Bridging the Digital Divide: Inclusive Digital Transformation for Differently Abled Students in Sri Lankan Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This study critically examines the potential for inclusive digital transformation within Sri Lankan higher education (HE), specifically focusing on addressing the persistent inequalities that characterize the digital divide for students with disabilities. The rapid, global shift to online education, significantly accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, exposed critical gaps in technological infrastructure, digital literacy, and pedagogical inclusivity within the nation's universities. Employing a qualitative, interpretive research design grounded in constructivist and phenomenological paradigms, this research explored the lived experiences of 20 differently abled undergraduates and five academic staff members across four public Sri Lankan universities. Data were systematically gathered through semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis. The findings reveal that while digital transformation ensured educational continuity during crises, it concurrently exacerbated disparities concerning accessibility, the availability of assistive technology, and institutional responsiveness. Key systemic barriers identified include a pervasive lack of policy coherence, limited faculty preparedness regarding inclusive digital pedagogy, and insufficient institutional accountability. Conversely, the study documents students' remarkable resilience, adaptive agency, and strong peer collaboration as powerful forces that help navigate otherwise exclusionary systems. The research emphatically argues that effectively bridging the digital divide requires integrating Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles and Digital Equity Theory into HE policy, pedagogy, and operational practice. By systematically institutionalizing inclusive digital design and proactively fostering comprehensive attitudinal change, Sri Lanka can achieve equitable and sustainable access to higher education for all learners.

Keywords: Digital Divide, Higher Education, Inclusive Education, Universal Design for Learning, Students with Disabilities, Education for Differently Abled Students, COVID-19 Pandemic.

INTRODUCTION

The digitalization of higher education has fundamentally reshaped how knowledge is created, disseminated, and experienced across the globe. While this technological innovation offers distinct advantages, such as greater flexibility and broader reach, it has also accentuated deep-seated social and educational inequalities (Wedikandage, 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic catalyzed an unprecedented and often rushed shift toward online learning, compelling universities worldwide to adopt digital platforms, such as Learning Management Systems (LMS), Zoom, and Google Classroom, as their primary mode of instruction. For many students, this rapid transformation enabled continued access to education, but for others, particularly those with disabilities, it imposed new, challenging forms of exclusion.

In Sri Lanka, the abrupt transition to digital learning highlighted both the promise and the pitfalls of educational modernization. (Wedikandage, 2024) Although digital tools have become commonplace, digital participation remains notably uneven. The pandemic immediately exposed structural inequities in infrastructure, training, and access to materials. While students from well-resourced, urban backgrounds adapted relatively easily, differently abled students and those from rural or low-income families struggled significantly to access or benefit meaningfully from online education. Students without adequate technological devices, those facing affordability issues with connectivity, and those living in remote areas with limited internet coverage were often unintentionally excluded from the digital learning process.

While several studies have examined the digital divide in higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic, limited research has specifically explored the intersection between digital transformation and disability inclusion in Sri Lankan universities. Most existing studies focus on general access to online learning rather than the lived experiences of students with disabilities. This study, therefore, contributes to the literature by examining inclusive digital transformation through a phenomenological lens, integrating Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and Digital Equity Theory to analyse accessibility challenges in Sri Lankan higher education.

The Digital Divide: A Multidimensional Challenge

The concept of the “digital divide” has evolved beyond the simple measurement of access to connectivity and devices. The digital divide is defined as the gap between the "haves" and the "have-nots" in terms of limited, inaccessible, or unaffordable internet access compared to those who are well-equipped. Van Dijk (2020) conceptualizes the divide as a multi-dimensional phenomenon operating across three critical levels: access (the physical availability of technology), skills (the users’ capacity to engage meaningfully with the technology), and outcomes (the derived educational benefits). For differently abled students, the divide operates across all three dimensions, often worsened by existing social stigma, attitudinal barriers, and severely inadequate institutional support.

