



UNDERSTANDING WORKPLACE INCLUSION: EXPLORING EMPLOYEES' PERCEPTIONS, ATTITUDES AND EXPERIENCES REGARDING COLLEAGUES WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

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The unemployment rate of persons with disabilities in Sri Lanka continues to create a significant challenge not only for the individuals affected but also for the national economy, which misses the chance to benefit from the talents of capable people (Antonopoulos, Sugden, & Saliba, 2023). This study, conducted aimed to understand how workplace inclusion is experienced by employees who work alongside colleagues with special needs. Specifically, it explores the perceptions, attitudes, and lived experiences of co-workers, academic staff, and department heads in relation to inclusive employment practices. Using a qualitative research approach and following the case study design, the study involved two senior academics (heads of departments), five academic staff members of the departments, and ten non-academic staff from the Department of Special Needs Education and the Learner Support Unit at the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the heads and academics, while a focus group discussion was conducted to collect responses from non-academic staff. Thematic analysis was applied to identify common patterns and meaningful insights. Findings indicate that overall attitudes toward colleagues with disabilities are positive. Heads of departments emphasized the value and capability of these employees, and academic staff expressed willingness to foster a supportive work environment. While non-academic staff were also supportive, many expressed a desire for more awareness and orientation about the type of disability and how best to interact with and support such colleagues, preferably before recruitment. This reflects the need for preparatory training to enhance comfort and collaboration. Despite the goodwill expressed by staff, employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities remain limited. The study highlights that inclusion must go beyond policy and be supported through infrastructure, communication, and staff development. The study recommends increased disability awareness training for all employees, workplace adjustments based on individual needs, and active policy implementation to ensure a truly inclusive and supportive environment.

Keywords: workplace inclusion, Employees' perceptions and attitudes, experiences, special needs, inclusive employment.

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INTRODUCTION

Inclusion in employment is a fundamental right, yet for many persons with disabilities in Sri Lanka, it remains an unfulfilled promise. Although the Public Administration Circular No. 27/88 mandates that 3% of vacancies in the public sector be reserved for individuals with disabilities, its implementation has been inconsistent and largely symbolic. Many qualified persons with disabilities, some holding university degrees and possessing valuable skills are often excluded from meaningful employment. Rather than contributing to the economy through their potential, they are too often excluded. Inclusion in employment is a fundamental right, yet for many persons with disabilities in Sri Lanka it remains unrealized. Although Public Administration Circular No. 27/88 mandates a 3% public-sector employment quota, inconsistent implementation has left many qualified individuals excluded from meaningful work and perceived as dependents rather than contributors. Globally, employment supports economic independence, dignity, and social inclusion (Bush et al., 2008), yet people with disabilities continue to face lower employment and labour force participation rates despite interventions such as wage subsidies, specialized employment services, and assistive technologies (Baert, 2016; Hemphill & Kulik, 2016). In Sri Lanka, while the public-sector quota exists in principle, inclusive employment in the private sector remains largely voluntary. To address this gap, the National Secretariat for Persons with Disabilities has issued guidelines promoting inclusive hiring, reasonable accommodation, ability-based job matching, inclusive workplace design, and skills development, particularly for youth with disabilities. However, structural gaps persist, underscoring the need for stronger institutional commitment. Beyond policy and infrastructure, attitudinal bias remains a critical but less visible barrier. Unconscious beliefs that portray persons with disabilities as less competent or dependent continue to influence recruitment, workplace interactions, and career progression (Antonopoulos et al., 2023; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). In this context, the present study examines employees' perceptions and experiences of working with colleagues with special needs to identify both explicit and implicit factors shaping workplace inclusion and to bridge the gap between policy intent and everyday practice in Sri Lanka.

The study was guided by the following aim and specific objectives:

Aim:



To understand how workplace inclusion is experienced by employees who work alongside colleagues with special needs.

Objectives:

1. To study the views of the heads of the departments involved in employees with Special Needs.
2. To assess the level of support provided by the workplace to facilitate employees with Special Needs.
3. To explore co-workers' perceptions and attitudes towards working with employees with special needs in their respective workplaces.
4. To identify the challenges and experiences faced by co-workers when collaborating with employees with special needs.
5. To propose suggestions from co-workers and heads on how to improve inclusive practices and foster a more supportive work environment for all employees.

METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative, multiple case study design to explore employees' perceptions and experiences of working with colleagues with special needs at the Open University of Sri Lanka. The cases examined were the Department of Special Needs Education (Case A), involving an employee with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), and the Learner Support Unit (Case B), involving an employee with a severe visual impairment.

Participants were purposively selected from staff who directly interacted with these employees and included two department heads, five academic staff, and ten non-academic staff members. Data were collected through interviews and a focus group discussion, with participant identities protected through a coding system.

Table – 1: Title Codes given for the participants of the study

Case – A (Dept. of Special Needs Education)		Case – B (Learner Support Units)	
Participants	Codes	Participants	Codes
Head/SNE	CAH	Head/LSU	CBH
Academics	CAA1, CAA2....	N/A	N/A
Non-Academics	CAN1, CAN2....	Non-Academics	CBN1 & CBN2

The qualitative data collected were analysed using thematic analysis to identify common patterns, shared experiences, and meaningful insights into attitudes, challenges, and inclusive practices within the workplace.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study set out to understand workplace inclusion by exploring perceptions, attitudes, experiences, and support systems concerning employees with special needs.



The data gathered through interviews with two department heads, academic staff, and responses from non-academic employees were analysed thematically. The findings are presented under five key themes corresponding to the research objectives.

