

School vs. University: From the ‘Eyes’ of Students with Disabilities

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Abstract

It should also be noted that the Malaysian government has taken the initiative to cater to the educational needs of students regardless of their background and ability. The efforts to uphold the pillars of inclusivity in the Malaysian education system demonstrate this. It is important to remember that inclusive education has helped deal with the problem of students with disabilities (SWD) at the preschool, primary, secondary, and tertiary levels by making sure they get fair treatment in school so they can move on (Muhammad Fikri Othman & Nur Ezan Rahmat, 2020). Starting with the *Zero Reject Policy*, *Four Special Routes*, and the Guidelines of the Disabilities Inclusion Policy in Higher Education Institutions in 2019 by the Ministry of Education, SWDs in higher education institutions are beginning to receive long-awaited attention. The purpose of this policy is to guide higher education institutions in Malaysia to systematically and comprehensively design action plans for the implementation of inclusive education. It is important that SWD at higher education institutions receive sufficient support in terms of facilities, infrastructure, a conducive teaching and learning environment, and community involvement. There are several issues related to the experiences of SWDs at schools and universities. This study explores the experiences of SWD in both school and university settings. The findings reveal four main themes: identity as SWD, teacher, lecturer involvement, peers, and assessments.

Keywords: Students with Disabilities (SWD), School, University, Teaching, Learning, Policies

1. INTRODUCTION

Based on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2016, the most prominent key to guaranteeing equal rights to education within the non-discrimination environment is through inclusive education. UNCRPD has introduced four phases or situations for recognising inclusive education. The UNCRPD has delineated four phases of scenarios to achieveing inclusive education namely; exclusion, segregation, integration, and inclusion. The world's education system now employs this as a benchmark to implementing inclusive education (Lawrence, Ihebuzor, & Lawrence, 2020). Efforts are being made by the world community to uplift the concept of inclusive education for all the disabled people to have access to equal opportunity for education. Malaysia, as one of the signatories of the UNCRPD since 2008, subsequently enacted the Person with Disabilities Act 2008 as a means of rights and protection for the said community.

People with disabilities (PWD) are a category of individuals experiencing challenges such as visual impairments, hearing impairments, autism spectrum disorders, behavioural issues, and learning disabilities (Maciver et al., 2019). In Malaysia, the Persons with Disabilities Act of 2008 defines PWDs as individuals possessing long-lasting physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments that may hinder their complete and effective involvement in society. The Social Welfare Department in Malaysia has therefore established seven categories of PWDs acknolwdged by Malaysian law. The categories encompass physical, hearing, visual, mental, speech, learning, and multiple disabilities (Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development, 2024).

Statistics from the Social Welfare Department indicate that a total of 736,607 people, or 2.2% of the Malaysian population, have registered as individuals with disabilities in 2023 (Mahaizura Abdul Malik, 2024). Additionally, based on the statistic by the Ministry of Higher Education, only

1,981 students with disabilities were recorded in the enrolment at 16 public universities in Malaysia. This figure is equivalent to 0.27% of the PWD population in Malaysia and merely 0.33% of the total enrolment of public universities in Malaysia, which was 593,101 in 2023 (Ministry of Higher Education, 2024).

Article 24 of the UN policy on PWD mandates that inclusive education must incorporate the " Whole Systems" approach, which requires education ministries to reform their institutional policies and procedures. In light of this, the Malaysian Education Blueprint (MEB) 2013–2025 was introduced—a brilliant initiative that emphasises the rights of marginalised groups like people with disabilities and *Orang Asli* (Ministry of Education, 2013). In addition to providing for SWD at the elementary and secondary levels, MEB has developed into a steppingstone for expanding opportunities and guaranteeing high-quality education for SWD at both the school and university levels. The *Zero Reject Policy* at school and *four special routes* at university are the evidence that the students with disabilities are given equal opportunity to fully participate in the mainstream education system.

The Ministry of Education has provided several education programs for students with disabilities, such as the Special Education Program, the Special Education Integration Program, and the Inclusive Education Program (Ministry of Education, 2013). Under the National Policy for Persons with Disabilities, Malaysia strives to make mainstream education available for all students with special needs at both school and university levels. Therefore, in 2019, the Ministry of Higher Education also introduced the guidelines for the disability inclusion policy in higher education institutions. This guideline serves as a reference to ensure that students with disabilities are receiving sufficient support regarding facilities, infrastructure, a conducive teaching and learning environment, and community involvement (Ministry of Higher Education, 2019).