The negative consequences of rapid digital transformation have become particularly pronounced for historically vulnerable populations, minorities, and socio-economically deprived groups, demonstrating that the same information technology (IT) that positively influences some can negatively affect others. The pandemic is consequently worsening these pre-existing societal inequalities. Furthermore, a strong correlation exists between socioeconomic status and the digital divide in distance learning, with statistically significant associations between parental education levels and the ability to provide students with support during the pandemic.

Policy and Conceptual Frameworks

Globally, the foundational discourse on inclusive digital education is shaped by Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and Digital Equity Theory. UDL, as defined by CAST (2022), emphasizes pedagogical flexibility through providing multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression to accommodate learner diversity effectively. Digital Equity Theory (Robinson et al., 2022) complements this by asserting that technological participation must be equitable in both opportunity and outcome. These frameworks jointly highlight that access alone does not guarantee inclusion; instead, pedagogy, institutional culture, and institutional structures must align to support diverse learners. Cooper (2006) also suggests that to overcome barriers, issues related to online material accessibility, pedagogy, organization, and culture must be addressed to effect necessary organizational change.

Despite Sri Lanka's National Policy on Disability (2016) and commitments to Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4 and 10), which articulate principles of equality and accessibility, practical implementation remains highly inconsistent. While Disability Support Units (DSUs) exist, they often lack the financial and administrative autonomy needed. Furthermore, there is a critical absence or fragmentation of formal digital accessibility policies, and faculty rarely receive systematic training in inclusive digital pedagogy. The fundamental rights of disabled people include the Right to Education, Right to Humanization, and Right to Empowerment. Crucially, while India included disabilities in its COVID gazette, the Sri Lankan COVID act has not included disabled persons, violating the principle of "Nothing about us Without us". This suggests a lack of sensitivity by the government, which should recognize that it is a state responsibility to include all disabled people when policymaking.

Despite the increasing adoption of digital learning technologies in Sri Lankan universities, empirical research examining digital accessibility for students with disabilities remains limited. Existing studies primarily focus on general online learning challenges rather than disability-specific barriers within digital platforms. Consequently, there is a critical need to understand how differently abled students experience digital transformation and what institutional strategies can support inclusive higher education environments.

Comparative Context and Research Aim

The challenges observed in Sri Lanka mirror those in other developing nations, such as Bangladesh and India, which continue to struggle with infrastructure inequities, limited policy coherence, and insufficient staff training. In contrast, countries such as Japan and Australia have institutionalized inclusive digital education through mandated accessibility standards, regular audits, and mandatory faculty development.

Against this backdrop, the primary aim of this study is to explore how inclusive digital transformation can bridge the digital divide for students with disabilities in Sri Lankan higher education. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Examine how differently abled students experience digital learning environments.
2. Identify institutional, pedagogical, and attitudinal factors influencing digital inclusion or exclusion.
3. Propose strategies to enhance inclusive digital transformation through policy, capacity building, and Universal Design for Learning principles.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative, interpretive research design. This design is firmly grounded in the constructivist paradigm, which views knowledge as socially constructed through individuals' lived experiences. A phenomenological approach guided the inquiry, seeking to uncover the specific meanings that differently abled students and educators attach to their experiences within Sri Lankan universities. This approach was necessary to identify the specific challenges students with various impairments face in accessing higher education opportunities.

Participants and Setting

The research was conducted across four public universities located in the Western Province, selected to represent a diversity of academic disciplines and technological capacities. Participants included 20 differently abled undergraduates encompassing visual, auditory, and mobility impairments. Additionally, five university staff members participated, including lecturers, ICT coordinators, and DSU officers. Purposive and snowball sampling were utilized to recruit individuals with direct experience in digital learning and accessibility challenges.

Data Collection

Data were primarily collected through semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis. Semi-structured interviews provided the necessary flexibility to explore participants’ personal experiences while maintaining consistency across key themes, including accessibility, pedagogy, institutional support, and emotional well-being. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were conducted in either Sinhala or English. For hearing-impaired participants, interpreters and written communication methods were used to ensure their full participation.

Documentary analysis involved reviewing institutional policy documents, DSU reports, and Ministry of Education circulars. This analysis enabled triangulation between participants' lived experiences and the institutions' formal policy discourse.

