

Challenges and Solutions in Teaching and Learning for Students with Disabilities in Higher Education Institutions

Hazlin Falina Rosli

Faculty of Social Sciences, Selangor Islamic University

Safura Ahmad Sabri

Faculty Management & Muamalah, Selangor Islamic University

Nur Fikhriah Takril

Faculty Management & Muamalah, Selangor Islamic University

Abstract

Raising public awareness about People with Disabilities (PWD) requires addressing accessibility challenges within the educational systems of higher education institutions (HEIs). Advocacy efforts and ensuring equal opportunities for PWD demand serious attention. This study examines the role of academic staff, focusing on fostering an understanding of the needs of PWD within HEIs using a qualitative approach through in-depth interviews. Five participants were selected, including academic faculty who works closely with PWD students and PWD students from various disability categories, such as visual and auditory impairments. The findings indicate that the ability of academic staff in HEIs is perceived as limited due to insufficient knowledge of teaching practices. Additionally, the lack of necessary resources and support for PWD students poses significant challenges for academic staff. Consequently, the study explores the challenges and responsibilities of educators in incorporating specialized education into higher education. Addressing these challenges is crucial in strengthening intervention efforts and promoting inclusive discussions aimed at raising awareness of PWD issues in society.

Article Progress

Received: 22 September 2024

Revised: 06 October 2024

Accepted: 20 October 2024

Keywords: Disability, Awareness, Accessibilities, Challenge, Equal Rights, Opportunities

1. INTRODUCTION

The development of communities and individual personalities is significantly shaped by the demand for education. It is widely acknowledged that education is a crucial tool for enhancing human capital, encompassing a person's abilities regardless of their background. These educational matters equally apply to individuals with disabilities (PWD). According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020), about 93 million children and 720 million adults, roughly 15% of the global population, have disabilities or impairments. Despite being a minority, PWD are valued members of society, entitled to equal rights and opportunities to participate fully.

PWD students are afforded the same educational opportunities as their non-disabled peers. The Persons with Disabilities Act (2008) ensures that individuals with special needs are not excluded from mainstream education due to their disabilities. This is grounded in the understanding that PWD have similar aspirations to pursue higher education, as well as shared interests and goals with other students. Given that some PWD demonstrate cognitive abilities equal to or exceeding those of average students, they deserve equal educational opportunities to avoid being marginalized. Through advanced education, PWD can expand their knowledge, develop social skills, gain academic credentials, and enhance intellectual capacities—key steps toward empowering this group (Hurst, 1996).

In Malaysia, the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) is dedicated to providing inclusive access to higher and lifelong education for all citizens, including PWD, to foster skills development and sustainable livelihoods. MOHE's enforcement of the PWD Inclusive Policy at Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) reflects its commitment to promoting an inclusive, non-discriminatory society,

aligning with the government's vision (MOHE, 2021). Similarly, Strategic Thrust 3 of the Disabled Action Plan 2016–2022 focuses on cultivating gifted and high-potential human capital by enhancing access to high-quality, inclusive education for PWD at all levels, including lifelong learning. This approach highlights the growing recognition of PWD as a group vital to the nation's development. Like other societal groups, the PWD community significantly contributes to the country's economic progress.

Various definitions describe PWD. The World Health Organization (WHO) identifies PWD as individuals who, due to physical or mental conditions, are unable to fully or partially meet their social living needs in the way typical individuals can (WHO, 2020). The Disabled Action Plan (PTOKU) 2016–2022 defines PWD as individuals with long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments, facing significant challenges in daily life, which hinders their societal integration. Wan Sabri Wan Husin (2013) further describes PWD as individuals with diverse neurological, sensory, communication, behavioral, emotional, and physical traits, which limit their ability to lead a standard life and require varying degrees of support from others.

HEIs are responsible for ensuring inclusive education for all students, including those with disabilities. However, despite efforts to provide equal opportunities, students with disabilities often face multiple challenges that hinder their academic achievements. This article explores the difficulties faced by academic staff in supporting PWD students and provides suggestions for potential solutions.

2. TEACHING AND LEARNING CHALLENGES AND PROBLEMS

2.1 Discrimination and Social Stigma

Students with disabilities often face social stigma and discrimination, which can negatively impact both their academic journey and psychological well-being. Creating an inclusive and supportive campus environment is essential, and this can be accomplished through awareness campaigns, peer support programs, and encouraging positive attitudes towards disability among students and staff.

Social stigma and discrimination towards disabled students are widespread issues that can lead to feelings of isolation, lower self-esteem, and heightened stress. These experiences often result in poor academic outcomes and mental health issues. Research by Daruwalla and Darcy (2020) demonstrates how stigma can significantly hinder students with disabilities from fully participating in academic activities, affecting both their academic performance and overall quality of life.

Awareness campaigns are vital in addressing social stigma and promoting inclusivity. These campaigns educate the campus community on the challenges faced by students with disabilities and emphasize the importance of fostering a supportive environment. Zabeli and Gërguri (2021) argue that well-crafted awareness campaigns can help dispel negative stereotypes and promote a more accepting and inclusive campus culture. Such campaigns can take the form of workshops, seminars, and multimedia initiatives that focus on the experiences and contributions of disabled students.

Peer support programs are also crucial in enhancing the social integration and academic success of disabled students. These initiatives allow students to connect with peers who can provide emotional support, guidance, and practical help. A study by Connelly and Milligan (2019) found that peer support programs not only improve the social experiences of disabled students but also boost their academic persistence and overall well-being. Peer mentors help bridge the gap between disabled students and the broader campus community, creating a more inclusive environment.

Fostering positive attitudes towards disability among both students and staff is key to building an inclusive campus culture. This can be achieved through targeted training programs that highlight the value of diversity and inclusion. Khuzwayo and Chivhanga (2022) suggest that such training effectively challenges biases and promotes empathy, resulting in a more supportive environment for all. These programs should cover topics like disability etiquette, accessibility, and the benefits of diversity in academic settings.

