



Disability Rights and Inclusive Education: Evaluating Legal Compliance in Higher Education

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Abstract

Disability rights legislation establishes obligations for equitable access to higher education, yet assessing institutional implementation requires transparent and reproducible indicators. This study developed and demonstrated a documentary compliance assessment framework aligned with India's Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, and relevant higher education accessibility principles. A synthetic dataset comprising 300 fictional institutions was analyzed using descriptive statistics, institution-level indicator scores, accessibility profiles, and accommodation-related measures. Thirteen binary indicators were combined with conditionally applicable reservation and accommodation criteria to construct an illustrative completeness index. Four tables and four figures summarized the simulated distributions. The mean indicator score was 54.26% among fictional government institutions and 54.43% among fictional private institutions. Accessibility audit completion was recorded for 57.7% of simulated institutions, while 82.5% of simulated accommodation requests were fulfilled. These outputs demonstrate the analytic capabilities of a structured institutional assessment but do not provide empirical evidence of actual legal compliance or discrimination in India. The framework highlights the need to distinguish statutory duties, documented policy adoption, and verified operational performance. Future application requires institution-specific administrative records, accessibility audits, and student participation to establish defensible legal conclusions..

Keywords: Disability rights; Inclusive education; Higher education; Legal compliance; Reasonable accommodation

Introduction

Inclusive higher education is not just about adding students with disabilities, but it is about adapting teaching methods, bringing the campus and campus life to the students, ensuring that the institution's processes and procedures allow for entitlements to be realized. In India, these needs are part of a constitutional pledge to equality and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016. But whether the law is protected or institutionalized is an empirical issue. In the context of students with visual impairment, research shows that while formal educational opportunities may exist, institutional expectations can limit educational choices (Palan, 2021). A systematic scoping review also highlights that aspirations, accessibility and accommodation need to be addressed as a package when exploring equitable participation (Bartolo et al., 2023).

Thus, institutional compliance evaluation should relate to enforceable requirements and to evidence of policies in the real world of academic practice. Program design, differential staff readiness and inaccessible learning materials can negatively affect the accessibility of higher education. Academic practice and institutional support are noted as some of the challenges that have remained in engineering education (Mashwama & Omodan, 2024). The studies on student withdrawals also indicate that disadvantages due to disability can also span the educational path and are not limited to admission to higher education (Rußmann

et al., 2024). These results suggest that multidimensional assessment is needed, and not relying on one measure of inclusion.

Assessment accommodations are especially significant as seemingly equal procedures can have different impacts. Nieminen (2023) combines ableism with assessment in critical work on assessment to explain how ableist assumptions can be present in regular university practices. Simultaneously, questions about consistent evidence, fairness and appropriate individual adjustments (Lovett, 2021) emerge with regard to accommodation policy. A structured evaluation should then consider if there is a procedure in place, if pupils have access to it and if interventions are provided. The fact that an administrative policy exists does not in itself mean that these results have happened unless further records are available.

Additional layers of legal obligations emerge where there are physical and digital environments. The Universal Design approach is to plan for a variety of participation, not to consider accessibility as an exceptional adjustment (Khurana, 2022). Digital inclusion is also critical, given that more and more, the educational delivery is based on websites, learning management systems, and electronic materials. The National Education Policy 2020 has a wider vision of reforming education in which equity and access has been included (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020). International monitoring also highlights that for inclusion to be addressed, it is not only about enrolment, but also about institutional systems and barriers (UNESCO, 2020).

The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 has specific provisions for reservation in government and government aided institutions in Section-32. Not all private institutions can assume that they are automatically applicable and the reservation requirement is not the same as a general score on an institution's performance. To valid measurement, it is necessary to distinguish such legal categories. Interpretation of disability statistics is also complex, as the numbers and categories will vary based on the definition and measurement of disability (UNICEF, 2021). International reviews of higher education inclusion reveal that there are gaps between the formal policy claims and student and faculty experiences (Osuna-Juárez & González-Castellano, 2024).

