

Universal Design for Learning and Inclusive Assessment for Assessment Equity among Learners with Disabilities: A PRISMA Informed Systematic Review

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ABSTRACT

Assessment continues to function as a structural barrier to equitable participation for learners with disabilities, even in education systems formally committed to inclusive practice. Tasks, formats, conditions, and scoring approaches designed around an assumed “average” learner may produce exclusion not by intention, but by design. This PRISMA-informed systematic review examines peer-reviewed evidence on Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and inclusive assessment frameworks as approaches to improving assessment equity for learners with disabilities across primary, secondary, and higher education settings. Six structured search queries were conducted using scholarly retrieval tools to identify peer-reviewed English-language sources published between 2014 and 2025. Sources were screened for relevance and eligibility, and extracted data were analysed using thematic synthesis. Thirteen sources met the inclusion criteria, including systematic reviews, a meta-analysis, a meta-ethnographic review, primary empirical studies, and conceptual papers. Five themes were identified: UDL as a proactive framework for reducing assessment barriers; movement from individual accommodation models toward universally designed assessment; assessment as a continuing site of exclusion in learners' lived experience; persistent institutional, training, and resourcing barriers; and the promise and limits of technology-enhanced and online assessment. The review concludes that UDL and inclusive assessment frameworks are complementary but unevenly implemented. Genuine assessment equity requires structural, policy-level, and cultural change alongside task-level redesign, sustained educator preparation, and active partnership with learners with disabilities in assessment design.

Keywords: Universal Design for Learning (UDL); inclusive assessment; disability; assessment equity; special education; PRISMA informed systematic review.

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has become a stated policy commitment across most national education systems, reinforced internationally by instruments such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which frames education as a right to be realised without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity (United Nations, 2006). Yet placing learners with disabilities in mainstream classrooms does not, by itself, guarantee equitable participation in the activities that determine academic progression, certification, and self-understanding as a learner. Among these activities, assessment occupies a particularly powerful and comparatively under-examined position. Assessment regulates who is recognised as competent, who progresses, and whose knowledge counts as valid evidence of learning. Where assessment tasks, formats, timings, and environments are designed around an implicit ‘average’ learner, they can function as a structural barrier to inclusion even when instructional practice has been substantially adapted.

This problem has global relevance. Across high-income and lower-resourced education systems alike, governments have committed to inclusive education targets, yet large-scale and classroom-level assessment

practices have generally lagged behind instructional reform. Two related but distinct bodies of scholarship have emerged in response. The first is Universal Design for Learning (UDL), a framework calling for curricula, materials, and assessments to be designed from the outset to accommodate learner variability through multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression (CAST, 2024; Meyer, Rose, & Gordon, 2014). The second is a more recent and more explicitly socio-political strand of scholarship on inclusive assessment, which questions whether procedural fixes whether universal design features or individual accommodations are sufficient to address the deeper ways in which assessment can produce disablement and exclusion (Nieminen, 2024a, 2024b; Tai et al., 2023).

Despite the growth of both literatures, few reviews have explicitly brought Universal Design for Learning and inclusive assessment scholarship into direct comparison to examine their respective contributions to assessment equity for learners with disabilities across primary, secondary, and higher education settings. This gap limits the availability of integrated evidence capable of informing assessment policy, instructional practice, and future research. Therefore, this PRISMA-informed systematic review synthesises the available peer-reviewed literature on UDL and inclusive assessment frameworks in relation to assessment equity for learners with disabilities.

The review was guided by the following question:

What does the peer-reviewed literature report regarding the contribution of Universal Design for Learning and inclusive assessment frameworks to assessment equity for learners with disabilities across educational settings?

METHOD

Design

This study employed a systematic literature review design to synthesise empirical, review-level, and theoretically substantive literature relating to Universal Design for Learning (UDL), inclusive assessment, disability, and assessment equity. The review was informed by the PRISMA 2020 (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) reporting guidelines (Page et al., 2021) to enhance transparency in the identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and reporting of sources. Since the review sought to examine both empirical evidence and conceptual developments within the field, eligible sources included empirical studies, evidence syntheses, and theoretically substantive conceptual papers.

