



## Creating inclusive campuses: Exploring the challenges of higher education students with disabilities in Malaysia

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### ABSTRACT

Creating inclusive campuses is essential for ensuring that Students with Disabilities (SWD) can fully participate in higher education. While previous research has focused on well-established Malaysian universities, there is a critical gap in understanding the unique challenges faced by students with disabilities in newer institutions with limited resources and a developing support system. This study explores the challenges SWD encounter in achieving both academic success and social integration. Twelve university students with various disabilities, recruited from three Malaysian public universities established less than 50 years ago, participated in semi-structured interviews, highlighting areas needing urgent improvement. Using thematic analysis, four primary themes were identified: (1) academic challenges, (2) inadequate services and facilities, (3) mobility difficulties, and (4) social relationship problems. SWD struggle with the pace of instruction, managing their time, and accessing learning materials; experience challenges worsened by inadequate facilities, face reduced independence and participation due to mobility barriers; and experience social exclusion and stigma. These findings emphasise the systemic barriers that continue to hinder inclusivity and underscore the critical need for universities to adopt comprehensive strategies that provide SWD with effective support for academic achievement, well-being, and meaningful participation in campus life.

**Keywords:** student with disabilities, inclusivity, disability challenges, higher education, thematic analysis

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Higher education plays a transformative role in shaping individuals' futures, providing opportunities for personal growth, professional development, and social integration. For Students with Disabilities (SWD), access to higher education is particularly transformative, as it not only fosters independence and empowerment but also promotes equal opportunities in society. In Malaysia, formal education programs for SWD were first introduced in the 1980s. Recognising the importance of providing quality education for SWD, this area gained significant attention, culminating in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) becoming the first institution to offer an accredited degree program in Special Education in 1996 (Khairuddin et al., 2020).

According to the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, the total number of SWD enrolled in public universities in 2023 is 1,981, with visual disabilities being the most common at 1,132 students. This is followed by 450 students with other types of disabilities and 308 students with physical disabilities (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2023). Despite their relatively small numbers, the needs of students with disabilities must not be overlooked. A conducive and accessible learning environment is crucial to ensuring their academic success and overall well-being, as every individual has an equal right to a high quality of life and education.

Recognising the importance of accessibility for SWD, the *Dasar Inklusif Orang Kurang Upaya* was introduced as a government initiative to enhance facilities and support systems in universities, ensuring that students with disabilities are no longer denied the opportunity to pursue higher education (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2019). Under the guidelines established by the Ministry of Education Malaysia, all 20 public universities nationwide are required to implement the policy and set up a Disabilities Service Unit starting from the 2019/2020 student intake (Zainal & Min, 2021).

While the push for inclusivity in higher education has gained momentum nationally, with initiatives and policies emphasising equal access and support for all students, the reality for SWD in Malaysia highlights persistent gaps. Although progress has been made to promote inclusive education, many universities still struggle to fully address the diverse needs of SWD (Zaki & Ismail, 2021). As a result, these students continue to report significant difficulties, demonstrating that efforts to create truly inclusive environments have yet to achieve their full potential.

Previous research has explored the experiences of SWD in Malaysian higher education, focusing primarily on well-established, older universities with extensive resources and a longer history of accommodating diverse student populations. A study by Yusmarhaini Yusof et al. (2019), for instance, was conducted at ten of the oldest universities in the country. These institutions typically have greater access to resources, including infrastructure, support services, and experienced staff, which can influence how they address the needs of SWD. Such studies have highlighted challenges related to physical accessibility, limited awareness among faculty and peers, and the availability of specialised services. While these findings provide valuable insights, they may not fully capture the realities faced by students in newer universities, which often operate with different resource constraints, institutional cultures, and levels of readiness to accommodate diverse student populations.

Newer universities, while aspiring to establish themselves as competitive and inclusive institutions, often face unique challenges. Limited budgets, developing infrastructures, and evolving policies can affect their ability to provide the necessary accommodations and support systems for SWD (Fernández-Batanero et al., 2022). These institutions may also lack the established networks of advocacy and expertise found in older universities. Consequently, understanding the experiences of SWD in these settings is crucial to creating a more comprehensive picture of inclusivity in Malaysian higher education.

This article aims to address this gap by investigating the experiences of SWD in three different Malaysian universities that were established less than 50 years ago. By focusing on these institutions, the study seeks to uncover the unique challenges faced by students within emerging academic settings and to identify opportunities for creating more inclusive campus environments. This research not only provides a comparative perspective on inclusivity in Malaysian higher education but also offers actionable insights to guide the development of policies and practices that better serve SWD in diverse university contexts.

