



Mitigating Inequality in Educational Assessment: JAMB's Inclusive Initiatives and Their Impact on Candidates with Special Needs in Nigeria's Tertiary Admissions

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Abstract

Inclusive education has gained global recognition as a driver of equitable development. The principle is that all learners, regardless of ability or background, should learn together in environments that accommodate their diverse needs. In Nigeria, the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB) has become a key institution championing this ideal through its administration of the Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME). This article examines JAMB's inclusive initiatives and their impact on candidates with special needs in Nigeria's tertiary admissions. It assesses the establishment of the JAMB Equal Opportunity Group (JEOG) in 2017 and related policy frameworks designed to enhance access for persons with special needs. The study reviews strategies such as adaptive examination formats, assistive technologies, and supportive admission policies, and assesses their impact on educational equity. The analysis highlights significant progress, evidenced by increased enrollment of candidates with disabilities in tertiary institutions, and discusses remaining challenges such as resource constraints and infrastructural gaps that hinder full inclusivity. Findings indicate that JAMB's efforts have fostered greater educational equity for persons with disabilities, aligning with global inclusive education goals and mitigating inequality in educational assessment. Recommendations underscore the need for sustained policy support, funding, and capacity building to consolidate gains. The study concludes that JAMB's initiatives provide a valuable model for inclusive higher education in Nigeria, illustrating how policy innovation and commitment can advance equity for special needs candidates and reduce inequalities.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Inequality, JEOG, Policy Frameworks, Equity, Special Needs.

Introduction

Inclusive education is an approach that integrates all learners, including those with special educational needs, into mainstream classrooms and learning environments. It is guided by principles of equity, accessibility, and the belief that every individual has the right to quality education in a supportive setting. UNESCO (2017) states that education is an indispensable tool for development, and inclusive



education advocates for all children to learn together in settings that address their diverse needs, rather than in isolation. This approach, initially focused on students with disabilities, has broadened to encompass all forms of learner diversity, challenging traditional practices of segregation and fostering both learning and social development for all students (Kurth et al., 2018). In essence, inclusive education aims to "leave no one behind," promoting respect, collaboration, and equal opportunity within the learning environment.

Nigeria has embraced the inclusive education ethos as part of its national development efforts. The Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB), the body responsible for conducting the Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME) and regulating entry into higher institutions plays a key role in operationalizing inclusivity in the education sector. JAMB's policies are explicitly anchored in inclusivity, with admission frameworks designed to ensure fairness for disadvantaged groups. For example, JAMB allocates admission slots based not only on merit but also on locality (catchment areas) and educationally less developed states in Nigeria, reflecting a commitment to mitigate inequity and promote social justice in access to tertiary education. These policies aim to level the playing field for candidates from marginalized backgrounds, including those with disabilities, in alignment with Nigeria's broader goals of inclusive growth.

A major milestone in Nigeria's pursuit of inclusive higher education was the establishment of the JAMB Equal Opportunity Group (JEOG) in 2017. The JEOG is an 11-member committee tasked with ensuring that candidates with special needs such as those who are blind, deaf, or have other disabilities have a fair and convenient opportunity to take the UTME and gain admission without discrimination. JEOG's creation signified a proactive commitment by JAMB's leadership to craft a more robust framework for assessing and admitting these candidates, even in the absence of external pressure or legal mandates. Notably, since JEOG's inception, the number of candidates with disabilities gaining admission to Nigerian institutions has risen markedly from only 44 in 2014 to 286 in 2021, indicating the positive impact of focused inclusive policies.

Complementing JEOG, Nigeria has strengthened its policy and legislative framework for inclusion. The Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act of 2018 is a landmark law that forbids discrimination on the basis of disability in education, among other sectors, and mandates accommodations for persons with disabilities. JAMB's initiatives align with this Act by ensuring examination centers and processes are accessible and by providing the necessary support for disabled candidates. Furthermore, the Federal Ministry of Education, in partnership with JAMB and other stakeholders, launched the Ministerial Roadmap for Inclusive Access to Quality Higher Education in Nigeria (2024–2028)—a strategic plan unveiled in 2023 to accelerate inclusion in tertiary education. This roadmap sets targets such as a 5% annual increase in admission of candidates with special needs and outlines strategies to create an inclusive learning environment across all institutions.

