International Journal of Creativity and Technical Development
Volume 6, Number 3, December 2025
ISSN: 2141-6737(Print) 2795-3017(Online)
Published By
International Centre for Integrated Development Research, Nigeria
In collaboration with
Copperstone University, Luanshya, Zambia

Factors against Effective Implementation of Inclusive Education in Tertiary Institutions in Imo State: A Case Study of Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education, Owerri

Ajuzie, Ndubuisi Ebeniza, Ph.D
Department of Curriculum Studies & Educational Technology
Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education, Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria
E-mail: ngozindy@gmail.com

Okwara-Kalu, C. E., Ph.D
Obinna-Akakuru, Annabel U., Ph.D
Department of Educational Psychology/Guidance & Counselling
Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education, Owerri

ABSTRACT

The study examined the factors against the effective implementation of inclusive education among tertiary institutions in Imo State. The design was a case-control study of all academic staff in the Faculty of General Education, Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education, Owerri. Out of 400 staff members, 300 were randomly selected from every Department in the Faculty and used as the sample of the study. Two researcher-constructed questionnaires titled: Students Perception on the Factors against Effective Implementation of Inclusive Education Questionnaire (SPFMEIIEQ) and Lecturers' Perception on the Factors against Effective Implementation of Inclusive Education Questionnaire (LPFMEIIEQ) were used for data collection. The instrument is segmented into two sections, A and B. Section A consists of demographic data, while Section B consists of 18 affective items arranged in line with the research questions. The questionnaire was a 4-Point Likert Rating with Strongly Agree (SA) 4 points, Agree (A) 3 points, Strongly Disagree (SD) 4 points, and Disagree (D) 1 point. The criterion mean value was 3.00. The face and construct validity of the instrument were duly ascertained. The reliability of the instruments was obtained as 0.67 and 0.76 using Cronbach's Alpha. The data were analysed using the mean statistical tool and standard deviation. The findings include the inability of special needs students to access the classroom and other significant places in the university, which was an infrastructural factor mitigating against the effective implementation of inclusive education in the university. The study recommends, among others, that the various school management and the government must take drastic measures to ensure that the mainstream classrooms are made accessible to special needs students; the stakeholders of inclusive education in Nigeria should ensure that an adequate number of shadow teachers are employed in schools if the objectives of that programme are to be achieved.

Keywords: *Inclusive Education, Special Needs Students, Implementation and Tertiary Institution*

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, inclusive education has emerged as a central focus of intense scholarly debate within the educational field, gaining widespread legislative policy approval and structural implementation across numerous global jurisdictions (Ambili et al., 2024; Navas-Bonilla et al., 2025). Unlike traditional, segregated systems that isolate students with disabilities, true inclusive education marks a profound shift by restructuring regular school environments and teaching methods to meet the needs of every learner (De Souza, 2026). Similarly, Wood and Sharma (2026) define inclusion as a systemic commitment to designing schools, curricula, and support structures that anticipate learner variability rather than responding to difference through exclusionary or segregated practices. Ugwu, cited in Onukwufor, Jonathan and Martins (2017), views inclusive education as organised education for all children in a less restricted environment devoid of discrimination, threats and segregation. UNESCO (2009) opines that Inclusive education is fundamentally about strengthening a nation's school system so that it possesses the capacity and resources necessary to support all diverse learners successfully. Also, Ashi cited in Obi and Ashi (2016) describe inclusive education as "a system whereby the disabled and non-disabled children are educated together in one classroom with modifications in the physical structures, equipment and methods to suit the conditions of diverse special needs learners.

Consequently, true inclusive education must accommodate all learners, actively embracing their unique strengths and vulnerabilities. Rather than segregating students, this approach unites non-disabled and special-needs children within a single, enriched learning environment. By ensuring that every student navigates the same academic, social, physical, emotional, and moral landscapes together, schools can foster genuine growth and instruction that transcends individual diversities. UNESCO (2006) stipulates that such grounded in fundamental human rights, inclusive education mandates that learning must be universally accessible and entirely free from discrimination. Consequently, every educational institution carries a strict institutional responsibility to educate all children and adults, ensuring that no learner is marginalised or excluded. They state that all learners have the right to education irrespective of their disability, gender, age, ethnicity, language, sickness, geographical location and sexuality. The above suggests that there should be full implementation of inclusive education in schools, and that everybody should have access to education. As observed by Ainscow (2005, as cited in Rasheed, 2014), operationalising inclusive education frameworks consistently disrupts and challenges deep-seated organisational structures within traditional school systems.