## **2 METHODS**

### **2.1 Design and Respondents**

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the experiences of Students with Disabilities (SWD) in Malaysian public universities. This approach was selected as it allows for a systematic yet flexible means of gaining rich insights into respondents' perceptions of their lived experiences.

This study employed purposive sampling to select respondents who met the following criteria: (a) individuals aged 18 years or older; (b) currently enrolled as students in a public university established less than 50 years ago; and (c) identified as having a disability, but excluding developmental disabilities, deaf or mute.

The respondents in this research were selected based on specific criteria to ensure their relevance to the study's focus. First, individuals aged 18 years or older were included, as this reflects the typical age range of university students in Malaysia. Second, participants were required to be enrolled in a public university established within the last 50 years, aligning with the study's aim to explore the challenges faced by Students with Disabilities (SWD) within newer public universities. Although there are 15 such institutions nationwide, respondents were recruited from three of them. Additionally, respondents were identified as having a disability, with the exception of those with developmental disabilities, deafness, or muteness. This exclusion was not a reflection of the importance of these groups' experiences but rather a methodological decision driven by the nature of this qualitative study. Since the research relied heavily on verbal interviews to capture detailed narratives, communication barriers could have hindered the depth and accuracy of data collection.

The decision also considered the specialised approaches and resources required to effectively engage with respondents from these groups, such as sign language interpreters or alternative data collection methods. These were beyond the scope of this study. By establishing these criteria, the

study ensured a focused and manageable scope while addressing the primary objectives of the research.

Recruitment began by reaching out to Disability Service Units and student associations in three public universities. These organisations were identified as key points of contact for SWD, as they manage support services and have direct communication with students. Potential respondents were contacted via email, where they were provided with an information sheet detailing the study's objectives, eligibility criteria, and expectations for involvement. Respondents were selected based on their willingness to share their experiences and their diverse backgrounds to ensure a range of perspectives. The final sample comprised twelve (12) university students (five females and seven males) aged between 21 and 25 years. The sample size for this study was in line with Creswell & Poth's (2024) recommendation for a qualitative study, which is four to five. Respondents represented a diverse range of disabilities, including physical, visual, and mental impairments, and all held valid Persons with Disabilities (PWD) cards. Table 1 provides a detailed overview of the respondents' backgrounds, including their gender, age, and specific types of disabilities.

**Table 1.** Respondents' backgrounds.

Respondent	Gender	Age	Types of disability
R1	Female	21	Visual Disability
R2	Male	21	Visual Disability
R3	Male	21	Visual Disability
R4	Male	23	Physical Disability
R5	Male	21	Visual Disability
R6	Male	21	Visual Disability
R7	Male	22	Psychiatric Disability (Chronic Anxiety Disorder)
R8	Female	25	Visual Disability
R9	Female	24	Visual Disability
R10	Female	23	Physical Disability
R11	Female	21	Visual Disability
R12	Male	22	Physical Disability

## 2.2 Ethical Considerations

The ethical considerations were undertaken to ensure the rights, privacy, and well-being of respondents throughout the research process. The first step involves obtaining informed consent, during which respondents are informed about the research objectives, confidentiality measures to protect their privacy, and the voluntary nature of their participation. Before any data collection begins, respondents are given ample opportunity to review the consent forms, ask questions, and provide their consent. Their rights and well-being are prioritised, as participation is entirely voluntary, and they may withdraw from the study at any time without any repercussions.

All information pertaining to the respondents was treated as confidential and securely stored to maintain their anonymity and privacy. Additionally, respondents have the right to be provided with a detailed explanation of the research objectives and methodology.

## 2.3 Procedure

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain an in-depth understanding of the respondents' experiences. The interviews lasted between 30 minutes and 1 hour, allowing sufficient time for respondents to share their thoughts and elaborate on their responses. Each session was audio-recorded with the respondents' consent to ensure accuracy, and the recordings were later transcribed verbatim, preserving every word and nuance expressed during the conversation.

Respondents were encouraged to reflect deeply on their experiences and provide detailed accounts of the challenges they faced as SWD. By conducting the interviews in Malay, respondents could communicate their experiences without the potential barriers of a second language. The primary question guiding the discussion was: *What are the challenges faced by SWD at their university?* This open-ended question allowed respondents to explore various aspects of their lives, including academic, social, and environmental challenges, offering rich and meaningful insights into their unique perspectives.