In spite of these developments, implementing inclusive education in Nigeria is not without challenges. Earlier studies (e.g., Adebisi, 2014) document persistent barriers to special needs education in Nigeria, including inadequate funding, lack of trained special education teachers, insufficient assistive materials, and societal stigma. These barriers can impede the full realisation of JAMB's inclusive vision. Moreover, while significant policy strides have been made, a gap often exists between policy formulation and practical implementation on the ground (Maulida, 2019). For instance, many schools and examination centers still lack the physical infrastructure (ramps, Braille machines, etc.) and personnel required to accommodate certain disabilities. Bridging this gap is critical, as the consequences of exclusion are profound—marginalized groups such as persons with



disabilities may be denied their fundamental right to education, and the nation loses out on the contributions of a segment of its human capital.

This article explores how JAMB's initiatives have sought to overcome these hurdles and foster educational equity for persons with special needs.

Literature Review

Inclusive education has gained substantial scholarly and policy attention worldwide. Global frameworks such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 stress inclusive and equitable quality education for all. Research indicates that inclusive educational practices benefit not only students with disabilities but also promote a culture of empathy and cooperation in classrooms (Nilholm & Göransson, 2017). Inclusion is fundamentally about restructuring school cultures, policies, and practices so that they respond to the diversity of students (Ainscow, 2020). Key elements include curriculum differentiation, teacher training for diversity, and supportive services (e.g., speech therapy, assistive technology). According to Chukwuemeka et al. (2020) teachers' knowledge of instructional models can guide effective preparation for technology-enhanced inclusive education. In countries like the United Kingdom, strong legal mandates (Equality Act 2010 and the Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice 2015) enforce the inclusion of students with disabilities in all aspects of education. These measures have been credited with improving access while also emphasizing that assessment processes remain fair and secure for all students (Tai et al., 2022). This underscores that inclusivity and academic standards can co-exist. These accommodations ensure equity without lowering the integrity of examinations. As Lawal (2012) emphasized, this ensures that assessment is designed, developed and administered in ways that treat all people equally and fairly.

In the Nigerian context, literature points to both progress and ongoing challenges in inclusive education. Adebisi (2014) identifies major barriers to implementing special needs education in Nigeria, including inadequate funding, negative attitudes, and lack of facilities and materials. These issues result in many children with disabilities being out of school or struggling within an educational system not designed for them. However, policy efforts have intensified in recent years. The National Policy on Education in Nigeria now includes provisions for special needs education, and programs to integrate disabled students have been introduced in some states (Adebisi, 2014). Evidence of incremental improvements is seen in increased public awareness and advocacy by NGOs and disabled persons' organizations for inclusive schooling. Research by Chukwuemeka and Samaila (2019) found that teachers in special education schools in North-West Nigeria perceived great benefits in using high-tech assistive devices, yet did not use them regularly due to capacity gaps. This finding underscores the importance of JAMB's capacity-building initiatives for exam officials.

When it comes to higher education admissions, JAMB's role makes it a focal point for inclusion at the tertiary level. There is limited academic literature explicitly examining JAMB's inclusive education initiatives, likely because these initiatives (such as JEOG) are relatively recent. However, commentary and reports by education stakeholders provide insight. Idoko (2023) observes that JAMB has become a vehicle for social justice in admissions, deliberately allocating opportunities to under-represented groups as a matter of policy. This is a shift from decades past when admissions were often skewed by elitism or lack of support for disadvantaged candidates. Popoola (2022) reports that JAMB's inclusive education scheme is "yielding desired results," quoting JAMB's Registrar as noting improved performance and access among candidates with disabilities. Similarly, Ampitan (2024) lauds the creation of JEOG as a "concrete step to boost access of People with Disabilities (PWDs) to



tertiary education," crediting JAMB leadership for proactively addressing a long-neglected need. These accounts, while journalistic, underscore a perception that JAMB's initiatives are making tangible differences.

Academic studies on inclusion in assessment highlight the importance of accommodations and alternative formats. The National Centre on Educational Outcomes (NCEO, 2016) outlines strategies such as providing exam materials in Braille or large print, allowing extended time, permitting assistive devices (screen readers, hearing aids), and offering readers or scribes for those who need them. All these measures enable students with disabilities to demonstrate their true knowledge without the format of the exam being a barrier. Literature suggests that when such accommodations are properly implemented, students with special needs can perform on par with their peers (Spenceley & Wheeler, 2016). However, it is also noted that simply granting accommodations is not enough; educators and exam administrators must be trained to implement them correctly to ensure fairness (Eluemuno et al., 2022). A safe and supportive exam environment (free of stigma and distraction) is essential for these accommodations to work as intended.