Therefore, there should be distinct indicators related to admissions, accessibility, accommodations, and institutional accountability. The importance of supportive instructional design with regard to academic participation is illustrated through evidence on learning differences (Kiljunen et al., 2024). Studies with students with autism also suggest that a focus on support over time is needed to support student progression and degree completion (Bakker et al., 2023). The compliance framework should not imply violation from a low overall score if a legal duty is not clearly specified, its applicability to the institution has not been clearly defined and the basis for the decision is not clearly explained.

This study makes a methodological contribution through a transparent demonstration of how this is done in a completely simulated Indian institutional data set. It seeks not to quantify actual universities. Rather, it provides an example of the operationalization of variables, the treatment of missing or inapplicable data, and the representation of institutional patterns based on which they can be tested in empirical studies. Studies of postsecondary completion highlight the need to focus on a variety of institutional conditions (Nail, 2024), and recent research on inclusive educational preparation emphasizes that disability must be part of the larger conversation about equity in education (Boardman et al., 2024). The demonstration is built to help inform future auditable, institutional evidence gathering.

Research objectives:

1. To operationalize Indian disability-related higher education obligations into transparent institutional indicators.
2. To demonstrate descriptive comparisons of accessibility, accommodation, and accountability measures using simulated records.
3. To identify verification requirements and limitations for future empirical legal compliance assessment.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

A cross-sectional, institution-level synthetic data set was used for a methodological demonstration in a quantitative approach. One imaginary institution was analyzed in an imaginary 2025–2026 time period. This design was chosen to explore repeatable data-processing routines and to see whether indicators could be aggregated without giving undue weight to observations generated in institutions. No recruitment of students was involved in the research and there were no real inspection of the campus or any interviews. Statutory requirements and education accessibility principles provided the basis for the analytic framework; however, the framework does not attempt to offer a legally binding compliance certification.

2.2 Variable Operationalization

Indicators of institutional ownership, institutional type, total enrolment, students with disabilities, admissions, physical accessibility, digital accessibility, accommodation provision and governance were analysed. Thirteen binary institutional measures were coded 1 for a simulated "yes" and 0 for a simulated "no. The applicability of the reservation was defined by government ownership or government-aided and was based on the

simplified operational assumption of the data. This rule was applied in a purely simulative manner and not considered as a replacement for an individual institution's lawfulness. The number of requests and fulfilments were used to estimate the number of accommodation request fulfilled.

2.3 Composite Indicator Construction

An illustrative indicator score was calculated from source columns as there were no numbers in these columns, only formulas. Numerator was the total number of applicable affirmative criteria and denominator was the number of nonmissing applicable criteria. Thirteen general binary criteria were added, as well as a reservation criterion which has been applied to designated eligible institutions, and a complete-request-fulfillment criterion which has been applied to institutions where at least one request has been registered. Scores were multiplied by 100, so as not to have a decimal. If a criterion was not applicable then it was not coded as a failure. The differential legal weights were not used. The index was therefore read as a measure of the completeness of the descriptions of indicators of legal compliance, and not so much as a validated measure of legal compliance.

2.4 Statistical Analysis

Data validation, aggregation and descriptive statistics were performed using Python and pandas. Ownership groups were summarized in four different ways: by number of institutions, by the median enrolment, by the sum of the disability-related enrolments, and by the mean indicator scores. The prevalence of indicators was determined by the percentage of simulated institutions coded as affirming the indicator. Means, medians and standard deviations of scores were calculated for each institution type. The denominators of Reservation and accommodation were analysed. Causal inferences and significance tests were not used given the algorithmically created observations are not sampled from a real institutional population.