## 2.4 Analysis

The study utilised thematic analysis to interpret the qualitative data, enabling a detailed exploration of respondents' experiences. Thematic analysis is a flexible and widely used method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It allows for rich, detailed, and complex accounts of data that are especially useful in understanding the lived realities of marginalised groups such as SWD. This method ensured a structured approach to data analysis, allowing for a nuanced understanding of the challenges encountered by SWD in higher education settings in Malaysia.

The data were analysed using the six-phase framework of Thematic Analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, the transcripts were read repeatedly to achieve familiarity, followed by the generation of initial codes to capture meaningful features of the data. Codes were then collated into potential themes, which were reviewed, refined, and clearly defined to reflect the essence of respondents' experiences. Finally, the themes were organised into a coherent narrative and supported with direct

quotations in the results section. This systematic process ensured a rigorous and trustworthy analysis of the challenges faced by SWD.

### 3 RESULTS

Through a detailed analysis of respondent interviews, this section highlights the primary challenges faced by SWD in Malaysian universities. The findings are organised into four key themes, which are (1) academic challenges, (2) inadequate services and facilities, (3) mobility difficulties, and (4) lack of social support. Each theme represents critical areas requiring improved inclusivity efforts. Respondents' feedback, originally shared in Malay, has been carefully translated into English to ensure accurate representation of their experiences and perspectives. Table 2 provides a concise summary of these themes and their subthemes, offering an overview of the key insights from the analysis.

**Table 2.** Challenges faced by students with disabilities.

Themes		Sub themes
Theme 1: Academic challenges	–	Struggles in following lessons
	–	Extra time needed
	–	Difficulties in accessing academic materials
Theme 2: Inadequate services and facilities	–	Inaccessibility of university facilities
	–	Environmental adaptation
	–	Lack of SWD unit support and staff's awareness
Theme 3: Mobility difficulties	–	Difficulties in navigating the campus
	–	Challenges in participating in the university's activities
Theme 4: Lack of social support	–	Stigma
	–	Communication problems

#### 3.1 Academics Challenges

Academic challenges emerged as the first theme, reflecting the difficulties SWD encounter in managing their studies and engaging with learning materials. This theme comprises three subthemes: (1) struggles in following lessons, (2) extra time needed, and (3) difficulties in accessing academic materials.

One major difficulty reported was following lessons in class, particularly for respondents with visual impairments, when engaging with subjects that required close attention to visual details, such as calculations. Fast-paced teaching and the reliance on visual methods such as whiteboard notes or slides left many struggling to keep up. Several respondents described being unable to grasp processes in subjects that required visual attention, such as calculations, which affected their

ability to engage fully in lessons. For example, one respondent explained how even sitting at the front of the class did not help him keep up with the pace of teaching: "There is a difficulty... like wanting to learn, even if I sit in front but can't see.... I can't catch what is learned [what was taught], especially the calculation lesson" (R6).

Time management posed another significant challenge. Many respondents noted that completing academic tasks required them to invest more hours than their peers, particularly those with visual impairments who depended on recorded lectures or screen-reading software. This additional effort often slowed their progress and prolonged the time needed for assignments. One respondent highlighted how routine tasks such as completing coursework demanded far more time: "The record used to be self-study [class recordings were used during revisions] ... assignment will take a long time to find information on Google" (R2).

Difficulties also arose from the way teaching materials were provided. While instructors frequently shared notes in digital form, these were not always compatible with assistive devices. As a result, students often had to reformat materials, such as converting them into braille or scanning documents, which was both time-consuming and unreliable. One respondent explained, "If it's like a note from the lecturer, I have to braille it back because the lecturer gave it in softcopy form" (R9). Another added that even when scanning applications were used, the results were not always accurate: "If the scan [the scanned materials] is a little difficult to read, you can use the apps, but it runs around a bit [the apps did not read the materials correctly], that's what it has" (R8).

Accessing library resources presented further difficulties. With most materials available only in hard copy, respondents often had to depend on friends to help locate and interpret resources. This reliance created another layer of complexity in their academic experience. As one respondent shared, "Usually, if you want to find information, you can go to the library there. But when you get to the library, it's because everything is in hard copy, so if you want to ask another friend for help, it's another story" (R11).

