



MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES FOR CREATING ACCESSIBLE AND INCLUSIVE HIGHER EDUCATION CAMPUSES: A MULTIDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVE ON UNIVERSAL DESIGN, GOVERNANCE, TECHNOLOGY AND POLICY

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ABSTRACT

Accessibility and inclusion have emerged as critical imperatives in higher education governance globally. Universities are increasingly mandated to provide equitable educational opportunities to students with diverse needs, including persons with disabilities. While international and national legal frameworks have evolved significantly, practical implementation within higher education institutions (HEIs) remains uneven and fragmented. Accessibility is frequently relegated to a matter of physical infrastructure or statutory compliance, rather than being treated as a core institutional management responsibility that encompasses governance, strategic planning, digital systems, teaching–learning processes, and student services.

Drawing upon ongoing doctoral research titled “*Management Strategies for Creating Accessible and Inclusive Higher Education Campuses: A Universal Design Perspective*,” this paper examines the conceptual foundations of accessibility and inclusive education, highlighting the acute need for a strategic approach to institutional management. The study reviews major international and Indian policy developments—including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, the National Education Policy 2020, and recent statutory accessibility guidelines. Identifying critical gaps in existing scholarship, the paper proposes a mixed-method research design to investigate institutional practices across selected HEIs.

Ultimately, this paper conceptualizes accessibility as a multidisciplinary concern situated at the intersection of management, disability studies, architecture, information and communication technology (ICT), public policy, law, and education. It proposes the development of a *Strategic Accessibility Management Framework* grounded in the principles of Universal Design and inclusive governance to drive sustainable organizational transformation.

KEYWORDS: Accessibility, Higher Education, Universal Design, Inclusive Education, Governance, Management Strategies, Disability Inclusion

1. INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions (HEIs) play a transformative role in promoting social mobility, driving economic development, and fostering democratic participation. In recent decades, ensuring accessibility and inclusion within these institutions has transitioned from a peripheral welfare concern to a central pillar of educational

policy and governance. The global movement towards inclusive education recognizes that universities must actively identify and dismantle systemic barriers that restrict the full and equal participation of students with disabilities and other marginalized demographics.

This imperative is underscored by

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the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), which frames accessibility and inclusive education as fundamental human rights. Concurrently, the rapid digitization of the higher education landscape has fundamentally transformed what it means to be an accessible campus. Critical operational domains—ranging from admission procedures and teaching–learning environments to assessment systems, library repositories, and administrative functions—are now heavily mediated through digital platforms. Consequently, modern campus accessibility must holistically encompass physical infrastructure, information and communication technologies (ICT), institutional policies, governance mechanisms, and social participation.

In the Indian context, accessibility has received escalating policy traction through the enactment of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016, the mandate of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, and specific compliance guidelines issued by the University Grants Commission (UGC). Despite this robust regulatory environment, implementation remains highly inconsistent across institutions. This paper addresses this gap by outlining a strategic, multidisciplinary management approach to institutional accessibility.

2. MULTIDISCIPLINARY DIMENSIONS OF THE STUDY

Accessibility in higher education is inherently multidisciplinary, situated at the cross-sections of management, disability studies, architecture and the built environment, ICT, law, public policy, and education. Traditionally, accessibility within universities has been viewed through a reductionist lens as a mere infrastructural or welfare obligation. However, the growing recognition of disability rights, rapid technological transformation, and evolving educational practices have expanded its scope far beyond the tokenistic provision of ramps, elevators, and specialized services (Ainscow & Miles, 2008; United Nations, 2006). Contemporary HEIs are increasingly required to adopt integrated approaches that address physical accessibility, digital inclusion, institutional governance, pedagogical practices, and student support systems in a highly coordinated manner (Burgstahler, 2015; World

Health Organization & World Bank, 2011).