Numerous researchers have elucidated that despite their limitations, disabled people still need and desire to compete with others, particularly within educational system (Barbareschi, 2021). Furthermore, it has been reported that some SWDs achieve and perform similar to or better than typical students in school and at university (Muhamad Nadhir & Rosila Bee, 2016). However, disabled students too, are struggling to fit into the mainstream educational system, where cases of dropouts are quite high among the students with disabilities due to unsupportive institutions and a lack of facilities (Becker & Palladino, 2016). The challenges faced by students with disabilities also come from the three types of stigmatisations. As put forward by Muhamad Nadhir and Rosila Bee (2016), the stigmatisation comes from self-stigmatisation of people with disabilities, stigmatisation of the non-disabled community towards the disabled people, and lastly, stigmatisation from disabled people to the non-disabled community.

Students with disabilities experience both favourable and unfavourable treatment from others, including teachers/lecturers, administrators, and peers (Agyekum, 2021). The support from teachers/lecturers is crucial during the learning sessions, particularly by addressing the barriers for students with disabilities. Yusmarhaini Yusof, Cheong, Azlin Hilma Hillaluddin, Fatimah Zailly Ahmad Ramli, and Zarina Mat Saad (2019), along with Hazlin Falina Rosli, Safura Ahmad Sabri, and Nurfikriah Takril (2022) have emphasised the role of lecturers to provide a better learning experience if they are able to cater to the special needs of disabled students, including making adjustments in their teaching method. Nur Ain Nabisya Azmi, Wan Arnidawati Wan Abdullah and Asmidawati Ashari (2021) also stated the same matter by adding that educational institutions should guarantee the effective implementation of policy to safeguard students with disabilities.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

The matter of SWD at educational institutions has been a topic of discussion for decades following the enactment of the PWD Act 2008. Despite the implementation of rules and programs throughout the years, comprehension of inclusive education remains elusive. Concerns are arising about the disparity between Malaysia's execution of PWD rights and those outlined by the United Nations (Amar-Singh, San, Teoh, Anit Randhawa, Wong, & Ng, 2022). Muhammad Fikri Othman and Nur Ezan Rahmat (2020) observed that the implementation of the Ministry of Education's special education guidelines is inadequate due to their restricted scope.

Students with disabilities in Malaysia face numerous obstacles within the educational system, affecting their access to excellent education and overall development. A primary concern is the insufficient infrastructure. Numerous educational institutions, as noted by Gan and Khoo (2024), remain deficient in critical infrastructure such as ramps, elevators, and accessible restrooms, hindering navigation for students with mobility impairments. Tan, Abdullah, and Munir Shuib (2019) emphasise that insufficient financial support may be the primary cause.

The Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013-2025) has proposed a strategy to enhance inclusive education. The Ministry of Education has implemented a Zero Reject Policy and Four Special Routes to ensure equitable access for all students with disabilities, whether in primary education or higher education. The inquiry hinges on the preparedness of educational institutions to accommodate them, contingent upon the expertise and training capabilities of their educators. Researchers have emphasised the deficiency of training for teachers and lecturers to support students with disabilities in the classroom. There is a deficiency of inclusive educational environments, and numerous educators lack sufficient training to assist children with varied needs. Getnet (2019) asserted that although teachers had expertise in their subject matter, this does not imply they are equipped to instruct children with disabilities without appropriate training. This disparity frequently results in the segregation of students with impairments and insufficient personalised support. Gow, Mostert, and Dreyer (2020) discovered that the advantages of accommodation are contingent upon the lecturer's subjective preferences, notwithstanding the presence of a policy. Neglecting to recognise this issue will ultimately impact the pupils' performance.

Sudarwati (2022) recommends that testing and evaluation for students with disabilities be appropriately connected with their specific forms of difficulties. Due to the constraints of their physical, auditory, visual, or cognitive abilities, evaluations involving writing, speaking, reading, and listening necessitated more explicit instructions on their execution. The principles of fair adjustment in assessment lack significance when the entire system, including both teaching personnel and administration, marginalises the matter.

