

# BREAKING BARRIERS & BUILDING INCLUSIVITY

A Journey Towards Inclusive Education  
for Students with Disabilities in Sri Lanka



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## Directory of key organisations that contributed to IncEdu project

### Sri Lanka



University of  
Peradeniya



University of  
Ruhuna



Sri Lanka  
Technological  
Campus



Eastern  
University  
of Sri Lanka

### Europe



Uppsala University  
Sweden



University of  
Zagreb  
Croatia



Masaryk  
University  
Czech  
Republic



Transilvania  
University of  
Brasov  
Romania

## Facts about the IncEdu project

"Developing Inclusive Education for Students with Disabilities in Sri Lankan Universities (IncEdu)" is a collaborative project under the Erasmus+ Capacity Building program, which is co-funded by the European Union. With a core mission to break down barriers and provide equal educational opportunities for students with disabilities (SWDs) in Sri Lankan universities. IncEdu is an ambitious project rooted in four essential pillars: raising community awareness, enhancing staff competencies, establishing a model support centre equipped with resources and assistive technology, and making impactful policy recommendations.

The project was **coordinated by University of Peradeniya** in partnership with **three Sri Lankan universities**:

- The University of Ruhuna
- Eastern University of Sri Lanka
- Sri Lanka Technological Campus

Additionally, the project welcomed contributions from **four European partners**:

- Sweden - Uppsala University
- Czech Republic - Masaryk University
- Croatia - University of Zagreb
- Romania - Transilvania University of Brasov

The project's diverse array of activities was carefully tailored to each partner institution, addressing their unique needs and possibilities. Initiatives ranged from awareness sessions with students to the establishment of SWD support centres within universities.

This multi-faceted approach was our response to the multifaceted challenge at hand.



**To find out more visit**

<https://arts.pdn.ac.lk/incedu/index.html>

# Embarking on a Transformative Journey

Imagine a project that takes you on a transformative journey with the aim of breaking down barriers and opening doors to a more inclusive future. IncEdu aims to mitigate the obstacles faced by students with disabilities (SWDs) in Sri Lankan universities, ensuring they get the same opportunities as their peers. This project walks the walk. It's about starting the journey of spreading awareness, sharpening skills, and creating a support system to empower SWDs.

The project IncEdu was not just about making changes; it was about igniting a transformative movement that would leave no SWD behind in their pursuit of higher education. To set the stage for this transformative journey, it was crucial to develop a systematic process that could pinpoint the root issues, identify solutions, and ultimately create lasting change.

This publication is a testament to the dedication and hard work of the IncEdu project partners. It is a collection of experiences, insights, and best practices that were meticulously crafted to inspire and guide others on their journey towards creating a more inclusive and aware educational environment for SWDs, not only in Sri Lanka but across the globe.

As you delve into the chapters of this publication, you will discover the process of identifying, developing, and implementing awareness-raising activities that lie at the heart of IncEdu.

It's a story of collaboration, innovation, and transformation.

**We hope that this journey, our journey, serves as a source of inspiration and empowerment for all those committed to creating a more inclusive educational landscape.**



# Chapter 1: A Vision of Inclusive Education

The purpose of this joint project publication is to serve as a source of inspiration. It acts as a roadmap for those seeking to make a meaningful impact on the educational landscape for students with disabilities (SWDs), not only in Sri Lanka but also in other contexts.

## 1.1 Why this publication?

**To showcase best practices:** By highlighting the most impactful awareness-raising activities conducted within Project IncEdu, we offer a deeper understanding of what works and the process behind their development. We intend to provide actionable insights and lessons learned that can be utilised by organisations, educators, policymakers, and stakeholders. These insights offer a practical guide for those committed to fostering inclusivity in higher education.

**To empower change:** This publication is not just about informing; it's about igniting change. By sharing our experiences and findings, we hope to inspire and guide others on their journey towards creating a more inclusive and aware educational environment for SWDs in Sri Lanka and beyond.

In essence, this publication stands as a testament to the collective efforts of the IncEdu project partners. It is a tool for progress, a source of knowledge, and an invitation to join us in the pursuit of inclusive education for all, while also revealing the intricate process of identifying and shaping these initiatives.





## 1.2 Who Will Find Value?

This publication is designed for a diverse audience, including:

- **Educators, academic staff** and **administrators** seeking to enhance inclusivity in higher education.
- **Policy makers** and **advocates** invested in creating equitable educational opportunities. interested in inclusive practices.
- **Researchers** and **scholars** examining the intricacies of inclusive education and its impact.



Can you recall a personal experience or story that relates to the challenges faced by students in accessing higher education?

In your opinion, what are the key challenges students with disabilities face when pursuing higher education in your context and how can these challenges be addressed effectively?

What role do educators and policymakers play in fostering inclusivity in higher education, and how can their efforts be further enhanced?

# Chapter 2: Making Change Happen

In Sri Lanka, higher education has traditionally been viewed as a path to success, opening doors to a brighter future. However, in this quest for knowledge and personal growth, students with disabilities (SWDs) have long faced steep and often insurmountable challenges. Although international and national standards call for equal opportunities, individuals with disabilities (SWDs) often remain on the periphery of higher education, with their potential going untapped and aspirations remaining unrealized.

This chapter delves into the heart of the matter, which is the importance of raising awareness about SWDs and the essential role it plays in facilitating their integration into Sri Lankan universities. It sheds light on the need to alter the current narrative and create a more inclusive educational environment for SWDs.

## 2.1 The Awareness Gap: A Two-fold Challenge

The challenge of unawareness regarding SWDs' potential and the opportunities available to them is two-fold. Firstly, there is a profound lack of awareness among SWDs themselves, their parents, and secondary school teachers regarding the support systems available for higher education. This absence of knowledge and encouragement often leads to SWDs prematurely ending their educational journey, unaware of the heights they could reach by pursuing higher education.