2.5 Visualization and Quality Assurance

The cleaned data were directly used to create four tables and four figures. The graphics presented ownership comparisons, the frequency of accessibility indicator, a distribution of the scores by type of institution and selected reservation and accommodation measures. Data types, conditional denominators, and outputs were tested, and outputs were exported in the .csv, .xls, and .png (300 dpi) formats. There was a clear separation of full-fulfillment at the institutional level, and the percentage of single accommodation requests fulfilled. This was to prevent an institution-level percentage being misinterpreted as a request-level result. Since the analysis was completely synthetic, no human subject ethical approval was necessary. To improve the interpretability of the analysis, it was also decided to differentiate the legal definition of an indicator from the mathematical definition used for the simulation. Giving a positive reporting for an accessible website was considered to be an indicator and not a conformance to an applicable accessibility standard. Similarly, an assessment of the presence of a reservation indicator was only made where the simplified institutional classification indicated this was applicable; a positive assessment did not imply that statutory assessment of seats / candidate eligibility was carried out. The reporting structure was thus consciously descriptive. Institution-type comparisons were provided without hypothesis testing, as the population generated was not from a sampling mechanism that would allow for generalizing to the population level. These decisions limited the potential for being misled by the apparent numerical accuracy as proof of a judicial determination. Quality control of the counts and denominators was done prior to exporting tables and figures. The institution-level reservation numerator was checked against the quantity of records marked eligible, and the accommodation fulfillment was generated in two ways: first, by adding up all accommodation requests; and second, by counting institutions in which all accommodation requests had been met. These two outcomes were reported separately as their unit of analysis is different. If the answer to a conditional question was missing, then it was deemed to be inapplicable, not bad, as missing might indicate that a county did not perform the activity at all. The outcome was a workflow that was reproducible in Google Colab using an uploaded Excel file as input and a single downloadable archive of the output tables, plots, and cleaned analytic file.

3. Results

3.1 Institutional Profile and Ownership

The fictional sample comprised of 300 institutions, of which 155 were government and 145 were private institutions. The mean illustrative scores were 54.26% and 54.43% respectively. The institutional profile is summarized in Table 1, with the ownership-group means near-equivalent as illustrated in Figure 1. These simulated values do not lend themselves to an inference that actual government and private institutions do the same.

Table 1. Simulated Institutional Characteristics by Ownership

Ownership	Institutions	Median Enrollment	Total Disabled Students	Mean Illustrative Score
Government	155	16514.0	111617	54.26

Private	145	15240.0	104183	54.43
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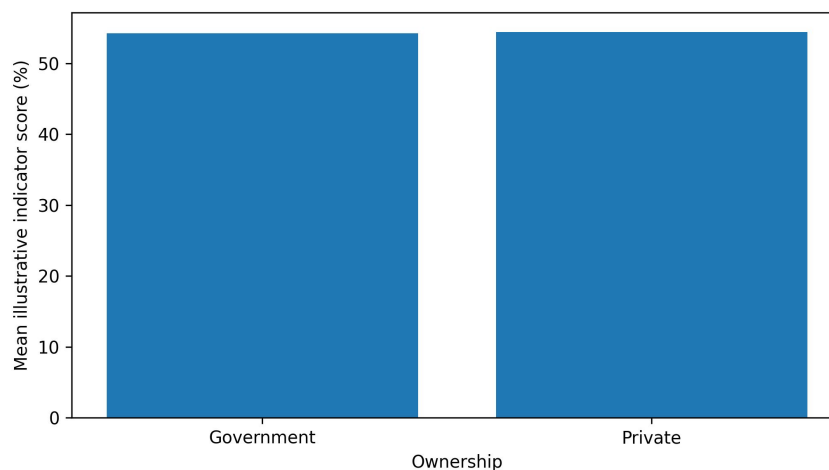


Figure 1. Mean illustrative indicator score by ownership. Simulated observations only.

3.2 Accessibility Indicators

Overall, in the simulated institutions, 173 records (57.7%) were completed for accessibility audits. Fifty-six percentage of the accessible entrances, 58.7% of the classrooms, 60.7% of the toilets, 53.3% of the libraries, 61.0% of the websites, and 57.0% of the LMS were coded as accessible. All thirteen institutional indicators appear in table 2. Figure 2 shows six different access indicators and illustrates the varying prevalence they produce.