Evidence highlights the success of initiatives that promote an inclusive campus culture. Research by McNaughton and Light (2022) indicates that campuses with active inclusion programs report higher satisfaction and engagement levels among disabled students. These programs—comprising awareness campaigns, peer support, and staff training—are crucial in reducing stigma and enhancing both academic and social experiences for disabled students. Such efforts show the commitment of higher education institutions to creating an equitable learning environment.

Reducing social stigma and discrimination against students with disabilities is essential for their academic and mental well-being. HEIs can cultivate a supportive environment through awareness initiatives, peer support, and fostering positive attitudes towards disability, ultimately improving the educational experiences for all students.

2.2 Communication Barriers

Communication barriers between academic staff and students with disabilities can significantly hinder effective teaching and learning. For instance, students with hearing impairments may have trouble following lectures, while those with visual impairments may struggle to access written materials. Offering alternative communication methods and ensuring that all course materials are accessible can help overcome these challenges.

These communication barriers pose major obstacles for students with disabilities, often resulting in misunderstandings, reduced participation, and lower academic performance. Okon and Lawal (2020) argue that poor communication between educators and students with disabilities diminishes student engagement, ultimately compromising their overall educational experience. Addressing these barriers is essential to fostering an inclusive learning environment.

Students with hearing impairments often face challenges in following lectures, particularly in large classrooms where effective use of audio-visual aids is lacking. Emira and Brewster (2021) note that such students may miss key parts of the lecture, leading to gaps in comprehension and retention. Tools like sign language interpreters, real-time captioning, and hearing assistive technologies can significantly improve their learning experience.

Similarly, students with visual impairments struggle to access standard written materials such as textbooks, lecture notes, and digital content. Miele and Jenkins (2022) emphasize the importance of providing alternative formats like Braille, large print, and screen reader-compatible documents. Making all course materials available in accessible formats is crucial to enabling full participation for students with visual impairments.

Introducing alternative communication methods can greatly enhance the learning experience for students with disabilities. Offering lecture transcripts, audio recordings, and visual aids can bridge communication gaps. Clark and MacGillivray (2019) suggest that using multiple communication channels improves understanding and retention for all students, including those with disabilities. Additionally, applying inclusive teaching practices like Universal Design for Learning (UDL) can accommodate diverse learning styles and preferences.

Ensuring that all course materials are accessible is a key strategy for overcoming communication barriers. This involves using accessible document formats, adding descriptions to visual content, and employing accessible educational technologies. Wendt and Mason (2023) argue that institutions that prioritize accessibility in their instructional design see better academic outcomes for students with disabilities. Measures like conducting accessibility audits and training faculty in inclusive practices further support this goal.

Empirical research highlights the positive effects of accessible communication methods and materials on the academic success of students with disabilities. For example, Zhang and Wang (2021) found that students who receive accessible course materials and benefit from alternative communication methods report higher satisfaction and academic achievement. These findings underscore the importance of institutional dedication to accessibility and inclusivity.

Addressing communication barriers between academic staff and students with disabilities is vital for fostering an inclusive and effective learning environment. By offering alternative communication methods and ensuring the accessibility of all course materials, higher education institutions can overcome these challenges and enhance the educational experiences of students with disabilities. Committing to these practices not only supports the academic success of these students but also contributes to a more equitable educational system.

3. RESEARCH PROBLEMS

The academic performance of students with disabilities (PWD) is significantly influenced by the level of physical accessibility available in higher education institutions (HEIs). A study by Mohamad Esa and Alice Sabrina (2020) reveals that many facilities in HEIs are not specifically designed to meet the needs of PWD, as they prioritize the general public. This lack of specialized infrastructure poses a major challenge for PWD students, as it limits their ability to navigate campus environments, access educational resources, and fully participate in the learning process.

Carrasquilla (2022) highlights another critical issue: the insufficiency of academic training among educators, which hinders the effectiveness of inclusive education. Many lecturers are not equipped with the necessary skills to support PWD students, creating barriers in instruction. Hasnah et al. (2009) also underscore the challenges PWD students face due to adverse attitudes and biases from the campus community. These negative perceptions often result in feelings of inferiority and shame among PWD students, reinforcing their sense of isolation. The role of academic staff is crucial in fostering positive relationships with PWD students and advocating for their needs, particularly in terms of communication with the administration about improvements needed in facilities and resources.

Further research by Hasnah Toran et al. (2011) supports this finding, revealing that although the majority of educators are aware of communication challenges faced by PWD students, gaps remain in how these issues are addressed at an institutional level. Faculty involvement in transmitting PWD students' concerns to institutional leadership is essential for improving amenities and creating a supportive environment. However, as Hazlin, Wan Amizah, and Maizatul (2015) point out, the rights and needs of PWD students are often overlooked by regulatory authorities in Malaysia, further exacerbating their educational challenges.

Moreover, students with disabilities require tailored support, which includes both technical and interpersonal skills from academic staff. Lei (2007) and Norasmah and Rofilah (2013) emphasize that PWD students differ from their non-disabled peers, necessitating specialized knowledge such as proficiency in sign language, Braille, and other relevant tools for effective instruction. The development of these skills through comprehensive training programs is vital for improving the

teaching and learning experiences of PWD students. The lack of such training initiatives, as highlighted by Scheuerman et al. (2003), has led to a shortage of adequately prepared educators for PWD students in HEIs.

Frith (1991) further explores the concerns of educators regarding their preparedness to support PWD students, noting significant anxieties related to providing additional time for assignments, insufficient resources, and challenges in supervision and record-keeping. This research suggests that when academic staff are equipped with a deeper understanding of PWD needs, there is a positive shift in attitudes and practices, as also noted by Samsudin (2002). Sensitivity and compassion from both faculty and students are crucial in creating an inclusive and supportive educational environment for PWD students.

Collaboration among all stakeholders, including academic staff, administrative personnel, and student bodies, is essential for addressing the challenges faced by PWD students. Mbuva (2019) and Hussain et al. (2020) both stress the importance of support services and accommodations, such as accessible buildings, transport, and faculty training, in facilitating the academic success of PWD students. These studies emphasize that inclusive education requires more than just policy changes; it necessitates practical interventions that address the physical, social, and academic barriers PWD students encounter.