Secondly, even among the select few SWDs who overcome the odds to gain admission to higher education institutions, there persists a gap in knowledge and understanding. While Sri Lankan universities aspire to be inclusive, students often experience discomfort in the higher education setting. The primary reason for this discomfort is the pervasive unawareness among the peers, academic and administrative staff about the mechanisms available for accommodating SWDs in a supportive and inclusive environment.

## 2.2 The Power of Awareness

Whilst the issues at hand span many facets of society, a strategic effort on raising awareness within the university setting allows us to create meaningful change at an initial stage. By concentrating efforts within the university, we hope this will also create an effect that extends beyond the campus, ultimately transforming the way Sri Lankan society perceives and supports SWDs in their pursuit of higher education. This publication is a testament to the transformative power of awareness, illustrating how it can reshape the landscape of opportunities for SWDs and challenge societal perceptions.

Now, let's delve into the process of identifying and implementing awareness-raising activities that have been initiated within the IncEdu project. These activities represent a proactive approach towards addressing the critical issue of unawareness and are key to driving positive change in the Sri Lankan higher education landscape.



## Chapter 3: Paving the way for inclusive education

As we delve into the heart of this transformative journey, we explore a critical phase – preparation. This pivotal stage is the first step towards enhancing accessibility and inclusivity in higher education for students with disabilities (SWDs) in Sri Lanka. It lays the essential groundwork for subsequent actions, helping to bring to light the challenges faced and identify the means to overcome them.

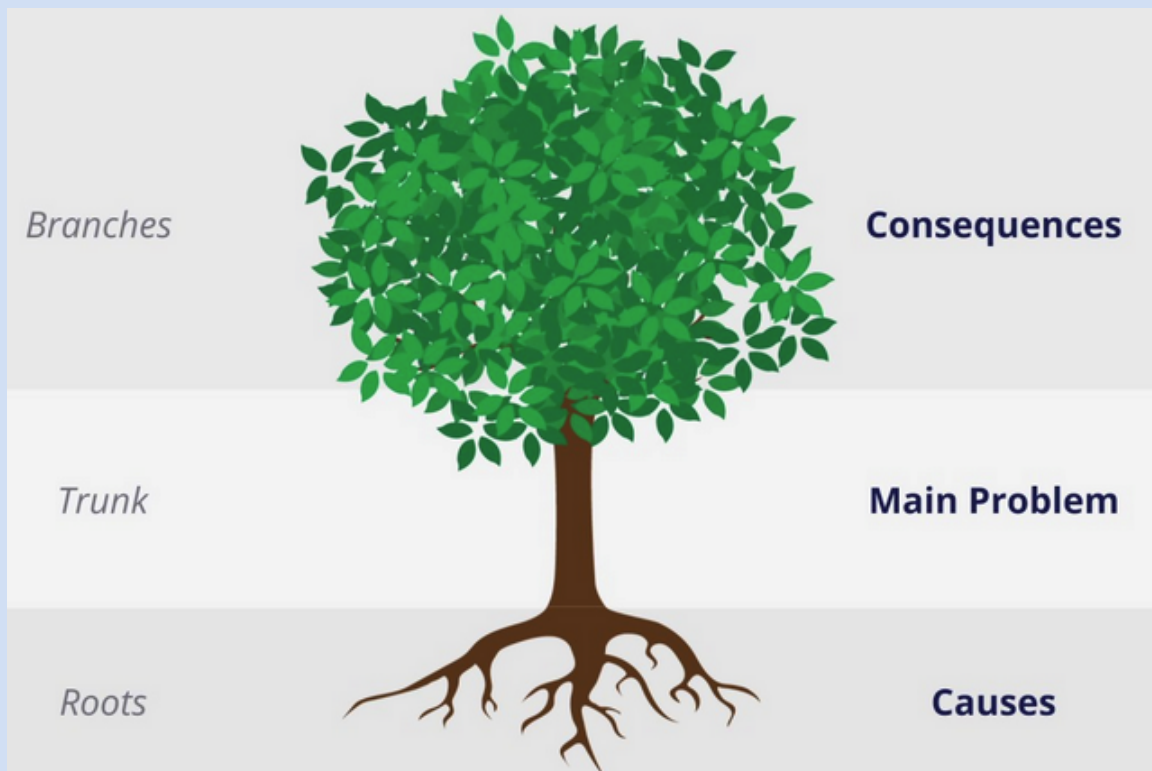
### 3.1 Planting the Seeds of Change

On the journey towards enhancing accessibility and inclusivity in higher education for SWDs in Sri Lanka, the first stage of the project, "Preparation," was crucial in laying the groundwork for subsequent actions.

#### *Mapping the Challenge - The Problem Tree Workshop*

Our journey towards developing awareness-raising activities for SWDs within the university in Sri Lanka began with a crucial first step: understanding the landscape of the issues related to awareness and inclusion.

The primary objective of the workshop was to unravel the intricate web of factors contributing to the fundamental issue at hand - the pervasive lack of awareness regarding the educational opportunities available for SWDs in Sri Lanka. To achieve this, the workshop delved deep into the problem by breaking it down into comprehensible components, systematically analysing its various facets, and uncovering the underlying causes and resultant effects. The method also captures the local and unique context of each partner. It allowed participants to view the problem from different angles, acknowledging the distinct challenges and opportunities faced by their respective institutions.



*Image 1: Problem tree illustration, source: TotalData*

Through in-depth discussions and collective brainstorming, participants meticulously unearthed the root causes that have given rise to the lack of awareness about SWDs' educational possibilities in Sri Lanka. Simultaneously, they also examined the effects and consequences of this issue, shedding light on the broader implications it had on the community.