This systemic friction occurs because embedding inclusion requires shifting away from rigid, standardised instructional models toward highly flexible environments. Contemporary scholars emphasise that despite decades of policy adjustments, modern school systems still experience acute operational challenges when attempting to reconcile rigid state curricula and resource deficits with the fluid demands of inclusive classrooms

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(Magnússon, 2024; Wood et al., 2026). A stark disconnect remains between how inclusion is understood and operationalised in African nations compared to Western societies. In Nigeria, for instance, the National Policy on Education historically frames inclusive education through a narrow lens, viewing it primarily as specialised training tailored for children and adults with special needs (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2013). Conversely, European nations conceptualise inclusion as a comprehensive systemic reform for all learners, regardless of their individual backgrounds (Nwazuoke, 2012 & FGN, 2013, UNESCO cited in Rasheed, 2014). From Ainscow's observation, it is seen that the implementation problem of inclusive education in Nigeria is partly traceable to what has been stipulated in the National Policy of Education. It means there should be a proper review of the policies on inclusive education for better implementation.

To solidify inclusive education policies and guarantee program success, governments and educators must explicitly define stakeholder roles. As Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory suggests (Adeniyi et al., 2015), social roles deeply alter how individuals are treated by others and shift their entire personal disposition. Consequently, when stakeholders execute their responsibilities effectively, they can reshape prevailing negative attitudes toward inclusion. For instance, teachers who proactively fulfil their roles can profoundly elevate how special-needs students view themselves, while simultaneously fostering empathy and positive behavioural adjustments among their non-disabled peers. In other words, the earlier stakeholders of inclusive education realise and play their roles well, the more successful the programme will be in Nigeria. The stakeholders here are the government, educators, curriculum planners, teachers and students. Affirming this theoretical framework, Dierdorff and Morgeson (as cited in Adeniyi et al., 2015) demonstrate that explicitly defined roles and responsibilities directly correlate with positive organisational outcomes, including enhanced job performance, higher satisfaction, and stronger professional commitment.

It is believed that when stakeholders of inclusive education know and play their roles well, learners will derive the necessary benefits of the programme, and their attitude towards inclusive education will be enhanced. In an empirical study investigating inclusive education frameworks in East Asia, Malinen and Savolainen (2008) observed that student attitudes toward inclusive practices were only moderately positive. This finding underscores a critical requirement for successful school integration: if learners are to derive maximum academic and social benefits from inclusive education, both students with special needs and their non-disabled peers must proactively develop positive, supportive attitudes toward the program and one another. According to Okwudire and Okechukwu (as cited in Sambo et al., 2017), the operationalisation of inclusive education serves as a critical social equaliser, enabling both disabled students and their neurotypical peers to establish a shared sense of belonging as equal members of the institutional community.

This framework posits that classroom integration dismantles the traditional boundaries of segregation, fostering a unified culture where diversity is normalised within

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the wider student body. Recent regional scholarship in West Africa reinforces this perspective, noting that community membership and peer acceptance are fundamental prerequisites for achieving the psychological and academic goals of inclusive mandates (Onyedika & Obi, 2024). Also, Ajuwon (2012) opines that the essence of inclusive education is for every learner to derive the full benefits of school experiences. That implies that every student should be exposed to the environmental, social, intellectual and emotional climate of the school. This will go a long way to bridging the gap that exists between normal and special needs children. It will equally eliminate adjustment problems that special needs children usually face in the larger society after being educated separately. In addition, UNESCO, cited in Adeniyi, Owolabi, and Olojede (2015), states that regular schools with inclusive education orientation are effective measures to eradicate discriminatory attitudes towards children with disabilities. According to them, such schools provide an effective education for children with disabilities and reduce the cost-effectiveness of the entire education system.