Overall, these challenges forced SWD to put in substantially more effort than their peers, often doubling their workload. This not only caused physical and mental fatigue but also emphasised the need for more inclusive academic support systems that can alleviate the disproportionate burden placed on students with disabilities.

### **3.2 Inadequate Services and Facilities**

The second theme, inadequate services and facilities, reflects the limitations students experienced with institutional support and campus infrastructure. This theme consists of three subthemes: (1) lack of university accessible facilities, (2) environmental adaptation, and (3) lack of SWD unit support and staff's awareness. These findings highlight how gaps in services and facilities undermined efforts to create an inclusive university environment.

One major concern was the inaccessibility of campus facilities, such as the library. Respondents described how facilities meant for SWD were either unavailable or misused. For instance, a toilet designated for SWD had been converted into a storage space, while the absence of an accessible

entrance at the lower ground floor forced students with physical impairments to use the stairs at the main entrance. Parking facilities also posed challenges, as limited spaces often created competition among SWD, sometimes forcing them to park far from their faculties or risk fines from campus police. As one respondent explained, "If you look at this library, the top floor has a toilet, but I can't access it; they're using it as a store... There's only one parking lot for disabled students, and we have to fight for it. When I park elsewhere, I risk being fined by the auxiliary police" (R4).

Respondents also reported difficulties with residential and campus environments. Dormitory rooms were often described as being too cramped, which restricted mobility and affected comfort. The uncomfortable environment not only affects students with physical disabilities in terms of mobility, but also affects students with mental health issues. One respondent shared how this contributed to their tendency to avoid staying in the room: "The room is okay, but I don't like cramped places. Maybe it's just me... I don't know if it has anything to do with my illness, but I feel like I need a bigger space. That's why I leave the room to walk outside; I don't like sitting in it" (R7). Beyond the dormitories, inadequate pedestrian pathways limited safe mobility across campus. Respondents suggested improvements such as constructing accessible "elephant tracks" or redesigning existing steep walkways. For example, one respondent remarked, "They can make an elephant track from the dormitory to the classroom. At least I can go by myself; I don't have to wait for others" (R10). Another respondent noted, "The pedestrian path provided needs to be improved because the existing path is too steep and difficult for visually impaired students" (R9).

A further issue was the lack of staff awareness about the presence and needs of SWD. Several respondents felt misunderstood or even stigmatised in their daily interactions. For example, one respondent recalled an incident when their use of an elevator drew negative reactions from staff, who initially questioned why they used it to access only one floor. Only after noticing the respondent's physical limitations did the staff appear to understand. The student reflected:

"Challenge eh... this is about the university's awareness with the students because... It's as if we disclosed the information during registration, but after entering, it's as if we never told them, as if they never had any information that they also have students like this... Like that day, when I got on the elevator, there was a sound, like why am I going up just one floor... after they saw the way I walked, it was okay..." (R4)

In addition, respondents emphasised the need for a dedicated unit to support SWD on campus. They believed such a unit could centralise resources and address challenges related to accessibility, accommodation, and inclusion. As one respondent suggested, "Perhaps they can establish an OKU (persons with disabilities) unit" (R12).

These findings reveal that inadequate facilities, insufficient services, and a lack of staff awareness compounded the challenges faced by SWD, reinforcing the urgent need for more inclusive and supportive campus environments.



### **3.3 Mobility Difficulties**

While inadequate facilities contribute to challenges faced by SWD, the third theme, mobility difficulties, specifically focuses on their lived experiences of mobility and navigation across campus environments. This theme is composed of two subthemes: (1) difficulties in navigating campus, and (2) challenges in participating in the university's activities. Together, these subthemes demonstrate how mobility-related challenges restricted students' participation in both academic and social activities, often leaving them dependent on others for support.

Respondents with visual impairments reported that moving independently across campus was particularly challenging, especially when travelling to unfamiliar or rarely visited locations. Difficulties in identifying directions or locating specific meeting points often created anxiety and slowed participation in group work. These challenges extended beyond campus boundaries, as visually impaired students also found it difficult to identify ride-hailing services such as Grab without assistance. One respondent explained, "If it's like going out, it's a bit difficult because I don't see the Grab that we ordered... The challenge is also possible if it's a group assignment, right? They pin that one place, and if it's a place I rarely go to, it's hard to go there because I can't see where our group is sitting. I'm afraid I'll end up in the wrong group" (R6).