Search Strategy

Six topic-based searches were conducted in April 2026 using structured combinations of free-text search terms relating to Universal Design for Learning, inclusive assessment, disability, assessment accommodations, student experience, online learning, and assessment equity. Searches were undertaken through scholarly retrieval tools indexing peer-reviewed literature published in English between 2014 and 2025. The search strategy was designed to capture literature addressing UDL, assessment design, disability inclusion, assessment accommodations, student voice, and technology-enhanced assessment. Records identified through the searches were screened against predefined eligibility criteria, and the study selection process is summarised in Figure 1.

Eligibility Criteria

Inclusion criteria applied at all screening stages were: (a) peer-reviewed journal articles or scholarly book chapters; (b) publications in English between 2014 and 2025; (c) study types including systematic reviews, meta-analyses, meta-ethnographic reviews, primary empirical studies reporting original data on disability and assessment, and conceptual papers making a substantive theoretical contribution to inclusive assessment or Universal Design for Learning; (d) direct relevance to assessment equity or assessment practice for learners with disabilities in primary, secondary, or higher education settings; and (e) bibliographic information that could be independently verified. Foundational sources predating the search period, including Meyer, Rose, and Gordon (2014) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006), were retained as background and theoretical references but were not included in the final synthesis. Exclusion

criteria were: (a) non-peer-reviewed materials, including blogs, newsletters, opinion pieces, and unreviewed preprints; (b) sources in which disability and assessment were not central to the study; (c) publications for which bibliographic details could not be independently verified; and (d) sources published in languages other than English.

Screening Process

The search and screening process followed the four PRISMA stages of identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion and is summarised in Figure 1. Across the six topic-based searches, 50 records were retrieved in total. Following manual removal of duplicate records, 35 unique sources remained. These records were screened at title and abstract level against the inclusion criteria. Twenty-one records were excluded because they were outside the scope of the review, were not peer reviewed, or did not meet the publication date requirements. Fourteen records proceeded to full-text eligibility assessment. One source was excluded because its bibliographic details could not be independently verified. The remaining thirteen sources met all inclusion criteria and were included in the final thematic synthesis.

Figure 1. PRISMA-informed flow diagram of the search and screening process

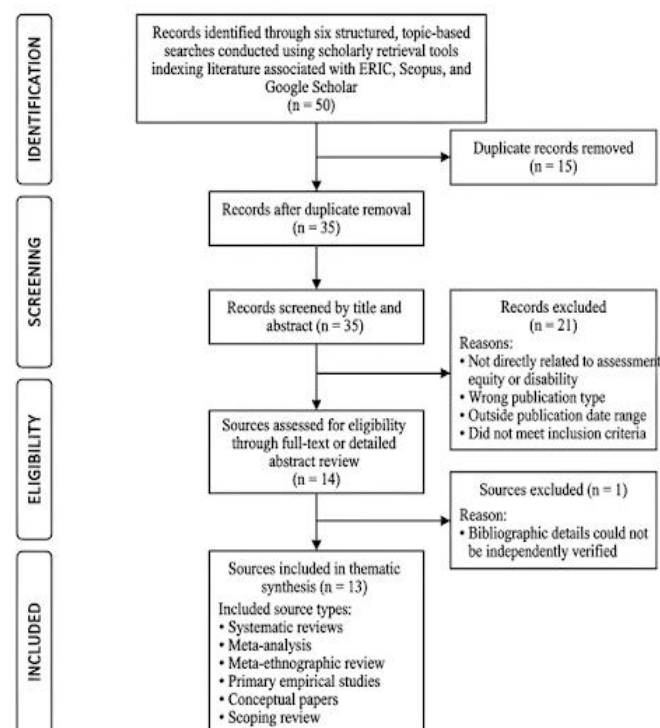


Figure 1. PRISMA-informed flow diagram illustrating the identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion of sources in the thematic synthesis ($n = 13$).

Data Extraction

For each included source, the following information was extracted: author(s) and year of publication, study type, educational context, sample or corpus size where applicable, thematic focus, and key findings relevant to assessment equity for learners with disabilities. Extracted information was organised to facilitate comparison across studies and to support thematic synthesis of the evidence.