Despite the wealth of research on the challenges faced by PWD students, there remains a gap in theoretical frameworks and empirical studies that directly link specific factors, such as physical infrastructure and academic training, to the learning experiences of these students. For instance, while Mohamad Esa and Alice Sabrina (2020) highlighted the inadequacies in facility design, they did not explore the direct impact on academic performance. Similarly, Carrasquilla (2022) pointed out the lack of educator training but did not offer detailed solutions for how this issue could be addressed.

Studies by Hasnah et al. (2009) and Hasnah Toran et al. (2011) identified negative attitudes toward PWD students, yet there is still a need for research into strategies for changing these attitudes and fostering greater awareness on campus. Scheuerman et al. (2003) and Frith (1991) noted the lack of trained educators and appropriate teaching materials, but practical models of training and resource allocation were not provided.

Future research should focus on developing comprehensive theories that clearly link the physical design of facilities, academic training, and inclusive practices to the overall educational outcomes for PWD students. Such studies will bridge the gap between theory and practice, ultimately improving the quality of education for PWD students in HEIs. By addressing these key areas, HEIs can create an environment that supports the full potential of students with disabilities, fostering both their academic success and personal growth.

4. METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach was utilized in this study, where data was collected through interviews with selected academic staff and students with disabilities (PWD). This study involved participants from two higher education institutions, Politeknik Sultan Salahuddin Abdul Aziz Shah, Shah Alam and Selangor Islamic University. Given that the PWD category is divided into seven (7) categories, the selection did not encompass all categories of disabilities. Instead, participants were chosen based on their suitability and ability to answer the questions posed, focusing on the visually impaired (blind), hearing impaired (deaf), and other categories. The primary focus of these interviews was to gather insights regarding the learning needs of PWD students during their studies and the role of academic staff in raising awareness of PWD needs within higher education institutions. Qualitative data

analysis was performed on information obtained from five (5) informants, consisting of academic staff and PWD students, through in-depth interviews conducted at the two educational institutions mentioned. This approach allowed the researcher to comprehensively understand the study objectives by examining the perspectives of those directly involved in the educational process.

5. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Based on the data analysis, it was found that the initiatives of the relevant parties consist of support systems and also curriculum and co-curriculum assessment systems.

a. Support System

The faculty members, particularly instructors, exhibit a consistent commitment to the well-being of students with disabilities by offering moral encouragement. PWD students are received warmly and are consistently met with a high level of dedication from the academic staff. Additionally, they actively engage in training sessions or seminars focused on instructional techniques tailored for PWD individuals, such as learning sign language to enhance communication between instructors and students. This behavior illustrates the faculty's attentiveness and empathy towards the requirements of these PWD students.

"...So, if we meet on the roadside, we are friendly, greet with Assalamualaikum... Then, in the class, we find that there are these special students we personally touch with him. For example, we ask, okay Muhammad do you understand or not..." (Informant 1)

Personal engagement with students with disabilities can significantly enhance their educational experience. For example, taking the time to individually ask students if they understand the material can make them feel valued and supported. Research by Thompson and Dickey (2020) emphasizes that personal attention from educators helps build rapport and encourages students to express their needs and concerns, leading to better academic outcomes and a more inclusive classroom environment.

"...We decided at that time we give a token for the interview. Take a little budget from the grant, we give a little as a token. Then, we respond to any outpouring they convey. Actually, we need to get close to them because they want to share the story don't know to whom because they can't see. They also don't know who the lecturer is. But when they hear the voice of a caring lecturer, they will tell a little by little about their problems."

(Informant 1)

Emotional support and active listening are critical components of supporting students with disabilities. Creating opportunities for students to share their experiences and challenges in a safe and supportive environment is essential. As noted by Walker and Test (2022), students with disabilities often need a trusted person to confide in, especially when they face difficulties that others may not fully understand. Educators who actively listen and respond to students' concerns can provide much-needed emotional support and guidance.

"...We have a PA each academic advisor right. The PA for the first semester will meet again, he will get acquainted, he will first tell face-to-face with the PA what the problem is..." (Informant 2)

Personal academic advisors (PA) play a crucial role in supporting students with disabilities. The advisor meets with students at the beginning of each semester to understand and address their unique challenges. According to Allen and Bowles (2019), consistent and personalized academic advising significantly improves the academic outcomes and retention rates of students with disabilities. These advisors serve as a primary point of contact, ensuring that students receive the necessary support and resources.

"Haaa courses to learn sign language for lecturers. Then sometimes we have an outdoor program with the Bukit Jelutong community. They will call these PWD kids to breakfast, gotong royong together. Get all kinds of alms, right. There are industries that want to take LI students and those who have finished studying there are industries looking for." (Informant 2)

Offering sign language courses for lecturers is a proactive approach to creating an inclusive learning environment. These courses equip educators with the skills needed to communicate effectively with students who have hearing impairments. Research by Foster and Cue (2020) emphasizes the importance of such training in fostering an inclusive classroom atmosphere and enhancing the educational experience of deaf and hard-of-hearing students.

"...We will conduct courses for all lecturers who teach. Regardless of PIS to PUO. They make one place, everyone goes to the course there..." (Informant 2)

"They at the hostel, once a week there is a night, they will learn sign language. That's the initiative of the hostel's committee to help their friends, right." (Informant 2)

These initiatives help students with disabilities to communicate more effectively and foster a supportive community within the hostel environment. Research by Williams and Garcia (2022) highlights the positive impact of peer-led initiatives on the social integration and well-being of students with disabilities.

"Like me, throughout one semester in class, I'm not good at giving me. But at least like you don't say you can't do this. You will try your best and find the best way to find opportunities so that I continue to learn to the coming semester. That means there are motivators like you, it's good for PWD actually." (Informant 3)

Academic staff play a crucial role in motivating students with disabilities by fostering a positive and encouraging learning environment. Informant 3 highlighted the importance of educators who refrain from discouraging students and instead find ways to support their continued learning. According to Baker and Ray (2019), the presence of motivating and supportive educators is essential for the academic success and self-esteem of students with disabilities. These academic staff act as motivators, helping students to overcome challenges and persist in their studies.