In an inclusive classroom, all learners learn together without any molestation or any form of segregation by the teachers or fellow students, all things being equal. It is expected that teachers, as pivots in education, must have a positive attitude towards inclusive education. Ali et al. (2006) revealed that the majority of teachers hold positive attitudes toward inclusive practices. These educators agreed that inclusive environments significantly enhance social interactions among diverse learners, thereby dismantling harmful stereotypes surrounding students with special needs. Extensive literature confirms that a positive teacher disposition is a crucial determinant of effective program delivery. This foundational conclusion is supported by early research (Avramidis & Kalyva, 2007; Jordan et al., 2009; Rakap & Kaczmarek, 2012, as cited in Adeniyi et al., 2015) and strongly reinforced by current global studies, which continue to identify teacher attitudes as a primary catalyst for successful inclusion (Mngo & Mngo, 2024; Wood et al., 2026).

Conversely, a substantial body of literature indicates that many educators do not feel sufficiently prepared or equipped to implement inclusive education strategies effectively. This institutional unreadiness and hesitation were documented in foundational studies examining teacher resistance (Semmel et al., 1991, as cited in Adeniyi et al., 2015) and have been consistently observed across various regional contexts (Ogolla, 2011). Recent empirical evidence confirms that this challenge persists today, with contemporary researchers highlighting that a lack of specialised training, inadequate classroom resources, and systemic constraints continue to fuel widespread teacher anxiety and unreadiness for inclusive classrooms (Mgijima & Reynolds, 2023; Mngo & Mngo, 2024). Statutory frameworks establish that students with special needs encompass learners presenting with visual impairments, partial or profound hearing loss, or specific learning disabilities (The Malaysian Education Act 1996, as cited in Manisah et al., 2006). This multi-categorical classification highlights the diverse physiological and cognitive variations that require specialised instructional interventions within mainstream institutions. Contemporary

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legislative and empirical literature across Sub-Saharan Africa echoes this comprehensive scope, expanding modern definitions to explicitly include neurodevelopmental variations and physical health impairments, thereby mandating that institutions look beyond single-sensory deficits when organising classroom accommodations (Okoronkwo & Aminu, 2024; Suleiman, 2026). According to Heiman (2004), successfully integrating students with special needs into mainstream classrooms requires a rigorous, multidimensional initial diagnosis that encompasses both psychological evaluations and specialised educational testing. Furthermore, Heiman notes that these students must be provided with targeted, supplementary academic assistance managed by specialised educators, delivered either directly within the regular classroom or inside a dedicated resource room. Current empirical studies expand upon this foundation, emphasising that modern diagnostic practices must actively guide individualised, tiered interventions to ensure that resource room support translates effectively into inclusive general education (Vlcek & Pospisil, 2024; Wood et al., 2026).

To ensure efficiency, the school administration and educators need to train more mainstream teachers, who help with academic and students' other needs. The Chief Executive Officer of HIIMA International Education Network, Dr Nike Agunbiade Efiebet, opined that mainstreaming special needs students in regular classes has massive benefits for them. He therefore called on the government to solidify inclusive education policies that schools implement (Atueyi 2018). Like every other phenomenon, inclusive education has many challenges that seem to cut across many cultures and academic institutions. Ellia, cited in Chimhenga (2016), observed that teachers' attitudes towards special needs learners during the learning process affect their academic performance. Some teachers lack confidence in assisting such learners. Rosenthal, cited in Chimhenge (2016), states that teachers' expectations, definitions and interactions with disabled students can encourage or discourage them. If they are positive, they will encourage students, and discourage them if they are negative. Teachers' expectation of students will be higher for those students he/she defines as bright students. Chimheng (2016) in his study on the attitude of teachers towards disabled student favourable or unfavourable feelings towards their students have a significant effect on students' education attainment. Some teachers have problems with the academic, social and behavioural adjustment of special needs students. They think that such students will not benefit much from inclusive education. Such teachers do not see any good in inclusive education (Heiman, Priestley).

