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SUPPORTING STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION: VIEWS AND EXPERIENCES

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Abstract:

SWD are often part of the minority in public society and their special needs are often not heard, as well as in the field of education. This study aims to learn more about the SWD's social surroundings, mental state, and support network from their own perspective based on their experience in a Malaysian public university. This study is a qualitative research and researchers performed focused in-depth interviews with 10 SWD that are registered with UPO for data collection. The results demonstrate that the issue of support systems is dynamic, and SWD must be ready for any future developments. The majority of the support required is related to the special equipment, facilities, and infrastructure in order to ease their mobility. In order to develop assertiveness and the capacity to assimilate into society, SWD also needs to be subjected to training or courses that can improve mental resilience, emotional control, and social skills. To meet the SWD's increased expectations, present systems need to be improved in accordance to the effectiveness of technology and changes in the demographics of the SWD nowadays. It is recommended that a similar study be carried out in all IPTAs and also private IPTs involving all SWD of various categories. This is to ensure that the rights and needs of all SWD can be implemented. The results of this study are expected to channel information about the support received by SWD at UiTM to be an example to other IPTAs in addition to identifying the challenges faced so that efforts towards solving the problem can be implemented immediately.

Introduction

People with disabilities (PWD) are often part of the minority group in public society and their special needs are often neglected, as well as in the field of education. There are many studies that agree that negative attitudes towards the disabled still exist due to myths and bad stereotypes that make prejudiced attitudes towards this group. This can be seen in the form of negative attitudes and behavior towards them whether in a social, educational or vocational context. The attitude of social rejection by the general public as well as the high social reach towards the disabled is one of the main causes of stress among the disabled. Chubbon (1992) stated that the solution to change the negative attitude towards PWD is by understanding the negative attitudes themselves (Toran, Mohamad, Yasin, Tahar, & Hamzah, 2010).

Universities are a crucial arena for a person to develop and strengthen their identity because they have a big impact on future employment opportunities. Nonetheless, there are concerns with regard to the learning environments and the student with disabilities (SWD) support system at Malaysian educational institutions. Due to a lack of resources and support structures that suit their needs, they continue to struggle in their daily lives and academic endeavours. Formal education programs for SWD in Malaysia started in the 1980s. The provision of high-quality education for SWD at that time began to be considered an educational priority so much so that Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) reportedly gave the first accreditation in Special Education at the degree level in 1996 (Khairuddin, Salleh, & Amin, 2020).

According to the People with Disabilities Act 2016–2022, a person with a long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory disability may not be able to engage completely and effectively in society due to several challenges. The Malaysian government signed the Proclamation on the Full Participation and Equality of People with Disabilities in the Asia and Pacific Region Agreement on May 16, 1994 as a result of a focus on PWD recognition and rights. This action led to the gazetting of the Disabled Persons Act 2008, which guarantees PWD access to and opportunities for further education (Tahir, Thambapillay, Yusoff, & Rahman, 2020) (Rafi, 2021).

The large number of students with special needs enrolling in public higher education institutions demonstrates the government's comprehensive participation. According to data from Malaysia's Higher Education Statistics, 979 SWD registered to continue their education in 2009. A total of 1115 SWD were registered in 2010. In 2011, 1221 SWD participated, and in 2012, 1372 SWD continued their studies. 1372 SWD were registered in 2013, while 1742 SWD were registered in 2014. Increased registration resulted to a total of 1930 SWD in 2015, and 2444 SWD in 2016 (Nasir & Efendi, 2020). Meanwhile, the government's propensity to pass civil rights legislation and fund technical innovation and support services at universities is the cause of the rise in the number of students with disabilities enrolling in post-secondary schools (Leyser & Greenberger, 2008).