Data Analysis

A thematic synthesis approach was used to analyse the included literature. The process involved repeated reading of the selected sources, identification of recurring concepts, and coding of findings related to assessment equity, Universal Design for Learning, inclusive assessment, learner participation, institutional factors, and technology-enhanced assessment. Related codes were grouped into broader categories and refined through comparison across studies. This process resulted in the development of five cross-cutting themes that form the basis of the findings presented in Section 3.

RESULTS

Thirteen sources met the inclusion criteria and were included in the thematic synthesis. The included studies comprised systematic reviews, a meta-analysis, a meta-ethnographic review, primary empirical research, conceptual papers, and a scoping review. Collectively, the studies represented primary, secondary, higher education, online learning, and cross-sector contexts. The diversity of study designs enabled examination of both the empirical evidence supporting assessment equity and the conceptual frameworks informing inclusive assessment practice.

Table 1. Characteristics and key contributions of the thirteen sources included in the thematic synthesis (n = 13)

Author(s) & Year	Study Type	Level / Context	Sample /Corpus	Key Contribution to Assessment Equity
AlRawi & AlKahtani (2021)	Systematic review	K–12 / higher education; Saudi Arabia + international	7 studies (2008–2018)	Positive but uneven evidence for UDL impact on students with intellectual disabilities
Almeqdad et al. (2023)	Systematic review & meta-analysis	K–12 + higher education; international	13 studies (2015–2021)	Overall positive, large effect (effect size = 3.56) of UDL on learner outcomes; considerable heterogeneity evident across studies
Bray et al. (2024)	Systematic literature review	Secondary (second level); international	15 studies (technology-in-UDL literature)	Uneven uptake of UDL technology; teacher preparation and resourcing are critical
Zhang et al. (2024)	Systematic literature review	PreK–12; international	32 studies (1999–2023)	Fidelity of implementation and conceptual clarity as persistent barriers
Yang et al. (2024)	Systematic review	Higher education / online; international	Online UDL literature (Distance Education, 45(1), 23–59)	Growing but methodologically uneven evidence base for universal design in online assessment
Utami, Ghufon & Ishartiwi (2025)	Systematic review (PRISMA)	Higher education (online); Indonesia + international	14 studies from 360 records (Scopus, ScienceDirect, ERIC)	Gap in special-education-specific evidence for UDL in virtual assessment; professional development urgently needed
Tai et al. (2023)	Conceptual / review	Higher education; international	Literature synthesis	Argues for moving beyond simple disability categories toward diversity-aware assessment design; rethinks contemporary strategies in assessment design
Nieminen (2024a)	Conceptual paper	Higher education; international	Literature review	Assessment for Inclusion (AfI) framework: five principles rethinking accommodations, anti-ableist work, celebration of human diversity, student partnership, and interdependence going beyond procedural accommodation

Nieminen (2024b)	Conceptual paper	Higher education; international	Theoretical	Proposes inclusive assessment as a structural paradox organised around three central tensions: diversity vs. hierarchies; uniformity vs. diversity; individualism vs. interdependence requiring more than task-level redesign
Nieminen, Moriña & Biagiotti (2024)	Meta-ethnographic review	Higher education; international	42 studies (2010–2022); 868 participants	Assessment is a primary barrier to inclusion; must be understood as an identity and belonging issue
Filippou, Acquah & Bengs (2025)	Systematic literature review	Higher education; international	43 studies (2001–2021)	Flexible assessment critical to inclusion; constrained by training and resourcing gaps
Nieminen (2025)	Primary empirical study	Higher education; Finland	139 survey respondents + 9 narrative interview participants (students with disabilities in Finnish higher education)	Students' own voices call for flexibility, choice, and authentic partnership in assessment design
Young & Clerke (2024)	Scoping review	K–12; international	Qualitative education research literature	Students with disabilities are still more often subjects of research than participants; partnership models needed

UDL As a Proactive Framework for Reducing Assessment Barriers

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) views assessment as a means of obtaining valid evidence of learning while minimising barriers created by the assessment process itself (CAST, 2024). Across the studies included in this review, UDL was generally associated with improved access to learning opportunities for learners with disabilities. AlRawi and AlKahtani (2021) found encouraging results for students with intellectual disabilities, although the studies included in their review varied considerably in design and quality. Likewise, Almeqdad et al. (2023) reported an overall positive effect of UDL across educational settings, but the magnitude of these effects differed across studies.