3. OBJECTIVES

This study intends to explore the experiences of students with disabilities at school and university. This helps to understand the disparity of treatments, perceptions, and adaptations on the part of students with disabilities in public universities in Malaysia.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach by conducting semi-structured interviews with six participants chosen through purposive sampling. Creswell and Poth (2018) have stated that purposive sampling allows researchers to select the participants that meet the criteria. The participants were also asked to record diary entries about their experiences. These two instruments allow more

coverage of data collection based on their genuine experiences. The focus of this study is to explore the different experiences of students with disabilities at school and universities. The interview data was analysed by using the Atlas.ti 24 software. Six participants with three types of disabilities (OKU card holders) were selected from several public universities in Malaysia. The demographic profile of the participants is represented in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Demographic Profile of the Participants

Participant	Gender	Age	Disability	Level of study
Participant A	Female	21	Hearing (Acquired)	Diploma
Participant B	Male	20	Hearing (Congenital)	Diploma
Participant C	Male	19	Hearing and Visual (Acquired)	Diploma
Participant D	Female	20	Visual (Congenital)	Diploma
Participant E	Male	23	Visual (Congenital)	Degree
Participant F	Male	22	Physical (Acquired)	Diploma

5. FINDINGS

The results were gathered and categorised into 4 main themes. All participants were asked to describe their experiences as SWD at school and universities. Based on the participants experiences, four main themes were discovered, which are (1) Identity as a student with a disability (SWD), (2) lesson and participation, (3) peers, and (4) assessments.

i) Identity as SWD

Both Participant B and F experienced distinct treatments at school and university due to their disabilities. Without an *OKU* (Disabled People) card, participant B did not receive any assistance to ease his difficulties as a student with a hearing disability. Being a person with single-sided deafness, Participant B was not able to apply for hearing aids or any accommodation due to his disabilities at school. This is due to the fact that single-sided deafness was not recognised as a type of disability during the year he was at school. At university, Participant B just continues his study without seeking any adjustment. Participant F, on the other hand, had received some adjustments made for his wheelchair-bound condition at school but experienced a lack of facilities at university. In the interview, it was found that the university where Participant F was studying was a new one with ongoing construction and development. It was also revealed that the university has yet to provide any accommodation for wheelchair users. Participant F explained that he had a difficult time moving around the campus since it has a lack of elevators and ramps for wheelchair students. He, however, did mention that the university has some plans to improve the facilities to be more wheelchair-friendly in the future.

Participant B

I applied around 2020 and got the card around 2021... It was quite late... In 2015, the government still hasn't recognised single-sided deafness as a disability. So in school, I was not recognised as an OKU student. So when in university, I just go ahead with it. I registered as an OKU student, but I did not request any privileges. I don't tell them (lecturer). They don't need to know.

Participant F

I was involved in an accident at the age of 14, which led me to begin using a wheelchair. I did not expect anything from school. But my teachers and school helped me a lot. They change my whole class to the ground floor and make sure we have a ramp for a wheelchair. [...] But at the university, since it's a new one, I do have some difficulties moving around. There aren't many lifts or elevators available here. And some routes are not wheelchair friendly.

The interviews revealed that all teachers at school were aware of the participants' disabilities. Though the participants were unsure of the process at school, the teachers were all aware of their conditions, even those with the invisible disabilities (hearing and visual). This contradicts the situation that they faced at the universities. Although they (excluding the physical disabilities) too did not inform the lecturers, none seemed to realise or receive any information about the participants' disabilities. Some revealed that they refused to inform their lecturer for not wanting to receive sympathy and being treated differently from others. The study clearly demonstrates that all participants opted to conceal their conditions from their teachers at school and lecturers at university.

Participant D

I did not inform my lecturers about my disability; I don't want any sympathy... When I was at school, they knew (teachers). Maybe my parents told them. But I would prefer for them not to know. I wear glasses like normal people. So if I don't tell anyone, they would not know.

Participant A

I don't think I want them (the lecturers) to know. So I go on with my classes. I am already in Semester 5. None of my lecturers know about it; it is better this way. The others won't see me differently... I'm wearing hearing aids under my 'hijab'; they cannot see that.

ii) Lessons and participation

When asked to make a comparison, Participant C mentioned that his teacher helped him adjust to listening activities in class, such as adjusting the seating position for maximum exposure to his vision and hearing. However, no involvement from the lecturer at university was recorded to ease his learning process. He admitted to having difficulties with the equipment used during lessons, especially for the English language subject. He encountered problems during listening activities with his hearing aids clashing with the frequency of the speaker. Participant A faced challenges in both school and university settings, particularly during the pandemic when there was a surge in online learning. As a student with hearing disabilities who engages in lip reading, the inability to do so can cause her to feel restless. This situation happened during Covid-19 with the teachers/lecturers not turning on the camera or wearing masks. The inability to grasp words and pronunciation posed a great challenge for her.

