

# Status of Students with Disabilities in Kenyan Education (Focus on Higher Education)

## Introduction

Kenya has a significant population of persons with disabilities (PWDs), yet they remain underrepresented at all levels of education, especially in post-secondary institutions. Estimates of disability prevalence in Kenya vary widely. The 2019 Kenya census reported that 2.2% of Kenyans aged 5 and above (about 918,000 people) have a disability <sup>1</sup>. However, other studies suggest much higher rates – for example, a 2018 Ministry of Education survey found 11.4% of children aged 3–21 had disabilities <sup>2</sup>. This discrepancy indicates possible undercounting in official data and reflects differences in definitions. What is clear is that *students with disabilities face stark disparities in access, attendance, and completion* at every stage of education. This report provides a comprehensive overview of the current situation, examining recent statistics, policy frameworks, institutional capacities, and the particular challenges of marginalized subgroups. It also benchmarks Kenya's progress against international standards (UNESCO, WHO, UNCRPD) and concludes with evidence-based recommendations to improve inclusion, equity, and accessibility in Kenyan higher education.

## Statistical Overview: Access, Attendance, and Completion Rates

**Enrollment and Attendance:** Children and youth with disabilities have lower enrollment rates and higher out-of-school rates than their peers. As of 2015, an estimated 16% of children with disabilities in Kenya were out of school <sup>3</sup>, compared to single-digit out-of-school rates in the general population. In other words, about *1 in 6* Kenyan children with disabilities were not attending any formal education. Those who do enroll tend to drop off at higher transition points. Table 1 summarizes recent enrollment figures for learners with special needs education (SNE) at different levels:

Education Level	Learners with Disabilities (SNE) Enrolled (2021)	Notes (Public Institutions)
<b>Primary Schools</b>	139,732 learners <sup>4</sup>	Spread across ~3,084 primary schools (incl. special units)
<b>Secondary Schools</b>	5,511 learners <sup>5</sup>	In 38 special secondary schools + 78 integrated schools
<b>Technical Institutes</b>	2,448 learners <sup>6</sup>	In 5 designated technical institutions for PWDs
<b>National Polytechnics</b>	<i>Very low (%)</i> – ~0.1% of students <sup>7</sup>	Mainstream polytechnic enrollment (integrated)

Education Level	Learners with Disabilities (SNE) Enrolled (2021)	Notes (Public Institutions)
<b>Technical Training Inst.</b>	<i>Very low (%) – ~0.2% of students</i> <sup>7</sup>	Mainstream technical institutes (integrated)
<b>Vocational Training (VTI)</b>	<i>Low (%) – ~3.3% of trainees</i> <sup>7</sup>	Community vocational centers (some inclusive programs)
<b>Universities</b>	<i>Data not robust; likely &lt;1% of total</i>	KUCCPS uses affirmative action in admissions <sup>8</sup>

*Table 1: Enrollment of Learners with Disabilities at Different Levels (Kenya, 2021).* Sources: Ministry of Education SNE enrollment data <sup>4</sup> <sup>7</sup>. (Note: University data is not systematically tracked, but participation is estimated to be under 1% of total enrollment, with affirmative action policies in place to boost access <sup>8</sup>.)

These figures highlight a **steep decline at higher levels**. While about 139,732 learners with disabilities were enrolled in primary schools in 2021, only ~5,500 were enrolled at secondary level <sup>9</sup>. This represents only ~0.2% of all secondary students, indicating that very few learners with disabilities transition to or persist in secondary education. The drop-off is even more pronounced in post-secondary education. Mainstream technical and vocational colleges report that students with special needs make up only 0.1–0.3% of their enrollment <sup>7</sup>. Although precise university figures are unavailable, various sources suggest **disabled students likely comprise well below 1% of Kenya's university population**. For example, the University of Nairobi's own analyses note that despite growing numbers of students with disabilities enrolling and completing university, the share of women with disabilities and overall PWD representation remains extremely low <sup>10</sup>.

**Completion and Attainment:** Due to these attrition trends, *completion rates for students with disabilities lag far behind national averages*. Kenya achieved near-universal primary completion for the general population ( $\approx$  100% in recent years) <sup>11</sup>. In contrast, one analysis found that as few as **11% of children with disabilities complete primary school, compared to 29% of children without disabilities** <sup>12</sup>. (Even if these particular figures are from a specific sample or context, they underscore a massive gap in attainment.) At secondary level, the gap widens further – less than half of all youth complete secondary school nationally, but among youths with disabilities the completion rate is even lower (specific data is scarce, reflecting historically poor tracking). Only a very small fraction of Kenyan youth with disabilities proceed to tertiary education. Studies note that *few women with disabilities in Africa attain a high school or college diploma* <sup>13</sup>, and Kenya is no exception. Indeed, past estimates suggested that **80–90% of school-aged children with disabilities in Kenya did not receive any formal schooling or needed educational services** <sup>14</sup>. While progress has been made since then (especially after free primary education was introduced in 2003), the current statistics confirm that most learners with disabilities either never reach higher levels or drop out before completion. This educational attrition greatly diminishes their later employment and livelihood opportunities, contributing to a cycle of poverty and exclusion.