Data Analysis

Data were rigorously analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The process involved six stages: familiarisation, coding, generating initial themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and synthesising findings into coherent narratives. Three major themes and two sub-themes emerged from the analysis: Technological access and assistive readiness, Pedagogical inclusion and instructional flexibility, and Institutional accountability and psychosocial resilience. Participants provided informed consent, and

confidentiality was assured; pseudonyms were used to protect identities. Special care was taken to ensure accessibility during interviews and to maintain sensitivity to participants' emotional contexts.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The qualitative findings reveal that the immediate shift to digital learning, while ensuring continuity, exposed profound structural vulnerabilities and created new forms of marginalization within the HE system.

1. Technological Access and Assistive Readiness

Despite the efforts of Sri Lankan universities to digitize content, technological inclusion remains insufficient and often superficial. While most participants had the necessary devices (smartphones, laptops), accessibility was limited by poorly designed materials and incompatible systems.

A visually impaired participant starkly highlighted the critical distinction between having access to technology and having access facilitated by technology: "I have all the devices, but I cannot access the notes. My screen reader says only 'graphic.' It means there is something there, but I cannot read it". Students routinely encountered barriers, including non-interoperable platforms, image-based text, and a pervasive lack of captioning. Furthermore, faculty interviews confirmed the issue of skill inequality; one lecturer admitted, "We upload materials quickly to the LMS, but few of us know how to make them accessible". This deficit aligns with Van Dijk's (2020) framework, confirming that the digital divide encompasses skill and outcome inequalities, not just infrastructural gaps.

While the home-based learning environment was beneficial for physically impaired students who avoided mobility issues, the online environment presented new acute problems:

- **Hearing-Impaired Students:** These students were identified as the most vulnerable persons in online education. Many do not know sign language, having taught it through lip-reading in regular schools, which has become extremely difficult to maintain online. Consequently, many deaf students did not attend online classes.

- **Visual/Low Vision Students:** While blind students benefited from reduced mobility issues, they lost the support of colleagues they relied on in onsite classes. Low-vision students experienced detrimental effects, including worsening vision due to longer screen time during the COVID period.

- **Students with Specific Injuries:** Students with learning disabilities, brain damage, spiral code damage, and nerve injuries found it very difficult to endure prolonged screen time or touch a device for an extended period.

Moreover, access barriers were compounded by a lack of essential resources. Students often lacked special devices, which universities typically provide only for examinations.

2. Pedagogical Inclusion and Universal Design for Learning

Pedagogy proved to be a critical area of failure, as many educators treated the transition as a technological adaptation rather than a pedagogical transformation. Hearing-impaired students reported severe difficulties following live lectures without captions or interpreters. One student conveyed the resulting academic disengagement:

"When the teacher plays a video without captions, I just stare at the screen. It is not learning—it is waiting".

Blind students experienced similar challenges; they could only listen, making it difficult to read presentations, respond (e.g., by raising a hand), or understand shared whiteboards. Even when sharing a presentation for assessment, conveying ideas was difficult due to the slides.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL), with its mandate for multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression (CAST, 2022), offers the necessary flexibility. However, the institutional reality is that Sri Lankan universities rarely train educators in inclusive digital pedagogy. A lecturer noted the gap: “We want to help, but we do not know how. There is no training on UDL or accessibility. We do our best”. This lack of institutional training perpetuates “retrofit inclusion”, addressing accessibility reactively, after exclusion has occurred (Al-Azawei & Serenelli, 2023).

Furthermore, mandatory courses like basic mathematics, IT, and English pose a significant adverse effect on disabled students, as their prior knowledge in these subjects is often very low. The situation is worsened by the fact that lecturers are often unaware of how many disabled students are in their class or the type of disabilities they have.