Participant C

My teacher didn't ask many questions, but they did make an effort to assist. Like, make sure I sit at the front because I cannot hear and see well. The teacher puts me near the speaker every time I have a listening activity... Lecturers at university don't know. So, I just learn like everyone else... a bit difficult in the listening activities for my English code; I just adjust...the audio is not clear and the speaker's sound was distorted...the frequency clashes with my aids.

Participant A

During blended learning, we have online class (university)... Some lecturers did not turn on the camera. I have to lip-read people to understand, so it's very frustrating... at school before, I got to attend classes during covid too. Everyone was wearing masks... very hard to hear and understand the lesson.

Being a person who is wheelchair-bound, Participant F had encountered supportive teachers and lecturers at both school and university. He received frequent adjustments due to his disabilities, including more time to complete the task and comfortable seating space. Nevertheless, being a centre of attention made him uncomfortable when it was done too excessively. Participant F regarded it as

‘over-treatment’ that made him feel awkward with the others. On the other hand, Participant B encountered difficulties at university since his hearing disabilities affect his ability to speak clearly, thus subjecting him to a horrendous experience with frequent presentations and group discussions. Participant B admitted to being nasal, thus making him unable to pronounce certain words clearly. He was also scolded for taking too much time to start speaking.

Participant B

I don't want to be treated differently from others here (university). That will gather too much attention on me...I should be able to learn like everyone else...School was ok, but the teachers focus too much on me... University is different. I have to do a lot of presentations, but my pronunciation is not clear (due to my hearing disabilities). It affects my speech...It was extremely frustrating when I had to participate in group discussions or give a speech. Some lecturers scolded me for taking too long to start speaking.

Participant F

Both my teachers at school and lecturers at university all help me a lot. They frequently ask me if I need anything. It's good that they asked...But sometimes I feel a bit embarrassed because they (lecturers) call up my name every time in class to make sure I'm ok... Once or twice is still ok. but too many times, it felt like a joke...Since I'm using a wheelchair, I do feel like I have become the centre of attention in class.

Participant E

I have monocular vision (single-sided blindness)...my teachers and lecturers usually asked me to sit at the front. At school, the teachers made sure that I would sit in the middle to gain more access to the board...at university, we can choose our own sitting so I just sit at any place available...but here (university) is a bit different...sometimes the classes I am in have white board that has light reflection on it, especially in the afternoon...and sometimes in lab with lights on...I did not say anything

The study also reveals that Participant E (monocular vision) had been well accommodated at school but not at university. Though he agreed that this was due to the practices at the university, where you can choose your own seating, he was unable to secure a suitable seat for the best light reflection and vision coverage. However, he never sought any help from lecturers or peers since he believed that it was his own responsibility to adjust to the surroundings.

iii) Peers

Regarding their interactions with peers, Participant D was exposed to having similar treatment from peers at both school and university. She was more open about her disabilities with her peers and received positive treatment at both school and university as well as admitted to having fewer problems with group discussion or group assignments. Her interaction and relationship outside of the classrooms were also positive with supportive peers and roommates. Participant F had initially found his school time to be quite challenging with his peers, requiring some adaptations to deal with his sudden disabilities (he was involved with an accident). He subjected himself to being in a more encouraging environment with his peers at university, where they tried accommodating his needs. Though he was optimistic about the peers, Participant F admitted that he occasionally felt uncomfortable and unsure of his peers' sincerity in helping him.

Participant D

I don't think there is any difference in treatment that I got from my friends from school or university. My friends at school accepted me as who I am. As for university, maybe because of the nature of

assignments, I don't get different treatment either. My friends are all mature people, too. So, they don't really say anything about my disabilities.

Participant F

At first, I found school to be quite challenging. Maybe my friends were not used to having a disabled friend [...] university friends are better. They help me go to class, and I have no problem doing assignments with them. They do group work at places where I can go... But sometimes I think they mostly feel sympathy for me, as if they are committing a sin for not helping me. Whether they are sincere or not, I could not tell... I want to be treated like normal people.