Table 1: Data from Malaysia's Higher Education Statistics shows the Following Trend of Enrolment of SWD as A New Student From Year 2009 to 2016

Year	Number of SWD Registration
2009	979
2010	1115
2011	1221
2012	1372
2013	1572
2014	1742
2015	1930
2016	2444

Source: (Nasir & Efendi, 2020)

However, the findings of the study on the experiences of SWD in institutions of higher learning show that they often face obstacles during their studies and get low results at the end of their studies despite having the same qualifications as other students when they first register for the university. Although the enrollment of SWD to universities is not a new issue, the percentage increase of annual enrollment is still far behind expectations. Statistics cited by the National Higher Education Strategic Plan state that the disabled are among the groups whose enrollment is still low when compared to the overall enrollment at the higher education level (Toran , Yasin, Tahar, & Sujak, 2009).

In fact, universities' primary responsibilities are to provide services, facilitate access, plan logistics, raise awareness, ensure buildings are accessible to the impaired, and create policies that specifically address concerns relating to disability (Yusof, Chan, Hillaluddin, Ramli, & Saad, 2019). Thus, this study is significant in order to comprehend the significance of the support system towards SWD's achievement and resilient behaviour in completing their studies.

Literature Review
There are two points that will be discussed in Literature Review which includes; definition of student with disabilities (SWD) and issues related to student with disabilities (SWD).

Definition of Students with Disabilities (SWD)
Based on the Action Plan for Persons with Disabilities 2016-2022, OKU is defined as "*... a person with a long-term disability in terms of physical, mental, intellectual or sensory who when faced with various obstacles may not be able to engage fully and effectively in society*". According to the Disabled Persons Act 2008, the disabled are defined as *"... including those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory deficiencies which, when interacting with various obstacles, can restrict their full and effective participation in society*" (Tahir, Thambapillay, Yusoff, & Rahman, 2020) (Rafi, 2021).

Tahir et al. (2020) stated that the emphasis on the recognition of the rights of the disabled has prompted Malaysia to agree to sign the Proclamation on the Full Participation and Equality of People with Disabilities in the Asia and Pacific Region on May 16, 1994. This event has led to the publication of the 2008 Disabled Persons Act which ensures access and opportunities to continue higher education for people with disabilities.

In short, SWD are those who have been diagnosed with a physical or mental impairment that prevents them from performing well in one or more important life activities. Every student with a disability experiences different learning difficulty. A concept evolved makes design accessible for everyone in the educational system, making education accessible to all students and creating adaptable learning settings that support the needs of all students while lowering obstacles to learning.

Issues Related to Students with Disabilities (SWD)

A study which focused on effects of education as a useful strategy for overcoming the limitations of disability concluded that educated disabled people are better equipped in managing their conditions. High-educated people with impairments are better in incorporating inputs related to health compared to those who are not high educated (Bengtsson & Gupta, 2017). Besides, Cutler and Lleras-Muney (2006) claimed that an educated handicapped person's likelihood of experiencing problems related to their impairment can be reduced over time. For instance, educated older persons with disabilities tend to use technology the most as a support system (Cutler & Lleras-Muney, 2006).

The most crucial factor in improving the quality of social relationships among disabled students at the university is emotional management during the teaching and learning process (Kordts-Freudinger, 2017). Students who received emotional support during the educational process are better equipped to communicate their feelings and ideas (Titsworth, Quinland, & Mazer, 2010). Hence, by managing their emotions, SWD will be better able to use their cognitive talents, learning techniques, and motivation (Almarghani & Mijatovic, 2017). This supports the findings of Klauda & Guthrie (2015) which claims that intrinsic motivation and student involvement during learning sessions are positively correlated. Walker & Palacios (2015) contend that there is still room for improvement in the significance of cognitive resource aspects, methods, and learning motivation. So, in order to ensure that the sustainability agenda for students with disabilities is realised, the institution, the government, and themselves as a triad must possess the knowledge and strength to comprehend the experiences of students with disabilities (Nasir & Efendi, 2020).