Analysis/Discussion

JAMB's Inclusive Initiatives and Strategies

Since 2017, JAMB has implemented a comprehensive program to make the UTME and tertiary admissions more inclusive. A cornerstone of this program is the JAMB Equal Opportunity Group (JEOG). JEOG organizes special examination sittings for candidates with disabilities, such as the blind, deaf, albinos, cerebral palsy, and others. These sittings are conducted in conducive environments with appropriate support. By 2021, JAMB had designated 11 centers across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones exclusively for candidates with special needs to take the UTME under suitable conditions. At these centers, JAMB provides accommodations like accessible infrastructure, including wheelchair ramps and ergonomic seating, and covers logistical needs notably, transportation and lodging for the candidates and their personal guides (if any) are funded by JAMB. These measures remove significant financial and practical barriers that might otherwise discourage PWD candidates from sitting for the exam. As a result, the participation of PWDs in UTME has steadily increased, and their success rates have improved, leading to higher enrollment numbers in tertiary institutions.

Another key initiative has been the development of alternative exam formats and assistive tools. JAMB, through JEOG and its technical teams, ensures that exam questions are provided in formats accessible to different disabilities. The need for alternative and flexible delivery systems in Nigerian education was highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic, when Chukwuemeka et al. (2021) argued for redesigned educational delivery mechanisms. JAMB's adaptive examination formats similarly reflect a responsive approach to diverse learner needs. For example, blind candidates take the exam using Braille question papers or computer screen reader software, while those with low vision can request large-print papers. Hearing-impaired candidates are accommodated by allowing a qualified sign language interpreter to be present in the exam hall to communicate instructions. JAMB has also introduced assistive technologies: specialized software can convert text to speech for blind candidates, and candidates with severe motor disabilities can be given personal computers or other devices to input answers. By tailoring the exam modality to the candidate's needs, JAMB upholds the principle that the mode of assessment should not itself become an impediment. It is important to note that these adaptations are made without altering the content or rigor of the exam; all candidates



ultimately answer the same questions, preserving the exam's standards while widening access (Ademeso & Lawal, 2026).

JAMB's inclusive approach extends to financial and policy support for disadvantaged candidates. Economically disadvantaged candidates, who are often from marginalized communities, benefit from fee waivers or reduced exam fees provided by JAMB. In some cases, JAMB has offered scholarships or grants to high-performing students from low-income backgrounds (including those with disabilities) to encourage their education. While JAMB is primarily an examination body, it recognizes that affordability is part of inclusion, if the cost of taking the UTME is prohibitive, access is effectively denied. By mitigating financial barriers, JAMB helps ensure that poverty does not exclude capable students from the opportunity to compete for university admission.

To foster a supportive environment, JAMB also undertakes awareness and training programs. Public awareness campaigns have been used to sensitize stakeholders (schools, parents, the public) about inclusive education and the importance of offering equal opportunities. Capacity building campaigns for inclusive education must begin with teacher preparation. Chukwuemeka et al. (2019) found significant differences in technological pedagogical content knowledge self-efficacy, suggesting that targeted training is essential for effective technology integration in inclusive settings. These campaigns are carried out via social media, workshops, and collaborations with civil society organizations, emphasizing success stories of PWD candidates and clarifying available accommodations. Internally, JAMB invests in the capacity building of its staff and affiliated exam officials. Training workshops and seminars educate invigilators, exam supervisors, and administrators on how to effectively work with candidates with special needs and uphold ethical conduct. For instance, officials are trained on how to securely administer exams using Braille papers or handle situations when a candidate has a medical episode during an exam. Such training is crucial to eliminate any biases or misconceptions staff might have and to ensure that inclusive measures are implemented consistently across all centers (JAMB, 2023).