The university management and administration also play a role by providing transportation facilities to PWD students as mentioned by informant Hanif who is a former student. "Like for example I am in IPT, there is a van to the KTM right. They already know me. For example, yeah. So, they are... If I want to go home at that time, I will take a van down to the KTM and they will help. That means from that angle the van facility there is okay for university students right for them to go here and there. It's easier..." (Informant 3)

The provision of transportation facilities by university management is another critical aspect of supporting students with disabilities. Informant Hanif, a former student, emphasized the importance of having accessible transportation, such as university vans, to facilitate easy movement to and from key locations like the KTM station. Research by Johnson and Lee (2020) indicates that accessible transportation is vital for the independence and mobility of students with disabilities, enabling them to participate fully in academic and extracurricular activities.

The government's efforts in providing sponsorship and scholarship assistance to this group of PWD students greatly assist them in pursuing higher education. "...Okay, their graduates. Because they study, they get an allowance. One semester RM3000 more. Get a scholarship not a loan... From Higher Education to give for scholarships..." (Informant 2)

Government efforts in providing sponsorship and scholarships to students with disabilities significantly aid their pursuit of higher education. Informant 2 noted that financial assistance, such as semester allowances and scholarships, helps alleviate the financial burden on students and allows

them to focus on their studies. According to Smith and Brown (2021), financial support from the government, including scholarships and allowances, is crucial in reducing financial barriers and promoting higher education accessibility for students with disabilities.

b. Curriculum and Co-curriculum Assessment System

This assistance is provided to students with disabilities to support their academic endeavours. This includes offering extended time for exam completion, furnishing supplementary materials for better comprehension, and tailoring a personalized learning framework based on their proficiency level.

Such initiatives are designed to streamline the educational evaluation procedure while also enhancing their learning experience, thereby broadening their prospects in the job market.

"...For example, before this there was no extra time for PWD especially autism or the blind, writing that writes slowly and so on. But now Alhamdulillah, the result of my interview with almost 10-15 PWD students, among them they suggest that the answer period be extended, which is 30 minutes. The second, the location of the examination place is downstairs not in DPU. If before this BPA put the students without identifying where the PWD is right. But Alhamdulillah, the BPA accepted this suggestion and starting from last semester we have started to notice these PWD children are given more attention. 30 minutes late to send exam papers and also the exam place is also at PKK..." (Informant 1)

Extended examination time and location adjustments are critical accommodations for students with disabilities, such as those with autism or visual impairments, who may require additional time to complete their exams. Informant 1 noted that based on feedback from interviews with 10-15 students with disabilities, the institution implemented a policy to extend exam time by 30 minutes and relocated exam venues to more accessible locations. As per the findings of Rao and Torres (2020), the implementation of these adjustments plays a crucial role in enhancing the academic outcomes and diminishing the stress levels experienced by students with impairments in examination settings, thus fostering an equitable evaluation atmosphere.

"...But because they have a lot of hands-on, they can do the project okay. So, the lecturer is okay with his marks. So, we look at attendance. Our attendance is not too rigid with him. If he can come, he can do what we ask him to do, that means he is okay."

"...If they are notes, exam questions, we simplify his sentence..."

"...We give the opportunity to learn here to get skills then he will continue into the world of work. Mostly the world of work. Now many are working at workshops, welding workshops, then electricians, wiring." (Informant 2)

Flexible attendance policies and adjustments in assessment criteria are also essential for accommodating students with disabilities. Informant 2 highlighted the importance of considering hands-on project work and not being overly rigid with attendance requirements. This flexibility allows students to demonstrate their skills and knowledge in practical settings. As noted by Black and Field (2019), flexible attendance and assessment policies help accommodate the varying needs and abilities of students with disabilities, thereby enhancing their academic success. Simplifying the language used in notes and exam questions is another important strategy for supporting students with disabilities. Informant 2 mentioned the need to simplify sentences in exam questions to make them more accessible. Research by Williams and Mayer (2021) supports this approach, indicating that clear and simplified language in assessment materials helps students with cognitive and learning disabilities better understand and respond to exam questions. Providing vocational training and preparing students with disabilities for the workforce is a key aspect of inclusive education. Informant 2 emphasized the importance of equipping students with practical skills that are directly applicable to the job market, such as working in workshops or as electricians. Jones and Gibbons (2020) assert that vocational training initiatives tailored to the distinct requirements of individuals

with disabilities can boost their chances of securing employment and streamline their integration into the labor market.

"...If the program that I take care of, we have indeed lowered it in terms of its co-curricular needs. So, from there, all of our assessments are totally different. Because the name of the program itself is different..." (Informant 4)

Customizing curricular and assessment programs to meet the unique needs of students with disabilities is essential for promoting inclusivity. Informant 4 mentioned that their program lowers co-curricular requirements and adopts different assessment criteria tailored to the specific needs of students with disabilities. Research by Green and Tilly (2022) highlights the effectiveness of individualized curricular adjustments in improving the academic outcomes and overall satisfaction of students with disabilities.

"Approximately he can understand we give marks. Not to say want to take full very much, no."

"Sometimes we do the exam a second time for him. I teach first the paper that we give once... Because our target is to make him understand..." (Informant 5)

Offering re-assessment opportunities and additional support is another important strategy. Informant 5 discussed the practice of conducting exams a second time and providing additional instruction to ensure students understand the material. According to Lee and Kim (2019), re-assessment opportunities and targeted instructional support help students with disabilities overcome learning challenges and achieve better academic outcomes.

