

POLICY BRIEF

Tech-Enabled Inclusion for Strengthening Malawi's Education Policy for SEND Learners

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Authors	Joel Mitchell Gopal Iyer Pilirani Kumasewera Carolyn Chidandale
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Acronyms

EMIS	Education Management Information System
DIESH	Directorate of Inclusive Education and School Health
MACODA	Malawi Council for Disability Affairs
NESIP	National Education Sector Investment Plan
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
UNCRPD	UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

Introduction

In Malawi, an estimated 14% of children between the ages of 5 and 17 have at least one functional difficulty, yet fewer than one in three children with disabilities attend school. Their attendance rates lag significantly behind those of their peers at every level; only 7% reach secondary education ([↑UNICEF, 2022](#)).

Malawi has established a strong rights-based foundation for disability inclusion. The Constitution ([↑Government of Malawi, 1994](#)), the National Education Policy ([↑Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2016](#)), and the recently enacted Persons with Disabilities Act 2024 ([↑Government of Malawi, 2024](#)), alongside international commitments including the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) ([↑United Nations, 2006](#)) and the Salamanca Statement ([↑UNESCO & Spain. Ministerio de Educación y Ciencia, 1994](#)), affirm every child's right to inclusive education. Despite this framework, implementation remains constrained. Following the expiration of the National Inclusive Education Strategy (NIES; [↑Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2017](#)), Malawi currently lacks a dedicated strategy to guide inclusive education in practice. Consequently, teachers and education personnel have limited national guidance on the identification, assessment, and support of learners with conditions such as dyslexia, autism spectrum disorder, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and other learning difficulties. Support for learners with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) is instead embedded within broader sector frameworks, resulting in fragmented implementation, inconsistent practices across schools, limited specialist support, and inadequate resources.

These implementation challenges underscore the need for innovative approaches that strengthen the education system's capacity to identify and support learners with diverse needs. This policy brief explores how targeted integration of technology, from accessible digital content to data-driven screening tools, can bridge existing capacity constraints, address systemic gaps, and ensure equitable, foundational learning for all learners with SEND in Malawi.

To realise its commitment to equitable education, Malawi must develop a consolidated, tech-forward inclusive education strategy that scales emerging digital innovations, modernises data systems, and systematically empowers educators to support the full spectrum of learner needs.

The policy and legal environment: A landscape of distributed mandates

The following analysis identifies the key policy assets and gaps that determine the possible options and avenues available for learners with SEND.

The expiration of the National Inclusive Education Strategy

The National Inclusive Education Strategy 2017–2021 ([↑Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2017](#)) provided an explicit framework for SEND, but its expiration has led to the diffusion of responsibility for policies across different bodies. Without an active strategy, inclusion is treated as a cross-cutting principle rather than a discrete reform pillar, leading to operational guidance gaps regarding identification, screening, and referral pathways. The consequence is practical: there are no standardised referral forms for learners with suspected disabilities, and teachers report not knowing where to send children who need specialist assessment.

Broad legal protections

Malawi's legal framework for inclusive education is comprehensive. The Constitution ([↑Government of Malawi, 1994](#)) guarantees the right to education and affirms equality and non-discrimination. This is reinforced by the Education Act 2013 ([↑Government of Malawi, 2013](#)) and the Persons with Disabilities Act 2024 ([↑Government of Malawi, 2024](#)), which together affirm the rights of learners with disabilities to inclusive education, reasonable accommodation, accessibility, and participation. The 2024 Act also establishes the Malawi Council for Disability Affairs (MACODA) to coordinate and regulate disability inclusion across sectors. These national protections are complemented by international obligations under the UNCRPD ([↑United Nations, 2006](#)), the Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989 ([↑United Nations, 1989](#)), the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child ([↑African Union, 1990](#)), and the Salamanca Statement ([↑UNESCO & Spain. Ministerio de Educación y Ciencia, 1994](#)).

However, while these instruments clearly articulate the rights of learners with disabilities, they offer limited operational guidance at the school level. The expiration of the National Inclusive Education Strategy 2017–2021 has widened this gap, creating inconsistent implementation, limited accountability, and unequal access to support services, the consequences of which are described in the sections below.