## Policy and Legal Framework for Inclusive Education

Kenya's policy and legal environment recognizes the rights of persons with disabilities to education, aligning with international commitments. Key frameworks include:

- **Constitution of Kenya (2010):** The current Constitution explicitly guarantees the rights of persons with disabilities, including the right to access educational institutions and facilities that are integrated into society "to the extent compatible with the interests of the person" <sup>15</sup>. Article 54 of the Constitution affirms that PWDs are entitled to education opportunities comparable to others. This marked a step forward from the previous (1963) Constitution which did not specifically prohibit disability-based discrimination <sup>16</sup>. The Constitution also enshrines the right to free and compulsory basic education for *all* children (Article 53), underscoring an inclusive approach.
- **Persons with Disabilities Act (2003, revised 2012):** This Act was one of the first comprehensive disability laws in Kenya. It prohibits discrimination in education and mandates that learning institutions accommodate students with special needs. It also established the **National Council for Persons with Disabilities (NCPWD)** to oversee disability rights and programs. The Act set a goal for PWD representation (e.g. a 5% employment quota in public institutions) and, in education, it provides for adjustments such as adapted infrastructure and materials. *However, implementation has been mixed*, and many provisions (like accessibility standards) are still not fully realized <sup>17</sup> <sup>18</sup> (e.g., few public institutions meet the employment quota <sup>19</sup>, and many schools remain inaccessible).
- **Basic Education Act (2013):** This Act operationalizes the constitutional right to education. It emphasizes inclusion, stating that no child shall be denied admission to a school on grounds of disability. It requires the government to provide suitable facilities for learners with disabilities in the basic education system. The Act also calls for establishment of special and integrated schools, curriculum adaptations, and teacher training to support special needs education. While the Act creates a strong legal mandate for inclusive basic education, critics note that it implicitly still allows a parallel system of special schools, which can perpetuate segregation if not carefully managed <sup>20</sup>.
- **Sector Policy for Learners and Trainees with Disabilities (2018):** This is a dedicated national education policy focused on disability inclusion, issued by the Ministry of Education. It represents a paradigm shift from the earlier 2009 Special Needs Education Policy. The 2018 policy makes **inclusive education the overarching principle**, rather than segregated special education <sup>21</sup> <sup>22</sup>. It covers all levels from early childhood to tertiary and TVET. The policy prioritizes a range of disabilities (hearing, visual, deaf-blind, physical, intellectual, learning disabilities, cerebral palsy, autism, albinism, etc.) and adopts *person-first language* <sup>23</sup>. It outlines commitments such as: adapting infrastructure and curricula, providing assistive devices, training teachers in inclusive pedagogy, improving data on learners with disabilities, and ensuring smooth transition into vocational and higher education. In short, the 2018 Sector Policy aims to "*promote the provision of education and training for learners and trainees with disabilities*" under an inclusive model <sup>21</sup>. This policy, along with its implementation guidelines, is guiding current efforts in schools and colleges to become more accommodating.
- **Other Relevant Laws/Policies:** Kenya has *domesticated* several international conventions through its laws <sup>24</sup>. The **Children Act (2001, revised 2022)** reinforces the right of children with disabilities to special care and education. Various **sessional papers and strategic plans** (e.g., the Kenya National

Education Sector Strategic Plan 2018–2022) include strategies for inclusive education. At the higher education level, universities have been encouraged by the Commission for University Education to develop disability policies. For instance, the **University of Nairobi Disability Policy (2020)** aligns with national laws and calls for mainstreaming disability in all university processes <sup>25</sup> <sup>26</sup> . It commits to principles like ensuring campus accessibility, providing reasonable accommodations, and increasing the enrollment of students with disabilities through affirmative action <sup>27</sup> .

- **International Commitments:** Kenya ratified the **UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)** in 2008 <sup>28</sup> , thereby obligating itself to uphold Article 24 of the CRPD which guarantees inclusive education at all levels. (Article 24 states that persons with disabilities must not be excluded from the general education system and that children with disabilities have equal rights to free and compulsory primary and secondary education <sup>29</sup> .) Kenya is also party to the **Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)** and has endorsed the **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** – notably SDG4 which calls for inclusive and equitable quality education for all by 2030. Regionally, Kenya has adopted the **African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child** and other protocols upholding education rights for children with disabilities <sup>30</sup> . These international frameworks have influenced domestic policy. For example, Kenya's 2018 Sector Policy explicitly references the CRPD and aims to align with its standards of inclusion <sup>31</sup> . Additionally, Kenya has made commitments at Global Disability Summits (2018, 2022) to improve disability-inclusive education <sup>32</sup> .

In summary, *Kenya's legal framework for inclusive education is robust on paper*, from the Constitution down to specific policies. The **challenge lies in implementation and enforcement**. Gaps remain between policy intentions and the reality in schools and universities, as discussed below. Still, the policy trend is clearly toward greater inclusion: Kenya has moved from a paradigm of special education (segregation) toward one of inclusive education and reasonable accommodation within mainstream institutions <sup>33</sup> . This sets an important foundation for progress.