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the problem, it was crucial to dissect it into manageable components. This deconstruction allowed participants to view the problem from different angles and break it down into definable chunks, making it more comprehensible and solvable.

The workshop served as a platform to collectively comprehend the nuances of the issue. By sharing their perspectives, experiences, and insights, participants also developed a shared understanding of the challenge at hand, thus fostering a sense of unity and collaboration.

### *Reflective Assignment on the Hinders and Problems*

Building upon the insights gained from the Problem Tree Workshop, participants embarked on a reflective assignment. This assignment involved individual reflection and group discussions on the obstacles hindering awareness for SWDs within their universities and what prevented their active participation in the classroom and on campus. The reflection process helped highlight the unique challenges faced by each partner institution, providing a nuanced perspective on the barriers to inclusivity.

### *Thinking Outside the Box - The Design Thinking Workshop*

From May 8th to May 12th, 2023, the Knowledge Sharing Workshop, hosted by Uppsala University, focused on Design Thinking. This approach encouraged participants to think creatively and empathetically. The goal was to identify and select activities that would raise awareness within individual universities about SWDs and their unique needs. As partners had already worked with identifying the problem and what the causes and effect of this was – now it was time to turn to solutions and possible activities



Image 2: The design thinking workshop session

Our approach to Design Thinking comprised several key stages, each a crucial step in our creative journey:

- **Research and Empathy:** The process kicked off by tapping into the insights we had gained during the Problem Tree Workshop. This stage wasn't just about data; it was about understanding the lived experiences of SWDs. We immersed ourselves in their world, delving deep into their challenges, and truly empathising with their unique needs.
- **Define the Problem:** With our newfound insights, we set out to refine the problem statement. This was a process of honing our objectives, making sure they were well-defined and laser-focused. By the end of this stage, we had a crystal-clear understanding of the issues at hand.
- **Brainstorm Solutions:** The workshop transformed into a hub of creativity as we unleashed a torrent of innovative ideas to address the challenges. Brainstorming wasn't just encouraged; it was celebrated. We welcomed ideas from every corner, embracing diversity in thought and encouraging everyone to think audaciously.
- **Focus and Refine:** With our trove of creative solutions, it was time to bring them down to earth. We used the SMART framework - Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Time-bound - to crystalize our strategies. This rigorous evaluation process ensured our ideas were not just creative but also practical, goal-oriented, and ready to make a real impact.

Design Thinking was our compass, guiding us from understanding the problems to finding innovative solutions. It was the spark that ignited our creativity and empathy, paving the way for the journey towards a brighter, more inclusive future in higher education.

Armed with these creative problem-solving techniques, we were ready to bring our ideas to life and make a tangible impact. This section sets the stage for the next phase, where we will delve into the specifics of the activities we selected and how we implemented them to create a more inclusive environment for SWDs.



## 3.2 Turning ideas into action

With the selection of awareness-raising activities, the project transitioned from the realm of ideas to the world of action. The implementation phase was a critical part of the journey towards a more inclusive higher education environment.

**Step 1, Creating Detailed Action Plans:** The heart of this phase lies in the creation of comprehensive Action Plans. Partners meticulously outlined the specifics of each chosen activity. These plans ensured that the efforts were not just well-intentioned but focused and precise. They included:

- **Measurable Objectives:** Clear and quantifiable objectives were set, making it easy to gauge the progress.
- **Assigned Responsibilities:** Every aspect of the plan was assigned to individuals or teams, ensuring accountability.
- **Resource Management:** Resources were meticulously managed to execute the activities efficiently.
- **Target Audience Identification:** Knowing the audience allowed for tailored approaches, ensuring the message resonated effectively.

**Step 2, Ongoing Support and Mentoring:** Uppsala University provided ongoing support and mentoring throughout WP 4. The ongoing support and mentoring were indispensable. This support included:

- **Written Feedback:** Uppsala University provided detailed written feedback on the plans. This feedback was not just about validation; it was an integral part of the project's growth.
- **Individual Check-in Meetings:** Regular one-on-one meetings ensured that partners had access to the guidance and resources needed for successful execution.



**Step 3, the Impact Assessment Report:** An essential aspect of this was the Impact Assessment Report. This report wasn't just a summary of the achievements; it was a compass guiding the way forward. The report served as a comprehensive evaluation tool that enabled partners to:

- **Measure Effectiveness:** The impact of the awareness-raising initiatives was assessed, ensuring they were making a real difference.
- **Identify Best Practices:** Through rigorous evaluation, what was working exceptionally well and why was pinpointed.
- **Learn Lessons for the Future:** By acknowledging what could have been done better, the way was paved for continuous improvement.
- **Foster Sustainability:** The report was a blueprint for ensuring that the achievements would leave a lasting legacy, inspiring future activities to build on the successes.



What issue or challenge related to inclusive education are you most passionate about addressing, and how can you clearly define this problem to serve as the foundation for your awareness-raising efforts?

How can you encourage creative thinking and empathy within your team or among stakeholders to develop innovative solutions for raising awareness about inclusive education?

**Consider** how you can adapt the "Thinking Outside the Box" and Design Thinking concepts to your project, fostering creative problem-solving and understanding of the needs of the audience you aim to reach.

## Chapter 4: Illuminating Inclusivity: Practical Case Studies

This chapter is a journey into the heart of the initiatives undertaken by Sri Lankan partners to increase awareness. The case studies offer insights into best practices and the practical steps taken to make a difference. These activities showcase the commitment, dedication, and innovation of the partners who ventured into uncharted territories to reshape the educational landscape for students with disabilities (SWDs).