A recurring observation in the literature was that assessment has received less attention than instruction within UDL research. Many studies focused on participation, engagement, and access to learning, with fewer examining assessment practices directly. Bray et al. (2024) noted that the use of technology to support UDL depended heavily on teacher knowledge and available resources. Zhang et al. (2024) similarly reported challenges related to inconsistent application of UDL principles and differing interpretations of the framework. Although the findings are broadly favourable, the literature provides stronger support for UDL as an instructional approach than as a well-established model for assessment redesign. More assessment-focused research is therefore needed.

From Individual Accommodation to Universally Designed Assessment

Assessment accommodations have traditionally been used to address barriers experienced by learners with disabilities. In many educational settings, access to these accommodations depends on formal disclosure of a disability and approval through institutional procedures. Some researchers have suggested that such arrangements can create additional challenges because support becomes available only after barriers have already been encountered.

Tai et al. (2023) proposed that assessment should recognise learner diversity as an expected feature of education rather than as an exception requiring separate processes. Nieminen (2024a) advanced this discussion through the Assessment for Inclusion (AfI) framework, which places participation, recognition, and inclusion at the centre of assessment practice. Within this framework, assessment is viewed not only as a means of evaluating achievement but also as a factor shaping students' educational experiences.

According to Nieminen (2024a), inclusive assessment involves reducing dependence on formal accommodation procedures, recognising different ways of demonstrating learning, and increasing student involvement in assessment decisions. Findings reported by Nieminen (2025) reflected similar concerns. Students with disabilities highlighted the importance of flexibility, opportunities for choice, and greater involvement in decisions affecting assessment. Many also preferred arrangements that reduced the need to repeatedly seek individual adjustments.

The studies included in this review generally supported assessment practices that consider learner variability during assessment design. Rather than relying primarily on adjustments introduced after difficulties arise, inclusive approaches seek to incorporate flexibility from the beginning. Such approaches may provide learners with disabilities broader opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge and skills.

Assessment as a Continuing Site of Exclusion in Learners' Lived Experience

Evidence relating to learners' experiences of assessment was found mainly in higher education settings, with comparatively little qualitative research identified at the primary and secondary levels. The meta-ethnographic synthesis by Nieminen, Moriña, and Biagiotti (2024), drawing on 42 qualitative studies encompassing 868 student participants and published between 2010 and 2022, provides the most comprehensive picture available of how higher education students with disabilities experience assessment. Students overwhelmingly reported experiences of exclusion, organised around two analytically distinct processes: barriers to physical, perceptual, and social access (such as inaccessible examination venues, inaccessible digital platforms, or inadequate notification of accommodation arrangements) and a less frequently studied but equally significant dimension concerning social participation, students' sense of belonging and recognition as fully legitimate members of their academic community. The authors concluded that assessment functions as a primary barrier to inclusion in higher education, not merely as a logistical challenge.

The empirical evidence in Nieminen (2025) extends this by documenting what students with disabilities said would constitute genuine improvement: authentic design partnership, not administrative compliance. The scoping review by Young and Clerke (2024), meanwhile, highlights a methodological layer of exclusion that compounds the substantive. Students with disabilities have historically been studied as research subjects more often than they have been engaged as active participants in educational research. This limits opportunities for learners to influence the development of assessment practices that directly affect them.

These studies suggest that assessment influences more than academic performance alone. Assessment practices can shape learners' experiences of participation, recognition, and belonging within educational settings.

Institutional, Training, and Resourcing Barriers

The study by Filippou et al., (2025) analysed inclusive policies and practices in higher education and found that flexible assessment arrangements were frequently associated with inclusive educational provision. However, there was considerable variation between institutions in their ability to implement such practices. Policy environments, staff understanding, organisational priorities, and available resources all influenced what could be achieved in practice. Barriers were identified both within and across national education systems included in the review.

