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An Evaluation of the Effectiveness of Support for Students with Educational Needs in ODeL in Higher Education Institutions (HEI) in Malawi

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ABSTRACT

The study evaluated the effectiveness of Special Educational Needs (SEN) support systems in Open, Distance and e-Learning (ODeL) programmes within Higher Education Institutions in Malawi. Specifically, it examined how existing ODeL provisions accommodate diverse learning needs, explored the experiences of students with SEN, and identified strategies for strengthening institutional capacity and national policy implementation. A mixed-methods approach employing a convergent parallel design was adopted. Quantitative data were collected through surveys involving 30 ODeL students, while qualitative data were generated through semi-structured interviews with eight lecturers and two ODeL coordinators, complemented by document analysis. The findings revealed that SEN support remains fragmented and largely dependent on individual lecturer initiative rather than coordinated institutional systems. For instance, two-thirds of students (66.7%) were unaware or uncertain about the availability of dedicated SEN services, 46.7% reported never receiving reasonable accommodations, and 80.0% identified inaccessible digital platforms as a major barrier. Additionally, 63.0% highlighted inadequate access to assistive technologies, 53.0% cited insufficient staff capacity in inclusive digital pedagogy, and 63.6% believed that national inclusive education policies were poorly implemented at institutional level. Qualitative findings reveal unclear policy mandates, reactive support mechanisms, and inconsistent accessibility practices across institutions. The study demonstrates that strong national policy commitments alone are not sufficient without the institutional operationalization, accessible technologies, and sustained professional development. It extends understanding of inclusive ODeL in low-resource contexts by integrating structural and experiential perspectives within a single analytical framework. The study recommends that investments in accessible digital infrastructure, procurement of assistive technologies, establishment of dedicated disability support offices within ODeL units, compulsory staff training in inclusive digital pedagogy, and dedicated national funding mechanisms to ensure effective implementation of inclusive education policies.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of Open, Distance and e-Learning has reshaped higher education systems across the world, offering opportunities for increased access, flexibility and lifelong learning. At the same time, concerns remain about the extent to which ODeL environments are prepared to support students who require differentiated instructional support because of diverse educational needs. Recent studies show that while digital learning platforms have widened participation to education, students with Special Educational Needs are still facing barriers linked to technology accessibility, inadequate pedagogical adaptation and inconsistent institutional support (Anthony & Keating, 2022; Ngubane-Mokiwa, 2021). These issues are especially significant in low-income countries such as Malawi where digital transformation is progressing but infrastructural and capacity limitations remain substantial. The integration of inclusive practices in ODeL is therefore not only a matter of equity but a necessary requirement for achieving national development goals in higher education.

Background

The global conversation on inclusive education has increasingly emphasized the role of technology in opening opportunities for learners who have long been marginalized within traditional systems. Digital learning has been shown to improve participation and reduce mobility-related constraints for students with visual, hearing, physical or cognitive challenges when institutions embed universal design principles and targeted support (Seale, 2023; Wambu & Ho, 2020). Despite this potential, researchers note that students with SEN frequently struggle within ODeL systems due to inaccessible digital content, limited assistive technologies and inadequate prepared academic staff (Moriña, 2022; Al-Azawei & Al-Badi, 2023). These global patterns mirror challenges in many African countries where digital equity remains uneven and disability-inclusive digital policies are still developing. At the regional level, the African Union has called for the strengthening of inclusive digital learning frameworks through Agenda 2063 and related continental education strategies, emphasizing the need

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for accessible platforms and institutional accountability. Evidence from Southern Africa highlights that although ODeL enrolments continue to grow, students with SEN often report inadequate adjustments within online environments and inconsistent institutional coordination (Muzata, 2021; Chisango & Maruzani, 2022). Studies from countries such as South Africa and Kenya show that inclusive ODeL is achievable when policies are matched with investments in assistive technologies, specialized training and robust support structures, yet these conditions remain uneven across institutions (Mutanga, 2023; Mphahlele & Khoza, 2020). In Malawi, the expansion of ODeL has been supported by several national policy instruments that acknowledge the rights of learners with disabilities and promote inclusive education. The National Education Sector Investment Plan (2020-2030) outlines commitments to equitable access and learner support, while the Education Act (2014) reinforces the right to non-discriminatory participation in all forms of learning. The Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities Act further mandates institutions to provide reasonable accommodations and accessible services, aligning national obligations with global inclusive education standards. Similarly, the National Inclusive Education Strategy (2017-2021) calls for institutional adaptation to diverse learning needs, highlighting the importance of accessible digital materials and staff training. The National Council for Higher Education's ODeL guidelines (2023) emphasize the necessity of learner support systems, digital accessibility standards and institutional accountability for equity in online delivery. These commitments converge with Malawi Agenda 2063, which envisions a knowledge-driven society built on inclusive human capital development. However, despite these frameworks, recent studies indicate that implementation gaps persist across HEIs, particularly in the area of digital accessibility and ODeL support for SEN learners. Researchers note that many institutions lack operational guidelines for translating inclusive policies into digital learning practice, resulting in uneven student experiences and weak institutional readiness (Somanje & Chawinga, 2022; Kapito-Tembo & Chibambo, 2023). These gaps highlight the need for systematic evaluation of how HEIs in Malawi are supporting SEN learners within expanding ODeL landscapes. The central argument emerging from this background is that although Malawi possesses a strong policy foundation for inclusive education, the effectiveness of SEN support in ODeL programs remains insufficiently understood and inconsistently implemented, presenting a risk of widening educational inequalities within a system intended to promote access.