The results of this finding according to a simpler theme as below:

Table 1: Result Finding

Category	Key Initiatives	Supporting Quotes
Support System	Commitment from faculty to support students with disabilities through moral encouragement, personal engagement, and tailored instructional approaches.	"If we meet on the roadside, we are friendly, greet with <i>Assalamualaikum</i> ... ask, okay Muhammad do you understand or not." (Informant 1)
	Emotional support and active listening to help students share their challenges.	"When they hear the voice of a caring lecturer, they will tell a little about their problems." (Informant 1)
	Personal Academic Advisors (PA) provide one-on-one support and guidance.	"The PA will meet face-to-face and discuss problems." (Informant 2)
	Sign language training for lecturers and students to foster communication.	"Courses to learn sign language for lecturers and weekly sessions at hostels." (Informant 2)
	Motivation from educators to encourage persistence in studies.	"Find the best way so that I continue learning to the next semester." (Informant 3)
	Accessible transportation provided by university management.	"University vans assist students with disabilities to commute to KTM and other locations." (Informant 3)
	Government sponsorship and scholarships to ease financial burdens.	"PWD students receive RM3000 per semester allowance and scholarships." (Informant 2)
Curriculum and Co-Curriculum Assessment System	Extended time and accessible venues for exams.	"30 minutes extra time for exams and accessible locations downstairs." (Informant 1)
	Flexible attendance and simplified language in assessment materials.	"We simplify exam questions and are flexible with attendance." (Informant 2)

Category	Key Initiatives	Supporting Quotes
	Vocational training to equip students with job market skills.	“Focus on practical skills like working in workshops or wiring.” (Informant 2)
	Tailored assessment programs to meet specific needs of students with disabilities.	“Assessment criteria are totally different for this program.” (Informant 4)
	Re-assessment opportunities and additional instructional support.	“We do the exam a second time and teach to ensure understanding.” (Informant 5)

6. IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES FOR PWDS RECEIVING EDUCATION IN HEIS

In Malaysia's educational system, the government places significant emphasis on addressing the needs and well-being of students with disabilities (PWD) at the primary and secondary levels, with the Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE) overseeing their education. Various strategies are in place to reduce dropout rates among PWD students, ultimately helping them achieve their full potential. However, as these students transition to higher education, the responsibility for meeting their needs shifts. Most higher education institutions (HEIs) bear the responsibility of ensuring access and providing necessary support for PWD students. Hasnah Toran et al. (2009) state that HEIs are obligated to uphold the social rights of PWD by creating a supportive environment and offering essential services. Failure to meet the educational needs of PWD students may lead to their exclusion from the national education system, hindering their overall development. Hence, educational institutions must ensure adequate assistance and support to help PWD students reach their full potential.

In this context, academic staff play a crucial role as they frequently interact with PWD students. Their involvement makes them key figures in supporting these students throughout the educational process. Due to their experience with PWD students, academic staff should have a foundational understanding of their needs in educational settings, distinguishing them from those who have limited contact with such students. These staff members should demonstrate empathy, sincerity, extensive knowledge of PWD, positive attitudes, unconditional acceptance, and consistent motivation (Supiah, 2006). Furthermore, it is essential for academic staff to recognize the importance of managing emotions effectively, especially when interacting with PWD students (Arman, 2020). A negative attitude from academic staff can hinder the effectiveness of teaching and learning for these students (Martin, 2003).

At the higher education level, academic staff must possess not only in-depth knowledge of their subjects but also creativity and innovation in their teaching approaches, particularly when working with students with disabilities. This is due to the distinct needs of these students, which require specialized teaching methods and aids to ensure effective learning (Abdul Rahim et al., 2006; Pratt & Stewart, 2002). Additionally, academic staff should be knowledgeable in managing individuals with disabilities, including understanding their personal traits, social interactions, cultural contexts, and relevant legal frameworks (World Vision International, 2007).

In terms of pedagogy, faculty members teaching students with disabilities should adopt a patient approach, especially when assigning tasks. This includes breaking assignments into smaller, manageable parts, which can significantly aid these students in their learning process (Raja Nur Fakhriah & Aizan Sofia, 2018). Educators should also be skilled in practical teaching methods and possess specialized knowledge, such as proficiency in sign language or Braille (Dobbins et al., 2009; Supiah, 2006; World Institute on Disability, 2005). Acquiring expertise in these areas is critical for ensuring that academic staff can effectively support students with disabilities in fulfilling their educational potential.

6.1 Awareness of staff towards PWD needs in HEI'S

One significant challenge in higher education is the lack of awareness and training among academic staff regarding the needs of students with disabilities (PWD). Many educators are not sufficiently prepared to meet the unique learning requirements of these students, leading to gaps in teaching efficacy. Professional development programs focused on disability awareness and inclusive teaching strategies are crucial to bridging this knowledge gap. Seale et al. (2021) emphasize that comprehensive training for academic staff enhances their ability to support students with disabilities effectively. Likewise, Lombardi et al. (2020) warn that without proper training, educators may inadvertently create inequitable learning environments, further marginalizing PWD students.

The current educational landscape in many higher education institutions (HEIs) reveals a substantial deficiency in the preparedness of academic staff to effectively teach students with disabilities. Research by Rao and Flores (2015) points out that many educators lack foundational knowledge in inclusive teaching practices. This gap can limit PWD students' academic progress, as lecturers may not be equipped to adapt curricula, employ assistive technologies, or design accessible learning environments.

Professional development programs tailored to disability awareness and inclusive teaching strategies are essential for closing this gap. These programs should cover a wide range of topics, including legal requirements, pedagogical techniques, and the use of assistive technologies. According to Scott et al. (2003), effective professional development initiatives can significantly improve educators' capacity to support diverse learners, leading to better academic outcomes for students with disabilities.

To foster an inclusive educational environment, HEIs must prioritize targeted professional development programs. These programs should incorporate training on Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which advocates flexible learning environments that accommodate diverse learning styles (Rose & Meyer, 2002). Moreover, workshops focusing on specific disabilities and the required teaching adaptations can provide academic staff with practical skills to address the needs of students with visual, hearing, and other impairments.

Empirical studies underscore the positive impact of professional development on educators' ability to teach students with disabilities. For instance, McHatton and Parker (2013) found that educators who participated in structured training programs reported increased confidence and effectiveness in their teaching practices. These educators also demonstrated a greater commitment to inclusive practices, creating a more supportive and accessible learning environment for all students.

The shift in the educational framework for individuals with disabilities has led to greater integration of these students into mainstream educational programs. Collaboration among academic staff and other stakeholders is crucial to achieving learning objectives for students with disabilities in HEIs. Challenges in managing the learning environment, often due to a lack of training or ineffective teaching approaches, need to be addressed to provide an enabling environment for PWD students. Research by Mohamed Esa and Alice (2020) suggests that a conducive environment significantly improves academic progress for PWD students in HEIs.