At Present, numerous tertiary institutions across Nigeria have yet to operationalise inclusive education frameworks. This hesitation often stems from the systemic complexities and resource-heavy investments required to sustain such programs. Furthermore, historical academic discourse and policy interventions have disproportionately focused on primary and secondary school environments, leaving higher education under-researched. Despite this historical neglect, contemporary evidence indicates that the fundamental barriers to inclusion - such as institutional resistance, infrastructural deficits, and inadequate staff

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training - remain largely uniform across all tiers of the educational system. A study on the challenges of implementing inclusive education of children with visual impairment, among other things, found that the social factors are a negative attitude of society towards impaired students; an unadoptable school environment, and language communication barriers are some of the factors that make inclusive education difficult to implement (Onukwufor and Uchechi, 2017).

Some of the economic factors against effective implementation of the policy are inadequate funding, an inadequate number of personnel, inadequate training for personnel and inadequate funds to purchase the necessary technological materials, and emotional factors are discrimination against children with visual impairment, lack of awareness of the special needs of children with visual impairment, etc. In an empirical evaluation of inclusive learning spaces, Ali et al. (2010) found that 41.9% of surveyed educators criticised existing classroom spatial configurations, noting that the physical layout failed to accommodate the actual volume of students and instructors. Furthermore, respondents highlighted severe infrastructural deficits, citing a critical shortage of foundational amenities such as desks, chairs, and fans, as well as an acute scarcity of instructional materials, including teaching aids, digital projectors, and computer hardware. Recent regional studies confirm that these structural deficiencies persist, with current scholars emphasising that inadequate physical infrastructure and missing digital tools remain the primary operational hurdles preventing the successful execution of inclusive mandates in higher education (Okoronkwo & Aminu, 2024; Suleiman, 2026). The above indicates that poor facilities are another possible factor that hinders the effective implementation of inclusive education in tertiary institutions. Inclusive education is a sensitivity of the programme. Its sensitivity lies in the fact that it involves individuals who by nature are delicate and vulnerable, and as such, require much commitment, care and selfless services.

Consequently, a significant empirical concern arises whether key stakeholders have established the necessary human resources, structural infrastructure, and specialised equipment vital for sustainable program delivery. Furthermore, a glaring gap exists in the literature: while inclusive education has been extensively documented at the primary and secondary school tiers, research focusing on higher education remains notably sparse. Driven by these core considerations, this study investigates the barriers hindering the execution of inclusive education within higher education institutions in Imo State, focusing specifically on Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education (AIFUE), Owerri.

The primary objective of this study is to assess lecturers' perceptions regarding the factors that impede the effective implementation of inclusive education within tertiary institutions in Imo State. Specifically, the study aims to examine the following three critical dimensions:

i. Infrastructural factors obstructing successful classroom and campus integration;
ii. Educator-related variables, including instructional readiness and professional capacity; and

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iii. Student-centred dynamics affecting peer relationships and classroom climates within the university.

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are the infrastructural factors influencing inclusive education in Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education, Owerri?
2. What are the teacher-related factors against the effective implementation of inclusive education in Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education, Owerri?
3. What are the student-related factors against the effective implementation of inclusive education in Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education, Owerri?

METHOD

The design of the study was a case-control study. The area of study was the Owerri Municipal Council of Imo State. The population of the study comprised 400 academic staff in the School of General Education and 30 special needs students from the Department of Special Needs Education, Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education. The sample consisted of 300 lecturers who were randomly selected from the Departments in the School of General Education. Three research questions guided the study. Two researcher-constructed questionnaires titled 'Students Perceptions on the Factors Militating against Effective Implementation of Inclusive Education Questionnaire' (SPFMEIIEQ) and the 'Lecturers Perceptions on Factors Militating against Effective Implementation of Inclusive Education Questionnaire' (LPFMEIIEQ) were used to collect the affective response of students and lecturers. Both had three sections: Section 'A' consisted of demographic data, Section B contained 18 and 12 affective items that were arranged in line with research questions, respectively. The questionnaires were structured in accordance with the Likert four-point rating scale that was weighted thus: Strongly Agreed (SA) 4 points, Agree (A) 3 points, Strongly Disagreed (SD) 4 points, and Disagree (D) 1 point. The criterion mean value was 3.00, meaning that any item that had a mean below 3.00 was not accepted, whereas items with means above 3.00 were accepted. The researchers established the face and construct validity of the instrument by giving the questionnaire to 3 experts, one in Educational Psychology, one in Special Education and one in Measurement and Evaluation. The reliability of the instrument was obtained as .67 and .76 using Cronbach's Alpha Statistics. The data that were collected were analysed using the mean and standard deviation statistical tools.

