

## **Theme: Innovative Open Education: Fostering Resilient Societies for Sustainable Economic Development**

**Subtheme: Changing mindsets for inclusive open education**

**Topic: A Desk Review of stakeholder's Mindsets toward Inclusive Open Education: Barriers, Opportunities, and Policy Implications**

### ABSTRACT

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This desk review examines educators' mindsets toward inclusive education, focusing on the barriers, opportunities, and policy implications. Despite the growing emphasis on inclusive education, the effective integration of open educational practices remains hindered by various challenges. The problem this review addresses is the limited understanding of how educators perceive and engage with inclusive open education and the factors that influence these perceptions. The research questions guiding this review are: 1) What barriers to inclusivity in open education are identified in current literature, 2) What opportunities exist for integrating inclusive open education into practice, as outlined in the literature? 3) How do policies and institutional frameworks shape or influence stakeholders mindsets and practices regarding inclusive open education? This study employs a qualitative desk review methodology and thematic analysis was employed. Synthesized findings from various sources to identify recurring themes about mindsets, barriers, and opportunities in the context of inclusive open education was discussed. This desk review would consolidate existing research and provide a comprehensive overview of the factors influencing educators' mindsets toward inclusive open education, offering valuable insights for policymakers and practitioners aiming to foster greater inclusivity in open education initiatives.

## Introduction

Open Education has emerged as a vital approach to ensuring equitable access to quality education. As defined by UNESCO (2002), open and distance learning are educational methods that remove the constraints of time and place, providing flexible learning opportunities for individuals. Open education significantly fosters democratize education and promote inclusivity by ensuring that education is accessible to all regardless of geographic location, financial status, culture etc. Inclusive education is the term used to describe an education system in which all learners are accepted and fully included, educationally and socially (Mpu & Adu, 2021). Inclusive open education aims to create a learning environment where everyone feels valued, respected and able to participate fully in accessing education. The move towards inclusivity is aided by the application of the principles of universal design for learning (UDL) to course delivery, where approaches that reduce barriers for Open education students benefit the learning experience of a student. Sadly however, there is limited and diverse understanding of how stakeholders perceive and engage with inclusive open education. Questions, uncertainties and contradictions still abound as to what it means, how it can be successfully implemented and to what outcomes (Tah, 2025).

The Philosophy of inclusive education recognises that every student has their own unique learning strengths and needs and education system need to appreciate and accommodate this diversity and importantly make sure that this is able to occur within mainstream classes at students local schools (UNESCO, 1994). In Europe, there is growing recognition of the need for inclusive education as a means to combat racism and discrimination and to promote citizenship and acceptance of different opinions, convictions, beliefs and lifestyles (European Agency for special needs and inclusive Education, 2015). In New South Wales, Australia, inclusive education is defined as an education system which “all students, regardless of disability, ethnicity, socio-economic status, nationality, language, gender, sexual orientation or faith, can access and fully participate in learning, alongside their similar aged peers, supported by reasonable adjustments and teaching strategies tailored to meet their individual needs” (New South Wales Department of Education (NSW DoE), 2021, p. 1). According to Tah (2025). Cameroon teachers understand inclusive education strongly on disability. In the same line of thought, China teachers’ perceive inclusive education primarily from the medical model of disability (Jia et al., 2022). In the context of Botswana, Inclusive education involves addressing the barriers that prevent students with disabilities from fully participating in the activities of the general education schools (Mangope et al, 2020). The concept of inclusivity in open education is understood in diverse ways which results in discrepancies in how it is translated into practice (Boyle & Anderson, 2020). For some stakeholder, the understanding and practice of inclusive education is reflective of challenges faced. The problem this review addresses is the limited understanding of how educators perceive and engage with inclusive open education and the factors that influence these perceptions. It is the fore crucial to understand stakeholders mindset towards inclusive education.

The increasing recognition of education as a cornerstone of the knowledge economy has driven growing demand and, consequently, higher enrolment rates across all levels of education. In Africa, while tertiary education enrolment has expanded significantly, the continent still records the lowest global participation rate at this level. According to Itasanmi et al. (2020), this enrolment growth remains insufficient to meet the rising demand for higher education—fuelled by rapid population growth, improved access to primary and secondary education, economic development, and national efforts to diversify away from primary industries into manufacturing and services. Improving education enrolment in Africa required a multifaceted approach which should include inclusive education plan, strategies and policy are crucial for increasing sustaining enrolment among marginalised groups and open education policies that ensure learning resources more accessible and affordable. Table 1 indicate summary of SADC country polices and strategies to Inclusive open education.

Table 1  
SADC Inclusive open education frameworks.