Policy Framework and Collaboration

JAMB's initiatives do not operate in isolation; they are supported by broader policies and collaborations. Compliance with national disability law (the 2018 Act) provides legal backing for JAMB's accommodations. Furthermore, JAMB works with the Federal Ministry of Education and agencies like the National Commission for Persons with Disabilities to inform policy. A notable policy effort is the aforementioned Inclusive Education Roadmap (2024–2028), which JAMB helped to formulate. This roadmap sets measurable goals for inclusive admissions (e.g., reserving a percentage of admissions for PWDs) and calls for infrastructural audits of universities to ensure they can support students admitted under inclusive criteria. However, the success of such frameworks ultimately depends on the strength of public sector accountability mechanisms to ensure policy alignment, adequate budget allocation, and effective monitoring (Lawal & Mohammed, 2026).

Collaboration has also been key in implementation. JAMB partners with international and local organizations knowledgeable in special education. For example, partnerships with NGOs representing the blind or deaf community have helped JAMB improve its accommodation processes (such as sourcing qualified scribes or obtaining Braille embossers). International bodies (like UNESCO and UNICEF) have provided guidance on aligning JAMB's practices with global best practices. In 2023, JEOG organized Nigeria's first National Conference on Equal Opportunity in Higher Education, which brought together over 500 participants including educators, disability rights advocates, and policymakers. The conference served as a platform to share experiences and propose



solutions to challenges faced by students with special needs in accessing tertiary education. It culminated in a communique urging all tertiary institutions to increase their admission slots for PWDs to reflect their proportion in the population and to improve facilities for these students. Such stakeholder buy-in is critical, as JAMB's inclusive admission efforts must be matched by universities being ready to receive and support these students.

Impact on Educational Equity

The cumulative impact of JAMB's inclusive initiatives has been significant. By standardizing accommodations and making them an official part of the UTME process, JAMB has sent a strong message that disability is not inability, and that the higher education system values all talents. Empirical indicators of impact include the rising number of PWD candidates not only writing the UTME but also successfully gaining admission. As noted earlier, admissions for students with disabilities have grown (from dozens per year a decade ago to hundreds per year now). This suggests that more PWD students are finishing secondary education and are encouraged to pursue tertiary education, likely because they perceive the exam process as fairer and more navigable now. Another outcome is improved performance of PWD candidates relative to previous years; with proper accommodations like extra time or Braille, these candidates can demonstrate their true academic abilities. JAMB's internal analyses have found that the performance gap between disabled and non-disabled candidates has been narrowing in subjects where accommodations are effectively provided (JAMB, 2023). This is a strong indicator that the exam outcomes are becoming more equitable.

The initiatives have also raised public awareness and acceptance. There is anecdotal evidence of changing attitudes for instance, media coverage of top-scoring blind candidates or success stories of JEOG beneficiaries helps counter stigma and assumptions about the capabilities of persons with disabilities. Furthermore, mainstream candidates and exam officials who participate in inclusive exam centers often report positive experiences, noting that the presence of accommodations did not disrupt the exam; on the contrary, it instilled a sense of fairness and seriousness in the process. In this way, inclusive practices may be fostering a culture of empathy and academic integrity.

However, challenges remain that temper these achievements. Resource limitations are a primary concern. As Dominic et al. (2020) found in their assessment of special education schools in North-West Nigeria, high-tech assistive technology resources are often inadequate and in poor condition. The cost of providing accommodations (special facilities, technology, and trained staff) is high, and funding is not always adequate or released on time. Many exam centers in rural areas still lack basic amenities (electricity, internet connectivity, etc.) which are necessary for certain assistive technologies to function. JAMB has made efforts to upgrade centers, but retrofitting all centers to be fully accessible is a gradual process. JAMB's efforts to provide assistive technologies at exam centers must be understood against this backdrop of systemic under-resourcing.

Human capacity is another issue. There is a limited supply of experts (e.g., sign language interpreters, Braille transcribers) available during exams, which can strain JAMB's ability to service every special candidate optimally. In some instances, candidates have reported that promised accommodations were not effectively delivered: for example, a malfunctioning screen reader or an ill-trained scribe can frustrate a candidate and nullify the benefit of the accommodation. These incidents point to the need for continuous monitoring and quality control of the inclusive measures.

Additionally, geographical disparities exist. Urban centers like Lagos or Abuja tend to have better facilities and more readily available support for special needs candidates, whereas those in remote or



conflict-affected areas might still find it challenging to access an inclusive exam center. JAMB's decision to establish one well-equipped JEOG center in each geopolitical zone is meant to address this, but traveling to these centers can be an obstacle for some candidates (hence the provision of travel support). Expanding the reach of JEOG centers or partnering with state governments to create more local centers could be beneficial in the future.