Challenges of a similar nature were reported in the UDL literature. Although research interest in Universal Design for Learning has increased substantially, its implementation has not been consistent across educational contexts (Zhang et al., 2024). Common concerns included limited opportunities for professional development, incomplete understanding of UDL principles, and uncertainty about how those principles could be applied in everyday practice. In many cases, the adoption of UDL did not automatically result in substantial changes to assessment practices.

Similar concerns were reported in online learning environments. Utami et al., (2025) noted a shortage of specialised training for educators working with students with disabilities in online settings. Their review also highlighted challenges related to the accessibility of digital learning and assessment platforms. While technology can increase flexibility and participation, it can also create additional barriers when accessibility features are not built into systems from the outset. This is particularly important for learners who rely on assistive technologies and accessible formats.

The literature reviewed suggests that assessment equity is shaped not only by the design of assessment tasks but also by the broader educational context in which assessment takes place. Resources, institutional support, educator preparation, and the accessibility of learning environments emerged as recurring factors across the studies reviewed. Without attention to these conditions, efforts to improve assessment inclusion may have limited impact across educational settings.

Technology-Enhanced and Online Assessment: Promise and Limits

The use of technology and online learning environments was a prominent consideration in multiple sources included in this review. Yang et al., (2024) explored universal design in online education, while Utami et al., (2025) examined the application of UDL in online learning for students with disabilities. The studies reviewed indicated that online assessment can offer increased flexibility. In a digital environment, students can engage with assessment tasks in different ways, work at their own pace, and present evidence of learning using different response formats. These features correspond to elements of UDL and may help reduce challenges experienced by learners with disabilities.

The benefits of technology, however, are not guaranteed. Some studies indicated that online assessment systems are effective only when accessibility is considered during the design stage. Online environments may also create new barriers when accessibility features are absent. Difficulties can arise when assessment tools are not compatible with assistive technologies or when assessment materials are unavailable in accessible formats.

The findings suggest that technology should not be viewed as a simple solution to assessment inequity. Instead, its contribution depends on the design, implementation, and support of assessment systems. Online assessment may provide greater flexibility and participation for learners with disabilities, but these benefits are more likely when accessibility is considered from the beginning of the design process.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this review suggest that Universal Design for Learning and inclusive assessment are closely related approaches to improving assessment equity for learners with disabilities. Although they originate from different traditions, both seek to reduce barriers that can limit participation in assessment. The literature reviewed indicates that UDL provides a practical framework for designing assessment tasks that accommodate learner variability, while inclusive assessment places greater attention on participation, belonging, and the broader social context in which assessment occurs. Across the studies reviewed, UDL was consistently associated with efforts to reduce barriers through assessment design. Rather than relying solely on individual accommodations, UDL encourages the development of flexible assessment approaches that recognise differences among learners from the outset. The evidence reviewed suggests that such approaches can support access and participation for learners with disabilities, although assessment-specific evidence remains more limited than the broader literature on teaching and learning.

The findings also highlight the importance of considering the perspectives of learners with disabilities themselves. Evidence from Nieminen (2025) and Nieminen et al. (2024) suggests that students often view assessment as one of the areas where exclusion is most visible. Participants valued flexibility, choice, and opportunities to contribute to decisions about assessment. They also reported that repeatedly requesting accommodations could be frustrating and, at times, stigmatizing. These findings suggest that improving assessment equity involves more than providing access to assessment tasks. It also involves recognising learners as active participants in the assessment process and ensuring that their experiences inform assessment design and practice.

The review also indicates that there are factors other than assessment design that need to be addressed to achieve assessment equity. These were repeatedly cited as barriers in various studies on the topic: policy, staff preparation, institutional support and resources. There was general agreement that flexible and inclusive assessment practices were important, but often underutilised and not consistently applied across institutions and educational contexts. The results indicate that educators are supportive of the principles of inclusive assessment, but encounter challenges in implementing them. The challenges reported in the literature included lack of professional development opportunities, uncertainty about implementation, and lack of resources. The results suggest that progress towards assessment equity depends on both effective assessment design and ongoing institutional commitment.