Country	Inclusive education Policy	ODL policy
Angola	Angola Inclusive Education framework	1
Botswana	Revised National Policy on Education (1994)	2
Comoros	National Social Protection Policy, adopted in 2017.	1
Democratic Republic Congo	it is actively working towards it	1
Eswatini	Eswatini Education and Training Sector(EDSEC) Policy	3
Lesotho	National Inclusive Education Policy (2018)	2
Madagascar	actively working towards inclusive education	3
Malawi	National Strategy on Inclusive Education (NSIE) of 2017	3
Mauritius	Inclusive education for children and youth with special needs (2017)	2
Mozambique	National Strategy for Inclusive Education and Development of Children with Disabilities (EEIDCD) 2020–2029	3
Namibia	Sector Policy on Inclusive Education (2013)	3
Tanzania	The National Strategy for Inclusive Education	2
Seychelles	Inclusive Education Policy	3
South Africa.	Inclusive Education and Training System (2001)	3
Zambia	The inclusive education policy guidelines ( 2017)	2
Zimbabwe	does not have single policy inclusion is built upon combination of national policies and frameworks, including the National Disability Policy, the Education Act, and various policy directives	2

**Key:1** - No dedicated ODL policy yet , **2-** Drafty ODL policy, **3-** Adopted ODL policy or national

### Purpose of the study

The purpose of this desk review is to explore how inclusive open education is understood and practiced by various stakeholders, with particular attention to the barriers, opportunities, and policy dynamics that shape its implementation.

### Methodology

This study adopts a desk review methodology which involves systematically collecting, analysing and synthesizing existing information related to inclusive open education. This desktop review used peer reviewed journal articles from the following data base, ERIC sage, EBSCO, Taylor Francis and google scholar of publication date of no earlier than 2018. The Keywords used during the search included: *inclusive education, open education, barriers to open learning, opportunities to open learning, educational equity, stakeholder perceptions on open learning, policy frameworks in open education, and ODL inclusion*. To ensure the trustworthiness of this desk review, a rigorous and systematic approach was employed in selecting, analysing, and synthesizing the literature. A clear set of inclusion and exclusion criteria guided the selection of relevant, peer-reviewed sources, ensuring the focus remained on high-quality, credible research. The **Included criteria was** Literature published between **2017 and 2025** in English, with a focus on higher education, inclusive pedagogy, and open learning practices across global and regional contexts, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Articles were specifically chosen on the various stakeholder in inclusive education, i.e., teachers, students, school administrators. Both articles of qualitative and quantitative research were utilised. A total of 30 articles , a remaining 15 articles were reviewed in which for each journal was specific to either barriers, opportunities or policy frameworks in open education. **The Excluded criterion was** Sources that addressed general education reforms without a specific focus on inclusivity or open education, or those lacking a clear connection to stakeholder perspectives or policy implications. The purpose of this methodological approach is to provide a comprehensive understanding of how inclusivity is conceptualized and operationalized in open education through existing scholarly literature, policy documents, institutional reports, and relevant theoretical frameworks.

#### **Trustworthiness**

To ensure trustworthiness, the study employed an empirical, thematic content analysis where multiple researchers independently coded and analysed data, followed by collaborative discussions to develop and validate themes and sub-themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

#### **Results, Findings and discussion**

##### **Key Barriers to inclusivity in open education**

There are five themes that emerges as barriers to inclusivity including, IT infrastructure, Human resource, political and legal barriers, societal perspective.

*IT infrastructure barriers.* Low middle income countries have challenges of IT infrastructure. which are relevant for Open learning and barrier to digital inclusion. Developing nations frequently struggle with low digital literacy, expensive infrastructure, and poor infrastructure, which make it challenging for educators and students to interact with online learning materials (Kennedy, 2025). Open learning require IT literacy, IT digital tools, internet yet countries in the third world report internet challenges and low digital skills. A key aspect of the digital divide, which is a reality, affects underprivileged groups like low-income people, people living in rural areas, and marginalised communities, face, is unequal access to technology. The lack of access to necessary personal devices, like computers, tablets, and smartphones, which are necessary for active digital engagement, poses a serious obstacle for these groups to meaningfully engage with digital learning platforms (Aderogba et al ,2021). One key challenge stems from disparities in access to technology and infrastructure across different regions and schools in South Africa (Chigona & Chigona, 2010; Ertmer, 2012). Schools in urban areas often have better access to technology resources than those in rural or underserved communities, exacerbating inequalities in educational opportunities (Ajani, O. A.(2024). The use of digital learning resources is disrupted by power outages, especially in rural areas, making it difficult for educators and students to rely on technology for instruction (Ersoy, 2023). Another aspect of the digital divide is students who struggle with a lack of digital literacy. People from disadvantaged backgrounds frequently struggle with digital tools, online interfaces, and software applications. This makes it difficult for them to properly navigate the intricacies of virtual learning environments, which limits their access to knowledge (Aderogba et al,2021). Unfortunately, this gap is a contributing factor to ongoing inequality in education, creating an endless cycle in which limited access to technology leads to low participation in online learning, which in turn reinforces disadvantage (Ersoy, 2023).