3. Institutional Accountability and Governance

Institutional responsibility for ensuring inclusion is highly fragmented. DSUs are under-resourced and lack the authority to enforce standards. As one DSU officer lamented: “We can recommend accessible materials but cannot enforce them. Accessibility is treated as an extra, not as essential”. This systemic weakness is consistent with UNESCO’s (2023) Global Education Monitoring Report, which found that weak accountability mechanisms are a significant barrier to educational inclusion. Moreover, there are still no policies for disabled students, even in the Quality Assurance Committee.

The categorization of disability in Sri Lanka relies solely on medical information. This contrasts sharply with frameworks like the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in America, which categorizes disability based on medical reports, functionality, day-to-day activities, and participation in education.

This institutional failure directly translates into limited career progression. One participant noted that despite achieving a first-class honours degree and a gold medal, their disability blocked them from a lecturer post, stating, "They are focused on my disability, not the ability". Disabled students face significant hurdles in pursuing white-collar jobs, even after graduating with honours.

Structural and financial barriers are also profound. The cost of living and travelling for disabled students is often remarkably high. Furthermore, in Sri Lanka, disabled students can generally pursue higher education only through the Arts stream, as they lack the facilities and equipment to study Maths, Science, Geography, or Economics at the university level. This is starkly different from Japan, where disabled students engage in Science and Mathematics using new technologies, such as colour-changing sounds for experiments and embossed graphs.

4. Psychosocial Resilience and Social Exclusion

Despite the systemic shortcomings, students exhibited notable psychosocial resilience and agency. They formed effective peer networks to transcribe lectures, share assistive software, and provide moral support. The necessity of this reliance was apparent: “We support each other because we cannot depend on the system”.

However, the online environment also fostered isolation. While blind students appreciated the freedom from travel, the psychological toll was evident: “Online learning freed me from travel, but sometimes I felt invisible; nobody saw my struggle”. This duality reflects the “post-digital paradox,” where technology simultaneously enables and marginalises learners (Selwyn, 2022).

Attitudinal barriers are deeply rooted, with society often viewing disability as a 'sin' and offering help primarily to gain merit. This belief makes it extremely difficult for disabled students to become independent and leads to reduced self-esteem. Disabled students are often isolated and excluded from extracurricular activities, such as sports or music. Furthermore, they often gather among themselves rather than mixing with normal students.

The lack of legal protection during crises further highlights sensitive issues. Even two years after the pandemic, no steps had been taken to improve nationwide signal coverage. Furthermore, laws relating to the rights of persons with disabilities have not been enacted due to political inaction, even following the 2016 UN Charter. There is also currently no mechanism for disabled students to complain about their rights.

Limitations of the Study

This study provides important insights into the experiences of differently abled students in Sri Lankan higher education; however, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample size was relatively small, comprising 20 students and 5 academic staff members from four public universities. Although the phenomenological design prioritizes depth over breadth, the limited number of participants may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Second, the study focused exclusively on public universities in the Western Province, excluding private universities and technical institutes that may present different digital accessibility contexts. Third, the findings are primarily based on self-reported experiences from interviews, which may be subject to recall bias or subjective perceptions. Finally, the study employed a qualitative design without quantitative measures, which limits the ability to statistically compare accessibility gaps across institutions. Future research should therefore adopt mixed-method approaches and broader institutional sampling to enhance generalizability and policy applicability.

Future Research Directions

Future research should expand the scope of this study by including private universities and technical institutes across different regions of Sri Lanka. Mixed-method approaches combining qualitative insights with quantitative accessibility assessments would provide stronger evidence for policy development. Longitudinal studies could also explore how digital accessibility evolves over time as universities adopt inclusive technologies and Universal Design for Learning practices.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study affirms that achieving inclusive digital transformation for differently abled students in Sri Lankan higher education demands a profound paradigm shift from reactive accommodation to proactive, mandatory inclusion. Although the nation has achieved progress in digitalizing its systems, inclusivity remains peripheral to core institutional planning. The education system, to be effective, must focus on the productive integration of disabled persons into the labour force, ensuring that their education is not wasted and that they do not become a burden on their parents' post-graduation.