There are certain students with impairments who need more time to finish their studies despite improved access and support (Erten, 2011). This demonstrates that in order for SWD to remain engaged with their courses, the institutions concerned must provide training programmes and assistance (Lombardi, Murray, & Gerdes, 2012). According to Kezar & Maxey (2014), Thomas (2016) and Khairuddin, Salleh, & Amin (2020), universities play a significant role for SWD in higher learning experiences. Through inclusive learning, social acceptability, constructive relationships, and productive learning processes can be successfully maximised (Hitch, Macfarlane, & Nihill, 2015). Referring to previous studies, among the driving factors for SWD include inclusive learning and also the involvement of the university as a support group to build faculty-student relationships, not only while in class but also outside the learning space (Kezar & Maxey, 2014) (Love, et al., 2015) (Hitch, Macfarlane, & Nihill, 2015). This relationship is very important because the spirit of belonging can prevent students from dropping out as well as encourage SWD to successfully obtain their degree Besides, the development of SWD emotional ties is necessary to promote motivation and involvement on a comprehensive level. The goal of inclusive education is to guarantee that students feel they are valuable members of the university community and that their contributions are valued, rather than just involving the curriculum and assessments in the learning process (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014).

In addition, studies on the relationship between emotions and motivation with religious components among SWD started to catch researchers' attention. This is because Islam describes the existence of disabled persons as a blessing from Allah swt. (Che Di, 2014). According to Ahmad Razuan et al. (2019), barriers like a lack of teaching aids, an assessment level that is inappropriate for the disabled category, communication, facilities that are accessible to PWD, the continuity of learning at home, and the poor parenting are the factors that contribute to SWD challenges in coping in university lives.

Also, there is a severe lack of infrastructure systems that need to be fulfilled. The accessibility features for people with disabilities in each university building are still poor (Ahmad, Rosli, Takril, & Sabri, 2017). This is in line with the studies by Madriaga et al. (2012), Khairuddin et al. (2020), Yusof et al. (2020) and Chan et al. (2022), which stated that there is inadequate access to training resources and support at the institution. According to Heiman (2006), students with learning difficulties expressed frustration over a lack of social support.

Table 2: Summary of Issues Related to SWD

No	Issues faced by SWD in university	Solution
1	Educated disabled people are better equipped in managing their condition	PWD should be supported to further their studies
2	SWD need more time to finish their studies	SWD should be helped in order to complete their studies
3	SWD-faculty relationship is important to make SWD feel belong to their community	Faculty and the people should play their role
4	SWD need emotional support	People surrounding them should play their role
5	Relationship between emotion and motivation with religion components among SWD	Religious component should be instilled to SWD
6	Severe lack of infrastructure system for SWD	The authorities should take action on the issue

Methodologies

This study is a selective, descriptive, cross-sectional qualitative study conducted through an in-depth interview method to find participants' opinions and thoughts about flexibility and motivation that affect their learning process. The research instrument and interview questions will be drafted and be conducted by a research team that will be trained to conduct interview surveys. Before being applied to the interview participants, the content of the questionnaire will first be confirmed by a panel of experts in the relevant field to ensure appropriateness, clarity, simplicity, understanding and the order of the questions. Modifications to the questionnaire will be made prior to use in the main survey.

This methodology was chosen because it is seen to help establish a relationship between the researcher and the subject, strengthen professional relationships through direct contact, measure the subject's interest in the research topic and increase the opportunity to obtain more in-depth information, which may be missed if using an online-based survey method (Szolnoki & Hoffmann, 2013). In this study, interviews are used because they are considered to have a

higher response rate and can create a comfortable atmosphere for the respondents because the subjects can feel more professional in relating to the interviewer.

The source of data for this study is a primary source gathered from the interview process with UiTM SWD that are registered with the Unit Pendaftaran OKU UiTM (UPO). The study sample consisted of SWD with vision problems, physical problems, hearing problems and learning problems (dyslexia). There is no designated technique for calculating sample sizes for qualitative studies (Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, & Fontenot, 2013). However, the researcher decided that the sample size for this study will be 10 students (out of 288 PKU registered with UPO throughout UiTM Malaysia). Interviews will last between 45 minutes to one hour and the audio will be recorded with participants' consent for data analysis process. Participants' consent to participate in the study will be audio-recorded in the beginning of the interview.