Table 2. Prevalence of Simulated Institutional Indicators

Indicator	Institutions Yes	Percent Yes
Reservation_Rule_Published	194	64.7
Accessibility_Audit_Completed	173	57.7
Accessible_Entrance	168	56.0
Accessible_Classrooms	176	58.7
Accessible_Toilets	182	60.7
Accessible_Library	160	53.3
Accessible_Website	183	61.0
Accessible_LMS	171	57.0
Accommodation_Policy	186	62.0
Disability_Support_Officer	168	56.0
Accessible_Grievance_Process	174	58.0
Disability_Inclusion_Training	169	56.3
Published_Annual_Inclusion_Report	170	56.7

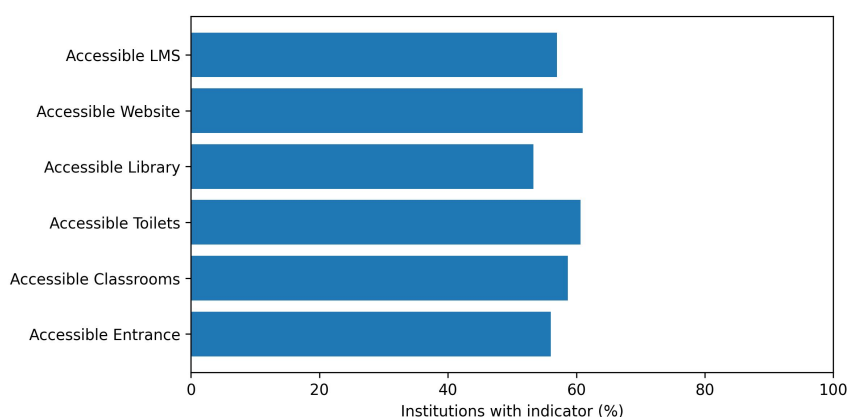


Figure 2. Simulated physical and digital accessibility indicators. Simulated observations only.

3.3 Institutional Type Differences

The simulated state universities had a lowest mean score of 53.67% and simulated private universities had a highest mean score of 56.86%. There was considerable variation at each institution level with SDs of about 18.62-21.74 percentage points. Descriptive comparisons are made in Table 3; distribution of scores is shown in Fig. 3. These differences are a reflection of the generated data set, and should not be read as a reflection of hierarchy in institutions.

Table 3. Illustrative Score by Institution Type

Institution Type	Institutions	Mean Score	Median Score	SD Score
Autonomous College	64	53.94	55.24	21.19
Central University	60	54.17	53.33	20.51
Deemed University	63	53.73	53.33	20.63
Private University	47	56.86	64.29	18.62
State University	66	53.67	53.33	21.74

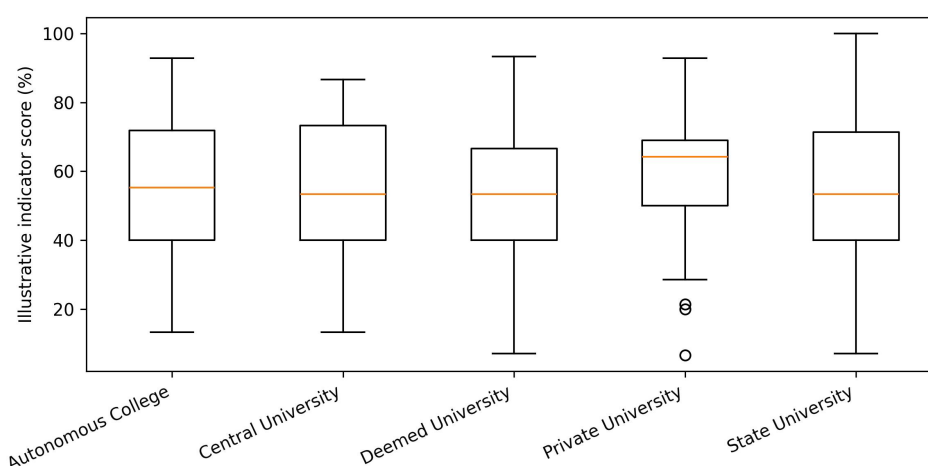


Figure 3. Distribution of illustrative scores by institution type. Simulated observations only.

3.4 Reservation and Accommodation Indicators

91 of 186 (48.9%) of the simulated institutions met the constructed reservation indicator among those that were designated as reservation-applicable. The simulated accommodation requests totalled 31,667 out of 38,405 (82.5%) that were recorded as fulfilled. But, 17 out of 299 institutions requesting (5.7%) had all requests fulfilled. Table 4 and Figure 4 make a distinction between the institution level reservation measure and request level fulfillment. At no actual university is either measure a reflection of the legal responsibilities.

