


# Challenges to Inclusive Education for Students With Disabilities in Japanese Institutions of Higher Education


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## Abstract

**Objective:** The purpose of the study was to elucidate the current challenges to inclusive education (IE) at the university level in Japan, thereby addressing the gap between policy and the provision of inclusion.

**Method:** This qualitative case study of a private university supporting inclusive policies in Japan included content analysis of data collected through semi-structured interviews to ascertain themes.

**Results:** The four identified themes were: inclusion practices as a conceptual challenge, conflicting practice of reasonable accommodations, inclusion management gaps, and barriers to and opportunities for inclusive education.

**Conclusions:** There is a significant disconnect between legal obligation and actual implementation of accommodations. Results demonstrate the difficulties in accommodating students due to rigid procedural requirements for accommodation, such as self-reporting documentation by students.

**Implications:** Contradiction between inclusion policy and practice related to students with disabilities hinders the provision of accommodation services to university students in Japan.

**Keywords:** *accommodation services, barriers/challenges, disability, inclusive education, university students*

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## Introduction

Inclusive education (IE) studies are frequently concerned with the gap between inclusive education policies and the actual inclusion of students with disabilities (Bulk et al., 2022). The complexity of the problem is underpinned by contextual and culturally enforced challenges that many university environments face (Maeda et al., 2021). East Asia faces a particularly difficult situation regarding educational equality for students with disabilities (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2018). In addressing the primary struggles students experience within institutions, scholars usually refer to the disability stigma persisting at many social levels and institutions (Eccles et al., 2018). Social pressure and rejection exacerbate students' problems with the learning process and class involvement (Lombardi et al., 2012). In turn, social isolation and low academic achievements negatively affect self-disclosure and enforce students' hesitation in asking for support (Markoulakis & Kirsh, 2013). Since the issue of inclusive education remains significant to both policy and practice, most studies attempt to address the gaps in relation to accessibility, recourses, and curriculum adaptations (Faura-Martínez & Cifuentes-Faura, 2022), along with disability services management (Cifuentes-Faura & Faura-Martínez, 2022).

Japan has adopted policies to pursue more inclusive education for individuals with disabilities, but the implementation and impact of these policies, the experiences of educators, and the problems faced by stakeholders are not well studied. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the progress of many institutions in incorporating inclusive education (Watermeyer et al., 2022). Japan thus presents an important case for the analysis of inclusive education policy. In a 2019 report on achievements towards sustainable development goals (SDGs), Japan was praised for its efforts in quality education (SDG4) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019). The Japanese government has attempted to increase social inclusion in educational settings by encouraging institutions to accommodate students with a range of special needs (Iwakuma et al., 2021); this effort is reflected in the Act for Eliminating Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Ministry of Justice, 2013). As a result, the number of students with disabilities pursuing an academic degree in Japanese universities has increased significantly, thus imposing an additional workload on academic staff (Japan Student Services Organization [JASSO], as cited in Ruddick & Pryor, 2021). One of the main problems of the Act is that it serves mainly as an encouragement for accommodation in higher education institutions (HEIs) in Japan but its application is not mandatory (Young & Schaefer, 2019). Therefore, the assurance of equal access to educational opportunities for students with disabilities remains under question, in both policy debates and applied practice at institutions (Tahir et al., 2019).

This study examines Japanese HEIs to gain insight into how IE programs are implemented and influenced by government policy. The next section discusses the literature on disability considerations in education, followed by a discussion of disability accommodation in Japan and the concept of reasonable accommodations. Following these reviews, the project discusses the interview method and qualitative analysis employed to generate findings presented in the final section. Among the studies focusing on faculty experiences in accommodating students with disabilities, this paper reveals valuable insights on the disability support system in a private institution. It analyses the current gap between policy and practice of inclusive education and supports the idea that the accommodation process is complicated by various factors that go beyond training needs.