To foster digital justice and guarantee that education is treated as a right, not a privilege, the following strategic recommendations are proposed, drawing comprehensively on the qualitative and contextual findings:

1. Systemic Policy and Accountability Reform

- **National Digital Accessibility Framework:** The University Grants Commission (UGC) must establish a National Digital Accessibility Framework mandating compliance-based audits and institutional accountability, moving accessibility from an optional "extra" to an essential standard.
- **Decentralized Responsibility and Legal Action:** Responsibility for disabled people must be distributed across every relevant ministry (education, health, welfare), not concentrated solely in one. Laws relating to the rights of persons with disabilities must be enacted swiftly.
- **Infrastructure Mandates:** The government must build necessary physical infrastructure for accessibility, including accessible buildings, public washrooms, and safe infrastructure for walking alone on roads (e.g., during pandemic regulations). Signal strength must be improved nationwide.
- **Data and Categorization:** A database containing comprehensive details on students' requirements should be created and shared across departments and welfare centers. Disability categorization should shift from relying solely on medical reports to including functionality, day-to-day activities, and participation in education, aligning with IDEA principles.

2. Capacity Building and Pedagogical Reform

- **Mandatory UDL Training:** Continuous Professional Development (CPD) programs focused on Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and accessible digital pedagogy must be mandatory and systematic for all faculty members and instructional designers.

- Instructional Flexibility: University teaching should shift toward a blended approach. Lecturers must be required to provide accessible materials (Word documents, audio content) before lectures to support blind and hearing-impaired students. Alternatives must be created for teaching, learning, and assessment processes for each specific disability.

- **Specific Skills and Curriculum:** Dedicated classes should be introduced to improve students' knowledge in IT, basic mathematics, and English, which are currently mandatory courses that severely disadvantage them. The education system should adopt the Individualised Education Program (IEP) model, which is individualised and regularly reviews students' skills to guide career development.

- **Technological Investment:** Institutions must invest in and develop open-access repositories for accessible materials in both Sinhala and Tamil. They must subsidize or provide essential assistive tools, such as the digital braille system, despite its high cost. Libraries must provide access to audiobooks and systems such as **DAISY (Digital Accessible Information System)**.

3. Institutional Support and Cultural Change

- **Empowering DSUs and Officers:** Disability Support Units (DSUs) require adequate funding and administrative authority. A trained "disability officer" should be present in each university department to assist disabled students. Good interaction and knowledge sharing among inter-university disabled centres are essential.

- **Career and Vocational Training:** Disabled students should be equipped with new technology and training sessions. Like in Japan, career coaching should be integrated, and institutes must be career-friendly to facilitate their transition to white-collar jobs. Vocational training mechanisms must be established for students with mild to moderate disabilities who possess the strength and aptitude for computer and technical skills but are currently neglected.

- **Attitudinal and Social Inclusion:** Lessons should be included in the school curriculum, particularly in civic education, to educate the public on how to be concerned and how to interact with disabled people. Both academic and non-academic staff need training on how to accommodate and interact sensitively with disabled students. Universities should provide opportunities for socialisation, including sports such as Paralympics and blind chess, and encourage mixing with non-disabled students.

- **Financial Support:** Scholarship programs are vital for disabled students to prevent poor parents from stopping their schooling.

By moving from a culture of treating disabled students as 'regular students' in lectures (which severely affects hard-of-hearing students) to an integrated, supported system, Sri Lanka can capitalize on the potential of its most fluent and clever disabled students. As seen in countries like Australia, being disabled can be an advantage when special government support is guaranteed, emphasizing the need for systemic support over individual resilience. Inclusive digital transformation, therefore, requires human commitment, systemic reform, and a shared vision of education as a right.

The findings of this study provide important policy implications for Sri Lanka’s higher education sector. Universities must transition from reactive disability accommodations toward systemic digital accessibility policies that embed Universal Design for Learning principles across curriculum design, digital infrastructure, and faculty training. Implementing national accessibility standards, conducting institutional accessibility audits, and investing in assistive technologies will be essential steps toward ensuring equitable participation of students with disabilities in digital higher education environments.

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