Problem Statement

Although Malawi has made notable policy commitments toward inclusive higher education, evidence suggests that students with Special Educational Needs continue to face significant challenges in ODeL environments. Studies

indicate that digital learning platforms in several Malawian HEIs are often not fully accessible to students with visual, hearing or physical impairments, limiting their ability to engage effectively with course content (Chawinga, 2019; Somanje & Chawinga, 2022). Recent research reports that assistive technologies such as screen readers, captioning tools and alternative formats are either unavailable or inconsistently provided, leaving students dependent on personal improvisation rather than structured institutional support (Kapito-Tembo & Chibambo, 2023; Kudzai & Chikoleka, 2021). These challenges are compounded by limited staff training in inclusive pedagogy, inadequate funding for disability support services and a general lack of monitoring mechanisms to ensure compliance with inclusive education standards (Mphatso & Chitera, 2020; Ramos & Castillo, 2024; Wane & Chigona, 2021). As enrolments in ODeL continue to grow, these systemic limitations raise concerns about digital exclusion, reduced participation and compromised academic outcomes for SEN learners, contradicting national goals of equitable access and inclusive human capital development. Consequently, while inclusive education policies exist in Malawi, their translation into effective SEN support within ODeL programs remains fragmented and insufficiently evaluated, which necessitates this systematic investigation of institutional practices, learner experiences and opportunities for strengthening support frameworks. Hence a need to assess the effectiveness of support for Students with Educational Needs in ODeL in Higher Education Institutions (HEI) in Malawi

Objectives

Main Objective

To evaluate the effectiveness of Special Educational Needs support systems in Open, Distance and e-Learning programs within Higher Education Institutions in Malawi.

Specific Objectives

- To assess how ODeL provisions in HEIs in Malawi accommodate the needs of students with Special Needs.
- To establish the experiences of students with Special Needs in ODeL programs in HEIs.
- To suggest strategies for strengthening institutional capacity and national policy frameworks for effective Special Needs Education support in ODeL.

Research Questions

- How do ODeL provisions in HEIs in Malawi accommodate the needs of students with Special Needs?
- What are the experiences of the students with Special Needs in ODeL programs in HEIs?
- What strategies can help strengthen institutional capacity and national policy frameworks for effective Special Needs Education support in ODeL?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Open, Distance and e-Learning (ODeL) have become central to higher education strategies aimed at widening

access and improving flexibility, but it also raises persistent questions about equity for learners who require specific accommodations. Recent scholarship emphasises that while ODeL can reduce geographic and time-based barriers, it can also reproduce or create new access barriers when course design, platform functionality and institutional support do not explicitly address learner variability and disability-related needs (Almeqdad, 2023; Gallego, 2023; Manase, 2024). In the Malawian context, where policy commitments to inclusive education and digital expansion coexist with infrastructural and capacity constraints, mounting enrolments in ODeL heighten the urgency of understanding how effectively institutions support students with special educational needs (R4D, 2023; NCHE, 2024). This literature review synthesises definitions, theoretical frames, and empirical evidence relevant to evaluating how HEIs in Malawi accommodate and support students with special educational needs in ODeL programs.

Definition of key terms

Special Educational Needs

Special Educational Needs (SEN) is commonly used to refer to learners whose learning is hindered by a range of impairments or learning differences that require adaptations in curriculum, pedagogy, assessment or learning environments to achieve equitable participation and learning outcomes (Banks *et al.*, 2022; UNICEF Malawi, 2021).

Open, Distance and e-learning

Open, Distance and e-Learning (ODeL) denote a spectrum of non-traditional delivery modes that rely on mediated technologies and asynchronous or blended pedagogies to deliver higher education, and it is characterised by flexibility in place and time but also by dependency on digital platforms and learning resources (NCHE, 2024; Manase, 2024).

Accessibility in ODeL

Accessibility in ODeL encompasses both technical accessibility, such as compatibility with screen readers, alternative text, captioning and navigable learning management systems, and pedagogical accessibility, such as multiple means of representation, expression and engagement derived from Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles (CAST, 2018; Almeqdad, 2023).

Assistive technology

Assistive technology refers to hardware, software and services that enable learners with disabilities to access, interact with and demonstrate learning in digital and blended learning environments; its presence or absence is a crucial determinant of effective participation in ODeL (Dithale, 2022; R4D, 2023).

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framing for examining SEN support in

ODeL draws on complementary bodies of theory that foreground systemic design, learner variability and rights-based inclusion.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

UDL provides a pragmatic instructional theory that emphasises proactive design choices to provide multiple means of engagement, representation and expression, thereby reducing the need for individual accommodations and enhancing learning opportunities for all students (CAST, 2018; Almeqdad, 2023). UDL has been widely applied in higher education research to analyse how course design and learning technologies can either enable or disable learners with diverse needs, and empirical studies show that UDL-informed interventions improve engagement and retention when coupled with institutional commitment and staff capacity building (Almeqdad, 2023; EdTechBooks, 2023).

Critical Disability Theory (CDT)

CTD complements UDL by shifting attention from individual remediation to the sociopolitical structures that shape exclusion, which prompts researchers to interrogate how institutional policies, resource allocation and normative classroom practices reproduce disadvantage for students with disabilities (Ndlovu, 2023; de Souza, 2022). A rights-based approach anchored in international norms such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Sustainable Development Goals further frames SEN support as an obligation of states and institutions, linking legal and policy instruments to institutional accountability and monitoring mechanisms (Banks *et al.*, 2022; Zongozzi, 2025). Together, UDL, CDT and rights-based perspectives create a multi-layered theoretical framework that supports analysis of both design-level affordances in ODeL and the wider institutional and policy environments that determine whether those affordances are realised.

Empirical literature on key themes drawn from the three research objectives

The extent to which ODeL in provisions accommodate SEN learners

Research consistently finds a mixed picture in which potential benefits of flexibility are undermined by gaps in design, technology and support. Studies from Sub-Saharan Africa and comparative higher education research indicate that while ODeL programmes can increase access for learners who cannot attend campus, many virtual learning environments lack basic accessibility features such as alternative text, keyboard navigation and captioned multimedia, and institutional procurement rarely prioritises assistive technologies (Dithale, 2022; Manase, 2024). In Malawi specifically, recent institutional reviews and HEI ODeL guidelines highlight conceptual alignment with inclusive principles but report operational shortfalls in implementing accessible LMS design, provisioning accessible materials and financing assistive

devices (NCHE, 2024; R4D, 2023). Comparative research from neighbouring countries shows that when HEIs invest deliberately in accessible platforms and prioritize staff training, enrolment and completion outcomes for students with disabilities improve, suggesting that the extent of accommodation is closely tied to institutional resource allocation and strategic leadership (Mutanga, 2023; Zongozzi, 2025).