## Literature Review

### Disability in Education

The discourse on disability suggests that inclusion presupposes the importance of individual differences in a learning environment and values diversity (Hornby, 2014). Mitchell and Sutherland (2020) emphasized that IE should involve full participation, without segregation of students into special classrooms or services. IE provides

individuals with equal opportunities regardless of their dis/abilities and ensures a suitable environment for an individual's growth and development (Tahir et al., 2019). Barriers to inclusion are diverse and vary depending on the disability type, along with its medical specificity; nevertheless, some studies addressing the problems of inclusion at institutions refuse to be guided by a disability type (Carballo et al., 2022) but rather take students with disabilities as one category. Fixation on a disability type is associated with a medicalized view toward students with disabilities and is largely criticized in the IE scholarship (Nieminen, 2022b).

The term *disabled student* imposes a socially constructed limit on a person, while the term *student with disability* highlights the presence of the human identity that comes first and defines a person as an equal unit of society (Nieminen, 2022a). This study utilizes the latter term, as it also resonates with the usage of the term in the Japanese discourse and legal documents (JASSO, 2021). Our research considers students with disabilities as an *equity group* and does not highlight a certain type of disability but attempts a more holistic approach to understanding challenges within the higher education system.

## Theoretical Framework

The research on barriers to IE follows the social model of disability proposed by Oliver (1996), which considers disability as a construct that is constantly evolving within society. The main assumption that drives the model is that the experiences of individuals with disabilities are shaped by institutional and organizational factors dictated by society and its policies. The educational institution is a crucial environment that needs reorganization and restructuring, so that persons with disabilities might receive equal educational opportunities and experiences (Healy et al., 2006). The social model of disability states that “people are disabled by barriers that exist in society” (Tinklin et al., 2004, p. 642), and the solution is in removing barriers and deficits of the environment that restrict the choices for the disabled, so they can have equal access to educational opportunities (Collins et al., 2019).

Bronfenbrenner's ecosystem theory presents yet another framework describing direct and indirect influences of the social context on the development and experience of an individual in an educational environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In IE studies, this theory is applied to suggest that the education system consists of different role players who create the sense of the environment and serve as the social underpinning for a learner's individual development. Bronfenbrenner argued that human development must be investigated through the prism of multifaceted interactions occurring within the environment (Kamenopoulou, 2016). According to Sharma et al. (2019), the complex structures of educational systems may be understood by focusing on teachers, students, or their parents. The ecosystem perspective on learning presents a conceptual system that guides a similar approach to research design and data collection (Peters et al., 2018). Foster and DeCaro (1991) employed the ecosystem theory to establish a more analytical approach to organizing data and examining the influence of the university environment on the population of students with disabilities. This research employs the ecosystem theory as a guiding heuristic for data collection and organizing the findings into separate categories.

### Disability Support in Japan

Japanese universities have struggled to ensure the accessibility of their infrastructure (Boeltzig-Brown, 2017), and their institutional administration and instructors may be unprepared to respond to the diverse needs of students (Ruddick & Pryor, 2021). Maeda et al. (2021b) believe the problems faced by Japanese universities in moving towards inclusive education remain unaddressed and advocate for investigating the challenges and the potential ways to address them.

The Japanese government's efforts to develop a more inclusive society and more inclusive education are reflected in two actions, namely signing into law the Act on the Elimination of Disability Discrimination (AEDD) and joining the Convention on the Rights for Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which was adopted in

2006 by the United Nations General Assembly (Boeltzig-Brown, 2017). Before the CRPD and AEDD, there was no legal enforcement or proper mechanism to accommodate students with disabilities, especially in a higher education setting (Kondo et al., 2015). The Convention manifested an anti-discriminatory climate at all educational levels and encouraged state parties to ensure an inclusive education system and support for persons with disabilities (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2006). The AEDD imposed a legal obligation for all national and public universities to accommodate students with disabilities on an equal basis with others (Kondo et al., 2015) and formulated self-advocacy procedures for students with disabilities if they are refused accommodation; private universities received encouragement to engage in this anti-discrimination initiative (Young & Schaefer, 2019).