National sector plans

Frameworks like the National Education Sector Investment Plan (NESIP) 2020–2030 ([↑Ministry of Education, 2020](#)) and the 2023–2027 Partnership Compact ([↑Ministry of Education, 2024](#)) embed inclusion within broader equity and access objectives. However, because SEND is integrated into broader reforms rather than standalone programmes, these plans lack SEND-specific costing frameworks and service delivery models. This means that budget allocations are usually unclear, and it is often challenging to track whether resources actually reach the learners who need them.

System-level constraints and structural barriers to inclusion

Despite growing institutional commitment to inclusive education, systemic constraints continue to limit delivery at the school level.

Capacity and resource gaps

Malawi faces acute teacher shortages across the education system. Nationally, the learner-to-teacher ratio stands at 95:1, while the learner-to-classroom ratio is 113:1. For learners with SEND requiring specialist support, the situation is even more fragile. The [↑Department of Inclusive Education \(2025\)](#) estimates that Malawi has 815 specialist teachers, while the Education Management Information System (EMIS) data indicates that there are over 240,000 learners with SEND across primary and secondary schools. This translates to roughly one specialist teacher for every 300 learners with SEND, making individualised support practically unattainable in most schools. Specialist teachers also lack adequate supervision, with few specialists available at zonal, district, and national levels to provide guidance and oversight. The workforce gap, combined with a persistent shortage of assistive devices, adaptive

learning tools, and specialised teaching materials, severely constrains the quality of education available to learners with SEND.

Data and visibility limitations

The current Education Management Information System (EMIS) captures data on learners with special educational needs, but lacks crucial granularity. While physical and sensory disabilities (e.g., blindness, deafness) are clearly reported, learners with learning difficulties and neurodevelopmental conditions are often lumped into a single category, obscuring their specific needs and skewing resource allocation. Greater disaggregation would enable more targeted resource allocation and differentiated support.

Special schools vs mainstream integration

Malawi faces structural and ideological tension between maintaining segregated special schools for specific disabilities and driving a newer push to integrate all learners into mainstream schools through resource centres ([↑Banks et al., 2022](#); [↑Cameron et al., 2020](#)). This policy dualism creates confusion for parents, distorts resource allocation, and leaves learners caught between two systems, insufficiently supported in mainstream classrooms, yet not fully reached by special schools. Resolving this tension requires explicit policy guidance on when and how both models operate and the conditions under which learners transition between them.

Emerging opportunities in tech-enabled inclusion

Although there are structural constraints, the landscape reveals significant readiness for technology to act as a system enabler.

Digital learning synergies

Malawi is well positioned to integrate technology into inclusive education, building on existing digital transformation efforts, including the Digital Malawi Programme, expanding internet connectivity in schools, and ongoing reforms under NESIP ([↑Ministry of Education, 2020](#)). Digital innovations for learners with SEND should be embedded within existing education, health, and social protection structures, rather than creating parallel systems. This would strengthen coordination, improve data systems, and enhance service delivery.

National-scale digital learning programmes focused on foundational literacy and numeracy provide a valuable foundation for this. Although not designed specifically for learners with SEND, their emphasis on self-paced, audio-based, and adaptive learning aligns closely with inclusive education principles. They can particularly benefit learners who require additional time, differentiated instruction, or alternative ways of accessing content. Building on these platforms presents a practical opportunity to adapt and scale digital solutions for SEND learners without starting from scratch.

Accessible content innovations

EdTech developers are producing digital materials tailored for learners with SEND, including Malawian Sign Language video storybooks (e.g., [teKitabu, 2021](#)), electronic braille resources, and adapted teacher-training content. These represent promising building blocks for a national accessible content library. However, without a clear policy framework, it remains difficult for developers and civil society actors to move from pilot phase to systemic use.

University-led digital screening

Research collaborations have successfully piloted the digitalisation of previously paper-based government screening tools, creating opportunities to strengthen early identification and assessment of learners with disabilities and learning difficulties. These tools have demonstrated potential to improve school-based assessments, streamline referral pathways, and support identification of conditions such as dyslexia, auditory processing difficulties, and cognitive delays. However, most remain at the pilot stage and require clear pathways for integration, government ownership, and scale-up to become part of routine practice ([Plaut et al., 2024](#)).

