

Bridging the Gaps: An Inclusive Education Framework and Development Program for Learners with Special Needs in Palawan's Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

Inclusive education affirms every student's right to quality learning by promoting participation, eliminating barriers, and addressing diverse learning needs. This study assessed the current state of inclusive education practices in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Palawan, Philippines. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research utilized both quantitative surveys and qualitative Focus Group Discussions to gather insights from administrators, faculty, and students with special needs. The study aimed to evaluate inclusive practices along three key dimensions: admission policies, institutional support systems, and learning environments.

Findings revealed that the implementation of inclusive education practices in HEIs was moderately problematic, with the learning environment emerging as the most significant area of concern. Common barriers included inadequate infrastructure, lack of faculty training, and insufficient support services. While perceptions of inclusion were generally

consistent across public, private, and private non-sectarian institutions—especially in terms of admission policies and institutional support—differences were noted in the learning environment component.

The study underscored the urgent need for a comprehensive policy framework to strengthen inclusive education in HEIs. Recommended interventions include targeted training for faculty and staff, increased disability and cultural competence awareness, enhanced academic and mental health support services, and improvements in campus accessibility. Community engagement, inclusive events, and feedback mechanisms were also identified as vital to promoting a more inclusive institutional culture. These findings offer practical recommendations for policymakers and HEI administrators to address systemic gaps and ensure equitable access and support for all students.

Keywords: *Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), Inclusive Education Practices, Admission Policy, Institutional Support System, Learning Environment*

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education is a plan and moral strategy that seeks to guarantee fair access to high-quality learning opportunities within mainstream educational environments for all students, irrespective of their differences in physical, intellectual, social, economic, linguistic, cultural, or other areas. Grounded in the principles of equity, human rights, and democratic participation, inclusive education is not only a pedagogical concern but also a social imperative.

The global legal framework supporting inclusive education is well-established, with several key international declarations and conventions forming the foundation. Most notably, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), adopted in 2006, emphasizes the right to inclusive education under Article 24, which mandates that persons with disabilities must not be excluded from the general education system. It also requires that reasonable accommodation and individual support be provided to ensure effective education participation.

In line with the CRPD, the 1994 Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education, championed by UNESCO, reinforced the commitment to inclusive education as the most effective strategy for combating discriminatory attitudes, building inclusive societies, and improving education for all. The framework emphasized that mainstream schools with inclusive orientations are best suited to accommodate diverse learners and achieve universal education goals.

Nationally, the Philippines has aligned its education policies with these international commitments. The 1987 Philippine Constitution, under Article XIV, Section 1, affirms the right of all citizens to quality education at all levels. The Magna Carta for Persons with Disabilities (Republic Act No. 7277) further reinforces this by mandating non-discriminatory access to education and support services. In higher education, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) issued Memo Order No. 36 (2006), which encourages higher education institutions (HEIs) to create inclusive environments through specialized services and faculty training.

Further strengthening the framework are CHED Memo Order (CMO) No. 77 s. 2017, which outlines the program for the Bachelor of Special Needs Education, and CMO No. 2 s. 2019, which mandates the integration of Indigenous Peoples Education in higher education. These issuances aim to capacitate educators to respond effectively to diverse learners, particularly those from historically marginalized groups such as persons with disabilities and Indigenous Peoples.

Despite these legal mandates and institutional efforts, challenges persist in translating these policies into meaningful practice, particularly in regions with limited resources.

In the regional context of Palawan, a province characterized by its geographical complexity and socio-economic disparities, the practical implementation of inclusive education in HEIs presents unique difficulties. While HEIs have expressed commitment to inclusive education, field observations suggest that this commitment does not always materialize into actionable, consistent practices. Among the recurring issues are: Limited access to assistive technologies and specialized instructional materials, Inadequate training and preparedness among faculty to address diverse student needs, Structural barriers such as underfunding, absence of institutional support systems, and a lack of inclusive policies contextualized to local realities.

These gaps are particularly evident in rural areas of Palawan where HEIs operate with minimal external support and often without dedicated personnel or units focused on inclusive

education. Moreover, although CHED policies exist, there is an observable variance in how public, private, sectarian, and non-sectarian institutions interpret and implement them.

Firsthand observations during preliminary fieldwork reveal a disconnect between policy intent and on-the-ground practice. While inclusive education frameworks and institutional commitments exist on paper, there are noticeable disparities in their implementation. For instance, while some institutions claim to be inclusive, their infrastructure remains inaccessible, and faculty often lack both awareness and skills to adapt instruction to varied learning needs. Furthermore, while policies advocate for inclusion of Indigenous Peoples and students with disabilities, these groups often remain underrepresented and underserved in HEIs across Palawan.

This mismatch between institutional claims and observed practices indicates not just an implementation gap but also a knowledge gap—specifically in understanding the actual conditions, strategies, and challenges faced by institutions.

This research is designed to bridge that gap by providing a systematic analysis of inclusive education practices in HEIs within Palawan. It aims to: map the demographic characteristics of students affected by inclusive education policies, document existing strategies used by HEIs to address diverse learner needs, identify challenges and gaps from the perspectives of administrators, faculty, and students and compare practices across different types of institutions (public vs. private; sectarian vs. non-sectarian).

In doing so, the study not only provides a clearer picture of the current state of inclusive education in Palawan but also generates practical insights that can inform institutional reforms, policy refinements, and future capacity-building efforts. It aims to be a relevant resource for educational leaders, policymakers, and stakeholders seeking to move beyond compliance toward meaningful, contextually grounded inclusive practices.

Ultimately, this research contributes to ongoing efforts to realize the vision of equitable, inclusive, and quality education for all, especially in underserved and geographically challenged regions like Palawan.