By sharing their experiences partner universities share knowledge on the impact level of different activities, how they can be structured, and any challenges along the way. They offer a vision of a future where inclusivity is not just a goal but a reality, both within Sri Lanka and beyond.





SRI LANKA TECHNOLOGICAL CAMPUS

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## A Clear Path to Support: Contact Point for SWD Needs and Concerns

Sri Lanka Technological Campus (SLTC) recognized the importance of addressing the needs of SWDs in a structured and unified manner. This recognition led to the initiation of designating and educating a dedicated staff member who would serve as the key point of contact for students with disabilities (SWD) needs and concerns.

The initiative sought to create a more structured process for monitoring, providing SWDs, their teachers, and the entire university community a clear and dependable channel through which SWD concerns could be addressed. By assigning this role to a specific staff member, SLTC intended to expedite support, making the everyday needs of SWDs more manageable. It was about empowering change, one step at a time, while creating more structure and clarity for everyone involved.

### Target group and reach

The dedicated staff member to coordinate matters related to SWDs at SLTC and other international affairs was selected by a panel of experienced university representatives. Information about the coordinator/ contact point was shared through emails/flyers, the website, and orientation programs. All internal staff and students have been encouraged to contact the coordinator/office when they get any inquiries/information on SWD's or when they need any assistance. The university tracks the number of SWDs who reached out to the coordinator, to evaluate the initiative's effectiveness and make improvements. Further, as SLTC is a private university, this would be a value addition in terms of marketing point of view as well, so that SWDs who are looking into higher studies will be ensured that they will get special attention, whenever they need.

## **Results**

A dedicated staff member was selected for this role, with the process of choosing the right candidate conducted through internal university communications. This individual is currently affiliated with the Special Needs Resource Centre at SLTC and demonstrates a strong commitment to the responsibilities of the role. This increases the confidence of the SWD's on hearing and answering their concerns, which will boost their interest and focus on education. Ultimately it will improve their academic performances. In addition to providing direct support to SWDs, the dedicated staff member is actively engaged in outreach, enhancing awareness regarding inclusive educational opportunities at SLTC. This outreach extends to prospective students beyond the university, making a broader impact.

## **Challenges and evaluation**

To support students with disabilities (SWDs), there are challenges such as building awareness, allocating resources, and addressing accessibility barriers. One of the key challenges is long-term retaining of the designated staff coordinator. A continuation process should be built up to sustain the coordination office with the designated staff coordinator.

Evaluation involves regularly assessing the impact, and gathering feedback and success stories of student satisfaction and academic achievements. The feedback is gathered from students as well as from involved staff members. The evaluation process included assessing the effectiveness of resolving SWD concerns as well. This was accomplished by tracking the lead time for resolutions and the rate of concerns successfully addressed. Corrective measures need to be taken in the processes, in case negative outcomes are highlighted from the feedback or evaluation results, so that the credibility of this task is ensured to those who experience it. These steps can make the journey smoother and more manageable, fostering an inclusive and supportive environment for all students.

## **Sustainability and potential transferability**

In order to ensure the sustainability of the designated staff member at SLTC, the university takes several steps. First, they provide ongoing training to keep staff updated on best practices for supporting SWDs. Additionally, appointing more specialised staff members to focus on SWD concerns can enhance the support system. SLTC has the potential to expand this role to offer a broader range of services that cater to inclusive education. These could include personalised academic accommodations, counselling, assistive technology, mentorship, accessibility improvements, and peer support networks.

Procedures need to be standardised and documented, such that even a new person engaged in this corresponding work scope will be aware of the step by step approach to be taken for different scenarios. This will ensure the sustainability of the work to be done by the allocated personnel in the long run. Same time, the performance metrics of these personnel should be monitored through a management information system (MIS) not only in a quantitative manner, but also qualitatively.



## A lesson for others

*“The biggest lesson from our team’s experience is that proactive, hands-on training and dedicated personnel can make a profound difference in raising awareness and support for students with disabilities. It’s not just about awareness campaigns but practical, tangible steps that empower our university community to take action and create a more inclusive campus. The commitment of staff and students, along with ongoing education and open dialogue, are essential elements in making a difference and fostering a more inclusive environment for all”*

- SLTC Team in IncEdu





# Integrating 'Inclusive Education' into Professional Development for Higher Education at the University of Ruhuna

Embarking on the journey of creating a more inclusive educational environment often starts with the commitment of academic institutions to equip their staff with the tools and knowledge needed to make a difference. The University of Ruhuna exemplifies this dedication through its innovative approach to inclusive education within their professional development program.

The Certificate Course in Professional Development in Higher Education (CCPDHE) is an essential induction program administered by the Staff Development Centers for academic staff in Sri Lankan Universities. This course is accredited by the University Grants Commissions (UGC) of Sri Lanka for the Lecturers, Probationary Lecturers, Instructors, Librarians and Demonstrators of Higher Education Institutes for the confirmation and promotion in academic careers. Therefore, Every newly recruited academic staff member is required to complete the CCPDHE program during their probationary period, a prerequisite for becoming a permanent academic member of the university. The course comprises ten modules namely; Orientation as a University Teacher, Personal Development and Counseling, Teaching and Learning Methods, Assessment and Evaluation, Curriculum Design and Revision, ICT Skills in Higher Education, Teaching Practice, Research in Higher Education, University Administrative Procedures, and Strategic Planning and Management for Universities Generally, this course is conducted over a period of six months by eminent professionals in their respective sectors. Both online and physical modes are used with many practical exercises as delivery methods in the modules.

## Target group and reach

The direct target group of this activity was newly recruited academics at the University of Ruhuna across its nine faculties. This year, 24 academics registered for and participated in the inclusive education session, a first in the university's history. Over the long term, all students in the university's nine faculties (approximately 10,000 at the moment) will benefit from the trickle-down effects of the staff development program.