Moriña and Biagiotti (2022) have noted differences in research on IE depending on the context of the country in which the study takes place. The study of IE in the context of higher education in Japan is underdeveloped and mainly limited to the viewpoints of students with disabilities (Singh et al., 2017) or their peers (Iwakuma et al., 2021). Japanese scholarship focuses mostly on policy issues (Boeltzig-Brown, 2017; Kondo et al., 2015) that review higher education policies and regulations to clarify the problems in the disability support structure or a reasonable accommodation system (Young, 2019). Sometimes studies compare Japanese policy and institutional practices with those of other countries that have a more advanced disability law system, including the United States (Klein, 2007), Brazil, and South Korea (Morin et al., 2017). The viewpoints of other participants in the learning process are inadequately represented in the literature, although those individuals are commonly positioned as culprits in the analysis of student experiences (Kimball et al., 2016). Despite the significant role of educators in academic inclusion, there is a dearth of literature addressing their experiences in accommodating students with disabilities at HEIs (Edwards et al., 2022).

### **Reasonable Accommodations**

Although anti-discrimination legislation advocates for accommodations at institutions in Japan, it provides little guidance or detail on how to implement accommodation procedures (Boeltzig-Brown, 2017). In Japan, the Basic Policy of the Disability Discrimination Act recommends reasonable accommodations based on the CRPD, which incorporates the concept of “disproportionate or undue burden” (Nagase, 2022, p. 106). Accordingly, the Japanese legal system requires accommodations only if their cost or impact on practice is not excessive. Thus, only national institutions are legally mandated to incorporate reasonable accommodations into regular administration service, while non-national public institutions are only urged to design their course of action (Boeltzig-Brown, 2017). The decision on the extent of the imposed burden is decided, according to the Basic Policy for the Discrimination Elimination Act (Naikakufu, 2015, as cited in Nagase, 2022), by private businesses on an individual basis.

The disability services supporting students with disabilities at universities in Japan are usually provided by the university administration, academic or counselling staff, and some students working part-time as peer tutors or assistants (Boeltzig-Brown, 2017). Peers students are used to accommodate students with hearing and speech impairments, while the faculty usually deals with visual impairments by modifying their instruction style (JASSO, 2015a, as cited in Boeltzig-Brown, 2017). The majority of HEIs (88.3% or 1,032 out of 1,169) assign the responsibility for disability services to existing university and college departments, such as the student affairs office (JASSO, 2021). The office most frequently assigned to perform disability support function is the generic administrative office (51.4%, or 470 out of 914 HEIs), followed by the student office (24.9%, or 228), healthcare centers (17.4%, or 159), and other offices (JASSO, 2012, as cited in Boeltzig-Brown, 2017). Only about 38.9% of HEIs have a department, center, or office dedicated specifically to disability services provision; about 49.4% of institutions have another committee that performs the relevant functions, and 11.7% of institutions don't have a committee at all (JASSO, 2021).

Japanese higher education does not require a specific entity to serve the needs of students with disabilities (Kondo et al., 2015), and that needs further legislation (Cooper, 2015). University staff usually lack training or

any specific qualification in relation to education for those with special needs (PEPNet-Japan, 2012, as cited in Boeltzig-Brown, 2017). Despite Japan's attempts to create professional communities specialized in disabilities and special needs, such as the Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD), or online databases collecting information about different impairments, such as PEPNet-Japan, staff at HEIs lack sufficient awareness (Young & Schaefer, 2019).

National surveys and policy analyses illustrate significant issues related to structural inconsistency and the problems inherent in the transition from legal obligations to implementation. The Japanese disability support system in higher education is said to be 30 years behind the United Kingdom or the United States (Cooper, 2015). Although the Japanese system has progressed quite quickly in terms of policy and development of guidelines, the disability law does not guarantee the social inclusion of students with disabilities in a HE context (Kim, 2009). Higher education institutions in Japan are currently at a critical point in finding the way to accommodate students with disabilities individually and to address their special needs. Further research is necessary to gain an in-depth insight into the issues related to the implementation of IE at the tertiary level.

