



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. The study explored perceptions, attitudes, and experiences of co-workers, staff, and heads regarding workplace inclusion for special needs colleagues. Using a qualitative research approach and following the case study design, the study involved two senior academics, 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 academics, while a focus group discussion was conducted for non-academics. 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. Many non academics 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 viewed as dependents or burdens, simply because the system fails to recognize and support their abilities. Globally, employment is not only a pathway to economic independence but also a key driver of self-esteem, dignity, and social inclusion (Bush et al., 2008). Yet, people with disabilities consistently face lower employment rates and reduced participation in the labour force compared to their non-disabled peers. Over the past two decades, a range of interventions such as wage subsidies, disability-specific employment services, and assistive technologies have been implemented worldwide to bridge this gap. However, research suggests that these initiatives have not led to substantial improvements in employment outcomes for people with disabilities (Baert, 2016; Hemphill & Kulik, 2016). In Sri Lanka, while the public sector quota exists in principle, the private sector has been largely left to voluntary inclusion. Recognizing this gap, the National Secretariat for Persons with Disabilities has issued strategic recommendations encouraging private companies to adopt inclusive hiring practices and provide reasonable accommodations. Recent guidelines highlight that both public and private employers have a role to play in creating an equitable labour market. They emphasize job matching based on ability rather than disability, the need for inclusive workplace design, and the importance of skills development, especially for youth with disabilities. One of the less visible but deeply impactful barriers is attitudinal bias. While policies may express inclusion, workplace cultures often remain shaped by hidden attitudes unconscious beliefs that influence how people perceive and treat others.



Research shows that such biases commonly portray people with disabilities as less competent or dependent (Antonopoulos, Sugden, & Saliba, 2023; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). These stereotypes can subtly yet powerfully affect recruitment decisions, workplace interactions, and career advancement opportunities. In this context, understanding how employees perceive, react to, and experience working with colleagues who have special needs becomes critical. This study explores those perceptions and experiences, aiming to identify both the clear and hidden factors that shape inclusion in the workplace. By giving voice to employees and exploring their attitudes both conscious and unconscious this research seeks to bridge the gap between policy and practice, and ultimately contribute to building more inclusive, respectful, and equitable work environments 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 adopted a qualitative research approach to gain a deeper understanding of how employees perceive and experience working alongside colleagues with special needs. A multiple case study design was used to explore these perspectives. The Department of Special Needs Education named as Case A and the Learner Support Unit named as Case B. In Case A, the employee under study is an individual with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), while in Case B, the employee is an individual with a severe visual impairment. These distinct profiles provided rich opportunities to examine how different types of disabilities influence workplace experiences and perceptions, as well as the forms of support and adjustments that colleagues and institutions consider necessary.



Participants were selected using purposive sampling, focusing specifically on individuals who directly interact with two employees with disabilities within the institution.

The sample consisted of two department heads, five academic staff members, and ten non-academic staff members drawn from the Department of Special Needs Education and the Learner Support Unit of OUSL. Data collection involved interviews with the department heads and academic staff, while a focus group discussion was conducted with the non-academic staff. For ease of reference, the following coding system was used to identify participants:

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

The heads of departments played a pivotal role in initiating inclusion. The department head of Case A shared that her motivation to recruit an individual with Autism stemmed both from a strong sense of moral obligation and from compliance with Sri Lanka's national directive to reserve 3% of employment opportunities for persons with disabilities. Sri Lanka has a policy to reserve this 3% quota for qualified persons with disabilities in the public sector, established by a 1988 Public Administration Circular.

"Policies are important, but unless someone takes that first step, they remain only words on paper." mentioned by CAH and CBH also stated that,



"I felt it was my duty, not just as an administrator, but as a human being, to give him an opportunity. The policy reminds us of our responsibility, but my conscience reminded me even more."

This provision is further reinforced by broader constitutional and policy frameworks safeguarding the rights of people with disabilities, such as the Protection of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act. Although the candidate did not rank highly in interviews, he was selected to reflect the department's commitment to inclusive employment. CAH specifically mentioned that,

"I knew others had scored better, but inclusion cannot always be measured by marks or rankings. We had to show, through our actions, that we are serious about giving space for persons with disabilities."

The head, in case B from a technical background, expressed strong support for inclusive hiring, especially through technology-based roles suited to individual capabilities.

"Technology gives us a way to match tasks to strengths. If a person is skilled in one specific area, we can design duties around that rather than focus on their limitations."

Both heads noted that while policies for students with disabilities exist at The Open University of Sri Lanka, formal structures for staff are lacking. Nevertheless, they demonstrated leadership by creating flexible duties, involving family members for support, and assigning meaningful responsibilities that helped the employee grow professionally and socially.

CAH mentioned that,

"We didn't want to give him 'token work.' Instead, we assigned meaningful responsibilities, things that contributed to the department. Over time, we saw him become more confident and independent."

Their satisfaction with the employee's performance was evident, and they recommended expanding such initiatives further. CBH suggested that it is a new learning journey for all of us.

"It has been a learning journey for all of us, and I would strongly recommend expanding such initiatives to other departments. One appointment can change an entire workplace culture."

2. Perceptions and Attitudes of Co-Workers

Academic and non-academic staff largely expressed positive attitudes towards working with individuals with special needs. Academics valued the contributions of their colleagues with disabilities and acknowledged the enrichment brought by diverse abilities. They appreciated that inclusion fostered patience, flexibility, and mutual respect within the team.