## Infrastructure, Teaching Methods, and Support: Capacity to Accommodate Students with Disabilities

The effectiveness of inclusive education in Kenya depends heavily on the availability of accessible infrastructure, appropriate learning resources (including assistive technologies), inclusive teaching practices, and staff capacity. An assessment of the current situation shows significant shortcomings in these areas, though there are some ongoing initiatives:

- **Physical Infrastructure & Accessibility:** Many educational institutions in Kenya – from primary schools up to universities – lack the infrastructure to accommodate students with physical disabilities. Basic modifications such as ramps, elevators, adapted washrooms, and tactile paving are often missing or insufficient. A recent study of the University of Nairobi (UoN) found “*accessibility issues for learners with disabilities*”, noting that the physical campus environment still presents barriers <sup>34</sup> . In primary and secondary schools, especially in rural areas, classrooms may be up a flight of steps or have uneven terrain, making them unreachable for wheelchair users. Some progress has been made: new public building standards require accessibility, and the NCPWD sometimes provides grants for school infrastructure adaptations. Nonetheless, **the majority of schools are not fully compliant with universal design**. This forces many students with mobility

impairments to rely on personal assistance or simply not attend schools that are inaccessible. Inclusive facilities like resource rooms, sensory rooms or quiet spaces (for learners with autism or sensory needs) are still rare. The government has established a few model inclusive schools in each county with better facilities, but scaling this up has been slow due to funding constraints.

- **Assistive Technologies & Learning Materials:** Access to assistive devices and specialized learning materials remains limited. Students with visual impairments often lack Braille textbooks, magnifiers, screen-reading software, or refreshable Braille displays. Those with hearing impairments face a shortage of sign language interpreters, hearing aids, and captioning services. According to the UoN study, learners with disabilities **“need adequate support in terms of assistive technology and adapted seats”**, and without such support it is very difficult for them to participate equally <sup>35</sup>. Only a few universities (e.g., Kenyatta University, University of Nairobi) have resource centres with computers equipped with JAWS or NVDA screen reader software for blind students, or loaner wheelchairs and ergonomic furniture. At the basic education level, the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD) produces some Braille and large-print books, and the Kenya Institute of Special Education (KISE) has developed Kenyan Sign Language (KSL) training materials and a sign language dictionary. However, coverage is limited: many learners with disabilities still rely on donors or NGOs for assistive devices like white canes, brailers, or specialized software. The high cost of technology and lack of local production means many schools simply do without, leaving students at a disadvantage.
- **Inclusive Teaching Methods:** Pedagogical practices in most Kenyan classrooms have yet to fully embrace inclusive education principles. The dominant mode is still lecture-based and exam-oriented, with little differentiation of instruction. Teachers receive limited pre-service training on inclusive methodologies. **Few teachers are equipped to adapt curricula or instructional strategies to diverse learning needs.** For example, multi-sensory teaching techniques or individualized education plans are not common. A UNESCO review noted that across many African countries, under 10% of teachers had in-service training in inclusive education approaches <sup>36</sup>. Kenya is likely similar – while KISE offers certificates and diplomas in Special Needs Education (SNE) and has trained thousands of SNE teachers, these specialists are still far too few. In 2020, it was reported that *only about 2 teachers per county had been trained in inclusive education specifically* (on average), not counting those with general SNE training. Regular classroom teachers often feel ill-prepared to support, for instance, a child with autism or intellectual disability in a mainstream class. This leads to practices like *“teaching to the middle”* or sidelining learners who need extra support. In higher education, lecturers typically have no training on accommodating disabilities and may be unaware of how to adjust teaching (e.g., providing lecture notes in advance, using microphones, allowing assistive devices in exams, etc.). The UoN case study identified *“limited or ineffective capacity building for lecturers”*, which negatively influences their instructional practice in terms of inclusion <sup>34</sup>. Encouragingly, the Teachers Service Commission (TSC) has recently introduced in-service teacher training modules on inclusive education, and some NGOs (e.g., SightSavers, Inclusive Futures) are working with schools to demonstrate child-centered, inclusive pedagogies. These efforts need expansion to reach all teachers.
- **Specialized Support and Services:** Effective inclusion often requires specialist support personnel – such as sign language interpreters, Braille transcribers, itinerant special educators, therapists (occupational, speech), and counselors. In Kenya, there is a *critical shortage* of such personnel in the education system. For instance, there are relatively few certified Kenyan Sign Language interpreters

available; as a result, deaf students in mainstream secondary schools or universities often struggle without consistent interpretation. Similarly, educational assessment centers (which assess children's disabilities and recommend placements/support) are not adequately resourced in many counties. The government does support some special units and schools which act as resource centers (e.g., a special school for visually impaired may assist surrounding schools in transcribing Braille). However, coordination is weak. The UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report (2020) noted that globally many countries are transitioning specialist resources to support mainstream schools <sup>37</sup> – Kenya is beginning to move in this direction, but many resources remain concentrated in separate special schools. University disability support offices, where they exist, have very limited staff and budgets. Overall, most students with disabilities do not get the full range of accommodations they need (whether it be tutoring, therapy, or technological support).

- **Staff Capacity and Attitudes:** Beyond skills, teacher and staff **attitudes** toward inclusion play a big role. Stigma and low expectations for learners with disabilities can hinder inclusion. Some Kenyan teachers and even parents hold beliefs that children with certain disabilities (especially intellectual or psychosocial disabilities) cannot learn academically, which may lead to neglect or assignment to non-academic activities. On a positive note, awareness is growing. The Ministry's 2018 Sector Policy and recent training emphasize *attitudinal change* and see diversity as a strength. Still, more needs to be done to sensitize educators. The University of Nairobi study's framework stressed that for true inclusion, institutions must value diversity and remove "fixed ability" mindsets <sup>38</sup> <sup>39</sup>. Currently, the gap in Kenya's higher education was summarized as being sustained by "*a lack of adequate policies, resources, and support services ... [and] limited capacity building for lecturers*", among other factors <sup>34</sup>. Large class sizes – common in public universities and secondary schools – compound the challenge, as teachers struggle to give individualized attention. Research confirms that **smaller class sizes are important for effective inclusive education** <sup>40</sup>, yet Kenya's education sector faces overcrowding (especially after Free Primary Education led to enrollment surges). This makes it harder for staff to implement inclusive practices even if they are willing.