### **Educator Perceptions**

The role played by teachers and their impact on the negative experiences of students with disabilities are critical and may be a key barrier to more inclusive experiences for students with disabilities (Dela-Fuente, 2021). Lombardi and Murray (2011) suggested that faculty attitudes and their teaching practices are directly related to the learning achievements of students with disabilities. There was a relative lack of interest in the role of faculty in post-secondary contexts until Fonosch and Schwab (1981) emphasized their significance for successful academic integration. Some researchers blame teachers' perspectives, views, or attitudes when it comes to the exclusion of students with disabilities (Woodcock & Nicoll, 2022), and Rao (2004) argued that faculty have the most detrimental impact on the failure to include students. Faculty's negative attitudes or their self-doubts about addressing the needs of students may shape discriminatory behavior in the learning environment (Wright & Meyer, 2017).

Instructor reluctance to adjust their teaching methods is a matter of concern (Haegele et al., 2018), even though there is literature on teaching methodology that incorporates inclusive pedagogy (Aguirre et al., 2021) or the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (Navarro et al., 2016). Many studies have attempted to understand the level of faculty knowledge of law and pedagogy (May 2014). The circumstances of COVID-19 opened a new aperture in the scholarship and encouraged researchers to reevaluate faculty knowledge and practice related to online teaching and learning support (Guilbaud et al., 2021). Faculty attitudes and perspectives in this context have been reexamined along with the experiences of dealing with students with disabilities (O'Keefe et al., 2020). Recent papers agree that each university's case presents a different environment in which to explore IE in HEIs (Crawford & Cifuentes-Faura, 2022).

As well as examining the experiences of students and disability support staff (Edwards et al., 2022), studies inquire about faculty opinions and problems they encounter in attending to the needs of students with disabilities. Lopez-Gavira et al. (2021) conclude that faculty appear to be the key figures in ensuring the inclusion of students with disabilities. Several researchers have investigated how faculty members perceive accommodations for disability and their associated challenges (Carballo et al., 2022). Studies in the United States achieved good results in interpreting the identified challenges from different angles (Gilson et al., 2020). By contrast, Japanese students with disabilities are "underrepresented" compared to their Western counterparts (Cooper, 2015, p. 95). There is now a drastic growth in studies learning from faculty experience in countries such as Spain (Aguirre et al., 2021), Greece (Papadakaki et al., 2022), Saudi Arabia (Alkeraida, 2021), and the United Arab Emirates (Benkohila et al., 2020). The Asia Pacific context is mostly represented by countries such as Australia (Goggin et al., 2017); New Zealand (Classen et al., 2021); South Korea, Thailand, and Indonesia (Kusuma, 2021); and Taiwan (Wang, 2023). Therefore, by examining the perspective

of university faculty and staff in Japan, our study contributes to the existing scholarship by representing a different set of stakeholders in the multidimensional domain of IE at HEIs.

## Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The analysis of IE policy and practice in Japan may shed light on the current situation and problems that university stakeholders encounter while attending to the needs of students with disabilities at the levels of policy, institutional management, and teaching/learning processes. This study examines barriers to IE at the tertiary level of education in Japan by focusing on the following issues:

1. What challenges are perceived by university faculty and staff in moving towards inclusive higher education for students with disabilities in Japan?
2. What are university faculty and staff experiences in accommodating students with disabilities in Japan?
3. What factors influence the work of university stakeholders in attending to the needs of students with disabilities?
4. What is the gap between inclusive policy and practice in relation to student accommodation at universities in Japan?
5. What do university faculty and staff perceive as barriers to and enablers of more inclusive higher education for students with disabilities?

We examined the HEI learning environment in Japan at the levels of organizational analysis, the specific work involved in providing inclusion, and the systemic factors that hinder the implementation of IE.