- **Management & Governance:** From a managerial perspective, cultivating an accessible campus demands strategic planning, explicit leadership commitment, targeted resource allocation, inter-departmental coordination, and robust monitoring mechanisms (Burgstahler, 2015).
- **Disability Studies & Law:** Disability studies contribute a critical rights-based understanding of inclusion by prioritizing equality, active participation, and the provision of reasonable accommodations (Peters, 2007; United Nations, 2006). These principles are formalised by legal instruments like the UNCRPD, the RPwD Act, 2016, and the NEP 2020, which impose clear statutory obligations on educational institutions to create non-discriminatory environments (Government of India, 2016, 2020; United Nations, 2006).
- **Architecture & ICT:** The built environment provides the physical foundation for accessible campus infrastructure via the principles of Universal Design (Connell et al., 1997). Simultaneously, advancements in ICT place a clear focus on the baseline necessity of accessible websites, learning management systems (LMS), and digital resources (Jaeger, 2011; Seale, 2013).
- **Educational Theory:** Finally, educational theory contributes by championing inclusive pedagogies and learner-centered paradigms that flexibly accommodate diverse student needs (CAST, 2024; Rose & Meyer, 2002).

Given these complex interdependencies, accessibility cannot be effectively addressed through a single disciplinary silo. Instead, it requires a holistic framework that bridges these diverse fields. By adopting a multidisciplinary orientation, this study examines how HEIs can develop strategic accessibility management mechanisms that align governance, technology, infrastructure, policy, and pedagogy, thereby strengthening the capacity for sustainable institutional transformation (Burgstahler, 2015; Griful-Freixenet et al., 2017).

3. CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

To build a sustainable strategic framework, it is necessary to clarify the core conceptual paradigms underpinning modern inclusion discourse:

accessibility, inclusive education, and Universal Design.

3.1 Accessibility refers to the proactive design of environments, services, and systems in ways that enable all individuals, regardless of their physical or cognitive capabilities, to participate on an equal basis. While historical applications focused almost exclusively on physical barriers, contemporary scholarship expands this definition to incorporate communication systems, information technologies, institutional services, and broader social integration.

3.2 Inclusive Education shifts the institutional burden from the student to the system. It emphasizes the systemic removal of institutional, environmental, and attitudinal barriers, demanding that learning environments adjust to accommodate diverse learners rather than forcing learners to assimilate into rigid, unyielding structures.

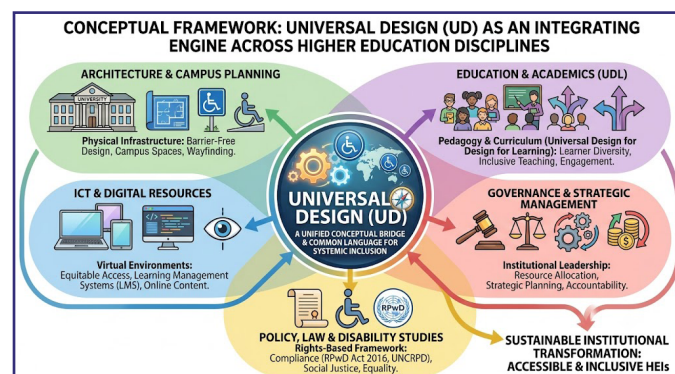
3.3 Universal Design (UD) serves as the operational mechanism for this philosophy. It advocates for the design of products, environments, and services to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for subsequent adaptation or specialized retrofitting. When extended to academics, **Universal Design for Learning (UDL)** operationalizes this by providing multiple means of engagement, representation, and action/expression.

3.4 For higher education management, Universal Design represents a pivotal paradigm shift: it transitions institutional practice from *reactive, individualized accommodations* (e.g., providing a student a separate exam room at the last minute) to *proactive, institutional planning* (e.g., designing digital assessment platforms accessible to all from the outset). Consequently, accessibility becomes a shared, cross-functional institutional obligation uniting administrators, faculty, planners, and policymakers.