## Results

The incorporation of 'Inclusive Education' into the CCPDHE program yielded remarkable outcomes. The primary objectives of this initiative were successfully achieved, contributing to the sustainability of inclusive education at the University of Ruhuna and beyond.

1. **Enhanced Understanding:** The faculty's new academics exhibited a significantly improved understanding of inclusive education. They now possess the fundamental knowledge and principles necessary to create inclusive learning environments that benefit students with disabilities (SWDs).
2. **Improved Knowledge:** Academic staff members gained valuable insights into the specific needs and requirements of SWDs in the educational process. This knowledge equips them to proactively address the unique challenges faced by SWDs and foster a supportive and accommodating educational environment.
3. **Continuity of Inclusive Education:** By incorporating 'Inclusive Education' into Module 01 of the CCPDHE program, the University of Ruhuna ensured the continuity of inclusive education from the inception of academic careers. This strategic inclusion guarantees that all future academic members are well-prepared to promote inclusive practices and support SWDs.



## **Challenges and evaluation**

An impressive 91.0 percent of participants either strongly agreed or agreed that the workshop's objectives were met. Participants expressed their interest in learning more about inclusive education during discussions and in evaluation forms, demonstrating their desire to apply their learning to benefit their future students.

Participants provided comments indicating their interest in learning more about inclusive education during the discussion, The following comments selected from the evaluation form also highlight their views.

*“Learned how we need to work with students who have disabilities”.*

*“Was able to get an idea of how to deal with SWDs. As a member of the teaching staff, we may have to deal with various students with disabilities”.*

*“Will be able to apply the things learned to benefit my students in the future”.*

*The activity emphasised the power of continuous communication and evidence-based arguments in driving positive change for SWDs. This led to the inclusion of a session on inclusive education in the CCPDHE course, which is conducted for all new academics annually.*

## **Sustainability and potential transferability**

The session on 'Inclusive Education' will be sustained within the CCPDHE program for newly recruited academics from 2023 onward. Moreover, the Staff Development Centre conducts workshops for all university stakeholders in which 'Inclusive Education' will be an area of focus. Participants' feedback also indicated the need for more in-depth sessions on inclusive education.



## A lesson for others

*“This case study exemplifies how small, strategic changes can lead to remarkable results. To those embarking on a similar journey, the experience of the University of Ruhuna underscores the importance of persistence and advocacy. A focus on evidence-based arguments and effective communication can significantly influence institutional change. Moreover, it highlights the critical role of professional development programs in instilling inclusive education as a core value from the very beginning of an academic's career. It offers an inspiring path for other institutions to follow, propelling them toward a more inclusive and equitable educational landscape.”*

- Ruhuna team IncEdu





# Empowering SWDs through Assistive Technologies

Empowering students with disabilities (SWDs) within a university setting is a fundamental step towards ensuring their equal access to education, promoting independence, reducing discrimination, and fostering an inclusive culture. The IncEdu team at the University of Peradeniya recognized that raising awareness is a crucial foundation in empowering SWDs in universities, not only to comply with legal requirements but to cultivate a culture of inclusion and support. This initiative aimed to create a conducive learning environment for SWDs, resulting in improved academic and personal outcomes while reshaping societal perceptions of this group of students.

## Target group and reach

The initiative targeted a broad spectrum of stakeholders, including academic and non-academic staff within the faculty, administrative officers, both in-service and pre-service teachers, and administrative representatives from zonal, provincial, and Ministry of Education levels. To reach this diverse audience, the University of Peradeniya employed a multifaceted approach. This encompassed in-person awareness sessions, which directly engaged academic staff, non-academic staff, in-service and pre-service teachers, and administrative officers from various levels. Additionally, the use of street drama and exhibitions served as effective mediums to extend awareness to schoolchildren, peers, and the wider community.

In total, approximately 1,200 individuals actively participated in a range of awareness activities, making the outreach of this initiative substantial and inclusive.

## Results

During the awareness sessions, a significant majority of stakeholders (99%) exhibited prior unfamiliarity with assistive technologies, the rights of SWDs, and the principles of Inclusive Education. This evident lack of awareness was reflected in their responses to introductory questions at the commencement of select workshops. Moreover, participants' feedback, encompassing verbal comments and responses to Google Form inquiries, underscored the ongoing development of their capabilities in supporting SWDs in their educational journeys. This progress was facilitated through diverse activities involving administrative assistance, participation in laboratory exercises, and aiding SWDs in their day-to-day routines. In terms of knowledge and skill enhancement, one of the attendees, a pre-service teacher, articulated the following perspective:

*“Today, we learned about a range of new assistive technologies, spanning both hardware and software, and acquired hands-on experience in their application to enhance the learning experience of students with disabilities (SWDs). I now firmly believe that the integration of technology to establish a safe and inclusive learning environment is genuinely remarkable. As a teacher specializing in special needs education, I can make a substantial contribution to enriching the lives of SWDs.”*

*(Teacher 1/NCoE/2023/10/20)*



*Image 3: Attendees from the non-academic awareness session*

## Challenges and evaluation

The evaluation of the initiative adopted a systematic and multifaceted approach, incorporating diverse methods, strategies, and tools to assess its progress and overall success. Key metrics were employed to gauge the effectiveness of the initiative, including:

- **Workshop Assessment:** The total number of workshops conducted, served as a fundamental measure of the initiative's execution.
- **Participant Engagement:** The level of active engagement exhibited by participants throughout the initiative was closely monitored to assess its impact and effectiveness.
- **Communication Effectiveness:** The generation and dissemination of flyers and messages via social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook were additional tools employed to evaluate the initiative's reach and communication success.
- **Participant Feedback:** Valuable feedback from participants, collected through both hard copy forms and Google Forms distributed at the conclusion of the workshops, played a crucial role in assessing the initiative's outcomes.
- **Participant Perspectives:** The initiative further incorporated participant views and opinions, recorded as written statements in a dedicated book at the exhibition, offering an additional layer of insight and depth to the evaluation process.