## Methods

Using qualitative analysis, we examined classroom instructional practices, needs of students with disabilities, the impact of peer dynamics, the social and cultural impact of IE on the learning environment, and institutional procedures involving faculty, disability support services, and reasonable accommodations. Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with a small cohort of university faculty and staff to examine key issues in responding to the diverse needs of students and to reflect on potential barriers preventing inclusion of students with disabilities in a postsecondary setting.

## Context and Instrumentation

The participants are all associated with the case study site, an international private university in Japan with about 6,000 students that has been nominated as one of the leading institutions in Japan in terms of inclusivity and diversity. The university has established its own disability support system, which involves individual management of application procedures and self-reporting, consultation with faculty and experts, and the application of reasonable accommodation when approved. Information on student disabilities at the university is strictly confidential (Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University, n.d). The university as a case study site does not represent all private education institutions in Japan; however, it provides useful insight on local disability management and the level of governmental involvement in the inclusion of students with disabilities.

We adopted a case study approach using qualitative data from semi-structured interviews of faculty and staff members. Inductive and deductive approaches were used to investigate the perspectives of research participants and provide a summary of findings through grouping and thematic categorization (Liu, 2016).

The deductive part of the research is underpinned by the ecosystem theory as the conceptualizing and organizing tool in the description of the data findings. The ethics committee of the university approved the human subject research for this project based on guidelines established by the university and the norms of the international research community.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Five predetermined areas were used to guide the data collection procedure and to structure the coding frame of the study: teaching experience, academic adjustments, inclusion management, disability services, and the barriers to and strategies for inclusive education. These five areas were based on analysis of the literature and aligned with the ecosystem theory. A full list of interview questions is provided in the Appendix. Example questions from each of the five areas include: Tell me about a particularly memorable experience of dealing with students with disabilities in a classroom setting. What challenges did you encounter when addressing the accommodation needs of students with disabilities in a classroom setting? How does the university manage inclusion for students with disabilities? What has been your experience in negotiating accommodation procedures with disability support services for students with disabilities? What can enable a more inclusive environment for students with disabilities?

Qualitative content analysis was used to distinguish the codes based on the frequency of patterns, thus helping with a more coherent analysis of findings that was less dependent on the researcher's judgement (Sajedi & Erfani Rad, 2021). The content analysis method helped reveal and identify minor threads that the participants discussed (topics and ideas repeatedly raised within the data) (Schreier, 2012). The themes and subthemes were formulated based on the frequency of patterns produced using MAXQDA software. Schreier (2012) suggested qualitative content analysis is best for descriptive purposes, as it helps categorize the material based on code (meaning).

Each recorded and anonymized interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes in either online (11) or face-to-face (2) modes. The choice of mode was given to all participants to meet their needs and ensure their comfort in the interview (Patton, 1990). This strategy was used to encourage meaningful responses in the five focus areas. The primary transcriptions of interviews were retrieved using Otter software, and the final transcriptions were double-checked by the researchers. Peer cross-checking was included to achieve better accuracy. The coding frame was double-checked for errors through peer review to ensure the validity of the coding strategy.

## **Results**

The research involved 13 (4 female and 9 male) research participants. Nine of the participants were university faculty members, while 4 occupied administrative positions. Their ages ranged from 30 to 62 years old. One of 13 had special needs training. Qualitative examination of interview transcripts identified four general themes, as well as subthemes and key findings; these are summarized in Table 1. The four themes include inclusion practices as a conceptual challenge, conflicting practice of reasonable accommodations, inclusion management gaps, and barriers to and opportunities for inclusive education.