CAA1 mentioned that *"Having him in our department has taught us patience. We realized that not everyone has to work at the same speed, but the quality of his work is remarkable."*



Meanwhile CAA2 highlighted that *“He has become part of our daily routine. We’ve learned to adjust and support one another better, which has made us more like a family.”*

CBN1 explained how their behaviour and communication has changed because of this new implementation. *“When we make space for someone with different needs, the whole team learns to be more considerate. It has softened the way we speak and act with each other too”.*

However, one CAA3 raised a nuanced concern regarding how others interacted with a colleague with Autism, observing a tendency to treat him as childlike.

“I sometimes feel that people treat him like a child, using a tone that is overly simplistic. It’s well-meaning, but it reduces his dignity.”

This highlighted the need for awareness and sensitivity, not just toward the person with a disability, but among all team members. Despite this, the overall perception remained one of admiration and encouragement, suggesting a fertile ground for deeper inclusive practices.

3. Challenges in Integration and Support Systems

The challenges reported were not about the ability of the employee with a disability but about broader system-level issues. Some staff highlighted difficulties that arose from physical and technological arrangements. CAN4 explained,

“Sometimes when we share the office, he uses speech-to-text and has to read everything out loud. It helps him work, but it disturbs others too, so both sides find it difficult.”

CAN3 added

“If the university gave him a separate space or better tools, it would make things easier for all of us. At the moment, he works with his own laptop, but it’s not the best setup.”

CAA5 cautiously suggested avoiding placing multiple individuals with disabilities in the same department at once saying,

“It can feel challenging for staff at the beginning, as they are still learning the right way to support him.”

Most respondents emphasized the importance of understanding individual capacities rather than generalizing. CBN2 stressed, *“Each person is different. If you judge them only by the disability, you will miss their strengths.”*

Initially, the employee was assigned individual tasks such as translations, typing, and other desk-based work. As CAN7 explained,



“At first we thought it would be easier for him to handle work on his own, like doing translations or typing documents.”

However, over time the department began to notice his preference for interaction. CAN6 reflected,

“Later we realized he actually loves to be part of group work and enjoys interactive tasks with others. When he joins with colleagues, he seems happier and more motivated.”

This gradual shift highlighted not only the capabilities but also the importance of flexible job design. By moving beyond purely individual assignments, the department discovered that he could thrive in collaborative roles. CAA4 mentioned that,

“It showed us that what we assume is not always true. We just need to be flexible and let him find the work he enjoys and can do best”.

4. Environmental and Structural Modifications

Only limited physical or environmental modifications had been made within the departments. Most adjustments involved job flexibility rather than changes to infrastructure. As CBH explained,

“We didn’t have to change the building or the office. What mattered more was adjusting his duties so he could manage well.” CB2 emphasized the importance of tailoring changes individually, noting,

“Each person is different. You understand what support they need only after they begin working.”

Heads also pointed out that while physical facilities such as lifts or specialized modifications were not in place, the staff member managed effectively with the help of colleagues and his own devices. CAH commented,

“We didn’t provide any new equipment as an institution; he brought his own laptop and managed with that. The staff around him were very supportive, which helped him adjust.” A colleague further observed, *“Even without special facilities, he used his own laptop well. Whenever he found something hard, we helped him out.”*

This lack of infrastructural preparedness was acknowledged by both heads and staff, who felt that institutional support remained inadequate. CAH said, *“Policies talk about inclusion, but we don’t yet have the right facilities. Too much responsibility is on individuals.”* CBH added, *“We need real action better spaces, staff training, and proper systems, otherwise inclusion will remain only on paper.”*

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 set out to explore workplace inclusion by examining the perceptions, attitudes, experiences, and support systems surrounding employees with special needs at the Open University of Sri Lanka. Through thematic analysis of interviews and questionnaire data, it became evident that both leadership and staff displayed a largely positive and supportive outlook toward inclusion. Heads of departments showed strong initiative in aligning recruitment decisions with national policies, such as the Public Administration Circular No. 27/88, and institutional values. Academic and non-academic co-workers valued the contributions of their colleagues with disabilities, emphasizing that inclusive practices fostered greater empathy, teamwork, and mutual respect within the workplace. Despite these positive sentiments, several practical challenges were identified. These included the absence of formal institutional policies for staff with disabilities, limited physical accessibility, lack of structured awareness training, and insufficient assistive technologies. It was clear that sustainable inclusion requires more than individual goodwill; it calls for systemic planning, responsive infrastructure, and ongoing capacity building. In light of the findings, the study recommends the following measures to foster a more inclusive and equitable work environment:

- **Formalize Inclusive Employment Policies for Staff**
Institutions should broaden their existing disability-related policies to formally include staff. A well-defined framework for recruitment, support, evaluation, and retention will ensure consistency and accountability.
- **Conduct Awareness and Sensitization Workshops**
Regular training should be offered to all staff members to enhance their understanding of disability, address unconscious biases, and promote respectful and inclusive workplace culture.
- **Design Roles to Match Individual Strengths**
Duties and responsibilities should be matched with the specific strengths and capacities of employees with disabilities to enhance their 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, the journey toward full inclusion is ongoing. However, with intentional leadership, strategic planning, and a commitment to equity, institutions like the Open University of Sri Lanka can lead by example empowering individuals with special needs and creating truly inclusive workplaces.

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