METHODOLOGY

The implementation of inclusive education practices in Palawan's higher education institutions (HEIs) was thoroughly analyzed in this study using a mixed-methods research approach. The approach combined both quantitative and qualitative techniques in a single study, allowing the researcher to gather measurable data while also exploring the contextual experiences of key stakeholders. The use of mixed methods was grounded in the understanding that inclusive education is a complex, multidimensional issue—one that spans institutional policies, systemic barriers, and personal narratives. By integrating numerical trends with lived experiences, the study aimed to provide a more comprehensive and practical overview of inclusive practices in HEIs.

The research was conducted in multiple HEIs located across Palawan, selected for their active engagement in inclusive education initiatives. The inclusion of different institutional types—public, private-sectarian, and private non-sectarian—was intended to capture a broad and

diverse range of educational settings. This geographic and institutional diversity supported the generalizability and contextual relevance of the study findings.

Sampling techniques combined purposive sampling for administrators and stratified random sampling for teachers and learners. Administrators were selected based on their specific roles in policymaking and implementation of inclusive education within their respective institutions, ensuring that insights into institutional priorities and strategies were well represented. Stratified random sampling was used for both teachers and students to achieve balanced representation across key subgroups. Learner participants were categorized into three strata: (1) those with disabilities (physical, sensory, cognitive, or mental health-related), (2) gifted and talented learners, and (3) those from marginalized or socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Teacher participants were selected based on their direct involvement with students from these groups, ensuring the inclusion of classroom-level perspectives on inclusion.

To collect data, the study used two primary instruments: a structured survey questionnaire and a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) guide. The survey included four parts aligned with the study's objectives and Statement of the Problem (SOP). Part I gathered demographic information; Part II assessed the extent of inclusive education implementation across three domains—admission policies, institutional support services, and the learning environment; Part III identified challenges in these same areas; and Part IV included open-ended responses. The FGD guide was used to elicit in-depth qualitative insights from two learners with special needs, two teachers, and two administrators. Topics explored included perceptions of institutional practices, effectiveness of support services, challenges encountered, and suggestions for improvement. Both instruments were reviewed by five inclusive education experts to ensure content validity and were pilot tested with 30 participants from Holy Trinity University. Revisions were made based on expert feedback, and reliability analysis using Cronbach's alpha confirmed internal consistency for all survey domains ($\alpha \geq 0.70$).

Data analysis was conducted using both quantitative and qualitative procedures. Quantitative data were processed using SPSS and Microsoft Excel. Descriptive statistics (mean, frequency, and percentage) were used to summarize demographic profiles and measure the level of implementation and problems encountered in each of the three key domains. The Kruskal-Wallis H test was applied to detect significant differences in perceptions across stakeholder groups and institution types, with post-hoc pairwise comparisons conducted as needed. Spearman's rho correlation was used to assess the relationship between implementation levels and challenges encountered, offering insights into how well-implemented practices may mitigate common barriers. Qualitative data from the FGDs were analyzed using thematic content analysis. Responses were coded, categorized, and grouped into themes, which provided richer interpretation of the survey findings and informed the development of a proposed policy framework for inclusive education in Palawan's HEIs.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In response to the question, “describing the learners in terms of their Special Needs and School Attended. Table 1 explains the findings.

Table 1. Frequency Distribution on the Demographic Profile of the Learners (n = 380)

Profile	Frequency	Percentage
Special Needs		
Indigenous	234	61.58
Gifted	28	7.37
Talented	39	10.26
Person with Disability	79	20.79
Type of Disability	(91)	
Mental Health	30	32.96
Physical	37	40.66
Learning	21	23.08
Sensory	3	3.30
School Attended		
Private	28	7.37
Public	346	91.05
Private-Sectarian	6	1.58

Table 1 presents the frequency distribution of the 380 student respondents, highlighting their special needs classification, type of disability (if applicable), and the type of higher education institution they attended. Among the total respondents, a substantial portion, 234 learners or 61.58%, identified as having a special need. Of these, 20.79% were classified as talented, 10.26% as gifted, and 7.37% as indigenous. Additionally, 91 learners (approximately 24% of those with special needs) were identified as learners with disabilities (PWDs).

Within this subgroup, physical disabilities were the most common (40.66%), followed by mental health conditions (32.96%), learning disabilities (23.08%), and sensory disabilities (3.30%). These figures indicate a wide variety of support needs among the student population and reinforce the importance of differentiated institutional responses. This aligns with the findings of Motiño et al. (2022), who emphasized the increasing demand for tailored interventions in Philippine HEIs due to the rising enrollment of students with varied needs.

In terms of the type of institution attended, most respondents (91.05%) were enrolled in public HEIs, while 7.37% attended private non-sectarian, and only 1.58% attended sectarian institutions. This distribution mirrors national patterns where public HEIs serve primary access point for students with special needs, owing to their affordability and inclusive mandates (DepEd Order No. 72, s. 2009; Ballada & Tamayo, 2021).

These quantitative findings are substantiated by the insights shared during the focus group discussions. Participants consistently described the student population as highly diverse. These quantitative findings are corroborated by the information gathered from the focus group

conversations. The participants regularly described the student body as being very diverse. One respondent (R1) stated, "They are quite diverse, with a range of linguistic and cultural backgrounds, as well as varying strengths, limitations, and needs." Another (R2), speaking specifically about Palawan State University–Quezon Campus, noted, *"A significant portion of our student population comes from the southern municipalities of Palawan. We have students with visual impairments, learning disabilities, and a growing number of indigenous students from different communities."*

The qualitative data supports, the quantitative profile and confirms the presence of a multifaceted learner population, including not only students with disabilities but also those from indigenous groups, gifted and talented learners, and students from remote and economically disadvantaged areas. Respondents also mentioned students from the LGBTQ+ community, highlighting the need to expand the definition of inclusivity to encompass diverse gender identities and non-visible differences. One faculty member (R6) observed, *"Learners have diverse learning capabilities; thus, it creates a more challenging task for me as their prof."*

These responses reinforce the notion that inclusive education in Palawan HEIs is not confined to physical accessibility or academic accommodations alone. It requires systemic and cultural shifts that address a spectrum of learner identities and needs. This interpretation is consistent with the work of Florian and Black-Hawkins (2021), who advocate for an inclusive pedagogy that embraces diversity as an essential component of effective teaching and learning.