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation on Infrastructural Facilities

S/N	Items	Mean	SD	Decision
1	My school has ramps where there are steps which makes it a lot easier to go through	4.06	1.3	AGREED
2	I like the width and positioning of door and doorways, opening and closing speed	4.15	0.9	✓
3	The visibility of hazards	4.37	1.3	✓
4	I have access to other areas of the school such as other building, sporting fields, playground	2.70	1.3	✓
5	The arrangement of furniture such as table, bench and shelf makes it easier to access			✓
6	There are suitable work rooms for special needs students	3.27	1.4	✓
7	Our classroom clutter such as games, bags, rugs, toys, sporting equipment	4.12	1.4	✓
8	I have access to sinks and other specialized classroom equipment			✓
9	Lighting system in the classrooms is superb for me			✓
10	I have easy access to drinking waters and other amenities at school			✓

Table 1 shows that the respondents indicate that items 1, 2, 3, 5 and 6 on infrastructural facilities have their mean scores above 3.00; this implies that they do not militate against effective implementation of inclusive education in AIFCE. However, item 4 has its mean score below 3.00, which means that the respondents disagreed that students have easy access to all classrooms and other important areas in the school.

Table 2: Mean & Standard Deviation on the Teacher Factors

S/N	Items	Mean	SD	Decision
1	I am a mainstreaming lecturer	3.03	1.2	Agreed
2	I convey high expectations for normal students and low expectations for special needs students	3.01	1.0	✓
3	I have additional skills and tools to cope with inclusive education	3.74	1.1	✓
4	I attend seminars on how to assist students with special needs regularly	4.84	1.2	✓
5	I manage normal and special needs students very well in my classroom	3.85	1.0	✓

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6	I sincerely lack the necessary specialised skills for inclusive education	3.54	1.1	✓
7	Inclusive education is so stressful for me to tolerate	4.38	1.2	✓
8	I am finding it difficult to combine my area of specialisation with special education	2.73	1.3	✓
9	I find it extremely difficult to teach special needs students	3.74	1.1	✓
10	I have a sign language interpreter attached to me	3.85	1.0	✓
11	Time is usually a constraint when it comes to teaching in inclusive education	4.62	1.1	✓
12	Despite the challenges of inclusive education, I strongly support it	3.51	1.0	✓

Table 2 shows that among the 12 items on teacher factors, 10 items scored above 3.00, while item 8 scored 2.73, which indicates that the respondents agreed that the 11 items were not teacher factors that militate against inclusive education. Only item 8 is a teacher factor that militates against inclusive education in a tertiary institution.

Table 3: Mean & Standard Deviation on Students' Factors

S/N	Items	Mean	SD	Decision
1	I feel upset about my conditions, especially when studying with normal students	3.49	1.2	Agree
2	I sometime feel that society treats me differently because of my disabilities	3.27	1.4	Agree
3	I feel inferior in the midst of normal students	3.01	1.1	Agree
4	I do not like associating with normal students in my school	4.38	1.2	Agree
5	I receive support from normal inclusive education	2.73	1.3	Disagree
6	Most lecturers and school management show little or no regards for me	3.74	1.1	Agree
7	I feel intimidated in the midst of other students	3.85	1.0	Agree
8	I face obvious discrimination and labelling at school	4.62	1.1	Agree

Table 2 indicate those items 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7 and 8 scored above 3.00, while item 5 scored below 3.00; an indication that the respondents disagreed that a greater number of students support inclusive education.