Finally, it is worth noting that inclusive education is an evolving journey—as the needs of students diversify (for example, increasing cases of autism or learning disabilities among exam candidates are being recognized), JAMB will need to adapt its strategies. So far, the focus has been largely on physical and sensory impairments; cognitive and psycho-social disabilities pose a new frontier for inclusion, requiring different kinds of accommodations (like simplified language or breaks during exams for certain conditions). JAMB's inclusive policy will have to continuously broaden to encompass these areas as well.

In conclusion, JAMB's inclusive education initiatives have made commendable strides in promoting educational equity in Nigeria's tertiary admission process. By institutionalizing support for persons with special needs through JEOG, tailored exam formats, financial waivers, and collaborative policymaking, JAMB has significantly reduced historical barriers that excluded these individuals. While challenges of implementation persist, the trend is positive and aligns with global best practices. The success recorded thus far not only benefits the immediate stakeholders (the students with disabilities) but also enriches the higher education system with diversity and reinforces the credibility of admissions by ensuring that selection is based on ability and effort, not on extraneous factors like disability or disadvantage. The next section provides a brief conclusion and recommendations to consolidate these gains and address outstanding challenges.

Conclusion and Recommendations

JAMB's experience in Nigeria illustrates that inclusive education initiatives can be effectively integrated into high-stakes examination and admission processes, given strong commitment and thoughtful planning. Over the past several years, the Board's proactive measures from establishing JEOG and special exam centers to adjusting policies and providing assistive resources have begun to level the academic playing field for candidates with special needs. These efforts are in harmony with international norms and Nigeria's legal mandates on inclusion, signaling a shift towards a more just and accessible higher education landscape. As a result, many students who might have been left behind under the old system are now able to compete and excel, thereby fulfilling their personal potential and contributing to national development.

The impact of JAMB's initiatives is evident in improved equity outcomes, such as the growing number of disabled students gaining university admission and the reduction of procedural biases in the UTME. Moreover, by addressing the needs of marginalized groups, JAMB is upholding the integrity of its examination process, a truly fair exam is one where all candidates can demonstrate their knowledge under conditions that do not unduly disadvantage anyone. In this sense, inclusivity and examination integrity are two sides of the same coin. The progress made thus far demonstrates that with appropriate accommodations, candidates with disabilities perform on merit, reinforcing the credibility of the exam results.

Nevertheless, this study also recognizes ongoing challenges. Gaps in infrastructure, training, and resource allocation mean that not all intended accommodations reach every candidate seamlessly.



Some candidates still face an uneven playing field due to practical shortcomings. To address these issues, the following steps are recommended:

- a. The government and stakeholders should boost funding for inclusive education infrastructure. Modernizing more exam centers with assistive technology (e.g., computer software for visually impaired) and ensuring backup equipment can greatly enhance reliability. As recommended by the research findings, a comprehensive funding plan involving government and private partners could be developed to upgrade facilities by 2025.
- b. Regular training programs for JAMB staff and exam personnel on inclusive practices and emerging special needs should be institutionalized. By improving the competence and sensitivity of those who implement accommodations, errors and oversights will be minimized. Incorporating persons with disabilities as trainers (peer training) can enrich these programs with lived experience perspectives.
- c. It's crucial to enforce existing disability rights laws in all educational institutions. JAMB and the Ministry of Education should work together to ensure that once students with special needs gain admission, universities have the mandate and support to cater to them (accessible campuses, inclusive teaching). Additionally, policies should evolve to include support for a broader range of disabilities (such as learning disabilities or autism spectrum disorders) to anticipate future needs.
- d. Setting up a feedback mechanism where candidates who receive accommodations can report on their experience will help JAMB identify problem areas. This could be in the form of post-exam surveys or a dedicated helpdesk for special needs candidates. Monitoring data (e.g., performance statistics of candidates who used specific accommodations) can also guide adjustments in strategy.
- e. Continuing the conversation through conferences, workshops, and international collaborations will keep JAMB at the forefront of best practices. The upcoming international conference planned by JAMB to discuss best practices in accommodating disabilities in exams (as noted by a JAMB official) is a welcome initiative. Such engagements ensure knowledge transfer and can inspire similar bodies in other countries or other examination boards within Nigeria to adopt inclusive measures.

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