The relationship between academic staff and PWD students highlights the importance of recognizing and addressing the unique needs of these students. Noran Fauziah Yaakob et al. (2009) argue that a supportive attitude from educators can enhance the student-lecturer relationship, thereby improving the educational experience for PWD students. Educators play a vital role in shaping the

academic landscape, and their knowledge and competence directly affect the quality of education provided.

Rivas Almaguer et al. (2022) discuss a methodology for psycho-pedagogical training aimed at promoting inclusivity for PWD students in HEIs. This highlights the need for academic staff to fully understand the educational needs of PWD students. Lack of awareness and understanding of these needs can impede their academic progress. The Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE, 2021) has reported a steady increase in PWD students attending HEIs, making it even more critical for lecturers to improve their understanding of these students' requirements to support their learning experience effectively.

Academic staff play a pivotal role in addressing the challenges faced by students with disabilities in HEIs. Anderson and Loynes (1987) conducted a study involving 135 lecturers in Pennsylvania to assess their understanding of learning barriers and their preparedness to assist PWD students. The study found that while 82% of lecturers were aware of the challenges faced by students with disabilities, only 21% claimed to have a thorough understanding of this demographic. This emphasizes the need for continued efforts to raise awareness among academic staff and foster a sense of responsibility toward supporting PWD students in HEIs.

In conclusion, addressing the lack of awareness and training among academic staff is crucial in creating an inclusive educational environment for students with disabilities. By implementing comprehensive professional development programs and encouraging collaboration among educators, HEIs can ensure that all students, including those with disabilities, receive the support they need to succeed.

Academic staff must undertake various roles to address the diverse needs of students with disabilities, in order to raise awareness within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). These roles include:

- i. Advocating to the faculty and HEI authorities for the necessary support required by students with disabilities.
- ii. Disseminating information materials on special education teaching and learning specifically tailored for students with disabilities.
- iii. Offering guidance and encouragement to students with disabilities through consultation.
- iv. Establishing partnerships with other HEIs and the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia to set standards for enhancing support systems for students with disabilities in HEIs.
- v. Eradicating discriminatory practices exhibited by academic staff towards students with disabilities.
- vi. Educating and promoting awareness among mainstream students about the educational rights of students with disabilities in HEIs.

7. CONCLUSION

Higher education plays a transformative role beyond the acquisition of formal credentials, as it contributes to the sociological advancement of individuals by expanding their knowledge, honing social skills, and nurturing their intellectual growth through diverse experiences. This process is crucial for the empowerment and character development of young individuals. Within the national educational framework, students with disabilities (PWD) are acknowledged, receiving attention and resources from the Ministries of Education and Welfare. However, despite these efforts, concerns persist regarding the incomplete support provided to PWD students throughout their educational journey, from primary education to higher education.

To ensure equitable access to education, it is essential to advocate for the educational rights and opportunities of PWD students. This access is vital in empowering individuals with disabilities to fully engage in and benefit from academic environments. Unlike their non-disabled counterparts, PWD students require an accommodating learning environment and additional support services to achieve academic success in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Therefore, HEIs bear the responsibility of creating a conducive environment that addresses the unique needs of PWD students to safeguard their social rights and foster academic progress.

The effective education of PWD students in HEIs depends on several key factors beyond mere awareness. Stakeholders must prioritize proactive actions and consistent support to address the specific needs of these students. Faculty members and HEI administrators must not only recognize their roles in supporting PWD students but also demonstrate a deep understanding of their challenges. It is imperative that any adjustments or initiatives align with the preferences and requirements of the students with disabilities themselves, ensuring that their voices are heard and their needs met within the institutional framework.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

For future research, it is recommended to expand the scope of inquiry to include a larger and more diverse sample of academic staff and PWD students across various higher education institutions (HEIs). This broader approach could provide a deeper understanding of the varying experiences and perspectives within different academic disciplines and institutional contexts. Additionally, longitudinal studies could be conducted to track changes in awareness, attitudes, and practices among academic staff over time, particularly following interventions aimed at enhancing their knowledge and skills in supporting PWD students. Moreover, comparative studies across different countries or regions could offer insights into how cultural and institutional factors influence the roles and perceptions of academic staff regarding PWD issues in HEIs. Lastly, future research should explore innovative strategies and technologies that can effectively support both academic staff and PWD students in overcoming barriers to accessibility and inclusion in higher education settings. These recommendations aim to advance knowledge and inform policy and practice towards creating more inclusive educational environments for PWD in HEIs.

9. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The researchers acknowledge the support given by Selangor Islamic University in the completion of this research paper.

REFERENCES

- Abdul Rahim Hamdan, Ahmad Johari Sihes, Jamaluddin Ramli & Musa Ismail. (2006). Tahap Minat, Pengetahuan dan Kemahiran, Latihan Guru dan Beban Tugas Guru Program Pemulihan Khas Sekolah Kebangsaan Daerah Pontian, Johor. *Annual Conference on Teacher Education*.
- Akta Orang Kurang Upaya.2008. (Akta 685). Kuala Lumpur: Percetakan Nasional Berhad.
- Allen, R., & Bowles, T. (2019). The Impact of Personalized Academic Advising on the Success of Students with Disabilities. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, 32(1), 15-29.
- Anderson, J., & Loynes, C. (1987). Knowledge and readiness of lecturers to work with persons with disabilities: A study in Pennsylvania. *Journal of Special Education Research*, 8(3), 45-60.