Experiences of students with SEN in ODeL Programmes

The lived experiences and challenges faced by SEN students in ODeL are well documented in qualitative and mixed-methods studies, which emphasise psychological, pedagogical and structural barriers. Students frequently report difficulties disclosing disabilities to institutions, inconsistent access to accommodations, and feelings of isolation when course design does not include collaborative or synchronous engagement options (Munjanja, 2025; Manase, 2024). Evidence from African ODeL contexts points to rural–urban disparities, where learners in remote areas face compounded challenges due to poor internet connectivity, lack of devices and limited local support services, thus widening inequities even within ostensibly flexible ODeL programmes (Banks *et al.*, 2022; R4D, 2023). Staff perspectives corroborate these findings, as lecturers and support staff often cite insufficient training, heavy workloads and unclear institutional procedures for requesting and delivering accommodations as barriers to effective support (Munjanja, 2025; Dithale, 2022). These studies collectively emphasise that student experiences are shaped not only by the presence of assistive technology but also by institutional culture, disclosure practices and the availability of targeted academic and psychosocial support.

Strategies for strengthening institutional capacity and policy frameworks

The strategies have been proposed across the literature, ranging from concrete instructional design reforms to macro-level policy alignment. Pedagogically, the adoption of UDL principles, mandatory accessibility checks for all digital content, and the integration of multiple assessment modalities are identified as actionable strategies that reduce the need for reactive accommodations and foster

equitable participation (Almeqdad, 2023; EdTechBooks, 2023). Technologically, institutional investment in open standards, platform interoperability and the procurement of core assistive technologies paired with subsidised device loan schemes are recommended to close immediate access gaps (Dithale, 2022; R4D, 2023). At the policy level, scholars argue for clearer national guidance that links NCHE quality assurance processes to measurable inclusion indicators, ring-fenced funding for disability support services, and mandatory staff professional development for inclusive pedagogy (NCHE, 2024; de Souza, 2022). Evaluations of pilot interventions show that multi-pronged approaches combining policy mandates, resourcing and staff capacity building produce the most consistent gains in both student engagement and completion rates, signalling the need for coordinated action across institutional and national levels (Zongozzi, 2025; Mutanga, 2023).

Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework that guided this study puts institutional provisions and policy environment as primary independent variables that shape the mediating institutional processes and resources, which in turn influence student-level outcomes. Institutional provisions include ODeL course design, learning management system accessibility, availability of assistive technology and staff capacity for inclusive pedagogy; the policy environment includes national standards, NCHE guidelines and funding mechanisms that enable or constrain institutional action (NCHE, 2024; R4D, 2023). These factors mediate through operational processes such as registration and disclosure systems, accommodation request procedures, and ongoing learner support services; when these processes are coherent and resourced, they enable effective implementation of accommodations and accessible learning pathways (Dithale, 2022; Almeqdad, 2023). Student-level moderators include socioeconomic status, geographic location and digital literacy, which shape individual access to devices, connectivity and local support and thus interact with institutional measures to determine actual participation and learning outcomes (Banks *et al.*, 2022; Manase, 2024). Outcomes are expressed in terms of perceived inclusion, levels of engagement, retention and academic attainment, and their assessment

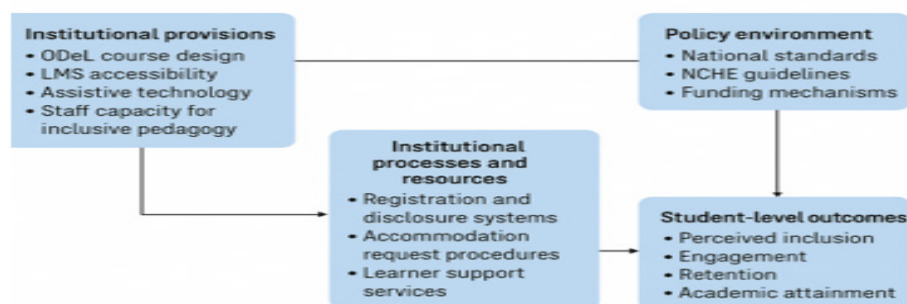


Figure 1: Conceptual framework

requires both quantitative measures (surveys, completion rates) and qualitative insights (interviews, focus groups) to capture the full complexity of experience (Zongozzi, 2025; Munjanja, 2025). This framework suggests that improvements in outcomes are most likely when national policy mandates are translated into funded institutional actions, when ODeL design follows UDL principles, and when student-level barriers, especially those tied to poverty and connectivity, are mitigated through targeted support.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research approach

This study adopted a mixed-methods research approach because the phenomenon under investigation requires both quantifiable patterns of provision and deep interpretive insights into how students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) experience support within ODeL environments. Mixed-methods approaches were widely recommended in contemporary educational and social research because they allowed researchers to triangulate findings, enhance validity and capture the complex interplay between structural, pedagogical and experiential factors that shape inclusion (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017). The quantitative component of this study was intended to provide measurable evidence on institutional accommodations, access to technology and student perceptions of support, while the qualitative component allows exploration of contextual nuances, institutional culture and lived experiences that cannot be adequately captured through surveys alone. Recent studies examining inclusion in higher education highlight that integrating numerical trends with narrative accounts generates a more comprehensive understanding of accessibility challenges and institutional effectiveness, making mixed-methods a suitable choice for examining SEN support in ODeL in Malawi (Banks *et al.*, 2022; Mutanga, 2023).

Research design

The study employed a convergent parallel design, where qualitative and quantitative data were collected concurrently, analysed separately and then integrated to derive comprehensive conclusions. This design was suitable for studies that investigate institutional practices and user experiences simultaneously, because it ensured that neither perspective dominates but instead contributes equally to the overall interpretation (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Feters & Molina-Azorín, 2020; Zuniga *et al.*, 2025). A convergent design was particularly valuable for education research in low-resource contexts, where structural inequalities and learner experiences interact in complex ways that require simultaneous exploration (Manase, 2024; Zongozzi, 2025). Through aligning numeric indicators of access with qualitative explanations from institutional actors and SEN students, the design strengthened the reliability of findings and provides a basis for actionable recommendations.

Study area

The study was conducted in Malawi, and it focused on five selected Higher Education Institutions (2 public and 3 private HEI) that offer Open, Distance and e-Learning programmes. Malawi has expanded its ODeL provision over the past decade in response to rising demand for tertiary education and policy directives supporting digital and flexible learning pathways under the National Education Sector Investment Plan and MW2063 (R4D, 2023; NCHE, 2024). However, disparities in digital infrastructure, connectivity and institutional capacity mean that the implementation of inclusive ODeL varies significantly across institutions. Research has shown that Malawi's higher education system continues to grapple with barriers related to accessibility of digital platforms, limited assistive technology and inconsistent institutional support for students with disabilities (Banks *et al.*, 2022; UNICEF Malawi, 2021). Examining HEIs within this environment provides a contextually grounded understanding of how national policies interact with institutional realities to shape SEN support.