Furthermore, the high concentration of students with special needs in public HEIs suggests an increased institutional responsibility to provide inclusive environments. This includes the development of culturally relevant curricula, implementation of professional development for faculty, and expansion of student support services, all of which are central to the Inclusive Education Framework for HEIs in Palawan.

In summary, the demographic data in Table 1, supported by the voices of FGD participants, reveals that inclusive education in Palawan is serving a diverse, underserved, and multidimensional population. This highlights the urgency of building inclusive systems that are not only policy-driven but also practice-oriented, learner-informed, and culturally sensitive.

In response to the question, "describing the level of inclusive education practices are implemented by HEIs in terms of Admission policies, Institution Support Services and Learning Environment, Table 2 explains the findings.

Table 2. Summary of the Mean Distribution on the Level of Inclusive Education Practices Implemented by HEIs

Indicators`	Administrators			Teachers			Learners		
	Mean	DI	Rank	Mean	DI	Rank	Mean	DI	Rank
Admission Policies	3.25	I	1	3.27	HI	1	3.01	I	3
Institutional Support Services	3.23	I	3	3.20	I	3	3.09	I	2
Learning Environment	3.24	I	2	3.23	I	2	3.17	I	1
Over-all Mean	3.24	I		3.23	I		3.09	I	

Legend:

- 3.26 – 4.00 highly implemented (HI)
- 2.51 – 3.25 implemented (I)
- 1.76 – 2.50 moderately implemented (MI)
- 1.00 – 1.75 less implemented (LI)

Table 2 presents the overall mean distribution of inclusive education practices implemented by higher education institutions (HEIs) across three key areas: Admission Policies, Institutional Support Services, and the Learning Environment, as evaluated by administrators, teachers, and learners. The results show that all three groups rated these practices as generally “implemented”, with no category reaching the “highly implemented” threshold across all respondent types.

Administrators rated Admission Policies highest (mean = 3.25), followed closely by the Learning Environment (3.24) and Institutional Support Services (3.23). Similarly, teachers gave their highest rating to Admission Policies (3.27)—notably the only instance in the table classified as “highly implemented.” Learners, on the other hand, gave lower ratings overall, with the Learning Environment rated highest (3.17), followed by Institutional Support Services (3.09), and Admission Policies lowest (3.01), though all still within the “implemented” range.

This consistent perception gap between institutional staff and learners suggests that while HEIs may be implementing inclusive practices on paper and in policy, the learner experience does not fully reflect this implementation. Learners' lower ratings, particularly in admission policies, indicate possible shortcomings in how students—especially those with special needs or from marginalized groups—experience equity and access in practice. While administrators and teachers may see procedures as sufficient, students may encounter barriers in navigating those systems, such as lack of personalized support, unclear processes, or insufficient accommodation. This gap is affirmed by Tinto's (2021) theory of student integration, which highlights that institutional success in inclusion depends not only on structural efforts but also on students' perceptions of belonging, fairness, and support. Similarly, Ferguson (2020) stresses that effective inclusion must be “felt” by students and not merely implemented administratively. If learners do not perceive inclusive measures as authentic or accessible, the policies, regardless of their design, may fall short of their intended impact.

The data suggests that HEIs have established the basic framework for inclusive education, but implementation from the learners' perspective remains limited. The discrepancy in ratings, particularly the lower scores from learners, highlights the need for greater responsiveness to learner feedback, stronger communication, and more personalized support systems. Institutions should move beyond compliance and toward a model of inclusion that is co-developed with students, ensuring that policies are not only enacted but genuinely experienced as inclusive.

Bridging this gap will require HEIs to enhance student engagement mechanisms, improve the visibility and clarity of inclusive programs, and regularly assess the effectiveness of implementation through student-centered evaluation tools. As affirmed by the literature, inclusive education must go beyond access—it must be relational, contextual, and meaningfully felt by the learners it aims to support.

In response to the question, “describing the problems the participants encounter along inclusive education practices implemented by HEIs in terms of Admission policies, Institution Support Services and Learning Environment, Table 3 explains the findings.

Table 3. Summary of the Mean Distribution on the Problems Encountered in the Implementation of Inclusive Education Practices by HEIs

Indicators	Administrators		Teachers		Learners		Total	DI	Rank
	Mean	DI	Mean	DI	Mean	DI			
Admission Policies	1.73	LP	1.81	MP	2.05	MP	1.86	MP	3
Institutional Support Services	1.67	LP	1.79	MP	2.16	MP	1.87	MP	2
Learning Environment	1.70	LP	1.78	MP	2.22	MP	1.9	MP	1
Over-all Mean	1.70	LP	1.79	MP	2.14	MP	1.88	MP	

Legend:

3.26 – 4.00	highly problematic
2.51 – 3.25	problematic
1.76 – 2.50	moderately problematic
1.00 – 1.75	less problematic

Table 3 presents the overall mean distribution of problems encountered in the implementation of inclusive education practices across three core areas—Admission Policies, Institutional Support Services, and the Learning Environment—as perceived by group respondents. The data reveals a clear perception gap, with administrators consistently rating issues as less problematic, while teachers and especially learners view them as more pressing concerns. The overall mean scores suggest that while institutional structures may exist, their functionality and impact on students, particularly those with special needs—remain limited.

Of the three areas, the learning environment emerged as the most problematic (mean = 1.90), a rating largely driven by learners, who gave it the highest score at 2.22 (moderately problematic). This indicates ongoing challenges with physical accessibility, instructional delivery, and access to inclusive classroom resources. Following closely was Institutional Support Services (overall mean = 1.87), where learners again reported more difficulties (mean = 2.16) than either teachers (1.79) or administrators (1.67). This reflects gaps in the quality, visibility, and responsiveness of support systems designed to assist diverse learners. Lastly, Admission Policies, although the least problematic of the three (mean = 1.86), still drew concern from learners (2.05), particularly around unclear guidelines and limited accommodation during the application process.