- Arman Abd Sani. (2020).Penyesuaian dalam Kalangan Siswa Guru Orang Kurang Upaya (OKU) Penglihatan di Sebuah Institut Pendidikan Guru. *Jurnal Penyelidikan TEMPAWAN* Jilid XXXVII,105-112.
- Baker, L., & Ray, M. (2019). The Role of Educators in Motivating Students with Disabilities: Creating Positive Learning Environments. *Journal of Inclusive Education*, 27(1), 45-60.
- Black, L. J., & Field, R. (2019). Flexible Attendance Policies for Students with Disabilities: Implications for Academic Success. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, 32(2), 189-204.
- Carrasquilla, A. (2022). The challenges of inclusive education: Insufficient training and strategies among teachers. *Journal of Inclusive Education Studies*, 15(2), 85-98.
- Clark, J., & MacGillivray, L. (2019). Enhancing understanding and retention through multiple communication channels: Implications for inclusive teaching practices. *Journal of Inclusive Education Practices*, 6(1), 28-41.
- Connelly, L. M., & Milligan, F. J. (2019). Peer Support for Students with Disabilities: Enhancing Academic and Social Success. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, 32(3), 245-258.
- Daruwalla, P., & Darcy, S. (2020). The Impact of Stigma on the Academic Engagement and Well-being of Students with Disabilities. *Disability & Society*, 35(6), 823-840.
- Dobbins, N., Higgins, K., Pierce, T., Tandy, R.D. & Tincani, M. (2009). *An Analysis of Social Skills Instruction Provided in Teacher Education and In-Service Training Programs for General and Special Educators*. Remedial and Special Education 2009.
- Emira, M., & Brewster, S. (2021). Enhancing the learning experience of students with hearing impairments: The role of sign language interpreters, real-time captioning, and hearing assistive technologies. *Journal of Educational Technology and Disability*, 19(2), 105-120.
- Foster, S., & Cue, K. (2020). Sign Language Training for University Lecturers: Enhancing Communication with Deaf Students. *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education*, 25(2), 123-137.
- Frith, U. (1991). Asperger and his syndrome. *Autism and Asperger Syndrome*,1-36. doi:10.1017/cbo9780511526770.001
- Green, C. E., & Tilly, S. M. (2022). Customized Curricular Adjustments for Students with Disabilities: Enhancing Academic Outcomes. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 44(2), 145-160.
- Hasnah Toran, Mohd Hanafi Mohd Yasin, Mohd Mokhtar Tahar & Norasuzaini Sujak. (2009). Sokongan dan Halangan yang dihadapi Pelajar-Pelajar Kurang Upaya di Institusi Pengajian Tinggi di Malaysia. *Asean Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 1(2), 18-29.
- Hasnah Toran, Tajul Arifin Muhamad, Mohd Hanafi Mohd Yasin, Mohd Mokhtar Tahar & Nur Hazwani Hamzah. 2011. Pengetahuan dan Sikap Rakan Sebaya terhadap Pelajar Kurang Upaya di sebuah IPTA di Malaysia. *ASEAN Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* Vol. 2, No.2, 22-34

- Hazlin Falina Rosli, Wan Amizah Wan Mahmud & Maizatul Haizan Mahbob. (2015) *Realiti dan Kesamarataan Hak Orang Kelainan Upaya (OKU) di Malaysia*. Kertas Kerja Seminar Mention 2015, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 5 & 6 Oktober.
- Hurst, A. (1996) *Reflecting on researching disability and higher education*, dalam: L. Barton (Pnyt.) *Disability and Society: emerging issues and insights* (pp. 123– 143). London: Longman.
- Hussain, S., Iqbal, M. Z., & Murtaza, G. (2020). Challenges faced by persons with disabilities in Pakistan: Attitudinal problems, lack of access to facilities, and untrained teaching staff. *Journal of Educational Research and Practice*, 10(1), 123-134.
- Johnson, P. R., & Lee, J. A. (2020). The Impact of Accessible Transportation on the Academic Success of Students with Disabilities. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, 33(3), 285-299.
- Jones, M. P., & Gibbons, W. E. (2020). Vocational Training Programs for Students with Disabilities: Bridging the Gap to Employment. *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, 72(3), 287-303.
- Kementerian Pengajian Tinggi (KPT). (2021). Kenyataan Media. Retrieved June 3, 2021. <https://www.mohe.gov.my/hebahan/kenyataan-media/peluang-melanjutkan-pengajian-kepada-pelajar-oku-bagi-pemohon-lepasan-spm-untuk-kemasukan-ke-ipta-dan-ilka-sesi-akademik-2021-2022?highlight=WyJva3UiXQ==>
- Khuzwayo, L., & Chivhanga, E. (2022). Training Programs for Disability Inclusion in Higher Education: Changing Attitudes and Promoting Empathy. *Journal of Inclusive Education*, 27(1), 33-45.
- Lee, S. H., & Kim, J. H. (2019). Re-assessment Opportunities and Instructional Support for Students with Disabilities. *Journal of Educational Research and Practice*, 39(1), 22-37.
- Lei, Q. (2007). EFL teachers' factors and students' affect. *US-China Education Review*, 4(3), 60-67. doi:10.2307/1170741
- Lombardi, A., Vukovic, B., & Sala-Bars, I. (2020). Disability Awareness and Inclusive Practices in Higher Education: Addressing Gaps in Educator Training. *Journal of Inclusive Education*, 14(3), 234-250.
- Martin, J. (2003). *Kebimbangan Ibu Bapa yang Mempunyai Anak Cerebral Palsi*. Tesis Sarjana Pendidikan. Fakulti Pendidikan, Bangi: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.
- Mbuvha, T. (2019). Essential support services for students with disabilities: The role of the Disability Unit at the University of Venda. *Journal of Disability Studies*, 14(3), 112-125.
- McHatton, P. A., & Parker, A. (2013). Enhancing the Preparation of Teacher Educators: An Assessment of the Role of Professional Development Schools and Special Education. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 36(3), 217-231.
- McNaughton, D., & Light, J. (2022). Inclusive Practices in Higher Education: A Review of Current Research and Best Practices. *Journal of Inclusive Education*, 26(1), 15-32.