## Sustainability and potential transferability

The IncEdu team at the University of Peradeniya recognized that continuous awareness sessions are a suitable method for encouraging stakeholders to continually support and create a conducive environment for individuals with disabilities (SWDs). As a result of these awareness sessions, a foundation has been established to incorporate some awareness sessions in the institutional annual action plans, promoting sustainability. For instance, conducting awareness sessions for non-academic staff on 'working with SWDs' and providing awareness sessions for newly recruited lecturers in the Faculty of Arts to introduce 'assistive technologies for supporting SWDs in learning' will be integrated into the 2024 Action Plan of the Faculty of Arts.

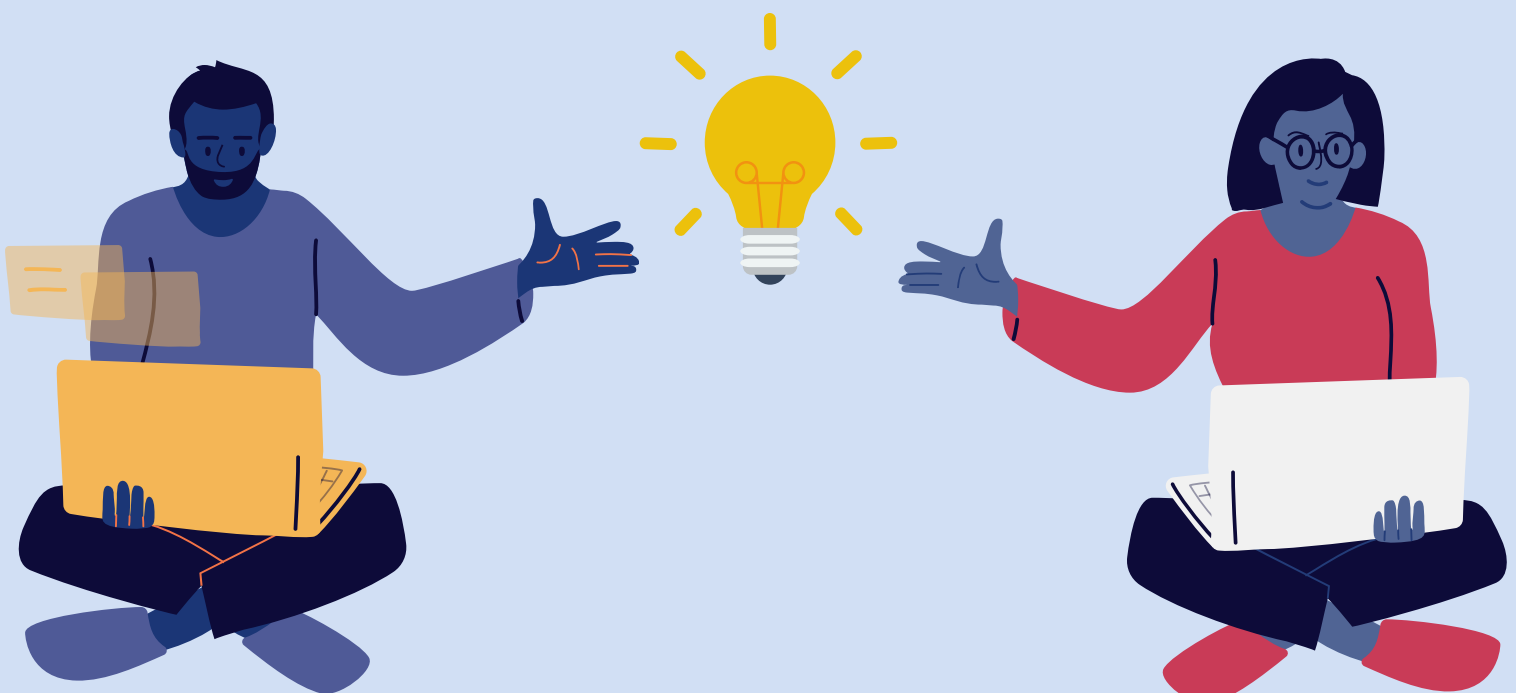


## A lesson for others

*“During the awareness activities, the most significant lesson we learned and would like to share was the power of teamwork, which transformed challenges into opportunities. Even though all four IncEdu members were occupied with different responsibilities, we managed to achieve more together than we ever could individually. The commitment of each member towards a common goal was remarkable.*

*Though IncEdu team members were exposed to a wide range of assistive technologies through numerous training sessions by expert partners, the team managed to select the most efficient, economical, and sustainable technologies that blend into the Sri Lankan requirements.”*

*- Peradeniya team IncEdu*





## Conducting a Research Forum on “Promoting Inclusive Education in Higher Educational Institutions”

Acknowledging the power of community and awareness, the Eastern University, Sri Lanka (EUSL) hosted a research forum aimed at university students and staff. The aim was to disseminate the findings of research conducted under the IncEdu project related to SWDs' support systems, conditions, and needs. Aspiring to emphasise the importance of including SWDs in the university's academic processes.

The forum, called “Promoting Inclusive Education in Higher Educational Institutions”, was hosted at the Centre for Multidisciplinary Research (CMR) who monthly and bi-annually host forums on different topics at the university. The centre played a key role in facilitating discussions centred around the research findings of IncEdu by providing a previously established point of contact with the audience. Participants were offered both physical and virtual attendance options to ensure broader accessibility.