In summary, while Kenya has **pockets of excellence** (some well-equipped special schools, a few universities with disability units, and dedicated SNE-trained teachers), the overall infrastructure and support system for inclusive education is inadequate. Many students with disabilities still encounter physical barriers at school, lack the assistive tools they need to learn, and have teachers who are not fully prepared to include them. These deficiencies contribute directly to lower attendance and completion rates. The government acknowledges these gaps – for instance, the Sector Policy 2018 calls for accessible school environments and capacity building – but turning policy into reality on the ground is a work in progress. The next section examines how certain subgroups face even greater hurdles.

## Challenges Faced by Key Subgroups (Intersectional Barriers)

Inclusive education in Kenya is further complicated by intersectional factors. Students who are not only disabled but also female, or from low-income families, or from marginalized regions/ethnic groups, often face compounded disadvantages. Some notable subgroup challenges include:

- **Girls and Women with Disabilities:** Female learners with disabilities experience a *double burden* of gender and disability discrimination. Consequently, their educational indicators lag behind not only non-disabled girls but also behind disabled boys. Studies have found that "*the number of women with disabilities in higher education remains low*" in Kenya <sup>10</sup>. From early childhood onwards, girls with

disabilities are more likely to be kept at home due to protective or stigmatizing attitudes. Some families prioritize education for sons, or fear for a disabled daughter's safety at school. Indeed, **sexual abuse and violence** are significant risks – girls with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to abuse on the way to school or even at school, which can lead to withdrawal from school <sup>41</sup>. Other barriers include poverty (families may invest scarce resources in sons or in the child perceived as most likely to contribute income later), and social expectations (household chores or care responsibilities often fall on girls, including girls with disabilities, limiting their study time). Discrimination and low expectations can be acute: teachers might assume a girl with a disability cannot perform well, thus giving her less attention. As a result, few transition to secondary school and even fewer to tertiary. Those who do reach universities report facing insensitivity and inaccessible facilities (e.g., lack of female attendants or mentors who understand their needs). **Poverty, sexual abuse, discrimination, indifferent reactions, limited learning resources, and physical access barriers** were all identified as key factors hindering the participation of women students with disabilities in Kenyan universities <sup>41</sup>. Addressing these requires not only general inclusion measures but gender-specific supports – such as ensuring personal safety, providing mentorship programs, and community outreach to challenge the stigma that educating a disabled girl is “wasted effort.” It's worth noting that empowering women with disabilities educationally has broad social benefits: studies show that educated women (including those with disabilities) have improved employment prospects and can positively impact community health and well-being <sup>42</sup>.

- **Learners from Low-Income and Rural Backgrounds:** Disability and poverty are closely intertwined. Children with disabilities from poor households face immense challenges in accessing education. Many cannot afford transport to school (especially if the nearest special unit is far away), assistive devices, or boarding fees for special schools. Even where primary education is tuition-free, there are hidden costs (uniforms, meals, etc.) that strain low-income families. Poverty also exacerbates disability – malnutrition or lack of medical care can worsen impairments and keep children out of school. In Kenya's arid and semi-arid land (ASAL) regions (which are predominantly rural and have high poverty rates), dropout risk is high for all children, but drought and hardship make it even harder for families to support a child with special needs <sup>43</sup> <sup>44</sup>. Additionally, remote rural areas often lack local schools with any sort of special needs program. A child who is blind in a pastoralist community, for instance, might have no trained braille teacher in the vicinity. While the government runs a *Cash Transfer program for Persons with Severe Disabilities* to assist poor households (covering some children with profound disabilities), its coverage is low and many needy families are excluded <sup>45</sup> <sup>46</sup>. Thus, low-income disabled learners remain at high risk of never attending or of dropping out early to beg or stay at home. According to one estimate, children with disabilities are **twice as likely to live in poverty** as their non-disabled peers <sup>47</sup> – a reflection of this vicious cycle.

- **Ethnic and Minority Groups, and Marginalized Regions:** Kenya's population includes nomadic pastoralist communities, indigenous groups, and remote rural populations (e.g., in northern counties) that have historically had limited access to schooling. For children in these communities who also have disabilities, the barriers are multiplied. **Ethnicity and indigenous status** can affect access – for example, special schools may not be culturally or linguistically adapted for certain communities. In some cultures, disability may carry a social stigma or be seen through a traditional lens (e.g., as a curse or bad omen), leading families to hide disabled children. Although attitudes are slowly changing, such beliefs still result in some children never enrolling. Moreover, many pastoralist regions have scarce educational infrastructure in general; specialized services are almost non-existent there. The intersection of **disability, ethnicity, and poverty** means that these children are

among the least likely to get an education <sup>48</sup> <sup>49</sup>. The 2021 Out-of-School Children study in Kenya found that out-of-school rates were highest in predominantly pastoralist counties (like Garissa, Mandera, Turkana) – areas that also lack disability services. Minority language speakers who are disabled face additional hurdles if instructional materials or sign language interpreters communicate only in the dominant language (e.g., Kiswahili or English). The government's approach has been to integrate inclusive education into *nomadic education centers* and use mobile schools, but coverage is spotty. Simply put, children with disabilities in marginalized communities often “fall through the cracks” unless specific outreach is done.