Table 4. Simulated Reservation and Accommodation Measures

Metric	Eligible n	Met n	Rate pct
Reservation criterion met (eligible only)	186	91	48.9
Accommodation requests fulfilled (requests)	38405	31667	82.5
All accommodation requests fulfilled (institutions with requests)	299	17	5.7

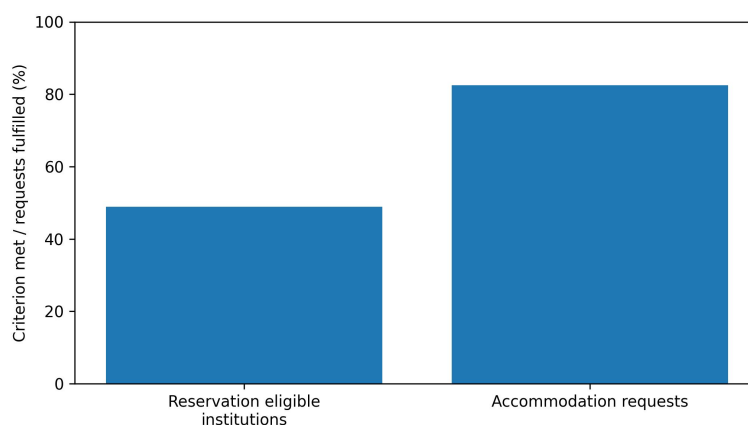


Figure 4. Selected simulated reservation and accommodation measures. Simulated observations only.

Taken together, the four tables and four figures showed how a structured indicator system could display several different aspects of institutional inclusion simultaneously. The closeness of the ownership-means was not taken as meaning real-world legal performance. Accessibility measures were reported separately since accessibility measures across infrastructure and digital-service indicators do not necessarily have to accompany each other. The institution-type distributions showed the potential for smudging differences with overall averages. Lastly, the reservation and accommodation outputs showed the reason for a legally relevant denominator needing to be defined prior to calculating percentage. The most informative result was methodological: the same simulated records gave different, but compatible, descriptions as a function of the unit of analysis (institution, indicator, accommodation request). Such differences would be relevant in a real institutional audit and should be set out first in any audit protocol to be used in future data collection.

4. Discussion

The simulated analysis shows that institutional inclusion can indeed be measured in various observable domains, but also provides an indication of the need for legal and methodological caution concerning composite scores. The binary indicators of policy accessibility and the existence of a policy can't measure the appropriateness, timeliness, or effectiveness of reasonable accommodation. Learning analytics research has also highlighted the need for a focus on inclusion, fairness, and interpretation when engaging with quantitative systems to support students with disabilities (Khalil et al., 2024). It is therefore important to view the proposed framework as a preliminary screening and audit-planning tool and not as an alternative to rights-based adjudication. Its key strength has been in breaking down institutional duties into quantifiable aspects and in the understanding that quantitative measures do not create substantive educational equality. This distinction is even more significant in the Indian context, where institutional practices should be examined in the light of statutory obligations and individual accommodation requirements.

An important finding of the demonstration is the difference between institution level and request level measures. It is possible for a lot of the requests to be fulfilled and for there to be a small percentage of institutions that are fulfilling all of the requests. These indicators are asking different questions and should not be combined without qualification. In the field of research, there has been an emphasis on the importance of reliable evidence in relation to the identification of educational accommodations and appropriate supports (Weis et al., 2022). By extension, formal arrangements can exist alongside exclusionary institutional cultures (Goodall et al., 2024) in the realm of higher education ableism. Future field studies should thus include not only accommodation counts, but also processing times, ease of access to the application process, student experiences, and information on why accommodations are rejected, and on the effectiveness of approved accommodations. Such information would enable a more thorough assessment of institutional sensitivity and would help to differentiate institutional compliance from genuine involvement in education.