4. UNIVERSAL DESIGN AS AN INTEGRATING FRAMEWORK ACROSS DISCIPLINES

Universal Design (UD) functions as the structural bridge linking the multiple disciplines involved in campus inclusion. Originally developed within architecture and environmental design to ensure barrier-free spaces (Connell et al., 1997), its principles

have naturally scaled to influence digital systems, pedagogical practices, institutional governance, and public policy.



Within an HEI, UD aligns disparate operational departments under a common directive:

- **In Infrastructure:** It guides campus planners to design spaces with intuitive wayfinding, step-free access, and inclusive spatial design (Connell et al., 1997).
- **In Education:** It leverages the UDL framework to ensure that curricula, instructional methodologies, and assessment systems inherently accommodate cognitive and sensory diversity (CAST, 2024; Rose & Meyer, 2002).
- **In Technology:** It underpins the technical development of digital tools, ensuring university web spaces and digital repositories conform to international accessibility standards (Jaeger, 2011; Seale, 2013).

From a managerial standpoint, UD transforms accessibility from a series of fragmented compliance checks into a cohesive, institution-wide strategy. By offering a unified conceptual language, it allows administrative leaders, technical teams, and academic faculties to coordinate long-term planning, prioritize resource allocation, and implement statutory mandates sustainably (Burgstahler, 2015; McGuire et al., 2006).

5. GLOBAL AND INDIAN CONTEXT

HEIs worldwide continue to struggle with systemic accessibility challenges. Empirical research indicates that despite extensive legislative mandates, students with disabilities frequently encounter persistent barriers, not only within physical architecture but also across rigid curriculum designs, exclusionary

administrative processes, and negative institutional attitudes.

In India, this challenge has taken center stage in public policy. The **Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016** officially codified accessibility as a legal right, imposing strict statutory obligations and timelines on educational institutions to guarantee non-discrimination and full access. Complementing this, the **National Education Policy (NEP) 2020** positions equity and inclusion as core metrics of educational excellence, mandating the deployment of assistive technologies, the creation of barrier-free campuses, and the mainstreaming of inclusive pedagogies.

To facilitate execution, the Government of India has notified targeted standards, most notably the *Harmonised Guidelines and Space Standards for Universal Accessibility in India, 2021*, alongside specific ICT accessibility metrics. Furthermore, the University Grants Commission (UGC) issued dedicated accessibility guidelines and standards for higher education institutions to streamline compliance (University Grants Commission, 2021).

However, evidence reveals a substantial execution gap between policy intent and institutional reality. Many Indian universities continue to operate with significant accessibility deficits, primarily because initiatives are handled in a siloed, piecemeal manner with minimal cross-departmental communication or strategic oversight.

6. RESEARCH GAP

While existing scholarship provides valuable insights into separate facets of disability studies, digital equity, and Universal Design, a critical gap remains:

The Silo Problem: Most existing literature examines physical infrastructure, digital accessibility, statutory compliance, or inclusive instructional practices in strict isolation.

There is a pronounced shortage of empirical research—particularly within the Indian higher education ecosystem—exploring how institutional governance structures, leadership behaviours, and strategic planning mechanisms actively operationalize

Universal Design. Accessibility continues to be mis-conceptualised as a reactionary welfare measure or an inconvenient legal obligation, rather than being analysed as a core, strategic management function. The proposed doctoral research directly addresses this gap by shifting the academic and operational discourse from *accessibility as compliance* to *accessibility as institutional governance*.