- **Other Intersectional Challenges:** Students with disabilities who are also in other vulnerable categories – such as refugees, orphans, or those living in informal urban settlements – encounter severe challenges. For instance, **refugee youths with disabilities** in Kenyan camps have extremely low higher education participation, due to both their refugee status and disability (lack of adapted services in camp schools, limited slots for tertiary education) <sup>50</sup>. Likewise, urban slum schools often lack basic resources, making disability inclusion very difficult; a child with a learning disability in a slum classroom of 60+ pupils will likely not get needed support. Multiple deprivations tend to reinforce one another.

In summary, inclusive education efforts must contend with these intersectional issues. Kenya's policies increasingly acknowledge them – for example, the Sector Policy 2018 has sections on gender mainstreaming and outreach to marginalized populations <sup>51</sup> <sup>52</sup>. Yet on the ground, **gender, poverty, and regional inequalities remain pronounced**. A holistic approach is needed, one that considers not just disability in isolation but the full context of each learner's situation (gender, culture, socio-economic status). Without such an approach, the most vulnerable subgroups will continue to be left behind, undermining the “leave no one behind” principle of SDG4.

## International Benchmarks and Comparisons

Kenya's journey toward disability-inclusive education can be viewed in light of international benchmarks and obligations:

- **United Nations CRPD (Article 24):** As noted, Article 24 of the UNCRPD requires states to ensure an *inclusive education system at all levels* <sup>29</sup>. In practice, this means moving away from segregated special schools towards accommodating students with disabilities in mainstream schools with appropriate support. Many countries struggle with this transition. Kenya, like numerous others, currently operates a **hybrid system** – it has a mix of special schools, integrated units, and inclusive schools. This reflects the global reality: according to UNESCO, about 25% of countries still legally provide for education of children with disabilities in separate settings, while only 17% have laws truly mandating fully inclusive settings; the rest use a combination of segregation and integration <sup>37</sup>. Kenya's legal framework does promote inclusion, but in practice the country has not yet fully met the CRPD standard of education “without exclusion.” The UN Committee on the CRPD, in its 2016 concluding observations for Kenya, urged the country to accelerate inclusive education – including training teachers and providing reasonable accommodation – and to **discourage the continued use of special schools** except as a last resort. (Kenya's subsequent Sector Policy 2018 was a positive response to such recommendations, cementing inclusion as the goal.)



- **Education for All (EFA) and SDG4 Targets:** Under the now-concluded EFA framework and the ongoing Sustainable Development Goals, countries are committed to equity in education access and outcomes. SDG target 4.5 specifically calls for eliminating gender disparities in education and ensuring equal access for persons with disabilities by 2030. Internationally, **Kenya has made progress on general enrollment indicators** (approaching universal primary education), but disparities by disability remain large. For instance, UNESCO's *Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report 2020* ("All Means All") highlighted that children with disabilities in many countries are 2-3 times more likely to be out of school than their peers. Kenya fits this pattern – disability is one of the strongest factors of educational marginalization, alongside poverty and rural location <sup>48</sup>. Globally, an estimated **244 million children and youth** are out of school (as of 2021) and a disproportionate number of these have disabilities <sup>53</sup>. In sub-Saharan Africa, UNESCO previously estimated that up to a third of out-of-school children have disabilities <sup>54</sup>. Kenya's own out-of-school population (roughly 1.8–2.5 million children, depending on the age range and estimate) certainly includes a large share of children with special needs. On the positive side, Kenya's inclusive education efforts (e.g., free primary education policy in 2003) did bring many more disabled children into school. The country's primary net enrollment for PWD students improved after 2003, contributing to the increase to ~50,000 learners with disabilities in public primary schools by 2011 <sup>55</sup> and nearly 140,000 by 2021 <sup>56</sup>. This is in line with global trends of better identification and enrollment of children with special needs in the last two decades. However, **Kenya's tertiary enrollment rate for PWDs is well below global averages**. In high-income countries, it's estimated about 5–15% of university students have disabilities (owing to strong support systems), whereas in Kenya it is likely <1%. Even compared to some middle-income peers, Kenya has room to improve. For example, South Africa, which has robust disability support in some universities, enrolls a higher proportion of students with disabilities than Kenya does.
- **WHO and World Bank – Disability and Development:** The seminal *World Report on Disability 2011* by WHO/World Bank estimated that about 15% of the world's population lives with some form of disability, and that disability prevalence rises with age (meaning many children have disabilities, but even more adults do, due to injury, illness, etc.) <sup>57</sup>. It also highlighted that 80% of PWDs live in developing countries <sup>57</sup>. This global context underscores that Kenya's low official disability prevalence (2.2%) is likely an underestimation – more inclusive survey tools might reveal prevalence closer to global norms. The report and subsequent analyses emphasize education as a critical area: lack of education is both a cause and consequence of disability-related exclusion. People with disabilities globally have lower literacy rates; for instance, UNESCO once noted that *in some countries, fewer than 3% of adults with disabilities are literate*, and women with disabilities often fare worst. While Kenya has made gains in basic literacy, there is still a notable gap between disabled and non-disabled populations. **No national education goal can be deemed achieved if PWDs are left behind**, which is why international benchmarks push for inclusive quality education. Kenya's Vision 2030 and its commitments at forums like the Global Disability Summit align with this ethos, but the country will need to greatly intensify efforts to meet the benchmark of equal participation by 2030.
- **Comparative Initiatives:** Internationally, several practices are considered benchmarks for disability-inclusive education: e.g., having a national inclusive education strategy (which Kenya now has), guaranteeing early childhood intervention services, ensuring all new school constructions are accessible, having one special needs educator or resource teacher per school, providing assistive technology through government programs, training 100% of teachers in inclusive pedagogy, budgeting specific funds for inclusion, etc. Few low- and middle-income countries have achieved all