The overall average score of 1.88 falls within the moderately problematic category, reinforcing the trend seen in earlier data: while administrators view institutional practices as mostly sufficient, learners experience these efforts as inconsistent, unclear.

These findings are consistent with those of Morina (2021), who emphasizes that despite policy frameworks for inclusive education in higher education, the actual experiences of learners often reveal a disconnect between institutional intentions and student realities. She notes that inclusion is often limited to policy statements and not reflected in practice, culture, or learning spaces. Similarly, Seale (2021) highlights that administrators often underestimate the challenges faced by learners with disabilities, particularly when it comes to accessing physical spaces, navigating complex bureaucratic processes, and receiving adequate academic support.

This data highlights a systemic challenge in how inclusive education is implemented in HEIs: although structures exist and are perceived by institutional staff as functional, they do not fully translate into accessible and supportive experiences for learners. The consistent gap between learner and staff perceptions across all domains—admissions, support services, and learning environments—underscores the need for a more student-centered and responsive approach to implementation.

To address these concerns, HEIs should: Conduct regular student feedback assessments on inclusion-related practices, ensure inclusive design in both physical infrastructure and curriculum; Improve staff training on inclusive practices, particularly at the admissions and support levels; Foster collaboration with students, especially those with disabilities, in designing and reviewing institutional policies.

Ultimately, inclusive education must move beyond policy compliance and be measured by student experience. Institutions that actively listen to and respond to students' challenges are more likely to build a culture of true inclusion.

In response to the question, “describing how the implementation of Inclusive Education of HEIs support the participants, the analysis of the results of the FGD explain the findings.

The responses of the participants of the Focus Group Discussion on how the implementation of Inclusive Education of HEIs support the participants are as follows:

With a focus on students from underrepresented and disadvantaged groups, the focus group discussion (FGD) participants provided several practical and helpful recommendations for enhancing the inclusivity and support of learning environments at higher education institutions (HEI). A recurring theme across the responses was the importance of creating a learning environment where all students feel a genuine sense of belonging, safety, and empowerment, regardless of their background, ability, or identity. This includes fostering a culture of respect, openness, and continuous feedback, which several participants emphasized as foundational to effective inclusion.

Participants highlighted both structural and pedagogical improvements. On the structural side, learners and staff recommended enhancements to physical environments, such as *air-conditioned classrooms and state-of-the-art facilities (R1, R6)*, as well as ensuring *accessibility in both physical and digital spaces (R3, R5)*. These are aligned with the findings of Cerna (2021),

who argue that inclusive environments require systemic infrastructural adjustments, not merely policy-level declarations. Learners with mobility issues or sensory impairments, for instance, benefit not only from ramps and elevators but also from assistive technologies and digital platforms designed according to accessibility standards such as WCAG (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines). As echoed in UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report (2020), inclusion is most successful when infrastructure, pedagogy, and leadership all converge in design and practice.

From a pedagogical standpoint, multiple respondents (R3, R5, R6) stressed the importance of training faculty and staff on inclusive teaching practices, including bias awareness, differentiated instruction, and cultural competence. These recommendations reflect what Florian and Black-Hawkins (2021) described as "inclusive pedagogy"—an approach that positions diversity not as a problem to be addressed but as an opportunity to enrich teaching and learning. Teachers who understand how to adjust teaching strategies to accommodate different learning styles, abilities, and languages are more likely to meet the needs of all students. Moreover, differentiated instruction and varied assessment methods were recommended as strategies to support learners with different preferences and challenges, reinforcing the need for flexibility in teaching.

Equally important were calls to *strengthen mental health support systems (R3) and social-emotional learning programs*, particularly to assist learners facing isolation, anxiety, or personal hardships. Mental health support was viewed not just as a supplementary service but as integral to academic success and student retention. This is consistent with the findings of Loreman et al. (2021), who asserted that inclusive education must include emotional and psychological support to be truly effective. Similarly, *R3 and R6 pointed to the need for robust peer support systems, mentorship programs, and student voice in decision-making*, all of which contribute to inclusive institutional culture.

On the policy side, FGD participants advocated for *mandated training in inclusive education as a requirement for hiring faculty (R1, R6), the creation of dedicated departments for inclusive education (R4), and clear, enforceable standards for accessibility in both learning materials and physical spaces (R2)*. These reflect a recognition that inclusion should not depend on goodwill or isolated efforts but must be institutionalized through binding policies, resources, and accountability mechanisms. As noted by Dizon (2021), inclusive education in the Philippines often struggles not because of the absence of policies, but because of their inconsistent implementation and weak monitoring.

Additionally, participants recommended *expanding financial aid and prioritizing admission for poor but deserving learners (R5)*, which addresses the economic barriers that many underrepresented students face. This perspective is echoed by Ghosh and Galczynski (2021), who argue that achieving equity in higher education requires confronting both systemic and structural inequality—particularly around access and affordability. Moreover, *R2 and R3 emphasized the importance of learner-centered policies*, including consistent mechanisms to identify learners with special needs and evaluate how well the institution is supporting them over time. Finally, respondents advocated for learners' participation in institutional decision-making, *regular feedback loops, and inclusive curriculum design (R6) that reflects diverse perspectives—by race, gender, culture, and ability*. These recommendations align with UNESCO (2020) and Ballada and Tamayo (2021), both of which emphasize the value of student voice and the importance of

embedding diversity across the curriculum, teaching methods, and institutional policies. Taken together, the responses underscore the need for comprehensive, systemic, and learner - informed approaches to inclusive education in HEIs. Inclusion must be designed at every level—from physical access and digital equity to pedagogical competence, emotional support, and policy accountability. The voices of students and faculty in this study reinforce what global research has long affirmed: inclusion is not a single initiative or policy, but a continuous commitment to equity, belonging, and academic success for all. Institutions that take these recommendations seriously, especially those rooted in lived experiences—will be better positioned to transform their learning environments into spaces where every student is welcomed, supported, and able to thrive.