Participants

Participants include ODeL students, lecturers and ODeL coordinators within the selected Higher Education Institutions. Students with declared or undisclosed special educational needs are central to the inquiry because their direct experiences provide insight into the accessibility of digital learning platforms, effectiveness of academic support and perceived barriers to equitable participation. Research shows that SEN students' voices are crucial for understanding inclusion in digital learning contexts, as their experiences often reveal gaps that institutional actors may overlook (Munjanja, 2025; Manase, 2024). Lecturers and coordinators are included because they shape course design, assessment and day-to-day support. This combination of participants strengthens the study's capacity to triangulate perspectives across multiple levels of the ODeL system (Dithale, 2022; Mutanga, 2023).

Sampling technique

A combination of purposive and stratified sampling strategies was used to ensure the inclusion of participants who contributed rich and diverse perspectives. Purposive sampling was appropriate for selecting lecturers and ODeL coordinators because it allowed the researcher to target individuals who hold specific responsibilities and knowledge relevant to SEN provision (Palinkas *et al.*, 2018; Etikan, 2016). Stratified sampling was used to recruit ODeL students to ensure representation across institutions and study programmes which is critical in Malawi where digital access and institutional support vary by location and socio-economic background (Banks *et al.*, 2022; R4D, 2023). Combining these techniques increased the credibility of findings by ensuring that both institutional and student perspectives are adequately represented in the dataset.

Data generation methods

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with lecturers, ODeL coordinators and SEN support officers to explore institutional practices, challenges and opportunities for supporting students with SEN. Semi-structured interviews allowed for guided conversation while still offering flexibility for participants to elaborate on their experiences, making them suitable for complex topics such as inclusion and digital learning (Alase, 2017; Brinkmann, 2018). Interviews were especially valuable for understanding how policies translate into practice, how institutional actors navigate resource constraints and how staff perceive their capacity to support SEN learners. Recent studies in African ODeL contexts indicate that such interviews provide deeper insights into systemic barriers and localised innovations that are often invisible in quantitative data (Mutanga, 2023; Zongozzi, 2025).

Data analysis

Quantitative data from students' surveys were analysed using descriptive statistics to determine patterns related

to accessibility, availability of assistive technologies and perceptions of institutional support. Statistical analysis helped to identify systematic trends and highlight disparities across demographic groups, which is particularly important in studies examining equity and inclusion (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Fritz *et al.*, 2019). Qualitative data from interviews were analysed thematically, following procedures that include coding, categorisation and synthesis of emerging themes. Thematic analysis was well suited for exploring lived experiences and institutional practices, as it allowed the researcher to interpret meaning across narratives and identify structural patterns (Nowell *et al.*, 2017; Braun & Clarke, 2021). Integrating quantitative and qualitative findings during interpretation enhances the depth and validity of the conclusions, ensuring that the study captured both the measurable and experiential dimensions of SEN support in ODeL.

Findings and discussion

Demographic profile of the respondents

Demographic profile for students

Table 1: Demographic profile of student respondents (n=30)

Demographic Variable	Category	Count (n)
Gender	Male	19
	Female	11
Age Group	18-24 years	7
	25-34 years	15
	35-44 years	6
	45+ years	2
Year of Study	Year 1	2
	Year 2	7
	Year 3	7
	Year 4	13
	Year 5	1
Reported Disability	No	22
	Yes	8
Primary Device for ODeL	Smartphone Only	18
	Laptop Only	5
	Multiple Devices (Desktop/Laptop + Smartphone)	7
Total (n=30)		

Demographic data for staff

Table 2: Demographic Profile of Academic & Administrative Staff

Role Group	Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (n)
Lecturers/Tutor(n=8)	Gender	Male	6
		Female	2
	Position	Lecturer	5
		Lecturer & HoD	1
		Tutor	1
		Lecturer	1

	Years of Experience	1-5 Years	4
		6-10 Years	2
		11-14 Years	1
		20+ Years	1
	Highest Qualification	Master's Degree	5
		Bachelor's Degree	2
		PhD	1
ODEL Coordinators (n=2)	Gender	Male	2
	Age Group	38 years	1
		40-50 years	1
		Academic Qualification	MSc
		PhD	1
		Experience in Role	2.5 years
		Not Specified	1
Total (n=10)			

The staff demographics in table 4.2 include (8 lecturers, 2 ODeL coordinators) reveal a cohort predominantly of early-to-mid career male lecturers, many of whom hold Master's degrees. This profile contextualizes the frequently cited "lack of training" in inclusive pedagogy; despite being subject experts, staff may lack specific professional development in Universal Design for Learning (UDL). The small sample of highly qualified coordinators emphasizes their role as key informants on systemic policy and resource barriers. Together, these demographics validate the reported gaps in institutional readiness and inform targeted, role-specific recommendations for capacity building.

Findings

Research objective 1: to assess how ODeL provisions in HEIs in Malawi accommodate the needs of students

with Special Needs.

Perception of staff on how ODeL provisions accommodate needs of SSEN

The study sought to establish how the provisions in HEIs support students with special needs. To this end, lecturers teaching ODeL Student, ODeL coordinators and ODeL students were asked to express their views. Findings are presented below from lecturers and coordinators first followed by views of students. Table 4.3 illustrates these findings.

Findings from lecturers and ODeL coordinators reveal that support for students with special needs in ODeL environments is uneven, unclear, and largely dependent on individual initiative rather than institutional systems. Four major themes emerged.

Theme 1: *Ambiguity in Policy and Institutional Mandate*

Table 3: Staff perceptions on ODeL provisions and their support for students with Special Needs in (HEIs).