these, but some have innovative models (for example, Rwanda trained a large cohort of teachers in inclusion as part of its CRPD compliance; Uganda has a comprehensive inclusive education policy since 2011; Brazil enacted strong inclusive education laws). **Kenya compares favorably in terms of having policies in place**, but lags in implementation. One benchmark is the availability of data: High-performing countries collect detailed data on enrollment and outcomes of students with disabilities. Kenya is improving here (the 2019 census disability data, EMIS data on SNE enrollment, etc.), but still lacks granular indicators like completion rates by disability type. Another benchmark is funding – UNESCO recommends that governments allocate resources to accommodate the *additional needs* associated with disability (e.g., hiring aides, buying devices). Kenya spends only a small fraction of its education budget on special/inclusive education needs. By comparison, some countries use formulas to give extra funding per disabled student. In Kenya, a capitation grant top-up exists for learners with disabilities, but the coverage (139k learners in primary) is narrow relative to the potential population, and the amount may not cover all needs <sup>56</sup> .

In conclusion, **Kenya's progress in disability-inclusive education is moderate when measured against international benchmarks**. The country has strong commitments and pockets of success, but overall outcomes (enrollment, completion, inclusion quality) for PWDs remain below global aspirations. This is not unique to Kenya – many countries are grappling with similar issues – but it signals that Kenya must accelerate practical actions if it is to fulfill both its own laws and its international obligations like the CRPD and SDGs. The next section provides concrete recommendations toward that end.

## Recommendations and Strategies for Improving Inclusion in Higher Education (and Beyond)

Achieving a truly inclusive, equitable education system in Kenya – particularly at the post-secondary level – will require concerted efforts from government, institutions, communities, and development partners. Below are evidence-based recommendations and strategies, building on best practices and the gaps identified:

**1. Strengthen Implementation of Inclusive Education Policies:** Kenya's policies are forward-thinking; the priority now is *putting them into practice*. The Ministry of Education should develop a clear **implementation roadmap** for the Sector Policy 2018 with timelines and accountability for actions like retrofitting schools, training teachers, and expanding support services. An inter-ministerial task force (education, health, social protection) could oversee this. In higher education, the Commission for University Education (CUE) and individual universities should operationalize policies by setting inclusion targets (e.g. each university increases enrollment of SWDs by a certain percentage annually <sup>27</sup> ) and monitoring progress. It is also critical to **increase budget allocations** for inclusive education – earmark funds for assistive technology procurement, hiring of special needs education teachers and university disability officers, and upgrading facilities. International donors and programs (UNICEF, UNESCO, World Bank, etc.) can be tapped to support these initiatives, but the government must also commit sufficient domestic resources (inclusive education should be seen as part of quality education, not an optional add-on <sup>58</sup> ).

**2. Improve Data Collection and Monitoring:** “What gets measured gets done.” Kenya should enhance its education management information system (EMIS) to better capture data on students with disabilities at all levels – including type of disability, educational attainment, and transition rates. Currently, data on higher education and TVET enrollment of PWDs is sparse. A **unified registry or database** (possibly linked to

NCPWD registration) could track PWD students through the education pipeline, helping identify drop-off points and barriers. The government could also collaborate with researchers for periodic surveys or audits of accessibility in institutions. Better data will enable evidence-based planning and allow Kenya to report progress on SDG 4.5 indicators (which require disaggregation by disability). Importantly, data collection must be done in a rights-based way (ensuring privacy and consent) and use the Washington Group questions or similar tools to accurately identify functional difficulties.

**3. Invest in Teacher Training and Capacity Building:** Teachers and lecturers are the linchpin of inclusion. Pre-service teacher training curricula in Kenya's TTCs and universities should be revised to include compulsory modules on inclusive pedagogy and managing diversity in the classroom. In-service training needs expansion – for example, rolling out a nationwide program to train at least one teacher in every school in inclusive education and basic sign language/Braille skills. The findings from the University of Nairobi study, which showed lecturers felt unprepared to support refugee and disabled learners <sup>34 59</sup>, suggest that *university faculty also need sensitization and training*. Universities could provide workshops to academic staff on accommodating different learning needs (universal design for learning principles, adjusting assessments, etc.). Peer learning should be encouraged: teachers from special schools or experienced inclusive schools can act as resource persons to mentor others (mirroring the UNESCO recommendation to **“share expertise and resources” to sustain inclusion transitions** <sup>60</sup>). Additionally, the TSC should recruit and deploy more SNE-specialist teachers to regular schools – e.g., ensure every primary school zone has an itinerant special needs teacher who can co-teach or assist in classrooms with high-need students. Building teacher capacity also involves addressing attitudes: incorporate disability awareness and empathy training to tackle stigma. When educators view learner diversity as a normal, positive aspect of teaching (as *“a strength to be celebrated”* <sup>38</sup>), inclusion thrives.