7. OBJECTIVES OF THE PROPOSED STUDY

The primary aim of the study is to evaluate and refine the mechanisms through which higher education institutions organize, execute, and monitor accessibility. The specific objectives are:

1. To examine the strategic management frameworks adopted by HEIs for developing accessible and inclusive campus environments.
2. To evaluate the implementation, compliance velocity, and operational effectiveness of national accessibility laws, institutional policies, and regulatory mandates.
3. To analyze the depth of integration of Universal Design principles across physical infrastructure, digital systems, academic services, and campus facilities.
4. To evaluate the precise role of institutional governance, administrative leadership, and strategic resource allocation in promoting and sustaining accessibility management.
5. To capture and evaluate students' lived experiences and qualitative perceptions regarding campus accessibility and inclusivity.
6. To systematically identify institutional, technological, financial, attitudinal, and infrastructural challenges hindering full inclusion.
7. To propose and validate a comprehensive *Strategic Accessibility Management Framework* capable of guiding long-term institutional execution.

8. PROPOSED RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To capture both the systemic institutional practices and the nuanced human experiences within campuses, this study adopts a **mixed-method research design**. This descriptive and exploratory approach will examine accessibility practices across a purposively selected cohort of central, state, and private universities in India.

The methodology balances multi-stakeholder feedback with technical verification:

- **Quantitative Strand:** Includes structured surveys administered to a stratified sample of students with disabilities, faculty members, university administrators, and designated accessibility coordinators.
- **Qualitative Strand:** Involves semi-structured interviews conducted with senior university leaders, policymakers, and disability support personnel, complemented by inductive document analysis of institutional strategic plans, budgets, and policy briefs.
- **Empirical Accessibility Audits:**
 - *Physical Audits:* Direct spatial evaluations of campus entries, ramps, elevators, restrooms, classrooms, laboratories, libraries, and emergency evacuation systems.
 - *Digital Audits:* Automated and manual technical compliance testing of university websites, learning management systems, admission portals, and digital communication applications.

Quantitative data will be processed using descriptive and inferential statistical techniques, while qualitative data will be systematically assessed via framework thematic analysis, allowing for the comprehensive triangulation of findings.

9. STRATEGIC ACCESSIBILITY MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK FOR INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFORMATION

The proposed *Strategic Accessibility Management Framework* serves as an operational tool designed to move institutional action away from isolated, ad-hoc interventions toward an integrated model of organizational change. Historically, institutional approaches have focused heavily on retroactive accommodations, which leaves initiatives fragmented and vulnerable to departmental silos (Burgstahler, 2015; Griful-Freixenet et al., 2017).

This framework re-centers accessibility as a primary management function embedded directly within university governance, leadership mandates, procurement processes, and quality assurance protocols. By treating accessibility as a core business process, the framework ensures the systematic

deployment of UD and UDL principles across all physical, digital, and pedagogical spaces (Burgstahler, 2015; Connell et al., 1997; Rose & Meyer, 2002).

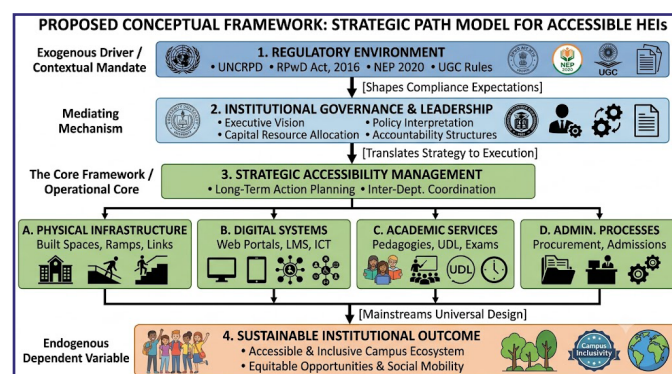
Achieving genuine institutional transformation requires universities to commit to clear operational criteria:

- **Long-term Planning:** Integrating accessibility goals directly into the university's five- or ten-year master strategic plans.
- **Resource Allocation:** Allocating dedicated, non-divertible capital budgets for both physical retrofitting and digital infrastructure upgrades.
- **Accountability Mechanisms:** Appointing chief accessibility officers or high-level committees empowered to enforce compliance across academic and administrative divisions (Ainscow & Miles, 2008).