Theme	Description	Supporting Quotations
Ambiguity in Policy and Institutional Mandate	Unclear institutional framework for supporting students with SEN, indicated by widespread uncertainty about policies and structures.	"Not sure what you're asking for exactly..." (Cod 1) "Not sure" (Cod 1 on policy & readiness) "Not sure" (Lct 1, 5 and 8)
Fragmented and Reactive Provisions	Accommodations exist as disconnected, ad-hoc measures rather than a systematized, proactive institutional approach.	"There is flexible instructional methods used...we also have Support Services for Students with SEN and Help Desk is also available" (Cod 1) • "Individualized Learning Support... Inclusive Assessment Methods..." (Cod 2) • Lecturer provision of accommodations only "sometimes" or "always"
Infrastructure and Platform Accessibility is a Persistent Barrier	Core ODeL platforms (i.e. Moodle, SIMS) are fundamentally inaccessible, creating a primary obstacle to inclusion.	"Inaccessible platforms" • Platforms rated as "Not accessible" (Cod) • Platforms described as "somehow inaccessible" (Lct 3)

Reliance on Variable Lecturer Initiative	Support is inconsistent and dependent on the personal awareness and effort of individual lecturers, not institutional policy.	• “most lecturers do not teach online” (Cod 2 9) • The students report that support tailored to students with disabilities is a mixture of “Never”, “Sometimes”, “Always
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There was strong evidence of uncertainty regarding institutional policies and structures meant to guide the support of students with special needs. Many staff members struggled to identify whether such frameworks existed, which signals that policies may either be absent, poorly communicated, or not operationalised. Several respondents openly stated they were unsure. One coordinator simply said, “Not sure what you’re asking for exactly...” (Cod 1), while others offered brief responses such as “Not sure” (Cod 1; Lct 1, 5, 8). When staff working directly with students are unable to identify clear institutional procedures, it suggests a gap in awareness, orientation, or institutional clarity. The consistency of these statements shows that the lack of clarity is not an isolated issue but rather a pervasive institutional challenge. This ambiguity limits the ability of lecturers and coordinators to implement inclusive practices purposefully, leaving them to rely on guesswork or personal discretion.

Theme 2: Fragmented and Reactive Provisions

Where support mechanisms do exist, they are described as scattered and reactive rather than part of a structured system. Staff acknowledged that certain accommodations are available, but these are provided in response to individual cases instead of being planned institutionally. One coordinator noted, “there is flexible instructional methods used... we also have Support Services for Students with SEN and Help Desk is also available” (Cod 1). Another added that the institution offers “Individualized Learning Support... Inclusive Assessment Methods...” (Cod 2). These responses show that pockets of support exist, but they are not coordinated across departments or embedded in institutional policy. The language used by lecturers further illustrates this fragmentation. Their support for students with special needs was described as occurring “sometimes” or “always,” reflecting inconsistencies in practice. This irregularity suggests that accommodations are offered based on individual staff capacity or awareness rather than a system that guarantees them. Overall, the findings point to HEIs employing ad-hoc measures rather than delivering an organised, proactive model of inclusive ODeL.

Theme 3: Infrastructure and Platform Accessibility is a Persistent Barrier

Staff highlighted that the digital infrastructure used in ODeL environments remains a major obstacle for learners with special needs. Moodle, SIMS, and other online platforms were widely described as inaccessible. One participant summarised this challenge bluntly as “Inaccessible platforms.” Coordinators reinforced this

by rating the platforms as “Not accessible.” A lecturer also described them as “somehow inaccessible” (Lct 3), suggesting that even staff who are familiar with the systems recognise their limitations. These statements point to a structural problem that staff members cannot solve individually. When core ODeL systems are not designed with accessibility standards in mind, students with visual, hearing, or physical disabilities face significant difficulties navigating their learning materials. This also burdens lecturers, who have to improvise solutions outside the formal system. The consistent mention of inaccessible platforms indicates that digital barriers are one of the most significant institutional shortcomings in supporting SEN students in ODeL.

Theme 4: Reliance on Variable Lecturer Initiative

The findings show that much of the support experienced by SEN students depends on how individual lecturers choose to engage with inclusive practices. This reliance on personal commitment rather than institutional policy creates inconsistency. One coordinator pointed out that “most lecturers do not teach online” (Cod 2 9), which limits opportunities for them to incorporate accessible digital teaching practices. Students’ feedback further revealed that the help they receive varies widely, with support being described as “Never,” “Sometimes,” or “Always.” This range of responses implies that students’ experiences are shaped by the attitudes, awareness, and effort of individual lecturers. In the absence of a strong institutional framework, responsibility falls on personal initiative. While some lecturers try to accommodate learners, others may not prioritise or understand the need for tailored support. This variability undermines the reliability of ODeL as an inclusive mode of learning and creates an unpredictable learning environment for students with disabilities.

Students’ Awareness of SEN-Specific Support Services

Findings from ODeL student reveal that a significant majority of students 66.7% (n=20) are either unaware (not aware) or uncertain (not sure) about the existence of dedicated SEN services at their institution. This indicates a major communication and visibility gap in institutional provisions. If generally students are unaware, it is highly probable that SEN students, especially those who have not disclosed their needs, struggle to locate and utilize these critical support systems. This finding points to a failure in translating policy into visible, student-facing services.

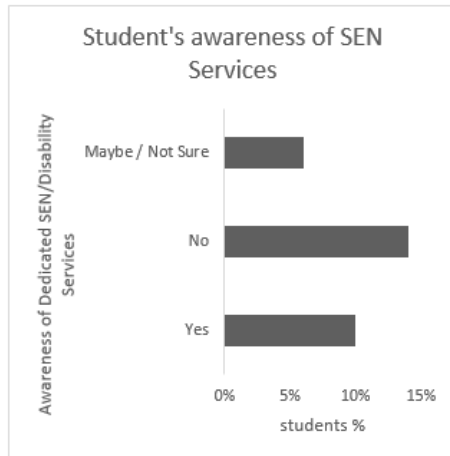


Figure 1: Students' awareness of SEN-Specific Support Services

Quality of support for students with SSEN in ODeL
Findings in figure 4.3 reveal that students' perception of quality of support for students with SEN is predominantly rated as "Average." This central tendency signifies a systemic experience of mediocrity and inadequacy. For SEN learners, "average" support translates to a daily reality of inconsistent accommodations, partial accessibility, and having to advocate persistently for basic needs. It reflects an environment where support is not absent but is unreliable and fails to meet the threshold required for equitable participation.



Figure 2 : Quality of support for Students with Special Educational Needs

The distribution, showing responses spread across "Good," "Poor," and "Very Poor," with minimal "Excellent," highlights profound inequity in experience. This variation suggests that a student's success is heavily dependent on chance factors such as a particular lecturer's awareness or the specific course platform rather than on standardized, institutionalized support systems. The presence of "Very Poor" ratings indicates that some students face severe neglect, encountering the very digital exclusion and compromised outcomes outlined in the problem statement.