1. Institutional Commitment and Leadership Perspectives

Department heads played a key role in initiating inclusive employment. In Case A, recruitment of an individual with Autism was driven by moral responsibility and compliance with Sri Lanka's 3% employment quota, with the head emphasizing that "policies are important, but unless someone takes that first step, they remain only words on paper." Despite the candidate's lower interview ranking, the appointment reflected institutional commitment, as "inclusion cannot always be measured by marks or rankings," and was framed as an ethical duty.

In Case B, the head highlighted the role of technology in aligning tasks with individual strengths rather than limitations. Both heads acknowledged the absence of formal staff-focused disability policies and responded through flexible work arrangements and meaningful, non-tokenistic responsibilities. Positive outcomes included increased confidence and independence of the employee, with leaders noting that "one appointment can change an entire workplace culture," positioning inclusion as a shared learning process.

2. Perceptions and Attitudes of Co-Workers

Both academic and non-academic staff expressed positive attitudes towards working with individuals with special needs, valuing diverse abilities and noting improved patience, teamwork, and mutual respect. Staff observed that while work pace may vary, "the quality of his work is remarkable" (CAA1), and inclusion strengthened collegial bonds, making teams feel "more like a family" (CAA2). Non-academic staff also reported more considerate communication (CBN1). However, concerns were raised about well-intentioned but overly childlike interactions that could undermine dignity (CAA3), highlighting the need for greater awareness to support respectful inclusion.

3. Challenges in Integration and Support Systems

Reported challenges were mainly related to system-level constraints rather than the employee's abilities. Staff highlighted limitations in physical space and assistive technologies, particularly in shared offices, noting that while speech-to-text "helps him work, it disturbs others too" (CAN4) and that better tools or separate spaces would ease integration (CAN3).

Some staff expressed initial uncertainty in providing support, especially when inclusive practices were still developing (CAA5). At the same time, respondents stressed the importance of recognizing individual capacities, cautioning that "if you judge them only by the disability, you will miss their strengths" (CBN2).

Initially assigned individual tasks, the employee later showed a preference for collaborative work, appearing "happier and more motivated" when engaged with colleagues (CAN6). This shift underscores the value of flexible job design and the evolving nature of inclusive practices.



4. Environmental and Structural Modifications

Only limited physical or environmental modifications were made, with adjustments focusing mainly on flexible job design rather than infrastructure. As one head noted, “what mattered more was adjusting his duties” (CBH), while another emphasised that support needs become clear only after employment, as “each person is different” (CB2). No specialized equipment was provided institutionally; instead, the employee relied on personal devices and collegial support, highlighting gaps in institutional preparedness. Both heads acknowledged that, despite inclusive policy intentions, organizational support systems remain underdeveloped, noting that “policies talk about inclusion, but we don’t yet have the right facilities” (CAH). This underscores the need for improved infrastructure, staff training, and formal support mechanisms to ensure sustainable workplace inclusion.

5. Suggestions to Foster Inclusion

Both academic and non-academic staff offered meaningful recommendations. These included,

- Providing targeted awareness programs to reduce prejudice.
- Offering structured training for staff on how to support colleagues with special needs.
- Ensuring thoughtful job allocation based on individual capabilities.
- Promoting inclusive recruitment campaigns.
- Encouraging autonomy and social interaction.

Heads emphasized the need for institutional-level planning and suggested that future recruitment be aligned with long-term support systems so that the employment journey is sustainable for both the individual and the institution.

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

This study explored workplace inclusion at the Open University of Sri Lanka by examining perceptions, attitudes, experiences, and support systems related to employees with special needs. Thematic analysis of interview and questionnaire data revealed a largely positive orientation towards inclusion among both leadership and staff. Department heads demonstrated initiative by aligning recruitment decisions with national policies, including Public Administration Circular No. 27/88, and institutional values. Academic and non-academic staff valued the contributions of colleagues with disabilities, noting that inclusive practices enhanced empathy, teamwork, and mutual respect. Despite these positive attitudes, several practical challenges were identified, including the absence of formal staff-focused disability policies, limited physical accessibility, lack of structured awareness training, and inadequate assistive technologies. The findings suggest that sustainable inclusion requires more than individual goodwill; it demands systemic planning, responsive infrastructure, and continuous capacity building. Based on these findings, the study proposes the following measures to promote a more inclusive and equitable work environment:



Formalize Inclusive Employment Policies for Staff

Institutions should extend existing disability policies to explicitly include staff by establishing clear frameworks for recruitment, support, evaluation, and retention to ensure consistency and accountability.

- **Conduct Awareness and Sensitization Workshops**
Regular staff training should build disability awareness, address unconscious bias, and promote an inclusive workplace culture.
- **Design Roles to Match Individual Strengths**
Duties and responsibilities should be aligned with the individual strengths and capacities of employees with disabilities to enhance productivity and workplace satisfaction.
- **Invest in Environmental Accessibility and Assistive Technology**
Institutional infrastructure including access ramps, signage, restrooms, and digital tools must be improved to accommodate the needs of all employees.
- **Create Mentorship and Support Systems**
Appointing trained mentors or supportive colleagues can ease the transition and integration of employees with disabilities into their teams, fostering confidence and collaboration.
- **Strengthen Monitoring and Feedback Mechanisms**
Regular check-ins and structured feedback can ensure continued development and early identification of challenges, promoting both individual and organizational growth.
- **Advocate for the Implementation of Employment Quotas**
Institutions must take proactive steps to realize the 3% employment quota outlined in national policy, transforming guidelines into visible change.

In conclusion, while full inclusion is an ongoing process, intentional leadership, strategic planning, and a commitment to equity can enable institutions like the Open University of Sri Lanka to empower employees with special needs and create truly inclusive workplaces.

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