In addition to navigation, mobility difficulties also affected participation in university-organised physical activities. Respondents with physical impairments described feelings of sadness and exclusion when they were unable to join sports or outdoor events. Watching their peers actively participate while they remained on the sidelines reinforced a sense of limitation and emotional distress. As one respondent shared, "We see that there are many physical activities at the university itself, like running... From an emotional point of view, we also feel upset because of physical constraints. We can't join, so we sometimes feel down... like with physical or outdoor activities" (R4).

Transportation within campus emerged as another pressing issue, particularly in large universities where distances between faculties and facilities were significant. Respondents emphasised that walking in the hot climate made it even more difficult to attend classes or access services, highlighting the need for more accessible transportation services. One respondent noted, "If you look at this university, for me it is very large compared to the institution next door. It is large, so for me, it needs a transport because we need to go somewhere hot" (R8).

Mobility difficulties restricted students' independence and reduced their opportunities to fully participate in university life. These findings underscore the need for universities to adopt a holistic approach to mobility, combining improvements in physical infrastructure with practical accommodations such as campus transport systems to create a truly inclusive environment.

### **3.4 Lack of Social Support**

The fourth theme, lack of social support, captures the interpersonal challenges that Students with Disabilities (SWD) experienced in their interactions with peers and staff. This theme includes two

subthemes: (1) stigma, and (2) communication problems. These challenges demonstrate how social dynamics within the university significantly shaped students' sense of belonging and emotional well-being.

One recurring difficulty was the lack of consideration from peers in shared living spaces. For instance, a student with visual impairments explained how navigating dark corridors in the college was especially challenging when roommates failed to turn on the lights, despite repeated requests. She reflected, "For the challenge, at the college... because I live at level G... people rarely turn on the lights. For example, if I go to my room [come back from class] late on Monday because my class is finished after 7 o'clock... it's inconvenient. They don't open the corridor lights... If I go out, I open it [turn on the lights], but if I don't, they don't" (R1).

Beyond living arrangements, many respondents reported encountering stigma and negative attitudes from peers, which often resulted in feelings of isolation and rejection. As one respondent explained, "I try to get along with them, but when they saw me, they convulsed before their eyes. Many are not very comfortable. Some stay away" (R3).

Emotional discomfort in using assistive devices also added to social challenges. Some respondents admitted to feeling shy or self-conscious about being seen with mobility aids, which limited their ability to navigate confidently. For example, one respondent noted, "I should have brought a stick, but I didn't bring it because I was shy" (R10).

Students with vision impairments further described difficulties in initiating or responding to social interactions, such as greeting or waving at others. This inability sometimes hindered their social engagement, as one respondent shared: "Then the challenge is, for example, normal people... they can see far away and can wave if people wave, but I can't see... What happened at this university is okay because I have been dealing with that since I was a child" (R5).

These experiences reveal that social exclusion, stigma, and communication barriers significantly hindered students' ability to feel included in campus life. Fostering understanding and empathy among peers, encouraging the normalisation of assistive devices, and improving lecturer awareness of accommodations are vital steps toward strengthening social integration for SWD.

## **4 DISCUSSION**

This study explored the challenges experienced by SWD in Malaysian public universities and revealed four major themes, namely academic challenges, inadequate services and facilities, mobility difficulties, and lack of social support. The findings of this study align closely with previous research conducted in Malaysian public universities, highlighting persistent challenges faced by SWD. Issues such as academic difficulties, inadequate services and facilities, mobility constraints, and social relationship problems have been consistently reported in local studies (Nasir & Efendi, 2020). By situating these results within existing literature, this study suggests that existing interventions may not fully address their needs. It also contributes to a deeper understanding of how systemic and institutional shortcomings shape the lived realities of SWD.

Academic challenges were among the most pressing concerns raised by respondents. Students reported difficulties in following lessons, managing time effectively, and accessing academic materials. These findings resonate with previous studies that have highlighted the academic barriers faced by SWD. For instance, a study by Ahmad et al. (2017) highlights barriers such as a lack of teaching aids, inappropriate assessment methods for certain categories of disabilities, and challenges related to communication and accessible facilities. The findings further support previous research by Khairuddin et al. (2020) and Yusof et al. (2019), which emphasised the lack of adequate training resources and institutional support for SWD.