Finding evidence in higher education was the major finding to emerge from this review and comparatively little from primary and secondary education settings. The majority of the studies reviewed focused on assessment experiences, practices of inclusive assessment, and implementation of UDL in higher education. A consequence of this is limited knowledge of the impact of these strategies on equity of assessment for students with disabilities in K–12 contexts.

This gap is significant because learners with disabilities face assessment throughout their school career and experiences in both primary and secondary schools can have an impact on post-primary education and the subsequent outcomes. This review identified very little evidence on the topic of assessment equity in school settings, which points to a need for additional research in this area. Future research may gain insights into the implementation of UDL and inclusive assessment across various educational settings and levels.

CONCLUSION

This PRISMA-informed systematic review synthesised thirteen peer-reviewed sources to examine the contribution of Universal Design for Learning and inclusive assessment frameworks to assessment equity for learners with disabilities. The evidence supports five conclusions: UDL provides a useful, proactive approach to reducing construct-irrelevant barriers in assessment through universal design, with consistent if moderate evidence of positive effects; inclusive assessment frameworks extend this work by attending to the socio-political dimensions of inclusion that design only approaches may not fully address; learners with disabilities themselves report assessment as a primary site of exclusion and call for genuine partnership in assessment design; institutional barriers, including training, policy, and resourcing, remain the dominant obstacles to implementation across all educational levels; and technology-enhanced assessment offers expanded flexibility, but only where accessibility is designed in from the outset. The contribution of this review is to bring these findings together in a single comparative synthesis, identifying where UDL and inclusive assessment scholarship converge and where each adds something the other does not yet fully capture. The review also provides recommendations for policy, practice, and future research.

LIMITATIONS

This review has six limitations. Although the review used transparent and reproducible search procedures, the absence of direct database export, reference-management deduplication, protocol registration, and dual independent screening limits its claim to full systematic review status.

Only published, peer-reviewed studies were included; grey literature, conference proceedings, and unpublished theses were excluded, which may introduce publication bias toward studies reporting positive or significant outcomes.

Sources were restricted to English-language publications. This limits the geographic and cultural representativeness of the findings and may exclude important contributions from non-Anglophone education systems, particularly in low and middle-income country contexts where disability inclusion policy and assessment practice may differ substantially from the Global North contexts that dominate the retrieved corpus.

The thirteen included sources are sufficient for a PRISMA informed systematic review aimed at thematic mapping, but the corpus is modest by comparison with large-scale meta-analyses that synthesise dozens or

hundreds of primary studies. Future replication using direct licensed database export and a larger search corpus would strengthen the methodological auditability of the review.

The evidence base for Theme 3 is concentrated in higher education. Primary and secondary education settings are underrepresented in the qualitative literature on learners' lived experiences of assessment, a limitation of the field rather than the review.

This review was conducted by a single author without a second independent screener. Inter-rater reliability was therefore not formally assessed. A multi-reviewer process with documented agreement (e.g., Cohen's kappa) would strengthen the systematic character of the screening process for submission to a high-impact journal.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Policy

Education ministries and institutional governing bodies should require assessment policies to explicitly reference UDL and inclusive assessment principles across all education levels, rather than treating disability accommodation as a parallel, separately administered process. Policy should mandate flexible assessment design as a baseline institutional expectation rather than an optional enhancement, supported by accountability mechanisms and adequate resourcing.

Teacher and Faculty Practice

One-off workshops are insufficient. Institutions should invest in sustained, practice-embedded, and discipline-specific professional development on both UDL assessment design and the participatory principles associated with Assessment for Inclusion. This should include training on digital accessibility in online and blended assessment contexts, which the evidence identifies as an area of growing need.

Future Research

Future research should (a) prioritise assessment-specific, as opposed to general instructional, UDL evidence at primary and secondary education levels; (b) conduct larger-scale quantitative studies on the effects of specific inclusive assessment redesigns on attainment, progression, and wellbeing outcomes for learners with disabilities; (c) extend the evidence base beyond Anglophone, Global North, and higher-education-dominated contexts; (d) involve learners with disabilities as active co-researchers in assessment design studies, consistent with the 'nothing about us without us' principle foregrounded in the inclusive assessment literature; and (e) investigate the interaction between UDL assessment design and specific disability types to determine whether universal design effects are distributed equitably across the full range of learner diversity.

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