**Table 1.** *Themes and Sub-themes*

Theme	Sub-themes	Explanation
Inclusion practice as a conceptual challenge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teaching-learning process</li> <li>• Classroom-level dynamics and obstacles thereof</li> </ul>	Educational inclusion of students with disabilities is a professional struggle for the faculty.
The conflicting practice of reasonable accommodations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Instructional challenges and flexibility</li> <li>• Faculty experiences in providing accommodation</li> </ul>	Despite the willingness to support and accommodate students with disabilities, faculty hesitate to adapt teaching strategies to the individual needs of students.
Inclusion management gaps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Response to inclusion and accommodation</li> <li>• Progress towards accommodation support</li> </ul>	Despite university efforts towards more inclusive education, faculty perceive a need to work more on disability-related affairs and accommodation structures.
Barriers to and opportunities for inclusive education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Barriers</li> <li>• Facilitators of inclusion</li> </ul>	This refers to the limited capacity of the university in disability support, human factors, and lack of clarity in policy.

### **Theme 1: Inclusion Practice as a Conceptual Challenge**

When evaluating the teaching and learning process, faculty members evaluated their experiences with students with disabilities as a struggle for which most of the respondents were unprepared. Furthermore, respondents claimed a lack of expertise. All participants suggested that beside professional limitations (such as low expertise in special needs education or practical limits and frustration in complex and unpredictable situations), they also encountered institutional factors such as the unsatisfactory function of communication channels, as well as lack of collaboration, instructions, or guidelines from the institution, and other factors that imposed a burden on inclusion. Respondents commonly referred to explanations related to poor training and infrastructural problems.

The participants had struggles in accommodating students inclusively in classrooms. For instance, one respondent said, “It was a challenge conceptually for me and physically for the school to have facilities that could accommodate somebody like that.” Other respondents suggested that faculty face unknown difficulties, saying “Because we have just one professor, for more than 200 students sitting in the same classroom ... we cannot see their difficulties.”

### **Theme 2: The Conflicting Practice of Reasonable Accommodations**

While respondents would accept accommodation requests from students with disabilities, their teaching strategy would not undergo a significant change. Therefore, the faculty would provide accommodations for students upon their request but could not adapt their teaching strategies to the personal needs of students. One respondent referred to the difficulty in dealing with fairness: “To be fair to other students in the class, I



shouldn't make an accommodation for this student." Another respondent suggested support "as far as the request of support implies changes that are not too drastic."

Faculty claimed their experiences of providing accommodation went beyond the expectations of disability-related support by the university and national policies. However, they hesitated to provide adjustments for students whose disability status was not officially recognized by the disability systems. Faculty did not feel well-informed or prepared to deal with a range of adjustments. One respondent expressed this clearly: "I don't have any training in recognizing or dealing with students with emotional disorders." Most respondents preferred to follow the official policy regarding accommodation and support to provide adjustments only through the established support provision structures.

### **Theme 3: Inclusion Management Gaps**

The third theme highlights gaps in university efforts, policies, and management; faculty pointed at inconsistency in the university's support system and expressed overall concern regarding problems that seemed beyond the educators' power. These include students whose medical conditions were not regarded as severe enough for disability status or students experiencing learning difficulties but lacking a medical certificate as proof of disability. One respondent suggested: "The problem is the way they are being notified by email," referring to the lack of needed interaction from disability services. Another commented: "We don't really get much information about the type of disability and the severity of it and what to do."

The faculty were concerned about the recognition of students with invisible disabilities because judgement regarding the application of accommodations and management of extraordinary cases both wind up being the responsibility of the faculty, according to the university's regulations on the support of students with disabilities.

### **Theme 4: Barriers to and Opportunities for Inclusive Education**

The university possesses limited resources for disability accommodations and for staff working with disability, as a result of limits set in the university budget. The limits on accommodations are acknowledged in the Notes section of the university's regulations, which admits potential limitations of resources and asks for students' understanding. Moreover, faculty were not aware of the available accommodation opportunities and lacked knowledge of the teaching support for students with special needs. This shows a considerable gap between the classroom practice at the university and even the limited resources available for the range of accommodation options. For example, one respondent said: "We don't provide personal assistance to particular students. All we can do is to provide something like an extension of time, a note taker. So, our support system is limited."