During the interview, Participant A did not reveal much about her experiences with peers. However, her diaries provided a different perspective. Her peers at school refused to work with her, which usually led to her teachers assigning the groups. She was also rejected and ostracized outside of her classrooms, where she admitted to having no best friends at school. This also led to her refusal to let her university peers know about her disabilities. Though she had a better experience at university, she was still worried for her peers to find out her secret. Participant A's peers were mostly ready to assist her during the lesson without asking. This, according to her, was a huge burden lifted in her university's life. Similar to Participant A, Participant C also hid his hearing disability from his peers. He had no qualm working together in group discussions or projects, as he rarely asked his peers anything during the lessons. However, he admitted that his peers could probably guess his condition and choose to ignore it.

Participant A

My experience at school was quite horrible. Most of them refused to be with the same group as me because of my disability... One time when the teacher was grouping, they pushed each other to avoid me. That was hurtful... At university, friends are okay. They don't mind working with me in the same group. But because they don't know. I always hide my hearing device. They just thought that I am not that smart whenever I asked them questions. The truth is, I cannot hear the lesson well.

Participant C

I don't tell my friends at university. Don't want to get the sympathy. I tried very hard to hide my hearing problem... when I wear my device, if they ask me, I just say it's an earpod. So no problem doing the assignment... but my eye, I think they can see (that there's a problem).

iv) Assessments

Participant F received ample adjustment when it comes to assessment at both school and university. Since he was unable to write at the same pace as before, he received extra time and was allowed to use special stationery to assist his writing. Participant F was very grateful for the accommodation. For him, he was able to perform well when the time was adjusted. As a student with hearing disabilities, Participant C did not have any problem with the audio during PT3 and SPM. Though he was not placed in a different location for his listening test, he was able to hear the audio even when it was conducted in a hall. However, his university listening test score was low due to poor hearing. There was frequency interference with his hearing aids, forcing him to take them off during the test. He did not blame the lecturer for the score but admitted to feeling devastated by the marks. For him, he could do better if he was not forced to take off the hearing aids. A similar situation happened with Participant A (with hearing disabilities), who also did not receive an adjustment during the listening test at the university. She, however, received help at school where a special room was prepared for her listening test due to her inability to receive/hear the audio for too long. Thus, some adjustments

were made for her to have a short break in the middle of the listening test when the audio became too overwhelming.

Participant F

The university will ask me if I need anything during the exam... The exam venue is usually accessible for me (wheelchair-bound), and they give me extra time for my exam because I cannot write at the same pace as others...school also helped me for my SPM. I got extra time too.

Participant C

For the PT3 test, it was held in a hall, but thankfully the audio was clear so no problem there... For SPM, I think it was the same...But initially the teacher proposed to put me in a room for the test. But the process didn't get the approval... Here (university), I don't get any help either... My score for listening was not good. I can't hear well because of the speaker...the frequency sort of clashes with my hearing aids. So I had to take it off during the listening test.

Participant A

Lessons are also okay. [...] My hearing got worse during Form 4. So I got special room for listening test at school... Here at university, I don't receive anything for listening test in language classes... I declared my disability when I first entered the university... Maybe the lecturers don't know. And I didn't tell them either.

As for Participants D and E, when they were at school, both were able to get bigger exam papers specifically printed for students with visual disabilities like them. Both of them did not have the same adjustments made for them at their universities. Though Participant F had no difficulties with subjects like Mathematics, it was a struggle for her when it came to questions with text, as she would get a headache trying to read the small printed words. As for Participant E, he would change his head position during final exams since he has monocular vision.

Participant D

My teachers always asked me if I was ok with the lesson. I can see the bigger exam paper well. When I first entered university, I didn't request a larger paper for the final exam. But for the math paper, I'm ok. If the subjects have a lot of text (wording), then I get a headache trying to read small letters. So I just follow the flow and get used to it...

Participant E

SPM exam papers were printed on big paper so I can see better. But I still need to move my head to see using my left eye. PT3 too; I got bigger paper. ... at university...I do not get bigger paper, just the same as my friends. During the final exam, I will change my head position to 45 degrees (using only my left eye) ... I don't blame them (university) because I did not tell ... but shouldn't they already know?

Based on all the data from interviews and diary entries, it was found that although the participants did not receive adjustments and accommodations at universities, they tried their very best to adapt to mainstream practices, like the non-disabled students. For them, being accepted by their peers was more important than getting special treatment, which could eventually expose their disabilities to the rest. Rather than becoming the centre of attention, they would rather choose to endure the difficulties at universities. This situation was a contradiction with the school. Based on their experiences, the schools were much more accommodating regarding lessons and assessments.