Recommendations

The recommendations offered below are targeted at policymakers, education officers, and development partners to harness technology and address the systemic constraints facing SEND learners in Malawi.

1. Finalise and adopt a tech-forward National Inclusive Education Policy

Ministry of Education, Directorate of Inclusive Education and School Health (DIESH) and MACODA should accelerate the formal adoption of the draft Inclusive Education Policy. The framework should move beyond generic inclusion principles and focus explicitly on digital learning and assistive technologies as core delivery mechanisms. In concrete terms, the framework can encompass the following:

- A national catalogue of approved assistive technologies and accessible digital content mapped to different disability types and learning levels.
- Mandatory accessibility through an inclusive design for all digital learning materials developed or procured.
- Measurable SEND inclusion targets embedded within EMIS reporting, along with progress tracking at district and school level.
- Clear referral and identification pathways, with digitally supported screening protocols for early detection of learning difficulties and neurodevelopmental conditions.

2. Modernise data systems for nuanced SEND identification

DIESH should upgrade the EMIS to mandate the disaggregation of learning and cognitive difficulties (e.g., dyslexia, neurodevelopmental conditions) alongside physical and sensory impairments. Current EMIS data conflate these different categories, undermining target allocation and masking the scale of unmet need.

Cross-sector collaboration between health and education is needed to support the transition of university-piloted digital screening tools into national early identification protocols, deploying them at early childhood development centres to catch developmental delays sooner to trigger the appropriate referral pathways.

3. Leverage digital platforms for scalable teacher capacity building

Ministry of Education and Development Partners should address the severe shortage of specialist teachers by utilising national eLearning platforms and mobile learning to deliver continuous professional development (CPD) and refresher courses. Training modules should focus on equipping teachers with the following practical competencies:

- Designing and delivering differentiated lesson plans within a single mixed-ability classroom.
- Using low bandwidth tools to ensure learning continuity and minimise school disruptions.
- Using text-to-speech tools, screen readers, and audio-based content to support learners with visual impairments or dyslexia.
- Applying structured observation and digitally assisted screening checklists to identify learners who may require referral for specialist assessment.
- Local Education Officers should facilitate peer-to-peer sharing and practical application of inclusive techniques within mainstream schooling. Resource centres should promote an 'open-minded, context-sensitive' approach to learning among practitioners.

4. Bridge the innovation-to-scale gap for EdTech and assistive devices

Development partners and private specialist centres should establish pooled funding mechanisms, where development partners can match government contribution to scale proven, locally developed accessible digital content (such as electronic Braille and digital sign language tools) from the project phase to national distribution. Scaling eligibility should be tied to independently evaluated evidence of learning improvement, using agreed metrics such as gains in literacy and numeracy scores. Such an approach would ensure that public funds are channelled through proven solutions and EdTech developers are provided a clear pathway to national adoption.

The Ministry of Education should ensure that foundational learning reforms and general digital learning rollouts automatically incorporate

‘accessibility by design’ to serve diverse learning needs without requiring separate, retrofitted investments for SEND. In practice, this means:

- Requiring suppliers to demonstrate compliance with accessibility standards for software, digital hardware, and content.
- Ensuring that physical device procurement includes accessible input and output mechanisms (tactile keyboards, audio playback, and adjustable displays) as standard features.
- Ensuring a robust checklist-based accessibility review tied into the Ministry’s approval process for all digital curriculum material and teacher training content.

Conclusion

Malawi has the legal foundations, institutional will, and emerging digital tools to transform inclusive education; however, these assets must be unified under a renewed national strategy. By investing in tech-enabled diagnostics, accessible digital content, and scalable eLearning for teacher development, Malawi can move from institutional recognition of SEND to the delivery of high-quality, equitable education for every learner. The priority is clear: adopt an inclusive education framework, embed technology as a structural enabler, and ensure that every child with a disability has a trained teacher, an accessible learning environment, and a clear pathway to support.

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