Most of the respondents mentioned the role of peer support, the promotion of knowledge, and better faculty awareness as invaluable factors in facilitating inclusive experiences in the classroom. Additionally, respondents discussed the impact of human factors such as social stigma, bias, and ignorance that contribute to students' poor self-advocacy and prevent them from speaking of their individual learning needs.

## **Discussion**

The faculty's role in academic and career prospects of students with disabilities is no longer disputed (Moriña & Orozco, 2023). Our study results point to significant structural barriers in the case of Japanese universities, beyond training needs and pedagogical skills. While most studies assume an important role for faculty influence on inclusion, others tend to put the responsibility on all members of the educational process and stress that only mutual feedback and support can ensure the implementation of inclusive policies (Solis-Grant et al., 2023). This result has implications for the role of faculty in ensuring a more inclusive learning environment for students with disabilities. The ecosystem theory recognizes that the school stakeholders

contribute equally to the training and development needs of an individual within a socially just study environment (Anderson et al., 2014).

The university's regulations for the support of students with disabilities require the faculty and staff to aid students with disabilities and ensure that support is provided. However, a significant gap exists between the inclusive education policy and practice due to the requirement for a medical certificate, without which support is not provided. The faculty feels a struggle in evaluating students with disabilities and a mismatch between the curriculum standard and the ability of students to meet the established standard, suggesting the need for more flexibility in curriculum design. Moreover, most faculty members question their own expertise in disability studies and meeting the educational needs of students with disabilities and hesitate to provide accommodations without precise university regulations. These findings correspond closely with other studies that emphasize the significance of faculty flexibility and readiness to employ diverse teaching methods when dealing with students with disabilities in classroom situations (Elbeheri et al., 2020). Lack of educational delivery skills raised in this study creates additional concern noted by others, such as Crawford and Cifuentes-Faura (2022), who claimed that the poor development of sustainable practices at institutions has slowed the achievement of development goals and resulted in lower interest in inclusion initiatives and programs. To ensure more effective accommodation practices for faculty, there is a need for a more collaborative and coordinated approach toward disability service, a finding echoed by Leech et al. (2009).

Respondents generally evaluated the university's efforts toward accommodation support as satisfactory and believed that the university makes efficient use of its limited resources. In comparison, an American university case study showed only moderate progress in the overall support system, noting issues in meaningful access (Lehrer-Stein & Berger, 2023). Though most participants (including faculty and administrative staff) in this study believed that the university quite successfully addressed student inclusion in general, they accepted that disability support (i.e., accommodation) had received little attention at the management level.

However, information transfer appeared to be a relatively common topic among the participants, who had mixed feelings regarding the ways the university negotiated the process of accommodation and guided faculty members. In some cases, faculty experienced frustration when receiving an accommodation letter from the disability office that included little information about the nature of disability and little instructional guidance. Poor support of faculty by administrative staff imposed a negative impact on their teaching practice. This suggests that stakeholders' attitudes towards disability support may have an impact on their performance as professionals (Nagase et al., 2020).

Although support service guidelines based on university policy claim to assign one academic office staff member to the student during the support period to ensure periodic consultations with the student, the actual experiences of faculty members and managerial staff revealed a lack of educational support at the administrative level. A similar argument is covered by Moriña and Biagiotti (2022) who characterized such challenges in the lives of students with disabilities as an academic issue. They suggested that despite the support available at institutions, students' academic success remains limited and directly impacts graduates with disabilities. Fernández-Cerero et al. (2023) noted that little attention is given to the development of educational plans for teacher training in special needs that focuses on inclusive experiences for students.

The university's chain of communication appears to leave little opportunity for faculty to be fully engaged in the procedures to establish accommodations, and faculty are often left to decide whether to ensure an accommodation or deny access to it. The communication chain runs only between students and support coordinators, and faculty are excluded from it. Kamran et al. (2023) argued that access to adequate resources for educators is crucial in ensuring high-quality accommodation for students; however, teachers frequently are guided only by the universities' general plans, with no specificity on diagnoses and knowledge of pedagogy

appropriate to them. Faculty concern over feedback and timely communication with students is justified, based on university regulations that require office coordinators to contact students with disabilities for feedback on the service quality. Faculty engagement and interest in inclusive learning and teaching are pivotal for student development in an inclusive classroom (Fovet, 2021).