*Political and legal Barriers.* Inadequate policies towards inclusive education have causes a problem contributing to an number of factors. For instance most of the policy to not outline clear the implementation of Inclusive education. Also there is little political will form government on developing of the ODL policy. One major obstacle is the lack of funding, which prevents many universities in low-income nations from having the necessary facilities for students with disabilities. Financial constraints impede the provision of specialised training for faculty members, the acquisition of assistive technologies, and the development of accessible infrastructure (Murtadlo et al., 2025).

*Human resources.* There is shortage of Inclusive education specialist resulting in classrooms that do not capture inclusivity thus marginalised students still suffer despite existing policies.

Inadequate training for educators impacts both their ability to be creative in the classroom and their ability to analyse the learning needs of the modern digital age.

Teacher education in Africa continues to rely on outdated training methods that do not equip educators to meet modern socioeconomic demands or adapt inclusive, technology-enhanced teaching strategies. Many teachers lack adequate professional development and digital proficiency, making it difficult to integrate active learning methods and digital tools into their classrooms. This challenge is compounded by limited financial support and sporadic training opportunities, which hinder sustained growth and effective technology integration in education (Moyo & Hadebe, 2018; Khumalo, 2025; Ajani, 2024). The majority of teachers in developing nations lack basic technological skills, and some are hesitant to use new technology in the classroom because they are unfamiliar with the proper guidelines for conducting virtual sessions. It's thought that in a traditional in-person classroom, teachers and students can use their facial expressions and emotions, something that may be challenging in virtual learning, which is associated with passive teaching (Ndibalema, 2022)

*Societal perspective.* Different studies indicate that different people perceive ODL differently. The working class have a positive attitude towards ODL and their perceptions have influenced acceptance towards the use of open education. Quality of Open education is usually a concern, however studies have found that there is no difference between open education and conventional university classroom settings. There remains concerns, however, about the effectiveness of distance education for learners who may be considered less independent and thus may require direct interaction throughout the instructional process (Schmidt and Faulkner 1989). Additionally the cost of open education is relatively cheaper to full time education. However, open education students are self-sponsored and face financial burden to both working class and non-working class.

*Contextualised material.* Online learning platforms do not accommodate the linguistically diverse audience of diverse learners because their content is in English (Navaneeth & Siddiqui, 2022). This lack of resources and language-appropriate content hinders their ability to understand and actively participate in online course materials. Language differences create ambiguity in communication, which is another area where the linguistic divide exists (Ersoy, 2023). The absence of a reading culture among students was another significant barrier, which leads to a lack of use of the course materials and comprehension of more complicated paradigms. A learner's motivation will be severely hampered in the case of online education by the presumed ability to use the internet, technological devices, and reading materials in a foreign language (Navaneeth & Siddiqui, 2022).

The issue of cultural insensitivity in educational content is equally significant. Online learning resources that disregard cultural diversity run the risk of jeopardising the educational experience for underprivileged students, who are likely to become disengaged and have difficulty understanding materials that are disconnected from their cultural contexts. The absence of culturally appropriate examples, analogies, and case studies in the course materials is another aspect of cultural barriers. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds frequently find it difficult to relate to content that does not relate to their experiences in real life. This disconnect consequently impairs their comprehension of ideas (Ersoy, 2023). The objectivist theory of learning, which underpins the majority of online learning platforms, views educational models as predictive and a "fit for all" solution that ignores social, economic, and cultural factors and has a propensity for western models. Students may feel more and more alienated as a result, particularly if they are studying a curriculum that lacks real-world examples (Navaneeth & Siddiqui, 2022)

#### **Existing opportunities for integrating inclusive open education**

Open education institutions exist in Africa and are accessible. The themes that emerged from the document review include open education resources and inclusivity of the marginalised groups.

*Open education resources.* The 21<sup>st</sup> century learning is exposed to the digital ICT world. The technology environment fosters learners to have ICT skills and open education exposed student to Open education resources which include, e library. In 2024, the internet penetration rate was 77.3% which indicates that people in Botswana have access to internet which is a gate way to open education. The use of Open Education Resources can enhance educational equity by reducing the cost of learning materials, which is often a barrier to access in traditional educational settings (UNESCO, 2002). OER adoption may be slowed down by some educators' traditional mindsets and worries about ownership and quality. This can include worries about losing control over the learning process or doubts about the legitimacy of open educational resources.