6. DISCUSSION

The results reveal four important themes derived from the experiences of students with disabilities at schools and universities. It was found that schools recognised the participants as disabled students more and provided reasonable adjustments compared to universities. Despite not informing the school, all participants mentioned that their schools were well aware of their disabilities and thus provided the required assistance. This is congruent with the Inclusive Education Programs, which enable public schools to be able to serve all children, including those with disabilities. Since all of the participants attended conventional schools, the system is deemed to cater to the needs of SWD, which is relatable to the policy stipulated by the Ministry of Education. The '*Garis Panduan Program Pendidikan Inklusif Murid Berkeperluan Khas*' was introduced in 2013 to assist the students with disabilities should they choose to enrol in conventional school instead of the special school (MOE, 2018). The selected schools in Malaysia are able to provide necessary adjustments from the guidelines, which include students' criteria, students' placement, teachers, teaching and learning, and assessment (Muhammad Fikri Othman & Nur Ezan Rahmat, 2020).

The Ministry of Education in Malaysia has worked alongside UNICEF to increase awareness of the importance of students with disabilities studying in the mainstream classroom. This has convinced more parents to finally enrol their children in the Inclusive Education Program (Singh, 2022). Special training has equipped some teachers to address the unique needs of students with disabilities effectively. While they are not perfect, the schools under the Inclusive Education Program have made significant progress since 2013. Due to this, most participants in this study received reasonable adjustment and accommodation in their studies.

Despite the efforts, the Malaysian government only started to recognise single-sided deafness in 2019. For Participant B, this loophole resulted in him not getting assistance as a hearing disabled student at school. The Malaysian Social Welfare Department, however, is currently working on identifying any types of disabilities to be included under the seven disability categories. With more exposure and research, there will be more emergence of disability spectrums and types that will be recognized in the future, thus abolishing the limited scope of disability definitions. Muhammad Fikri Othman and Nur Ezan Rahmat (2020) have addressed an issue of contradiction in the dual education system in Malaysia with the regular and special education systems. Due to this, there could be some misinformation that the mainstream school needs to adapt to in order to assist the SWD.

Self-advocacy, as defined by Ryan and Griffiths (2015), is an act of speaking and communicating one's own needs to others. In other words, it is to know one's rights and ask or demand for benefits. This study, however, has found that the majority of the participants exhibited an absence of self-advocacy as they refused to demand their rights as disabled students in order to "fit" in the mainstream system. Most are feeling content with the current arrangement at the university, despite lacking the adjustment to suit their special learning needs. De Los Santos, Kupezynski, and Mundy (2019) found similar results in their study, indicating that students with disabilities at tertiary levels believe they should not make excessive demands and, therefore, should refuse any special treatment. This concept is reflected by all participants, where they felt the compulsory and urgent need to adapt to the system like the non-disabled students. It was alarming because this matter relates to universities' assistance and disabled identity.

Whitaker (2018) stated that students with the identity of disabilities tend to put high expectations on themselves during the transition to a higher education level, thus making them unable to reveal their disabilities to avoid sympathy or doubt about their ability. This could clearly explain why all students refused to inform their respective lecturers or their peers about their disabilities and

special needs. Muhamad Nadhir and Rosila Bee (2016) attributed this idea to having two forms of stigma for students with disabilities. In congruence with apprehension of being stigmatised by others, self-stigma too plays a crucial role in adapting to their social life. To put it clearly, this is a matter of having less self-esteem and upholding their identity as students with disabilities. This, coupled with another stigmatization from the students with disabilities towards the non-disabled people, could worsen the experiences. The stigmatization that the non-disabled peers at the university would not be able to accept them is quite explicit in this study. Prior experience at school seemed to shape their perceptions and actions toward university life. Although the stigmatization towards peers has its basis, the stigmatization towards lecturers presents a different dimension of thinking. The explanation could be due to accumulative stigmatization that groups the peers and lecturers together. Kraus (2008) has addressed the issue of perceiving an accumulative group outside the disabled community, which allows associating opinions. Being in the group of non-disabled people might put the university lecturers under the same treatment.