In response to the question, comparing the implementation of Inclusive Education practices among Public, Private Sectarian and Private non- sectarian, Table 4 presents the findings.

Table 4. Kruskal-Wallis Multiple Comparison Test Showing Significant Difference in implementation of Inclusive Education among Public, Private Sectarian and Private non- sectarian

Variable	Mean	Kruskal-Wallis	P-value	Decision
Admission Policy	Private 3.06	0.109	0.947	H_0 : accept
	Public 3.00			
	Private-Sectarian 3.07			
Institutional Support System	Private 2.96	2.315	0.314	H_0 : accept
	Public 3.10			
	Private-Sectarian 3.02			
Learning Environment	Private 3.11	4.105	0.128	H_0 : accept
	Public 3.18			
	Private-sectarian 2.87			

Table 4 presents the results of a Kruskal-Wallis Multiple Comparison Test conducted to assess whether there are statistically significant differences in the implementation of inclusive education practices among three types of higher education institutions (HEIs): public, private non-sectarian, and private sectarian. The analysis covered three key areas: Admission Policy, Institutional Support System, and the Learning Environment. Across all domains, the p-values exceeded the 0.05 threshold, indicating no statistically significant differences in perceptions among respondents from different institution types. This leads to the acceptance of the null hypothesis (H_0) in all cases.

In terms of Admission Policy, the mean ratings were nearly identical across institution types—3.06 for private, 3.00 for public, and 3.07 for private sectarian—with a p-value of 0.947, confirming no significant difference. Similarly, for Institutional Support Systems, while public institutions showed the highest mean (3.10), followed by private sectarian (3.02) and private non-sectarian (2.96), the p-value of 0.314 suggests these differences are statistically insignificant. The Learning Environment also followed this trend, with public HEIs receiving the highest score

(3.18), compared to private non-sectarian (3.11) and private sectarian institutions (2.87), and a *p*-value of 0.128, again indicating no meaningful difference.

These findings suggest that institutional classification—whether public, private, or sectarian—does not significantly affect how inclusive education is implemented, at least from the perspective of the respondents. While minor variations in mean scores exist, especially in the learning environment, the differences are not statistically significant, meaning that institutional type alone is not a strong predictor of inclusive education quality.

This outcome is affirmed by Moriña and Carballo (2020), who argue that the success of inclusive education in higher education is less about the institutional label and more about the commitment of leadership, availability of resources, and the inclusivity of teaching practices. They emphasize that both public and private institutions are equally capable of advancing inclusive practices, if there is intentional investment in training, infrastructure, and policy implementation. Similarly, UNESCO (2020) highlights that inclusive education is best achieved when institutions—regardless of type—prioritize student engagement, culturally responsive pedagogy, and universal design for learning.

The results reinforce the idea that inclusive education outcomes are shaped more by institutional will and practice than by public or private status. Therefore, policy interventions and institutional reforms aimed at improving inclusion should not focus solely on classification but instead prioritize context-specific strategies, strong leadership, sustained faculty development, and adequate support services. This approach ensures that inclusion is meaningfully realized, regardless of institutional type.

In response to the question on the proposed policy framework/ development program to strengthen the implementation of inclusive education practices in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The proposed policy framework and development program are presented.

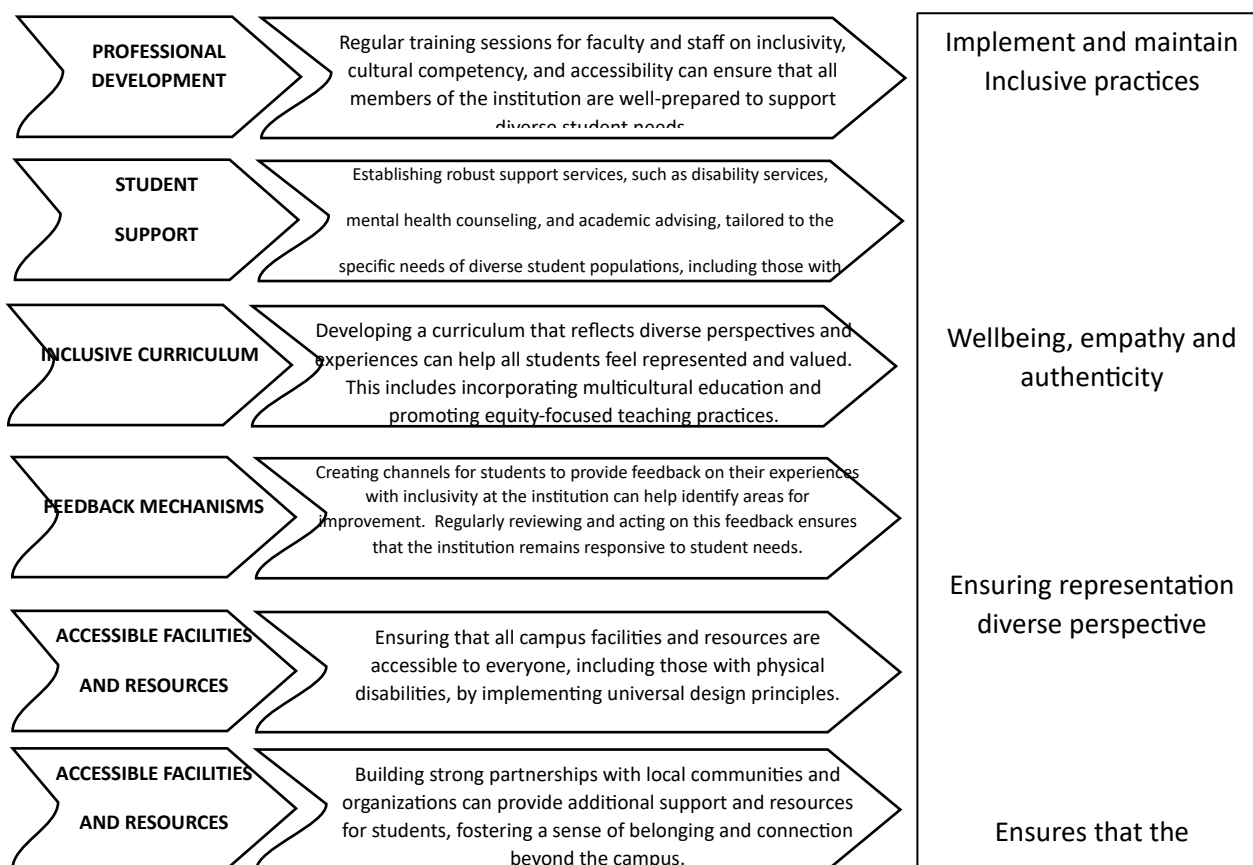
INCLUSIVE EDUCATION FRAMEWORK FOR HEIs IN PALAWAN

