insight emerging from this review is the evolution of inclusive learning from an access-oriented perspective toward a participation-oriented educational model. Earlier approaches focused primarily on increasing university access for underrepresented students, whereas contemporary perspectives emphasize creating learning environments where all students are able to participate, contribute, and succeed regardless of their backgrounds or individual characteristics. This shift reflects broader changes in higher education that recognize diversity as a valuable educational resource rather than a challenge requiring individual accommodation. Consequently, inclusion has become closely associated with institutional transformation rather than isolated support services.

The review also highlights that effective inclusive learning depends on coordinated institutional commitment. Inclusive teaching practices alone are insufficient unless supported by accessible curriculum design, institutional policies, leadership, faculty development, and comprehensive student support systems. The literature consistently indicates that successful universities integrate inclusion across multiple organizational levels, enabling equitable educational experiences that extend beyond individual classrooms. This finding reinforces the view that sustainable inclusion requires collaboration among academic leaders, instructors, student support professionals, and policymakers.

Another significant observation concerns the relationship between inclusive learning and student development. The reviewed studies demonstrate that inclusive learning environments strengthen students' sense of belonging, academic confidence, engagement, and persistence while simultaneously supporting equitable academic achievement. Rather than benefiting only specific student populations, inclusive educational practices improve learning experiences for the broader student community by encouraging flexible instruction, respectful interaction, and active participation. These findings suggest that inclusive learning contributes directly to educational excellence by creating environments that enable diverse learners to reach their academic potential.

The growing integration of Universal Design for Learning and inclusive pedagogy further illustrates the changing direction of higher education. These approaches encourage proactive instructional design that anticipates learner diversity rather than

relying on reactive accommodations after barriers emerge. Such educational practices support greater instructional flexibility while maintaining academic standards and promoting equitable participation. As higher education continues to adopt technology-enhanced learning, these principles become increasingly important for ensuring that digital learning environments remain accessible and inclusive.

Despite substantial progress, several challenges remain. Universities continue to encounter barriers related to institutional resources, faculty preparedness, policy implementation, technological accessibility, and the diverse educational needs of expanding student populations. Addressing these challenges requires continuous institutional investment in inclusive leadership, professional development, accessible technologies, and evidence-informed educational policies. Future research should also examine how inclusive learning can be sustained across different cultural contexts, academic disciplines, and rapidly evolving digital learning environments.

Overall, the findings indicate that inclusive learning environments should be understood as dynamic institutional ecosystems that integrate educational equity, accessibility, diversity, and student participation into everyday academic practice. Strengthening these environments will not only improve learning opportunities for diverse student populations but also enhance the overall quality, sustainability, and social responsibility of higher education.

6. | CONCLUSION

This study examined inclusive learning environments in higher education through a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) using the PRISMA 2020 framework. By synthesizing studies published between 2019 and 2023, the review explored the evolution of inclusive learning, its core dimensions, institutional implementation strategies, educational impacts, and emerging directions for future development.

The findings demonstrate that inclusive learning has evolved from an access-oriented educational approach toward a comprehensive institutional framework that emphasizes accessibility, educational equity, diversity, belonging, and meaningful participation. Effective inclusive learning environments are supported through coordinated institutional strategies, including Universal Design for Learning, inclusive pedagogy, faculty development, institutional leadership, and comprehensive student support services. These approaches collectively contribute to stronger student engagement, improved academic achievement, enhanced sense of belonging, and more equitable educational experiences.

The review also highlights that sustaining inclusive learning requires continuous institutional commitment and adaptation to emerging educational challenges. Technological change, digital accessibility, increasingly diverse student populations, and evolving educational policies require universities to develop flexible and evidence-based approaches that promote inclusion across both physical and digital learning environments. Institutional collaboration and long-term strategic planning therefore remain essential for maintaining inclusive educational systems.

Overall, inclusive learning environments represent a fundamental foundation for equitable and high-quality higher education. Universities should continue integrating inclusive principles into institutional governance, curriculum design, teaching practice, and student support systems to ensure that all learners have meaningful opportunities to participate and succeed. Future research should further investigate innovative institutional models, cross-cultural implementation strategies, and the role of emerging technologies in advancing inclusive learning within increasingly diverse higher education contexts.