On another note, the situation at university reflects the low level of awareness as well as weak policy execution with regards to the role of lecturers and staff administration. Since the disability policy at higher educational institutions was just implemented in 2019, most public universities, as mentioned by Nur Haziqah Muhamad Zaki and Zurina Ismail (2021), are still struggling to fully execute it at the pedagogical and administrative levels. Though the majority of the participants (excluding the wheelchair-bound) did not inform the lecturers of their disability, faculty members and administration must, by all means, provide suitable accommodation and adjustment, especially during assessment. However, the majority of participants were left to independently adjust to the system. Whether getting extra time, a bigger font, or paper for the exam, or an adjustment with the speaker during the listening test, these adjustments were not attributed to them. Sabri et al. (2022) mentioned that students with disabilities at universities are regarded as high-functioning learners and thus should be able to follow the syllabus. Nur Ain Nabisya, Wan Arnidawati and Asmidawati (2021), however, believed that students with disabilities at the university level require more assistance compared to at school since they have to be more independent in managing their lives academically and socially. Although these students do not need an altercation or syllabus changes, the assessment should be adjusted to accommodate them. The question, however, remains as to whether there is an equilibrium of educational standards if they could not perform to their best due to restrictions in adjustment. Scholars such as Yusmarhaini Yusof et al. (2019) and Taylor (2011) have long highlighted this issue. Tan, Abdullah, and Munir Shuib (2019) have even highlighted the comparison among Malaysia, England, and Australia's disability policies in higher education, where a lack of execution was identified in this country. This indicates that students with disabilities at Malaysian universities are still struggling to 'fit' into the mainstream system instead of being provided with the necessary adjustment and accommodations as stipulated in the universities' disabilities policies and Ministry of Education.

This study also reveals an interesting finding about the level of treatment for students with different disabilities. Only one participant (wheelchair-bound) is found to receive ample adjustment and accommodation at university. Comparatively, the others with visual and hearing disabilities or those with 'invisible disabilities' are found to receive no assistance. Though the argument of these is under the premise that they themselves did not reveal their disabilities to the respective lecturers, it should be noted that university administrations are fully aware of their disabilities based on the data from the student affairs division and disability unit. It does indicate poor coordination between the university administration and faculty members since the lecturers should be informed beforehand, allowing them to adjust their lesson accordingly. Taylor (2011) described this situation as isolating and marginalising disabled students from the system. Despite all of them holding a national disability card, the fact that they still need to inform all lecturers teaching them should raise an alarm about

how much the university disability policy has progressed after six years of its existence. It can be concluded that both physiological and psychological factors contribute to the challenges faced by students with disabilities.

7. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Inclusive education is not just an idea that looks pretty on paper. It is believed that the students with disabilities—despite being exposed to some adjustments—might experience invisible limitations due to how they think psychologically based on previous experiences. Regardless of whether it is congenital or acquired, students with disabilities are still struggling to adapt to the mainstream educational system. Despite not being limited, the four major themes identified in this study indicate that universities still need to make significant progress in elevating the concept of inclusive education. The disabilities policy needs more time to bring out its ‘claws’ to protect those in need. Though the school system is far from perfect, the fact that they are able to provide the basic necessities of learning for disabled students is a milestone that the Malaysian education system has achieved.

This study yields several recommendations. First, the plans, policies, and regulations pertaining to students with disabilities must not serve as a mere decoration. The Students Affairs and Academic Affairs Divisions, must in some way, include a note/label to identify which the students with disabilities. Since it has been proven that most of them refused to disclose it to the lecturers, it should be the university’s initiative to make the lecturers know before the semester has started. Secondly, it is advisable for all lecturers to conduct profiling at the beginning of the class so that required information could be shared through written materials. This will allow more opportunity for the students with disabilities to share their concerns and hope rather than orally demanding them to explain. Thirdly, the Disability Unit, together with faculty must identify and specify the most suitable adjustment needed for certain types of disabilities. The suitable adjustment and accommodation must be carefully identified to suit numerous spectrums and categories of disabilities to avoid underserved treatment.

In reality, more time is undoubtedly needed to perfect the execution of the policies and plans. This, however, should not be a reason for the lack of adjustment since the concept of inclusive education was long introduced in the year of 2013 in the Malaysian Education Blueprint. Though it can be considered new, the guideline for disability policy in higher education institutions has reached its sixth year of implementation. Over the years, debates have focused on the issues of budget, teacher/lecturer training, and facilities. It is an ignorant matter that has to be adjusted since Malaysians, in fact, are already aware of the needs of students with disabilities but choose to marginalise their importance. It is about time to address the main issue of policy and practices instead of blaming it on these factors.

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