Rationale

The proposed Inclusive Education Framework for HEIs in Palawan is based on the result of the study which aims to help everyone in higher education think about and improve inclusive practices.

All students benefit from living in a diverse and welcoming community and from a varied, inclusive education. These students will become future leaders, so the values we teach them will shape society. Inclusivity is vital in contemporary Higher Education. Every student must have an equal chance to thrive, irrespective of their background, demographic traits, or existing situations. Nonetheless, the comprehension of the wide-ranging nature and intricacies of inclusivity ‘in practice’ frequently trails behind the goal of being genuinely inclusive. Institutions frequently face challenges in articulating inclusive education and are short on guidance and resources to successfully integrate inclusive practices across a university.

Being inclusive does not lower academic standards or quality. Inclusion can maintain high expectations while teaching important skills and knowledge. It recognizes that some students face disadvantages due to exclusive practices and works to provide equal chances for all. Inclusivity isn't fixed; it requires teamwork among students, staff, and leaders to create a better environment. Understanding and practices evolve, and mistakes may happen. The framework aims to help everyone in higher education think about and improve inclusive practices. The approach focuses on broad inclusivity, considering the needs of different students, including those who commute, work, or have caregiving duties. The framework includes specific examples of inclusive practices that can help all students succeed



Representation of Inclusive Education Framework for HEIs in Palawan

To improve inclusive education, it is important to adopt four types of modifications: presentation, response, setting, and schedule. Effective practices like culturally responsive teaching should be used to respect the diverse backgrounds of students. Flexible learning options, mentorship programs, and regular assessments of inclusive programs based on feedback are crucial. Continuous professional development for staff on inclusivity is necessary, along with

various student support services for different needs. An inclusive curriculum that reflects diverse perspectives can help students feel valued. Feedback systems will help students share their experiences, and accessible campus facilities are essential. Finally, partnerships with local communities can enhance support and foster belonging.

Key Principles

The framework outlines six fundamental principles or methods of operation and six domains of action that enhance inclusive practice throughout an institution.

- **Professional Development:** Regular training sessions for faculty and staff on inclusivity, cultural competency, and accessibility can ensure that all members of the institution are well-prepared to support diverse student needs.
- **Student Support Services:** Establishing robust support services, such as disability services, mental health counseling, and academic advising, tailored to the specific needs of diverse student populations, including those with disabilities, indigenous students, and students from underrepresented backgrounds.
- **Inclusive Curriculum:** Developing a curriculum that reflects diverse perspectives and experiences can help all students feel represented and valued. This includes incorporating multicultural education and promoting equity-focused teaching practices.
- **Feedback Mechanisms:** Creating channels for students to provide feedback on their experiences with inclusivity at the institution can help identify areas for improvement. Regularly reviewing and acting on this feedback ensures that the institution remains responsive to student needs.
- **Accessible Facilities and Resources:** Ensuring that all campus facilities and resources are accessible to everyone, including those with physical disabilities, by implementing universal design principles.
- **Community Engagement:** Building strong partnerships with local communities and organizations can provide additional support and resources for students, fostering a sense of belonging and connection beyond the campus.

Inclusive Education Development Program for HEIs in Palawan

I. Introduction and Rationale

Based on international agreements like the UNCRPD and Sustainable Development Goal 4, which promotes inclusive and fair quality education for all, inclusive education has risen to the top of the global agenda. These frameworks emphasize the right of every individual—regardless

of ability, ethnicity, gender, or socio-economic background—to access meaningful learning opportunities within the general education system.

At the national level, the Philippines supports inclusive education through legal instruments such as the Magna Carta for Persons with Disabilities (RA 7277), Republic Act No. 10533 or the Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013, and more recently, Republic Act No. 11650, which institutionalizes inclusive education for learners with disabilities across all levels. These policies commit educational institutions to remove barriers, promote equity, and provide reasonable accommodations to ensure that no learner is left behind.

The proposed Inclusive Education Development Program for HEIs in Palawan which is anchored on the Inclusive Education Framework for HEIs in Palawan draws from these global and national imperatives while responding directly to the findings of a local study on the state of inclusion across higher education institutions in the province. The study revealed that while inclusive practices are being implemented to some extent, substantial gaps remain—particularly in areas such as admission policies, institutional support systems, and learning environments. These challenges disproportionately affect learners with special needs, especially those from indigenous communities, who constitute more than half of this population in HEIs across Palawan.

This program aims to address those gaps by operationalizing the six core principles of the Inclusive Education Framework for HEIs in Palawan: professional development, student support services, inclusive curriculum, feedback mechanisms, accessible facilities and resources, and community engagement. It recognizes that being inclusive does not mean compromising academic standards means removing barriers and creating environments where all students can thrive. By embedding inclusive practices into policies, programs, and day-to-day campus life, HEIs in Palawan can become agents of equity, social justice, and national development.