The programme was successfully completed by mid-august 2023, when project team members presented the forum findings. Following the conclusion participants expressed a positive attitude, looking forward to applying the knowledge gained during the sessions in future opportunities.

### Target group and reach

In total, the event reached 156 academic and non-academic staff as well as students from all faculties who participated both virtually and on-location. The CMR was chosen as the venue for our session due to its accessibility to the entire academic community of EUSL. Our intention was to share our message with academics outside the Arts faculty, whose departments are situated in various areas. This decision was made because students and staff in the Faculty of Arts and Culture were already familiar with the project's activities, having been discussed in official faculty meetings.



*Image : a speaker photo from the forum session at CMR*

## **Results**

The awareness-raising forum successfully informed 156 participants, including both students and staff from Eastern University, Sri Lanka, about the challenges encountered by SWDs in higher education. It also provided clarity on the existing policies and support mechanisms in the Sri Lankan educational system.

In essence, the activity not only deepened the understanding of SWD-related concerns but also revealed specific challenges at Eastern University. Participants also obtained valuable insights into the university specific policies. The discursive nature of the activity encouraged discussions that revealed possible areas of improvement within the university concerning SWD welfare. Participants were able to propose ways to enhance support and revising existing mechanisms - voicing ideas for a more inclusive future in higher education.



## **Challenges and evaluation**

One challenge encountered during the development of the forum was a lesser consideration for SWD matters by the academic administrators. We believe there to be two underlying reasons for this:

1. The comparatively small number of SWDs in proportion to the student body as a whole
2. A lack of concern on the issues SWDs face due to the absence of administrative units or student bodies that raise awareness for SWD considerations

This highlights the importance on engendering formal entities that promote awareness for SWD issues.

Following the activity, the CMR authored a summary report evaluating the active participation of participants and articulating the session discussions.

"The presentation and the discussion are more valuable and interesting. It has to be widely considered for further effective intervention."

"Another session on this project impact should be allocated in this forum."

Several participants requested an additional forum to discuss the project output at EUSL after the conclusion of the project. Additionally, the director of the CMR dedicated the forum to be used for discussions on SWD and inclusive higher education in the future. Another outcome of the session was a commitment from administrative staff at the university to create a committee for SWDs at EUSL.

## **Sustainability and transferability**

A key factor in fostering the activity's development was the successful utilisation of pre-existing structures to disseminate awareness raising information. The EUSL team harnessed the resources and logistical support managed by established centres experienced in hosting similar events by selecting CMR as the venue for the forum. A choice that proved to be both cost and time effective. Tapping into existing resources could be a strategic measure for the long term sustainability of the activity. In terms of transferability, it also opens the possibility to reflect on the circumstances and resources available at different institutions.



## A lesson for others

*“The EUSL team share two main considerations for the importance of raising awareness and on utilising pre-existing structures:*

- 1. If proper dissemination of knowledge is carried out then the due recognition would be given to the SWDs through which equity and equality would be ensured.*
- 2. In an academic environment where the matters of minority and vulnerable segments are given less concern, it would be difficult to undertake awareness raising tasks as a new venture, because it is indeed tiresome and cost effective and time consuming. Therefore it is more effective to identify available platforms like conferences and discussion forums.”*

*- EUSL team IncEdu*



# The Story about Brian

This remarkable story puts the spotlight on Brian Kingston, a student whose determination and aspirations opened a groundbreaking pathway for blind students in Sri Lanka. Brian's journey, alongside the relentless efforts of passionate individuals, heralded a new era of inclusive education in the country.

It all began during a Zoom meeting organised by Mr. Punniyadasa Kuruppu, the director of special needs students at the Ministry of Education, which took place as part of the IncEdu project. Brian Kingston, a student who had achieved an outstanding 9A passes in the Ordinary Level Examination, found his voice in this virtual gathering. Brian's request was simple yet profound - he yearned for the opportunity to pursue advanced-level education in the science stream.

## *A Vision of Inclusivity*

The obstacle standing in the way of Brian's dream was the absence of trained teachers, accessible technology, and supportive facilities for blind students within the science stream. The resonance of Brian's plea touched the hearts of those present, sparking a determination to transform his dream into reality.

United by a shared commitment to inclusivity, a team from Masaryk University (MU), one of the IncEdu project partners, pledged their support to help Brian access the necessary assistive technology and resources. The collaboration extended beyond borders as Prof. Petr from MU, inspired by Brian's spirit, envisioned a future where Brian would study science.

## *An Unexpected Twist*

A couple of weeks later, the Ministry of Education made a crucial decision. Brian was offered admission to Ananda College, one of the country's leading boy's schools in Colombo. However, the journey was far from straightforward. Despite the initial momentum, challenges emerged when it became clear that the teachers at Ananda College were unsure about how to teach a blind student in the science stream.

Not to be deterred, IncEdu project members initiated a constructive dialogue with the Ministry of Education. Their collective efforts resulted in a significant breakthrough - a training session for teachers from various schools, including Ananda College, organised by the IncEdu project team at the University Special Needs Resource Centre (SNRC).

After their participation in the training, the teachers at Ananda College were prepared to teach Brian in the science stream. Brian's journey continued to unfold as he ventured to the SNRC, captivated by the technological equipment and software provided through the IncEdu project. With unwavering support from donors, Brian acquired the essential tools for a blind student's academic journey, including a Focus-40 keypad for braille typing and reading.

## *A Dream Realised*

The narrative takes a heartwarming turn as Brian, alongside his dedicated mother, became regular visitors to the SNRC. He was driven by a newfound enthusiasm and the potential to take his Advanced Level (AL) examination in the Science stream using a computer – a pioneering initiative in Sri Lanka.

This chapter encapsulates the essence of IncEdu's transformative mission by illustrating the profound impact of inclusive education on the life of a remarkable young student.