The findings of this study have several important implications for future practice. More attention is needed to improve the disability support system in private institutions; particularly, there may be a need to impose legal obligations on private institutions to attend to the academic needs of students with disabilities. Institutions should aim to train faculty in the needs of students with disabilities and in more inclusive pedagogies. Specific suggestions should be given to faculty members having a student with a disability in a course. A key policy priority for institutions should be planning to care for students with disabilities for the duration of their entire course of study by establishing clearer standards in disability inclusion.

In terms of research, in-depth investigations across a range of institutions into faculty experiences in teaching and accommodating students with disabilities would be useful. There is a need for comparative studies that examine how different universities (national, private, and public) manage disability issues in their inclusion strategies and practical support. Such studies would potentially inform educational policy on how disability support should be ensured at different degree levels, regardless of the institution type and organization. A participatory design would allow a richer context for research so that student and faculty voices could be brought to the forefront of policy development.

## Limitations

A primary limitation is the lack of student perspectives and viewpoints. However, we narrowed the scope by directing attention only to university faculty and members of disability support staff who closely interact with students with disabilities. The research does not claim to reveal inclusion-related problems relevant to all Japanese universities, whether private, public, or national; we did not explore potential correlations between the university type and the inclusion experiences of students with disabilities. Rather, we investigated how one large private university responds to inclusive education.

Nevertheless, the study fills a gap existing in Japanese scholarship and provides the perspective of university educators on challenges to inclusive education as a valuable dimension in the academic discussion on barriers to inclusion. The findings present valuable experiences of faculty members that can be used for comparison with the activities, experiences, and views of other stakeholders, such as students with disabilities, their peers, and their families.

## Conclusion

The difficulty of addressing the academic needs of students with disabilities goes far beyond the attitudes of faculty. Faculty flexibility in addressing student needs is dependent on university policies and support systems that lack coordination. Although Japanese equal opportunity legislation presents standards and suggestions for the provision of support for inclusive education, private universities do not have a legal obligation to comply with the given standards but rather are encouraged to make an effort. The procedures for establishing accommodations for disabilities, as described by university staff and managed by institutional regulations, include certain expectations from students with disabilities who are not well informed about the range of available options. Lack of awareness and knowledge regarding student access to accommodations has been highlighted as one of the emergent themes in the results of this study. Lack of support system coordination and faculty flexibility leads to administrative complications, thus problematizing the accommodation procedure for students.

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## Appendix

### Interview Questions

1. Tell me about a particularly memorable experience of dealing with students with disabilities in a classroom setting.
2. What instructional challenges did you face when teaching with students with disabilities in your classroom?
3. How adaptive are you in your educational strategy when responding to the needs of students with disabilities?
4. Tell me a story of a particularly challenging experience of providing academic adjustments/reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities.
5. Can you speak of an example of providing academic adjustments for students with disabilities based on your teaching experience at the university?
6. How do you respond to the request for accommodation/adjustment from a student with disability?
7. How does the provision of academic adjustments impact the classroom environment? What are your observations about the peer dynamics?
8. What challenges did you encounter when addressing the accommodation needs of students with disabilities in a classroom setting?
9. How does the university manage inclusion for students with disabilities?
10. How often is the issue of the needs of students with disabilities raised at the management level?
11. What has been your experience in negotiating the accommodation procedure with disability support services for students with disabilities?
12. What do you think about the existing mechanism of accommodation support for students with disabilities available at the university?
13. What do you think the barriers are to a more inclusive academic environment for students with disabilities in higher education?
14. What can enable a more inclusive environment in higher education for students with disabilities? How can these obstacles be addressed?

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