II. Program Description

The Inclusive Education Development Program will be implemented across HEIs in Palawan over a period of two academic years. The program focuses on actionable and measurable initiatives aligned with the six principles outlined in the framework. Based on the study, emphasis will be placed on areas found to be most challenging: admission policies, institutional support systems, and learning environments.

To improve inclusive practices, the program begins with comprehensive training for faculty and staff on cultural competency and inclusive teaching strategies. This is followed by the strengthening of support services that address the diverse needs of students—especially those from indigenous communities and those with disabilities. Curricular revision will ensure the inclusion of multiple perspectives, while regular student feedback mechanisms will be institutionalized to identify barriers in real time.

Facility audits will be conducted to guide improvements in physical and digital accessibility, following universal design principles. Partnerships with local communities and civil society organizations will extend support beyond campus and encourage participation from students who may be balancing work, caregiving, or other life responsibilities.

Each initiative in the program is structured with clear objectives, timelines, budget estimates, and accountable units. Outcomes will be monitored quarterly to ensure progress and allow for course correction when necessary.

III. Program Matrix

Component	Objectives	Time Frame	Key Activities	Budget (₱)	Responsible Units	Expected Outcomes
1. Faculty & Staff Training	Build capacity for inclusive teaching and support	Aug–Nov 2025	Conduct workshops on inclusive practices, cultural competency, UDL principles	400,000	HR Office, Academic Affairs, External Trainers	90% faculty and staff trained; increased awareness and readiness
2. Student Support Expansion	Strengthen mental health, academic, and disability services	Oct 2025–Mar 2026	Hire additional counselors, set up referral systems, adapt support for SN students	650,000	Student Affairs, Guidance Office, Health Services	Improved service utilization; positive feedback from students
3. Inclusive Curriculum Review	Integrate diverse perspectives in all programs	Jan–June 2026	Review syllabi, train curriculum developers, integrate multicultural content	250,000	Curriculum Committee, Deans, Faculty Councils	Revised syllabi; at least 30% of programs updated
4. Student Feedback System	Institutionalize real-time feedback and inclusive dialogue	Nov 2025–Ongoing	Create anonymous digital platform; regular town hall meetings	150,000 (initial)	Quality Assurance, IT Services, Student Council	Increased feedback participation; actionable changes per semester
5. Accessibility Audit & Plan	Make facilities and resources fully accessible	Dec 2025–May 2026	Conduct accessibility audits; implement minor retrofits; prioritize UDL	800,000	Facilities Office, Disability Services, IT Unit	80% compliance with accessibility guidelines
6. Community Engagement	Extend inclusivity beyond campus through partnerships	Jan 2026–Dec 2026	Partner with NGOs, LGUs for student mentorships, cultural exchange, outreach	300,000	Community Extension Office, Indigenous Affairs	5 formal partnerships formed; increased community-student linkage
7. Inclusive Admissions Reform	Make admission policies transparent, equitable, and inclusive	Sept–Dec 2025	Policy review workshops; revision of entrance requirements for SN and IP learners	200,000	Admissions, Legal Office, Registrar's Office	New guidelines released; improved access for underrepresented groups
8. Monitoring & Evaluation	Track and report on implementation progress	Ongoing	Quarterly M&E reports, stakeholder consultations, real-time indicators	100,000	Planning Office, Research Of	

IV. Monitoring and Evaluation Plan

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) will serve as an integral component of the Inclusive Education Development Program to ensure that implementation is both effective and adaptive to the needs of students and institutions. Data collection and analysis will be overseen by a specialized M&E team made up of officials from the Planning and Quality Assurance Offices, in collaboration with the Research and Student Affairs Offices, throughout the program cycle. Regular monitoring will take place on a quarterly basis, using both quantitative indicators (such as the number of faculty trained, feedback submissions, facility upgrades completed) and qualitative input (such as student and staff satisfaction, narratives from learners with special needs, and focus group discussions).

Evaluation tools will include pre- and post-training assessments, student satisfaction surveys, accessibility compliance audits, and documented policy changes. A mid-term review at the end of the first academic year will assess early impact and guide any necessary adjustments. A final evaluation will be conducted at the close of the second academic year, focusing on the achievement of objectives and overall institutional change. Results from the monitoring process will be reported to HEI leadership and used to inform future strategic planning. Importantly, student participation, especially from underrepresented and special needs populations—will be embedded into the evaluation process to ensure that the program stays student-centered and grounded in lived experience.

V. Expected Long-Term Outcomes

The long-term vision of the Inclusive Education Development Program is to create a sustainable, equitable, and responsive higher education environment in Palawan that fully embraces diversity and inclusion. Over time, this program aims to shift inclusive education from a series of isolated initiatives to an embedded institutional culture across HEIs in the province. By building capacity among faculty and staff, strengthening student services, reforming admissions policies, and improving accessibility, institutions are expected to increase not only the participation of marginalized learners but also their retention, success, and graduation rates.

It is anticipated that students with disabilities, indigenous students, and others from historically excluded backgrounds will experience fewer structural barriers and greater engagement within the academic community. Institutional structures such as inclusive policies, curriculum, and support services will become standard rather than exceptional. Furthermore, HEIs will develop stronger links with local communities, enabling a two-way relationship that enhances both educational quality and social inclusion.

Ultimately, the program aspires to contribute to a generation of graduates who are not only academically competent but also socially aware, culturally respectful, and committed to equity. These outcomes align with the broader goal of inclusive nation-building, where education becomes a lever for justice and empowerment, starting right here in Palawan.

Conclusions

Based on the summary of findings, the following conclusions are drawn.

Inclusive education in Palawan's higher education institutions has made notable progress, yet its implementation remains uneven in scope and impact. Learners with special needs in the province are predominantly from indigenous communities, while those with sensory disabilities form a smaller group. This demographic composition underscores the need for culturally responsive strategies and focused outreach to address underrepresented subgroups more effectively. Most of these learners are enrolled in public institutions, placing public HEIs at the center of the effort to deliver inclusive education and highlighting their responsibility to lead in both policy development and implementation.