*Promoting education for the marginalised.* (women, refugees, students with disability) gender inclusion and equity is addressed. Open education models emphasize learner autonomy and empowerment, aligning with inclusive pedagogical approaches that cater to the diverse needs of students. By focusing on self-directed learning, critical thinking, and the ability to adapt learning environments to the individual learner's needs, open education can help create more inclusive educational experiences (Lewis, 1990). Open education's flexible nature allows for varied learning modes, such as self-paced courses, asynchronous learning, and blended learning environments. These models are particularly beneficial for adult learners, those with caregiving responsibilities, and people working full-time, allowing them to engage with education on their own terms (Kember & Murphy, 1990).

#### **Policies and institutional frameworks influencing stakeholders mindset.**

Effective policies are essential to embedding inclusivity in open education, but their implementation varies widely between western countries and Africa.

*Policy development.* Western world often have well-structured inclusive policies backed by funding and enforcement. In low middle income countries, many policies are symbolic, created to meet global standards rather than local needs, often lacking resources and institutional support, the practical integration of inclusive principles into national and institutional policies remains inconsistent and, in many cases, underdeveloped. Policy and its actual implementation frequently diverge significantly, frequently as a result of a lack of oversight and enforcement mechanisms. Such inadequate policies are "symbolic" because they are developed to adhere to international standards rather than as a direct result of locally driven changes. Such policies have little local substance, as evidenced by the lack of funding associated with them. There is undoubtedly some coherence in the way that a large number of policy-critical articles tend to highlight the role played by the international development sector in advancing inclusive education as the sole progressive strategy for teaching students with

disabilities. In this regard, donors have gained significant clout in advancing socioeconomically based practices that differ from those in low-income nations ( Mpu & Adu, 2021).

*Cultural relevance.* Culture is diverse yet central to inclusivity. However, both high income countries and low middle income countries face a clash of the western world oversimplify culture differences while Africa often adopts imported models that clash with local traditions. According to (2024) Cultural recognition is core principle to achieving social justice, inclusivity and equal access for all students. Culture can be a barrier to learning. This problem representation implies that schools lack the inherent capacity to address cultural diversity and require additional resources or training. Cultural aspect of inclusivity brings to par, Curriculum that is relevant or content validate for locals. This means use of contextualised learning materials. Additionally, In Africa, donor-driven policies can misalign with local context, emphasizing external models over local innovation, which can limit sustainability and stakeholder ownership.

*Implementation gaps.* In the 1990s, inclusivity was a concept primarily associated with children with special needs. Currently the world appreciates inclusivity of all marginalised groups. Countries also understand this concept but has not diverged to the philosophical understanding of inclusive open education. For instance, kids in Syria are refugees in Turkey hence the need to rethink inclusivity. As the inclusive culture-sensitive aspect of learning environments develops, it is important that policies embrace this gaps. Unstable economies and inadequate inclusive policies and regulatory frameworks, which lead to a lack of infrastructure and resources, are to blame for this lack of preparedness. Furthermore, using standardised models of inclusive education created in more affluent regions can present special challenges due to Africa's mixed sociocultural landscape (Murtadlo, 2025).

Furthermore, the policy does not provide a systematic method for incorporating ICT into the national curriculum, despite prioritising digital literacy as a crucial pillar of education reform. This could result in the uneven and fragmented implementation of digital education in different schools. This disparity is especially worrisome in light of educators' low levels of digital competency, a problem that widespread teacher preparation programs have yet to address (Kennedy, 2025). Inadequate Integration Between Inclusive Education and Open Learning Policies.

### **Conclusion**

The desk review has revealed several key points. Firstly it is evident that there are various barriers hindering the implementation of inclusive open education initiatives. These barriers include lack of technological infrastructure and digital divide, cultural and social factors, teacher training and professional development, Insufficient funding and resource allocation and policy-practice gap .In order to address these barriers ,policymakers need to take proactive awareness and provide necessary resources.

In terms of policy implications, the review emphasised the need for policymakers to prioritise inclusive open education in their agendas. This includes allocating funding for initiatives that promote accessibility and equity in education as well as developing policies intergrade open and inclusive education. Additionally policymakers should consider implementing measures to address mindset barriers and outreach programs for marginalised communities.

### **Recommendations**

To bridge this gap, we need a multifaceted approach. Firstly, Scale up inclusive Open education through government support, political will is a turning point to fostering resilient societies for sustainable economic development (Majoko et al., 2018). Secondly, schools require infrastructural upgrades to ensure physical accessibility and provide facilities catering to learners with diverse needs including not only persons with disability but refugees, women, people of low socio economic status. Thirdly, strengthening partnerships between schools and communities is important to foster collaboration and bridge the gap between schools and families.

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