Digital accessibility is more than just having a website or learning management system. The simulated binary fields are only a record of accessibility being affirmed (not of meeting technical standards). Digital participation and access were recognized as critical during the pandemic when students with disabilities were studied in relation to the use of technology (Kishira & Sasaki, 2024). UNESCO (2023) also warned that technology can exacerbate exclusion in cases of poor access, design and governance. An empirical audit should involve technical accessibility tests, user-centered evaluation, and review of accessible pedagogical content, and not be based on binary statements. Moreover, the level of digital inclusion should be assessed throughout the entire educational journey, from online admissions to course registration, virtual classrooms, exams, the library, and institutional communication. There can be accessibility problems at each of these stages, which limit participation in education despite formally inclusive institutional policies.

The measurement of institutional support structures and grievance mechanisms are similar in nature. A

disability support officer does not disclose the authority, caseload, training or capacity to obtain accommodation of the officer. Studies of accessibility service providers have highlighted the need to gain an understanding of institutional perceptions and practices (Gelbar et al., 2022). The broader impact of inclusive education governance (Goodall et al., 2022) is also manifested in support for transition and employment pathways. The next step in the research is to connect institutional policies with administrative data and students with disability experiences, and to triangulate formal arrangements and operational experiences. In addition, the accessibility, confidentiality, the procedural fairness, the timeliness of the resolution and the availability of an effective remedy should be evaluated for the grievance procedure. This would enhance accountability by looking at whether institutional mechanisms offer a meaningful form of protection or if they merely fulfill documentary conditions.

Cross-context literature also warns against taking inclusion practices for granted across institutions and/or countries. Local conceptions of disability and institutional norms influence exclusionary processes (Ndlovu, 2023). Peer mentoring studies report that relationships and participative methods can enhance support for students beyond compliance paperwork (Maia et al., 2024). The evidence from inclusive education beyond the higher education sector also places a focus on the experience of disabled learners and participatory evaluation (Paul et al., 2022). The results support a legal interpretation-administrative evidence-student testimony model of assessment. There is also a range of variations in governance systems, infrastructure, resources and capacity to support students within the Indian Higher Education system, which must be taken into account. Future compliance assessments should therefore use consistent legal principles and at the same time record contextual elements that could impact the implementation.

The basic restriction is that all the observations were simulated: The numbers shown in the patterns do not provide a good guide to the prevalence of these issues or reach any conclusions about discriminatory practices, statutory compliance or policy claims for India as a whole. Moreover, the unweighted index gives the same numerical value to different criteria, despite their varying legal importance. Prior to empirical use, experts should test each indicator for its relevance to relevant legislation, find institutional exceptions, set standards for the documentation, and examine the interrater reliability. A substantive evaluation of legal compliance would be possible with a stratified sample of actual institutions, with independently verified accessibility audits, and student interviews. Continued testing would also help to determine if institutional changes result in ongoing accessibility and participation in education. Finally, a compliance model should be based on evidence and include statutes, institutions, and the experiences of students with disabilities to ensure inclusion in higher education.

5. Conclusion

This research was an attempt to create and test a structured process for assessing institutional indicators of disability in higher education in India. It generated four descriptive tables and four figures on ownership, access, type of institutions, applicability of reservations and fulfillment of accommodation, based on 300 complete synthetic institutional records. The demonstration highlighted the need for re-computing composite measures, removing denominators for measures that are not applicable at the request-level, and differentiating between request-level outcomes and institution-level assessments. Its outputs can be used for audit of the analytic workflows and to create a repeatable institutional audit protocol, but they are not instruments for real university performance. A single unweighted percentage or having institutional policies does not indicate legal compliance. Statutory requirements should be considered in future research, as well as independent verification of accessible infrastructure and digital services, a review of accommodation case records and experience of a student with a disability. Such work should also distinguish between official duties and non-binding advice and evaluate the effectiveness of grievance options to provide remedies. These efforts can be supported by the proposed framework as a first methodological tool, which requires legal validation of the indicators and the use of real institutional evidence. More rigorous empirical research would enable policymakers, regulators and higher education institutions to pinpoint concrete implementation gaps and give proportionate and accountable answers in line with the concept of substantive educational equality.

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