Therefore, this data crystallizes the lived experience implied by Research Objective 2: SEN students in Malawian ODeL navigate a landscape of unpredictable and underwhelming support. The concentration of responses in the middle-to-low range of the scale provides quantitative evidence for the "inconsistent institutional support" and "uneven student experiences" cited in the background, confirming that the translation of policy into effective practice remains a significant Research objective 2: to establish the experiences and challenges faced by students with SEN in ODeL programs.

Student Inclusion during ODeL classes and activities

The findings reveal that a significant portion of students only sometimes or never feel included in their online classes/activities. This highlights a disparity in the ODeL environment, where the lack of physical interaction exacerbates feelings of isolation, particularly for those who require more engagement. This sense of exclusion is likely compounded for students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) by digital platforms that lack necessary accessibility features, making their participation both a technical and a social challenge. The support obtained from lecturers indicate a baseline of perceived goodwill but not necessarily competence or systematic accommodation.

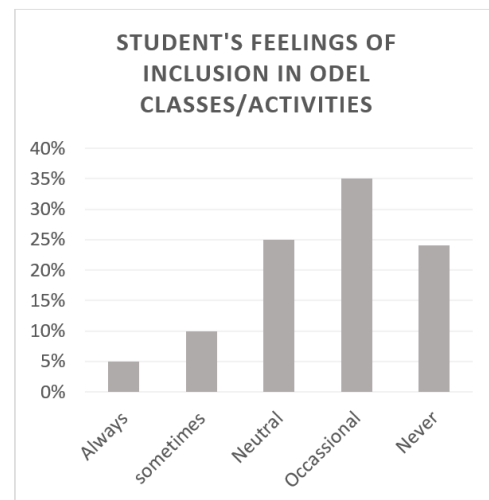


Figure 3: Student's feelings of inclusion in ODeL classes/activities

Student's perception of pedagogical support for SSEN

Furthermore, the study identifies a critical inconsistency in pedagogical support for SEN students. The majority of responses indicate that lecturer support is only "occasional," "neutral," or nonexistent, suggesting that inclusive practices are ad-hoc and dependent on individual lecturer initiative rather than being a systemic, institutionalized standard. This aligns with the recognized lack of specialized training in inclusive pedagogy for ODeL staff. Consequently, despite Malawi's robust policy frameworks, a significant implementation gap

persists, leaving SEN students to navigate complex digital environments with variable and often inadequate support, directly impacting their educational experience and success

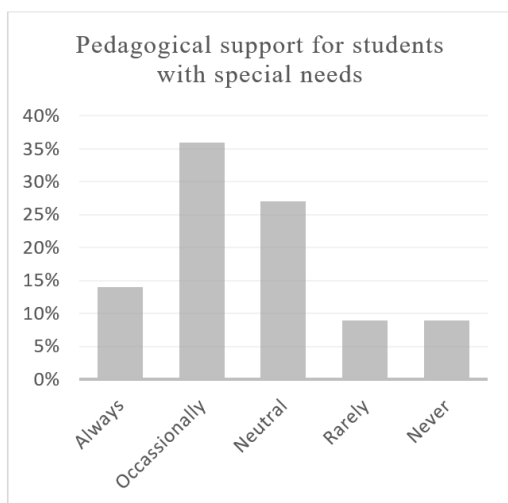


Figure 4: Student's perception of pedagogical support for SSEN

Access to Reasonable Accommodations

Nearly half 46.7% (n=14) of the students report never receiving any form of reasonable accommodation (e.g., extra time, alternative formats, captioned videos). This is a revealing proxy. When these accommodations are not widely practiced or understood among the ODeL student body, emphasizing that the specialized, formal process for securing SEN accommodations are further underdeveloped or opaque. This creates a challenging environment for SEN students who depend on these processes. The findings directly validate the problem statement's claim of "inconsistent institutional support." For nearly half of SEN learners, the promise of equitable participation is broken, forcing them to rely on "personal improvisation" in an already challenging digital environment. Furthermore, the significant 13% (n=4) who are "Not Sure" they have ever received an accommodation reveals a profound systemic opacity. This uncertainty points to poorly communicated procedures, a lack of clear pathways to request support, or accommodations being granted informally and unrecognizably. This ambiguity itself is a barrier, contributing to anxiety and a reluctance to disclose needs. While 40% (n=12) report having access, this minority status underscores the inequity and fragmentation of support. The experience of SEN students is thus characterized by a lottery of access, heavily dependent on individual lecturer awareness or specific course design, rather than guaranteed by robust institutional policy. This results in figure 4.5 crystallizes the core challenge that the translation of Malawi's "notable policy commitments" into a reliable, student-centered practice of accommodation remains incomplete, leaving a majority of SEN students to navigate their ODeL journey without the legally mandated supports essential for their success.

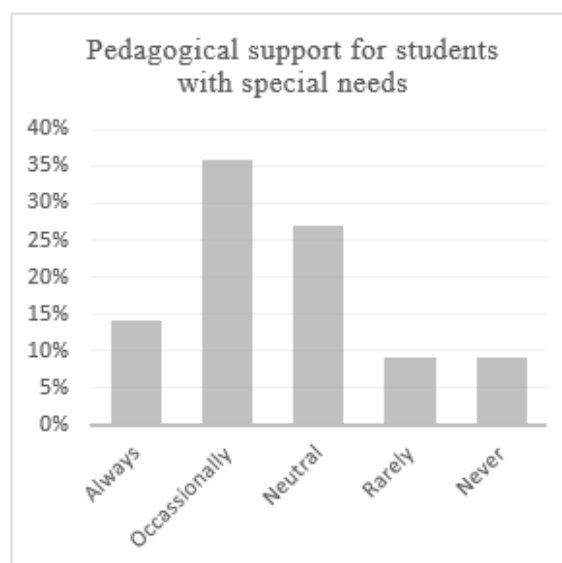


Figure 5: Access to reasonable accommodations by ODeL Students

Access to Reasonable Accommodations

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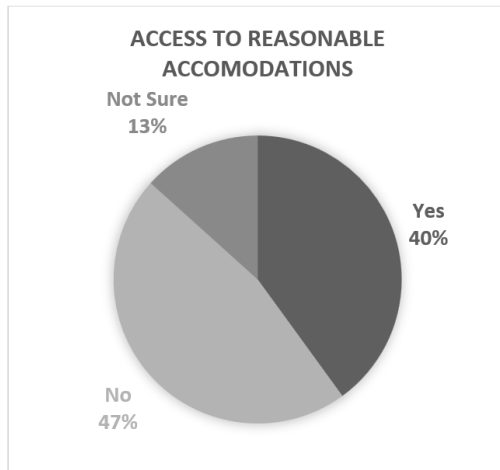