**Brian's case study serves as a testament to the power of determination, collaboration, and innovation in opening new doors for blind students in Sri Lanka's education landscape.**

## Chapter 5: Navigating the Path to Inclusivity: Insights and Lessons for Change-Makers

*What has been the biggest lesson from your team that you would share with others wanting to make a difference and raise awareness for students with disabilities?*

### *University of Peradeniya*

“The most significant lesson we’ve learned from our team’s experience, which we’d like to share with others looking to make a difference and raise awareness for students with disabilities, is the power of genuine collective intention. One key takeaway from our journey is that even if the individuals crafting a proposal or even the project teams lack in-depth knowledge of the real situation, a successful proposal can be achieved when the collective intention is sincere. International expertise and technological knowledge proved invaluable in driving progress. Still, it’s equally important for local partners to be innovative in adapting proposed solutions to align with the existing socio-economic and cultural context. Furthermore, we’ve learned that for a project to have a lasting transformative impact, it must be designed with sustainability in mind. This ensures that the positive changes we work toward can have a lasting effect on the lives of students with disabilities and the higher education landscape in Sri Lanka. Finally, it’s crucial to remember that our journey is just the beginning, and there is still a long path ahead to nurture inclusive education in Sri Lanka.”

SLTC

“IncEdu project made us discover that students with disabilities are an integral part of the learning process and as an institute, it is our responsibility to ensure that such students also fit perfectly into our education system through various assistive tools, techniques, methods and facilities.”

### *Eastern University, Sri Lanka*

“It was understood by the team that prior to intervening in the project that a least priority prevailed about the rights, access of infrastructure and the learning environment pertaining to this SWDs. However, the classification of project activities was laid solid platform to understand the ownership of the SWDs. This understanding further paid an avenue to share the responsibility and included the accountability of ensuring equity and equality in all aspects of the project. Further, the team felt that the dissertation component would be a strengthening strategy to enhance comprehensive understanding among the stakeholders pertaining to the needful to the SWDSs including the fundamental rights of SWDs which has been universally accepted in all aspects of life standard.”

### *University of Brasov*

“Collaboration has been essential in our commitment to supporting students with disabilities. Understanding the multifaceted nature of the challenges they face has allowed us to recognize that while knowledge and resources are essential, real change comes from shared action. Working with individuals, institutions, and communities, we've found that building a network of support and working with diverse stakeholders - from educators to policymakers and local communities - increases our impact. This networked approach helps break down barriers, challenge persistent stereotypes, and effectively mobilize resources. But the journey doesn't end with a single achievement or initiative. Ongoing collaboration and a commitment to sustained efforts are essential to ensure continued progress and the implementation of truly inclusive education systems everywhere.”

### *Uppsala University*

“Cooperating with the partner universities highlighted the complex and ever-changing nature of the issues SWDs face. From deeply rooted perceptions and attitudes to structural policy-obstacles and a lack of resources. Opening a dialogue for sharing insights, experiences and tools created a hands-on approach with meaningful impact, but it's important to remember that the journey to build inclusive education never truly stops. By continuing to apply the creative solutions fostered through IncEdu anyone can help engender inclusive education far beyond Sri Lanka.”

### *University of Ruhuna*

“The IncEdu project made us realize the importance of integrating SWDs into the higher education process through various means, from identification of SWDs to accommodating the needs of SWDs in the teaching, learning, and assessment processes of higher education. It was realized that small facilitation from the team contributed to an immense change in the identification of the potential of SWDs by themselves. The collaborative awareness-raising activities through north-south partnership led us to understand our ability to raise awareness and thereby advocate for various stakeholders, including academic, administrative, nonacademic, and students at the university, regarding positive attitudes towards SWDs, which facilitate tremendous behavioural changes and actions among the stakeholders. This process led to several administrative decisions, which contributed to the long-term sustainability of the incorporation of SWDs in the higher education process in Sri Lanka. The awareness and advocacy work contributed to taking decisions at the faculty, university, and national level for preparing policies on SWDs and incorporating inclusive education in the curricula of the staff development course at the university.”

## Chapter 6: Tips and Hints

**Understanding the Landscape:** Recognize that each region or institution may have unique challenges and opportunities. Tailor your initiatives to the local context by conducting thorough research and adapting your approach accordingly.

**Understanding the Problem (Root Causes and Consequences):** Launch your project with a comprehensive understanding of the issues at hand. Conduct workshops or sessions to dissect and analyse the root causes of these challenges and the potential consequences. For example this can be done by using Problem Tree method.

**Design Thinking for Solutions:** Embrace Design Thinking as a creative and empathetic problem-solving approach. Encourage brainstorming and transform identified issues into actionable solutions that address specific needs.

**Transition from Ideas to Action:** After selecting awareness-raising activities, make the shift from ideation to implementation. Be brave and dare to think outside the box and test something new, but do always ensure that your goals are SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound) to increase the chances of success.

**Planning is Fundamental:** Develop detailed action plans that include measurable objectives, clear responsibilities, resource management, and identification of your target audience. This structured approach ensures that your efforts are focused and effective.

**Evaluating:** Measure the effectiveness of your initiatives, identify best practices, learn from any challenges, and ensure the sustainability of your efforts. This evaluation is essential for continuous improvement. Aim to get the perspective of the target audience (for example students), this could be in a world café process, which sees student teams rotating and brainstorming what worked and what did not work so well with raising knowledge/awareness. This approach could be an effective way for you to understand how to proceed in the future.

*These key takeaways provide valuable insights for anyone embarking on a similar journey to enhance inclusivity in higher education for students with disabilities.*

*Understanding the problem, using creative problem-solving techniques, and maintaining a focus on impact and sustainability are crucial elements of success.*





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