**4. Enhance Accessibility of Infrastructure and Learning Materials:** A major push is needed to make educational environments accessible. The government should conduct an **accessibility audit** of all public universities and colleges, and formulate a plan (with budget) to modify buildings – installing ramps, lifts, tactile signage, accessible toilets, etc., in compliance with accessibility standards. No new school or campus buildings should be approved unless they meet universal design codes. The same goes for digital infrastructure: educational websites, e-learning platforms, and library resources must be made accessible (WCAG-compliant for web content, providing alternate formats for visually/hearing impaired users, etc.). In learning materials, prioritize the provision of assistive and adaptive technologies. For example, the Ministry can bulk-procure essential devices: Braille embossers for each county education office, laptops with screen-reading software for every blind university student, hearing aids for schools with deaf learners, etc. Partnering with organizations like Kilimanjaro Blind Trust or Lions Clubs can help distribute low-cost assistive devices (white canes, braille kits). *Assistive technology should be seen as a basic educational input*, not a luxury. Furthermore, expand the production of learning resources in accessible formats: KICD, in collaboration with braille presses and sign language experts, should ensure that curricula (including new CBC materials) are produced in Braille, large print, audio, and Kenyan Sign Language versions as needed. By equipping schools with these resources, students with disabilities will be better able to participate and achieve on an equal basis. In higher education, universities should establish or strengthen **Disability Support Centres** – these should serve as one-stop hubs where students can get assistive devices on loan, note-taker or interpreter services, and academic accommodations. Government funding or grants could support each university to have such a center with dedicated staff.

**5. Provide Targeted Support to Keep Students with Disabilities in School:** A twin-track approach is advisable – integrate students in mainstream settings *and* provide targeted support to those who need it

most <sup>61</sup> . For instance, **scholarships or bursaries** dedicated to students with disabilities can help offset the additional costs they often incur (transport, medical, assistive devices). Currently, some support exists (the National Council for Persons with Disabilities offers education bursaries, and a few county governments have scholarship schemes), but awareness and amounts are limited. Expanding these programs – or introducing a *Universal Child/Student Disability Benefit* – would reduce financial barriers. As one proposal suggests, a separate child benefit for children with disabilities could help families afford specialized care and **ensure more of these children complete primary school (currently only ~11% do) and transition onward** <sup>12</sup> <sup>62</sup> . Another support mechanism is mentoring and coaching: connect secondary and university students with disabilities to mentors (successful PWD professionals or older students) to guide and motivate them through transitions. To particularly assist **girls with disabilities**, establish mentorship and life-skills programs that address their unique challenges (e.g., confidence-building, reproductive health education to prevent school dropouts due to menstruation issues or pregnancy, and protection strategies against abuse). For students with more complex needs (like intellectual or multiple disabilities), schools can form **school-based inclusion teams** (as recommended in some Inclusive Futures guides <sup>63</sup> ) – a team of teachers, specialists, and the child’s parents who meet to create and monitor an individualized support plan. Such personalized attention can greatly improve retention and achievement.

**6. Engage Communities and Tackle Stigma:** Successful inclusion requires community buy-in. Many of the challenges (like girls being hidden at home, or negative attitudes from peers) stem from stigma or ignorance about disability. Therefore, a robust **awareness campaign** is necessary. The Ministry, together with civil society and media, should run ongoing public education highlighting that children with disabilities **have potential and a right to education** just like others. Featuring positive stories of Kenyan students with disabilities who have excelled (role models) can change mindsets. At the school level, head teachers should actively reach out to parents of disabled children in their locality to encourage enrollment – perhaps in partnership with local administrations (chiefs, etc.). Community dialogues can address cultural beliefs that hinder inclusion. It’s also important to train parents on how to support their child’s learning. When parents and communities become allies in inclusion, they can help monitor attendance (ensuring children aren’t kept home) and support school improvements. As the GEM Report 2020 notes, “*inclusion cannot be enforced from above*” – parental involvement and voice are key <sup>64</sup> <sup>65</sup> . Kenya could borrow a practice from some countries: establish **parent support groups** for parents of children with disabilities to share experiences and advocate collectively for better services. Furthermore, **student sensitization** should be part of school programs – forming disability clubs or including disability studies in curriculum – so that nondisabled students become more understanding and reduce bullying or social exclusion of their peers with disabilities.