Figure 6: Access to reasonable accommodations by ODeL Students

Challenges of ODeL for Students with SEN

Findings in figure 4.6 identify three core, interconnected barriers that define the critical challenges faced by SSEN in Malawian ODeL programs. Firstly, inaccessible platforms 80% (n=24) represent a primary technical failure, where learning management systems lack basic features like screen reader compatibility, keyboard navigation, and captioning. This directly prevents students with visual, hearing, or motor impairments from engaging with core content, contradicting the flexibility promise of ODeL. Secondly, the lack of assistive technology, 63% (n=19) such as screen readers, text-to-speech software, or alternative format providers, exacerbates this inaccessibility. Without these essential tools, students are forced into personal, often inadequate, improvisation, shifting the burden of access from the institution to the individual learner. Thirdly, and most critically, these technical shortcomings are compounded by poorly trained staff and inconsistent support 53% (n=16). Even if a platform were partially accessible, staff unprepared in inclusive principles and accommodation procedures cannot provide effective pedagogical adaptation or reliable support. This inconsistency creates a climate of uncertainty and isolation for SEN students, undermining their sense of inclusion

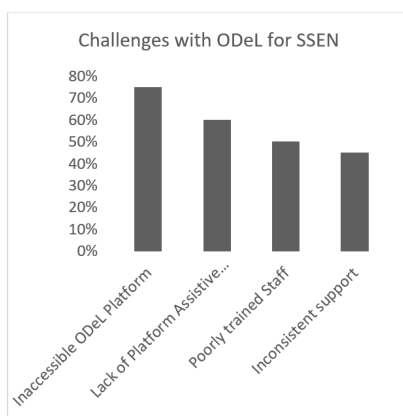


Figure 7: Challenges with ODeL for Student with Special Educational Needs

and academic confidence. Collectively, these challenges reveal a systemic implementation gap. They translate Malawi's robust inclusive education policies into a fraught daily experience for SEN learners, characterized by digital exclusion, heightened cognitive load to overcome barriers, and reliance on variable lecturer goodwill rather than standardized, equitable support systems.

Research objective 3: to suggest strategies for strengthening institutional capacity and national policy frameworks for effective SEN support in ODeL.

Suggestions from students

Bridging the Policy-Practice Gap through Enforcement
A primary finding is the overwhelming student perception that existing national inclusive education policies are currently ineffective at the institutional level. When asked if they believed national policies regarding inclusive education in ODeL were effectively implemented at their university, the majority of respondents (63.6%) stated "No," while 27.3% were "Unsure." Only a small fraction (9.1%) felt policies were being implemented effectively. This suggests that strategies must move beyond policy creation to policy enforcement and the development of operational guidelines at the university level.

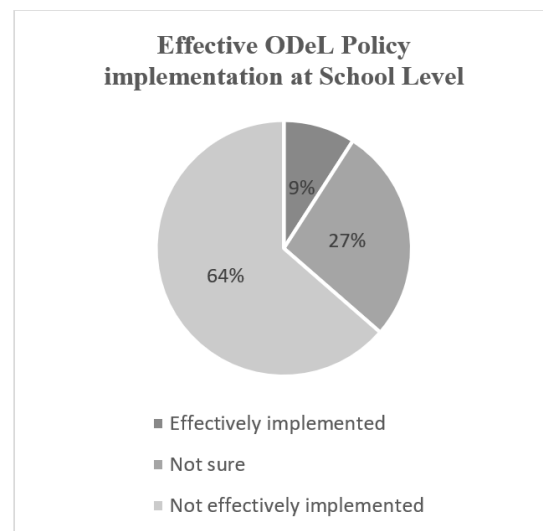


Figure 8: Effective ODeL policy implementation at school level

Prioritizing Technological Infrastructure and Assistive Devices

Students identified concrete technological interventions as the most critical strategy for improving their academic experience. When asked about specific changes they would like implemented, (45.5%) focused on improving the accessibility of the Learning Management System (LMS) and ensuring all digital course materials are readable by assistive software. Furthermore, when specifically asked about beneficial assistive technologies, over half the students (54.5%) identified screen readers and text-to-speech software as essential tools they currently lack or have inadequate access to.

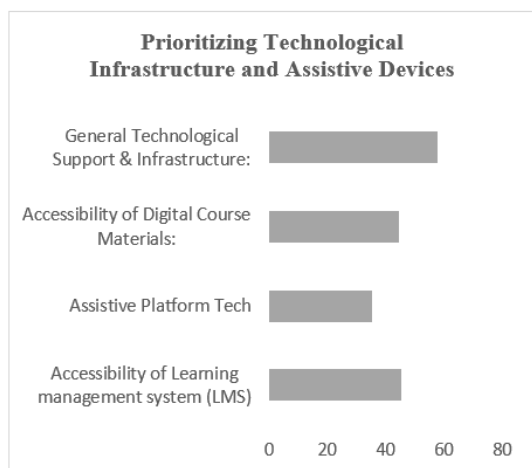


Figure 9: Technological infrastructure and assistive devices

Suggestions from ODeL Lecturers

Urgent Need for Specialized Professional Development

A primary finding is the unanimous agreement among lecturers on the necessity for specialized training. When asked about the most effective measures to build institutional capacity, 100% (5 out of 5) of the respondents prioritized professional development. Specifically, they emphasized the need for training on assistive technologies and inclusive pedagogy tailored for online environments. This suggests that current staff feel ill-equipped to meet the diverse needs of SEN students in a digital format.

Prioritizing Digital Infrastructure and Accessibility Standards

The responses highlight that policy frameworks must translate into tangible infrastructural improvements. Lecturers identified the development of mandatory digital accessibility guidelines for ODeL platforms and course materials as a critical policy intervention. Alongside this, they stressed the need for institutional investment in procuring and maintaining appropriate assistive software and hardware for students.