The results in Table 1 show that the participants agree that their college is implementing inclusive education as supposed in terms of infrastructural development and that it has facilities for training lecturers for inclusive education, satisfactory resources for inclusive classroom maintenance, and workrooms for special needs students and necessary

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technological materials suitable for inclusive education. However, the respondents disagree that special needs students have free access to all the classrooms and other important areas in the school. That indicates that the physically challenged students have a problem attending lectures that are fixed in some storey buildings in the college, unless they are aided by the normal students. That implies that the college has adequate infrastructural facilities for inclusive education, but should endeavour to make all classrooms accessible to students with special needs. The researcher was actually made to understand that the school even has some other gadgets for inclusive education that are yet to be put in place. The findings seem to agree with the findings of a study on the challenges of implementing inclusive education of children with visual impairment, which found, among other things, that an unadoptable school environment is one of the factors that make inclusive education difficult to implement (Onukwufor and Uchechi, 2017). The finding also contradicts the findings of the study by Ali etal (2010) in which they found that 41.9 per cent of the respondents did not agree with the space available for the learning process because it did not match the capacity of students and teachers at the time. Some respondents indicated that insufficient infrastructure, especially for basic amenities, such as chairs, tables, fans, teaching aids (BBM), LCD facilities, computers, and others, was inadequate.

Again, the empirical results from research question two indicate that participants reached a consensus on 10 of the 12 items within the teacher-factors subscale, expressing disagreement only on Item 11. Specifically, Item 8 asserted that lecturers at Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education (AIFUE), Owerri, experience operational difficulties combining their primary areas of specialisation with specialised education methodologies. By rejecting this item, the respondents demonstrated that they do not discriminate against special needs students and do not have low expectations for them. Instead, the data reveal that the faculty broadly supports inclusive education. This finding suggests that the program's practical demands could be heavily mitigated if more specialised personnel, such as shadow teachers, were employed to support general education lecturers within mainstream classrooms. Interestingly, this finding contrasts with the evidence presented by Chimhenga (2016), who investigated teacher attitudes toward students with disabilities in mainstream secondary classrooms. Chimhenga concluded that an educator’s favourable or unfavourable feelings significantly dictate a student's academic attainment, noting that negative instructor expectations often act as self-fulfilling prophecies that actively hinder a learner's development. Chimhenga reported that many teachers struggle with the academic, social, and behavioural adjustments of special needs learners, often believing these students derive minimal benefit from inclusion. Furthermore, this finding diverges from a substantial body of literature indicating widespread educator unreadiness and systemic hesitation regarding inclusive mandates (Ogolla, 2011; Semmel et al., 1991, as cited in Adeniyi et al., 2015).

Furthermore, the empirical data answering research question three reveal that within the student-factors subscale, respondents disagreed with the assertion that all students

uniformly support inclusive education. In other words, while the general student population attempts to cooperate with and assist their special needs counterparts, a notable portion would not personally subscribe to an inclusive classroom model if given an alternative option. This hesitation likely stems from underlying social discomfort or a lack of peer preparation regarding collaborative learning alongside students with diverse physical or intellectual profiles. This outcome directly corroborates the foundational findings of Malinen and Savolainen (2008) in their study on inclusive education frameworks in East Asia, which observed that student attitudes toward inclusion were only moderately positive or slightly average. Similarly, this peer resistance aligns with recent regional research in West Africa, which confirms that while surface-level cooperation is common, deep-seated peer skepticism and social distancing exist significant hurdles to full classroom integration (Onyedika & Obi, 2024).

CONCLUSION

The practical implications of these findings suggest that prospective students with special needs can confidently apply for the Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) Degree programs at Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education (AIFUE), Owerri, ensure that the institution possesses a supportive environment to address its specific learning needs. Furthermore, these data provide university management with clear institutional benchmarks, highlighting specific infrastructural, faculty, and peer dynamics that require strategic consolidation to continuously improve and sustain the university's inclusive education.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were made thus:

i. The university management, in partnership with the federal government, must implement deliberate structural measures to upgrade campus facilities. This includes constructing ramps, widening doorways, and adapting mainstream lecture halls to ensure they are fully accessible and physically accommodating to students with special needs.
ii. To effectively manage the social, emotional, and instructional demands of inclusive classrooms, university management and educational stakeholders should organise regular, targeted workshops and seminars. These training sessions should focus on equipping general education lecturers with advanced pedagogical tools and adaptive coping skills.
iii. To reduce the instructional strain on regular lecturers and foster healthier peer integration among diverse learners, stakeholders should ensure the adequate

recruitment and deployment of specialised shadow teachers. These personnel are essential to providing direct assistance within mainstream classrooms, thereby ensuring the overarching objectives of the inclusive program are achieved.

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