Ultimately, this framework provides a practical mechanism for HEIs to translate abstract international rights frameworks and national policy mandates (UNCPRD, RPwD Act 2016, NEP 2020) into measurable, day-to-day institutional outcomes, ensuring the long-term sustainability of inclusion initiatives (Government of India, 2016, 2020; United Nations, 2006).

10. PROPOSED CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The study conceptualizes campus accessibility not as an accidental outcome or a static condition, but as the direct product of active interactions between the broader regulatory environment, institutional governance, and strategic management practices.



Within this ecosystem, national laws and policies dictate the baseline legal expectations. Institutional governance and executive leadership act as the

critical mediating engines, determining how flexibly and aggressively a university interprets and funds those legal mandates. Finally, strategic accessibility management dictates the execution phase—determining whether UD principles successfully penetrate the physical, digital, academic, and administrative layers of the university. The framework developed and validated by this study will serve as an objective self-assessment tool for universities to evaluate their maturity stage along this implementation pathway.

11. EXPECTED CONTRIBUTIONS

This study expects to offer significant contributions to both theory and institutional practice:

- **Theoretical Contributions:** The study bridges fields that rarely converse, blending management governance models with disability studies and architectural design principles. This broadens the academic understanding of accessibility, moving it out of the domain of medical/welfare accommodations and firmly establishing it as an organizational management discipline.
- **Practical Contributions:** The validated framework will function as a practical toolkit for university chancellors, administrative registrars, and campus planners, offering actionable benchmarks for structural auditing, cross-departmental workflows, and inclusive procurement.
- **Policy Contributions:** The empirical insights generated from this research can assist national regulators, statutory bodies, and accreditation councils (such as NAAC) in designing more granular, reliable indicators for evaluating institutional inclusivity during national ranking exercises.

12. IMPLICATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION GOVERNANCE AND POLICY

The structural orientation of this study highlights several immediate policy implications for contemporary higher education governance:

First, **governance structures must mainstream accessibility.** Board rooms, executive councils, and academic senates must explicitly weave accessibility metrics into general budgeting, institutional risk registers, and key performance indicators rather

than isolating them within minor student-welfare subcommittees (Ainscow & Miles, 2008; Burgstahler, 2015).

Second, **procurement policies must demand Universal Design.** Universities must leverage their purchasing power by mandating that all third-party software vendors, LMS providers, construction firms, and content publishers present verifiable accessibility compliance certificates (e.g., WCAG 2.1 AA validation) prior to contract award, preventing the institutional adoption of exclusionary technologies (CAST, 2024; Connell et al., 1997; Rose & Meyer, 2002).

Third, **national accreditation frameworks must strengthen accountability.** Regulatory bodies like the UGC and national accreditation councils must elevate the weightage of accessibility metrics, transforming them from simple checkbox disclosures into deeply verified quality performance indicators (Government of India, 2020; University Grants Commission, 2021).

Finally, **systemic capacity-building is non-negotiable.** A policy is only as effective as the personnel executing it. Universities must establish continuous professional training tracks for faculty (in UDL methodologies), ICT teams (in digital compliance), and administrative staff (in rights-based student engagement) to translate policy goals into campus realities (Griful-Freixenet et al., 2017; McGuire et al., 2006).

13. CONCLUSION

Campus accessibility has evolved far beyond the basic addition of physical infrastructure. In our increasingly complex, blended educational landscape, modern universities must address digital systems, governance frameworks, procurement practices, and institutional cultures simultaneously to ensure meaningful student inclusion.

This paper argues that accessibility must be repositioned as an essential institutional responsibility and an indicator of educational excellence, rather than treated as a marginal compliance chore. By transitioning from a reactive, accommodation-based posture to a proactive, Universal Design

strategy, higher education institutions can move past fragmented execution. The proposed doctoral research aims to provide the empirical foundation and structural tools necessary to guide universities through this institutional transformation, helping them evolve into truly equitable, inclusive, and future-ready educational spaces.

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