Establishing Dedicated Institutional Support Structures

A recurring theme in the suggestions for strengthening capacity was the need for formalized support systems. Lecturers recommended the establishment of dedicated disability support offices within ODeL units. These offices would be responsible for coordinating accommodations, providing technical support, and acting as a central resource for both students and staff, moving beyond ad-hoc individual lecturer efforts.

Suggestions from ODeL coordinators

Prioritizing Institutional Policy Development and Enforcement

A primary finding from the coordinators' responses is the urgent need for the development and enforcement

of specific institutional policies. When asked to identify the most critical strategy for strengthening institutional capacity, the coordinators prioritized the creation of clear, enforceable institutional policies and guidelines for inclusive ODeL. This suggests that while national frameworks exist, they are not effectively translated into actionable institutional mandates.

Linking National Policy to Targeted Funding and Resource Allocation

In terms of strengthening national policy frameworks, the coordinators emphasized the need to link policy commitments with financial resources. They suggested that national policies must be accompanied by dedicated funding streams or budgetary requirements for HEIs to invest in assistive technologies and accessible infrastructure. This indicates that unfunded mandates are seen as a major weakness in the current policy landscape.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study reveal that support for Students with Special Educational Needs (SSEN) in Malawi's ODeL systems remains inconsistent and heavily reliant on individual lecturer initiative rather than institutionally embedded structures. According to Ngubane-Mokiwa (2021), such inconsistencies are common in many African ODeL settings where disability support is not systematically integrated into institutional planning. In agreement with this, Somanje and Chawinga (2022) argue that Malawian HEIs often operate without clear operational guidelines for inclusive digital learning, which mirrors the students' reports of limited awareness of available SEN services. However, unlike studies that suggest students are always completely excluded from support (Moriña, 2022), the present study shows that some learners do experience sporadic lecturer-driven assistance. This divergence highlights that while institutional gaps persist, individual staff adaptability can partially mitigate systemic weaknesses. A central finding concerns the limited accessibility of digital platforms used in ODeL delivery. According to Seale (2023), accessible digital design is foundational to inclusive online learning, yet many institutions fail to embed universal design principles at the course development stage. This aligns with Kapito-Tembo and Chibambo (2023), who found that Malawian digital platforms frequently lack features such as screen reader compatibility and captioning. The current study confirms these shortcomings, with students reporting inaccessible interfaces and materials. However, unlike Seale's (2023) emphasis on global standards, the challenges observed here reflect context-specific resource limitations, suggesting that solutions must consider the economic realities of low-income higher education systems. The study also found that assistive technologies are either absent or insufficiently provided. According to Al-Azawei and Al-Badi (2023), the availability of assistive tools strongly predicts SEN learner engagement in digital spaces. Similarly, Mutanga (2023) stresses that equitable access to assistive technologies significantly improves

participation for learners with disabilities within African HEIs. The convergence between these studies and the present findings illustrates a continental pattern of inadequate investment in assistive tools. However, the students in this study reported relying heavily on personal improvisation, which diverges from contexts like South Africa where institutional provision is more structured (Mphahlele & Khoza, 2020). This indicates that Malawi's challenge is not merely technological but structural, shaped by the limited funding allocated to disability inclusion. Weak staff capacity in inclusive digital pedagogy emerged as another significant constraint. According to Anthony and Keating (2022), academic staff often lack both the training and confidence to design accessible online experiences. In agreement, Wane and Chigona (2021) argue that without structured professional development, staff tend to rely on traditional pedagogical assumptions that do not align with inclusive ODeL practice. The current findings support these arguments, with lecturers acknowledging minimal training and uncertainty about how to adapt materials for diverse learners. However, while Anthony and Keating (2022) attribute this mainly to institutional negligence, the present study suggests that national policy implementation gaps also contribute to the capacity challenge. The findings further highlight weaknesses in institutional coordination and monitoring. According to Chisango and Maruzani (2022), effective inclusive ODeL requires coordinated oversight between disability units, ICT departments and academic faculties. This aligns with Muzata (2021), who found that fragmented support structures create confusion for students seeking accommodations. Students in this study similarly described a lack of clear procedures and inconsistent communication. Yet, in contrast to Muzata's (2021) assertion that institutions rarely possess policy frameworks, the Malawian context demonstrates that policies exist but are poorly operationalised. This divergence reinforces the idea that Malawi's challenge lies not in policy absence but in policy translation. Finally, the study's findings demonstrate that national frameworks, though comprehensive, do not consistently influence practice. According to Wambu and Ho (2020), national disability policies often fail when institutions lack enforcement mechanisms. In agreement, Mutanga (2023) notes that without targeted funding and accountability structures, inclusive ODeL remains aspirational. The present findings confirm this, as students and staff reported minimal alignment between institutional action and national commitments. This highlights a critical gap between aspiration and practice that must be addressed through better coordination, monitoring and resource allocation.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to assess the effectiveness of support for Students with Special Educational Needs (SSEN) within Open, Distance and e-Learning (ODEL) programmes in Malawian Higher Education Institutions.

The findings show that although Malawi has a strong policy foundation for inclusive education, the actual implementation of SEN support within ODeL remains inconsistent, fragmented and largely dependent on individual lecturer initiative. Students reported persistent barriers linked to inaccessible digital platforms, inadequate assistive technologies and limited pedagogical adaptation, which collectively weaken their participation and learning experiences. Institutional structures such as disability support units and ODeL departments were found to operate without adequate coordination, leaving most students unaware of available support systems or the procedures for accessing accommodations. The study also highlighted significant capacity gaps among academic staff, particularly in inclusive digital pedagogy and the design of accessible learning materials. These gaps reflect broader systemic challenges, including limited national enforcement mechanisms, insufficient funding for disability inclusion and a lack of structured institutional accountability. Despite the existence of strong national policy commitments, the translation of these frameworks into operational practice remains weak, creating a clear implementation gap between policy and lived experience. The overall conclusion is that effective support for SSEN in ODeL requires a shift from informal, individually driven practices to institutionalised, well-resourced systems. Strengthening digital accessibility, improving staff capacity, enhancing assistive technology provision and reinforcing policy enforcement mechanisms are essential for ensuring equitable access. Without deliberate investment and coordinated action, ODeL in Malawi risks widening educational inequalities instead of promoting the inclusive participation it aims to achieve.

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