Acknowledgement

We gratefully acknowledge the contributions of individuals who supported the completion of this article.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval and Originality Statement

Ethical approval was obtained for this study. The manuscript represents original work and has not been previously published, nor is it under consideration by another journal.

Data Disclosure Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

REFERENCES

- Chun, E., & Evans, A. (2023). *The department chair as transformative diversity leader: Building inclusive learning environments in higher education*. Taylor & Francis.
- Cervantez, D. O. O. (2023). Educational equity: A conceptual theoretical analysis from the context of higher education. *LATAM: Revista Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades*, 4(1), 61.
- Coffman, S., & Draper, C. (2022). Universal design for learning in higher education: A concept analysis. *Teaching and Learning in Nursing*, 17(1), 36–41.
- Gallagher, M., Najjuma, R., & Nambi, R. (2023). Bidi bidi creativity: The liminality of digital inclusion for refugees in Ugandan higher education. *Social Inclusion*, 11(3), 309–319.
- Guberina, T. (2023). Cultivating inclusive learning environments: Incorporating diversity through culturally responsive pedagogy. *Social Science Chronicle*, 2(1), 1–14.
- Hogan, K. A., & Sathy, V. (2022). Inclusive teaching strategies for promoting equity in college classrooms. In *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice* (pp. 505–510). Routledge.
- Kahu, E. R., Ashley, N., & Picton, C. (2022). Exploring the complexity of first-year student belonging in higher education: Familiarity, interpersonal, and academic belonging. *Student Success*, 13(2), 10–20.
- Kefallinou, A. (2020). Understanding the value of inclusive education and its implementation: A review of the literature. *Prospects*.
- Kolyda, F. (2023). Fostering a growth mindset in higher education for inclusive learning for all. *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*, (27).
- Li, Y., & Singh, C. (2022). Inclusive learning environments can improve student learning and motivational beliefs. *Physical Review Physics Education Research*, 18(2), 020147.
- Linnenluecke, M. K., Marrone, M., & Singh, A. K. (2020). Conducting systematic literature reviews and bibliometric analyses. *Australian Journal of Management*, 45(2), 175–194.
- Lopez-Gavira, R., Moriña, A., & Morgado, B. (2021). Challenges to inclusive education at the university: The perspective of students and disability support service staff. *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research*, 34(3), 292–304.
- Meehan, C., & Howells, K. (2019). In search of the feeling of belonging in higher education: Undergraduate students' transition into higher education.

-
- Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 43(10), 1376–1390.
- Moriña, A. (2019). Inclusive education in higher education: Challenges and opportunities. In *Postsecondary Educational Opportunities for Students with Special Education Needs* (pp. 3–17).
- Moreu, G., & Brauer, M. (2022). Inclusive teaching practices in post-secondary education: What instructors can do to reduce the achievement gaps at US colleges. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 34(1), 170–182.
- Nieminen, J. H., & Pesonen, H. V. (2022). Politicising inclusive learning environments: How to foster belonging and challenge ableism? *Higher Education Research & Development*, 41(6), 2020–2033.
- Page, M. J., McKenzie, J. E., Bossuyt, P. M., Boutron, I., Hoffmann, T. C., Mulrow, C. D., et al. (2021). The PRISMA 2020 statement: An updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews. *BMJ*, 372, n71.
- Petersson-Bloom, L., & Holmqvist, M. (2022). Strategies in supporting inclusive education for autistic students: A systematic review of qualitative research results. *Autism & Developmental Language Impairments*, 7, 23969415221123429.
- Sharma, A., Thakur, K., Kapoor, D. S., & Singh, K. J. (2023). Designing inclusive learning environments: Universal design for learning in practice. In *The Impact and Importance of Instructional Design in the Educational Landscape* (pp. 24–61). IGI Global.
- Snyder, H. (2019). Literature review as a research methodology: An overview and guidelines. *Journal of Business Research*, 104, 333–339.
- Stentiford, L., & Koutsouris, G. (2021). What are inclusive pedagogies in higher education? A systematic scoping review. *Studies in Higher Education*, 46(11), 2245–2261.
- Warren, S. R., & Zargarpour, N. (2021). Taking responsibility for educational equity in higher education: A college attainment program for underserved young women. *Journal of Higher Education Theory & Practice*, 21(9).