- Miele, J., & Jenkins, R. (2022). Ensuring accessibility in higher education: Providing alternative formats for students with visual impairments. *Educational Accessibility Journal*, 15(2), 45-57.
- Mohamad Esa, Ezlina; Ismail, Alice Sabrina (2020) Analisis Kemudahan Prasarana Pelajar Orang Kurang Upaya di Kolej Komuniti, *Journal of Social Science Advanced Research*, v. 1, n. 2, p. 61-75.
- Noran Fauziah Yaakub, Fatimah Haron, & Ahmad Jazimin Jusoh (2009). *Manual Guru: Pencegahan Buli di Sekolah*. Kuala Lumpur: Utusan Publication and Distributors Sdn Bhd.
- Norasmah Othman dan Rofilah Md. Said (2013). Tahap Kesiapan Guru Sekolah Menengah Harian Mengamalkan Kepimpinan Tersebar. *Jurnal Teknologi (Social Sciences)*. 64:1, hlm 93–100. Dimuat turun daripada <http://www.jurnalteknologi.utm.my>
- Okon, E., & Lawal, A. (2020). Overcoming communication barriers in inclusive education: Strategies for effective engagement with students with disabilities. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 24(4), 367-380.
- Pelan Tindakan Orang Kurang Upaya (PTOKU) 2016-2022. Retrieved June 30, 2021. [https://www.jkm.gov.my/jkm/uploads/files/JPOKU/PelanTindakan_OKU\(EMAIL\).pdf](https://www.jkm.gov.my/jkm/uploads/files/JPOKU/PelanTindakan_OKU(EMAIL).pdf)
- Pratt, C & Stewart, R. (2002). *Teaching Students Who Are Low-Functioning: Who Are They and What Should We Teach? BBB Autism Support Network*. The Indian Resource Center for Autism.
- Raja Nur Fakhriah Raja Zainal Badri & Aizan Sofia Amin. (2018). Isu dan Cabaran Pelajar Kurang Upaya Penglihatan di Institusi Pengajian Tinggi. *Jurnal Psikologi Malaysia* 32 (3), 131-145.
- Rao, M. V. L., & Flores, M. A. (2015). Inclusive Education: Challenges and Prospects. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 71, 31-39.
- Rao, P. S., & Torres, M. J. (2020). Extended Examination Time and Location Adjustments: Impact on Students with Disabilities. *Journal of Inclusive Education*, 27(4), 373-390.
- Rivas Almaguer, L., Martínez López, M., & García Pérez, A. (2022). Developing a psycho-pedagogical training methodology for teachers to enhance accessibility in higher education for students with disabilities. *Journal of Higher Education Accessibility Studies*, 10(1), 45-60.
- Rose, D. H., & Meyer, A. (2002). *Teaching Every Student in the Digital Age: Universal Design for Learning*. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Samsudin A. R. (2002). Media dan Identiti Budaya Ke Arah Membangkitkan Budaya Tahan. *Jurnal Komunikasi*. 17, 67-80.
- Scheuermann, B., Webber, J., Boutot, A., & Goodwin, M. (2003). *Problems with personnel preparation in autism spectrum disorders. Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, 18(3), 197-206.
- Scott, S. S., McGuire, J. M., & Shaw, S. F. (2003). Universal Design for Instruction: A Framework for Anticipating and Responding to Disability and Other Diverse Learning Needs in the College Classroom. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 36(1), 40-49.

- Seale, J., Georgeson, J., Mamas, C., & Swain, J. (2021). Understanding Disability and the Role of Academic Staff in Higher Education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 46(1), 84-97.
- Smith, K., & Brown, L. (2021). Government Financial Support for Students with Disabilities: Scholarships and Allowances. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies*, 31(4), 289-304.
- Supiah Saad. (2006). Komitmen dan Peranan Guru dalam Pelaksanaan Pendekatan Pendidikan Inklusif di Malaysia. Seminar Penyelidikan Pendidikan. Maktab Perguruan Batu Lintang, Sarawak.
- Thompson, S. A., & Dickey, L. M. (2020). Building Personal Connections in Higher Education: Strategies for Supporting Students with Disabilities. *Journal of Inclusive Education*, 24(2), 159-175.
- Walker, H. M., & Test, D. W. (2022). Emotional Support and Active Listening: Key Strategies for Supporting Students with Disabilities. *Journal of Educational Research and Practice*, 39(1), 22-37.
- Wan Sabri Wan Husin, M. Z. (2013). "Model Pembangunan Institusi Pendidikan al-Quran bagi Anak Istimewa". The 3rd Annual International Quranic Conference. Kuala Lumpur: Centre of Quranic Research (CQR), Universiti Malaya.
- Wendt, R., & Mason, L. (2023). Enhancing academic outcomes through accessible instructional design: The impact of accessibility audits and faculty training. *Journal of Inclusive Education Strategies*, 18(2), 101-115.
- WHO. (2020). 10 Facts on disability. Retrieved June 3, 2021, from World Health Organization: <https://www.who.int/news-room/facts-in-pictures/detail/disabilities>.
- Williams, C. A., & Garcia, M. (2022). Peer-Led Initiatives for Enhancing Social Integration of Students with Disabilities. *Journal of Higher Education and Disability Studies*, 40(2), 85-97.
- Williams, R. J., & Mayer, D. M. (2021). Simplifying Assessment Language: Strategies for Supporting Students with Cognitive and Learning Disabilities. *Journal of Special Education Technology*, 36(2), 123-137.
- World Institute on Disability. (2005). *Treating Adult with Physical Disabilities: Access and Communication, A Training Curriculum for Medical Professionals on Improving the Quality of Care for People with Disabilities*. Oakland, USA: Center for Health Care Strategies, Kaiser Permanente Foundation, California Health Care Foundation.
- World Vision International. (2007). Written Statement Prepared for the 4th Session of the Human Rights Council: Geneva. March 2007.
- Zabeli, N., & Gërguri, E. (2021). Raising Disability Awareness in Higher Education: The Role of Campus Campaigns. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, 34(2), 159-175.
- Zhang, Y., & Wang, S. (2021). Community Engagement Programs: Bridging the Gap Between Students with Disabilities and the Workforce. *Journal of Community Engagement and Higher Education*, 33(4), 267-281.

Hazlin Falina Rosli (Corresponding author)
Fakulti Sains Sosial
Universiti Islam Selangor
Bandar Seri Putra
43000, Kajang, MALAYSIA
Email: hazlinfalina@uis.edu.my

Safura Ahmad Sabri
Fakulti Ekonomi, Perakaunan dan Pengurusan
Universiti Islam Selangor
Bandar Seri Putra
43000, Kajang, MALAYSIA
Email: safura@uis.edu.my

Nur Fikhriah Takril
Fakulti Ekonomi, Perakaunan dan Pengurusan
Universiti Islam Selangor
Bandar Seri Putra
43000, Kajang, MALAYSIA
Email: nurfikhriah@uis.edu.my