**7. Foster Multi-Sectoral and Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration:** Education alone cannot solve all barriers. A child who is deaf will learn better if they have early health interventions (e.g. cochlear implant or hearing aids fitted) and if their family knows sign language. Thus, the Ministries of Health, Education, and Social Services must work together to ensure early identification and intervention services feed into education planning. The recent Kenyan **National Integrated School Health Policy** can incorporate disability screening and support. Social protection schemes (like cash transfers) should coordinate with school enrollment to ensure beneficiary children are in school. Moreover, universities and TVET institutions should collaborate with employers and organizations of persons with disabilities (DPOs) to create **pathways from education to employment** – such as internships for graduates with disabilities, which in turn incentivize more PWD enrollment in higher education by showcasing tangible outcomes. Within the education sector, better coordination is needed between special schools and regular schools: special schools can function as resource centers that disseminate expertise and perhaps allow part-time inclusion (for example, a special

school student joining a mainstream school for some classes, with support). Development partners and NGOs (like Sightsavers, Leonard Cheshire, Inclusive Education Initiative, etc.) are already supporting inclusive education projects in Kenya; their efforts should be scaled up and aligned with government plans for sustainability. Creating an **Inclusive Education Steering Committee** with representatives from government, DPOs, NGOs, and academia could help harmonize efforts and track progress.

**8. Focus on Higher Education Inclusion Strategies:** Given the special focus on higher education in this report, some specific strategies for universities and colleges include:

- **Accessible Admissions and Transition:** Ensure the university admissions process (both via KUCCPS and individual institutions) is accessible – application materials in braille or online forms compatible with screen readers, options to indicate disability and request accommodations during entrance exams or orientation. Use affirmative action aggressively: for instance, slightly *lower cut-off points for university entry* for students with disabilities (a practice Kenya already employs to some extent <sup>8</sup>), and reserve a quota of slots in public universities for qualified PWD applicants. Additionally, provide bridging or preparatory programs for PWD students (e.g., an extended orientation or pre-university catch-up for those from under-resourced schools).

- **On-Campus Support Systems:** Every university should have a Disability Support Office with trained staff and a reasonable budget. These offices should coordinate accommodations like extra time in exams, sign language interpreting, conversion of lecture materials to accessible formats, counseling, and peer tutoring. Faculty should be required to *provide course materials in advance* to these offices to allow time for conversion (such as Braille transcription or digital text for screen readers). Universities can also set up assistive device libraries – for example, Egerton University and Kenyatta University have in the past received donations of braille machines and established small resource centers; such models should be replicated and networked.

- **Inclusive Campus Life:** Beyond academics, universities must strive for inclusive campus life. This means hostels and cafeterias accessible to students with mobility impairments, sign language interpreters at public events or lectures, and proactive measures to prevent harassment or isolation of students with disabilities. Establishing active disabled students' associations can give students a voice in university governance and feedback on issues. Some Kenyan universities (like Maseno University) have signed MoUs with DPOs to improve campus accessibility – more institutions should do the same. The *culture* of the campus should be inclusive: disability awareness training for all new students and staff could be one approach.

- **Research and Innovation:** Leverage the higher education sector's capacity for research to advance inclusion. Universities can encourage research into low-cost assistive technology, or inclusive teaching methods suited for Kenya's context. Students in engineering or IT, for example, could be challenged to develop innovations (apps for KSL learning, locally made mobility devices, etc.) – thereby fostering a mindset that inclusion is a societal responsibility.

- **Monitoring and Benchmarking:** Universities should collect data on their enrollment and graduation of students with disabilities and publicly report it. Creating a **University Accessibility Index** in Kenya (ranking institutions on disability inclusion) could spur healthy competition and accountability. Internationally, there are initiatives like the Times Higher Ed Impact Rankings that include inclusion criteria; Kenyan universities should aim to feature by improving these facets.

By implementing the above recommendations, Kenya can make significant strides towards an education system where **“no learner is left behind due to disability.”** It is an ambitious agenda, but examples from around the world show it is achievable with political will and societal commitment. An inclusive higher education environment, in particular, will not only benefit students with disabilities but enrich the diversity

and learning experience for all students – and ultimately produce graduates who are more empathetic and equipped to build an inclusive society.

## Conclusion

Kenya stands at a critical juncture in its quest for disability-inclusive education. The **current state** reveals both progress and persistent gaps: thousands of children with disabilities have entered the school system thanks to affirmative policies, yet too few are completing secondary or advancing to universities. The nation boasts strong laws and policies aligned with the best international frameworks (CRPD, SDGs), but practical implementation is lagging – schools remain ill-prepared, and many students with disabilities still face daily exclusion. Especially in higher education, Kenya must do more to ensure that lecture halls and laboratories welcome diverse learners, including those with visual, hearing, physical, or cognitive impairments.

The **road ahead** will involve translating commitments into concrete actions: accessible schools and campuses, trained and motivated educators, adequate funding, and robust support networks around each learner. It also requires confronting deeper social attitudes through community engagement and showcasing the successes of inclusive education (for instance, graduates with disabilities contributing in various fields – these success stories can shift public perception from charity to empowerment). International comparisons remind us that inclusive education is a marathon, not a sprint: even wealthier countries are continually improving their practices. What matters is that Kenya keeps moving steadily forward on this path. By adopting the recommended strategies – from targeted resource allocation to community-driven initiatives – Kenya can accelerate its progress and serve as a regional leader in inclusive education.

Ultimately, fulfilling the right to education for students with disabilities is not just a policy obligation but a moral imperative and an investment in Kenya's human capital. A school or university that can cater to the needs of its most vulnerable learners will, by design, become a better learning environment for all. *Inclusive education – in the true spirit of “All Means All”* – will help Kenya unlock the potential of every student, disabled or not, thus driving the country toward a more equitable and prosperous future for everyone.

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