Across institutions, inclusive practices have been adopted to varying degrees. Among the three primary domains assessed—admissions, support services, and the learning environment—the learning environment received the highest marks. Improvements in accessibility and increased faculty awareness have contributed to a more inclusive atmosphere overall. However, gaps remain, particularly for indigenous and gifted students, whose unique learning needs are often unmet by current teaching methods. Support services, while present in many institutions, are delivered inconsistently. Students report uneven access to counseling, academic support, and accommodations, often due to staffing limitations and lack of trained personnel. Admission policies emerged as the weakest area, marked by inflexible procedures, unclear guidelines, and a general lack of mechanisms to accommodate diverse applicants.

The challenges encountered span all aspects of inclusive education. Admission issues stem from vague application processes and limited accommodations during entrance exams or interviews. Within support services, the shortage of specialized staff and mental health professionals further compounds barriers to learning. In the classroom, the predominant challenge lies in the limited adaptation of instruction to diverse learning styles. This disproportionately affects marginalized learners who already face systemic disadvantages. While various initiatives have been introduced—including faculty training, awareness campaigns, and cultural competency programs—their effects have been mixed. Students acknowledge the presence of these efforts but consistently report that their specific needs remain insufficiently addressed, pointing to a need for more focused and consistent application.

Differences in perception among stakeholder groups add another layer of complexity. Administrators, faculty, and students often view the same issues quite differently, particularly regarding the effectiveness of current policies and the extent of the problems encountered. These perception gaps suggest a disconnect in communication and role clarity, which in turn undermines coordinated implementation. Notably, these issues are not isolated to specific types of institutions. Across public, private-sectarian, and private non-sectarian HEIs, the level of implementation and the nature of the challenges remain broadly similar. This suggests that solutions must be system-wide rather than confined to individual institutions.

Feedback from learners with special needs has been largely consistent, though variations emerge when it comes to classroom experience. Indigenous and gifted students report instructional

approaches that do not align with their learning preferences, calling for classroom-level adaptations that go beyond accessibility to include pedagogical relevance and cultural sensitivity. A significant inverse relationship was found between the quality of inclusive education practices and the frequency of problems reported by students. Where policies are clear, comprehensive, and consistently applied, barriers are fewer, and learning outcomes improve. This relationship affirms the critical role of sound, actionable policy in reducing educational inequities.

Ultimately, while Palawan's HEIs have taken meaningful steps toward inclusion, there is a clear need for stronger, more integrated action. Future efforts must focus on reforming admissions processes, strengthening support services, enriching classroom instruction, and ensuring all initiatives are culturally and contextually appropriate. Equally important is sustained investment in faculty development, mechanisms for regular student feedback, and collaborative engagement among all stakeholders. Only through these coordinated efforts can the vision of inclusive education—as defined by equity, access, and full participation—be fully realized for every learner in the province.

Recommendations

Based on the conclusions, the following recommendations are hereby offered for consideration:

To advance inclusive education in Palawan's higher education institutions, several coordinated actions are necessary across policy, institutional, and individual levels. The Commission on Higher Education (CHED) should take the lead by developing comprehensive guidelines grounded in national laws and international frameworks such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). These guidelines must cover inclusive admissions, curriculum design, support services, and accessible infrastructure. To ensure implementation, CHED should integrate inclusivity indicators into accreditation and quality assurance systems, require annual monitoring reports from institutions, and provide targeted funding, faculty training, and technical assistance to support compliance.

At the institutional level, governing boards, academic councils, and regulatory agencies must embed inclusive education into strategic plans and institutional regulations. This includes revising policies to ensure non-discriminatory admissions, reasonable accommodations, inclusive curricula, and campus accessibility. Budget allocations must reflect these priorities through dedicated funding for assistive technologies, support services, and physical improvements. Institutions should pay particular attention to the needs of indigenous learners, persons with disabilities, and other marginalized groups by promoting student engagement, community partnerships, and inclusive governance practices.

Higher education institutions must implement inclusive education across all levels of institutional life. They should conduct policy reviews to identify gaps and align practices with national guidelines. Inclusive support systems—such as mental health services, academic

advising, and peer mentoring—must be established or strengthened. Regular faculty and staff training on inclusive pedagogy, universal design for learning, mental health, and cultural sensitivity is essential. Student feedback systems should be institutionalized to ensure learners are meaningfully involved in decision-making processes. Partnerships with local communities, indigenous groups, and organizations supporting persons with disabilities should be built to extend the impact of inclusivity beyond the campus. Monitoring and evaluation systems using both quantitative and qualitative data are crucial for tracking progress and guiding continuous improvement.

Learners with special needs should be empowered to take an active role in shaping inclusive education. They are encouraged to engage in institutional processes, collaborate with support offices, participate in peer mentoring, and contribute to the design and evaluation of programs and services. Their advocacy is vital in expanding access to mental health resources, academic accommodations, and financial assistance. The firsthand experiences of these learners provide essential insights for making inclusion more authentic and effective.

The researcher has a key role in translating study findings into practical change. Disseminating results to administrators, policymakers, and educators can help address documented gaps in admissions, support systems, and classroom practices. Collaborating with HEIs to develop training, evaluation tools, and capacity-building workshops can strengthen institutional capabilities. Additionally, the researcher should engage in advocacy and policy dialogue to promote awareness and influence systemic reform.

Future researchers are encouraged to conduct further studies to deepen the understanding of inclusive education, especially in geographically isolated and disadvantaged contexts like Palawan. Comparative studies across institution types, evaluations of long-term program outcomes, and investigations into the specific experiences of marginalized groups will help refine and expand inclusive strategies. Participatory approaches that involve both students and educators will ensure future research remains grounded, relevant, and impactful.

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