The second theme, inadequate services and facilities, reflects gaps in institutional support and infrastructure. Respondents described inaccessible toilets, limited parking, poorly designed dormitories, and a lack of staff awareness about disability needs. These findings are consistent with Chan et al. (2023), who found that physical inaccessibility remains a key barrier for Malaysian SWD despite the existence of policies. Similarly, Zaki and Ismail (2021) argued that while inclusive education policies exist, implementation remains fragmented and inconsistent.

Mobility challenges identified in previous studies were echoed in the experiences of respondents in this research. Research by Badri and Amin (2018) reveals findings on mobility difficulties faced by students with visual impairments were mirrored in the account of R6, who described the struggles of navigating unfamiliar locations due to an inability to perceive routes or environments clearly. These challenges reinforce the need for more comprehensive campus accessibility planning to support SWD, particularly those with vision impairments. Mohd Zin et al. (2023) also emphasised the support required, such as special equipment, facilities, and infrastructure, in order to ease SWD's mobility.

Social interaction barriers, another recurring theme in previous studies, also emerged as a significant challenge in this research. For instance, Khir and Zakaria (2023) identified a lack of social support as a major obstacle for SWD, particularly in interactions with peers who may not fully understand their needs. This was evident in the account of R1, whose roommate failed to accommodate her vision impairment by neglecting to turn on the corridor lights. This act of neglect not only created practical difficulties but also reflected a broader issue of limited understanding and empathy among peers, which can deepen feelings of isolation for SWD.

Taken together, these findings show that students with disabilities continue to face academic, infrastructural, mobility, and social barriers that restrict their full participation in higher education. What emerges clearly is that these challenges are not isolated but systemic, cutting across multiple dimensions of university life. Academic barriers intersect with emotional well-being, infrastructural limitations restrict independence, and social stigma undermines belonging. By capturing these interconnections, this study adds depth to existing knowledge and underscores the importance of approaching inclusivity holistically rather than piecemeal.

In conclusion, this study provided valuable insights into the lived experiences of SWD in three Malaysian public universities. Four major themes emerged: academic challenges, inadequate services and facilities, mobility difficulties, and a lack of social support. Each finding highlights the barriers that continue to hinder full participation in higher education. While many of these

issues have been reported in prior studies, the present findings deepen understanding by highlighting their emotional impact. Participants described frustration with inaccessible learning environments, the stress of unmet accommodation needs, and feelings of exclusion stemming from limited awareness among peers and staff. These findings emphasise the urgent need for universities to move beyond policy statements and adopt practical, student-centred strategies that ensure equitable access and participation for all learners.

Although Malaysia has introduced policies such as the *Dasar Inklusif Orang Kurang Upaya*, the findings reveal a persistent gap between policy frameworks and everyday realities. Inaccessible facilities, insufficient academic support, and inadequate social inclusion remain significant challenges, reflecting systemic shortcomings that extend across institutions. Bridging this gap requires universities to move beyond symbolic compliance and instead embed inclusivity into infrastructure, pedagogy, and campus culture.

The implications of these findings are threefold. First, at the institutional level, universities need to move beyond compliance with minimum requirements and adopt proactive measures such as upgrading facilities, improving mobility infrastructure, and establishing dedicated disability support units. Second, academic practices must be made more inclusive through accessible teaching materials, flexible learning approaches, and faculty training to better support SWD in diverse disciplines. Third, cultural and social inclusivity should be prioritised by fostering empathy, raising awareness among peers and staff, and creating supportive peer networks that reduce stigma and promote integration. Together, these strategies can help universities create environments that support both the academic success and the well-being of SWD.

Future research should widen its scope to include developmental and hearing disabilities, as well as private and older public universities, to capture a more comprehensive picture of inclusivity in Malaysian higher education. Such studies would provide valuable insights for tailoring interventions across varied institutional contexts.

This study reaffirms the systemic nature of barriers faced by SWD while emphasising the urgent need for coordinated action. Policymakers, administrators, and educators must collaborate to transform inclusive policies into practical realities. By doing so, universities can ensure that students with disabilities are not only granted access to higher education but are also empowered to thrive within it, academically, socially, and personally.

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## **AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS**

The first author conceptualized and designed the study, involved in data collection, conducted the primary data analysis, and wrote the manuscript. Second author assisted in data collection, contributed to initial coding of the data, and drafted parts of the early manuscript. Third author supported data collection and literature review and contributed to the initial draft. Fourth author provided critical revisions, proofreading, and guidance during the journal submission process. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

## **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to this study.

## **DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT**

The data that support the findings of this study are not publicly available due to privacy and ethical restrictions to protect participants' confidentiality.

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