Before the interview takes place, an invitation email will be sent to all SWD that are registered with UPO. The email will explain regarding the objectives of the study as well as confidential issues that will be applied throughout the interview process. If SWD does not respond to the first invitation email, a reminder email will be sent again after three weeks and a final reminder after another three weeks. Failure to answer or respond to the email indicates non-agreement to be interviewed and is considered as a refusal to participate in the study. Those who agreed to participate in the study will be scheduled for an interview and will be asked to fill in a consent form.

The results of the study will be in form of qualitative data and will be analyzed using thematic analysis. The results of the audio recordings will undergo verbatim transcription, open and closed coding followed by a theme identification process. The validity of the coding process will be implemented by comparing the codes and themes that have been identified with other researchers.

1	Formulation of Research Instrument for In-depth Semi-structured Interview
2	Confirmation of Research Instrument by Experts
3	Revision of Research Instrument (if any)
4	Invitation e-mail Sent to SWD Registered with UPO
5	Reminder e-mail Sent to SWD after Three Weeks (to potential respondents that has not respond to previous e-mail)
6	Another reminder e-mail Sent to SWD after another Three Weeks (to potential respondents that has not respond to previous e-mail)
7	An Interview Scheduled for Respondents that Agreed to Participate
8	Process of Data Transcription and Coding
9	Data Analysis
10	Results Obtained

Figure 1: Flow of Research Method

Findings

SWD have distinct demands that are specific to their type of impairment. It is necessary to comprehend the support idea to organise SWD's everyday operations. Most of the demand for supports are related to the addition of tools, facilities, and infrastructure to aid in their mobility. In order to develop assertiveness and the capacity to assimilate into society, SWD must be exposed to training or courses that can improve mental fortitude, emotional control, and social skills.

Being a disabled person requires a strong and resilient heart. High motivation, diligent, independent, focused, and consistent are important in forging success at university. In addition, SWD need to exercise to strengthen their physical due to mobility factors and the ability to attend classes. Difficulties encountered during learning are able to be solved by participating in the students learning group and by asking for help. In addition, support from friends, lecturers and the surrounding community is needed to ensure self-motivation to continue. The determination to learn and know oneself is also very important. Details of the findings can be divided into supporting students with disabilities concept, infrastructure and facilities support, support for teaching and learning programs and emotional and motivational element support.

Supporting Students with Disabilities Concept

All informants expressed a lack of understanding about the support concept. Most of them briefly touch on support from the aspect of equipment and facility assistance for the learning process to run smoothly. Informant F stated, "*I don't know how to explain*", but expressed the priority of the need to be placed in a small class to be comfortable with the learning process. One of the informants mentioned on the expected support or help is a special class or special program that teaches or exposes basic life skills especially on self-management, daily routines activities, communication, and socialization according to the SWD ability level.

Infrastructure and Facilities Support

Several respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the management system for disabled facilities. According to them, the institution must improve physical infrastructure, such as ramps, rails, and lifts, because steep stairs make it impossible for disabled students to move about.

"The biggest challenge for me is using my motorised wheelchair to get to the lecture hall because, even though I can do so now, I don't know how long the battery will last. Once, on the KPP3 hill, my wheelchair became stuck, and I had to break it while waiting for my friends to finish their classes because they were in the middle of studying." (Informant B).

Students with impairments need a variety of aids, including more ATMs in colleges. In addition, informant F made the following statement regarding the issue of the distance between colleges and classes, *"Maybe the university can provide special transport (for SWD) from college to campus...I don't think this is related to learning, but I want an extra ATM at an open place. Right now, they only have one. The place is just too scary, and I don't like to go there. It is always crowded with regular people."*

Furthermore, the distance between colleges and classes issue attracted respondent E to express an opinion, "*maybe the university can provide special transport (for SWD) from college to campus...*". While Informant F added regarding the elevators that replace stairs, "*if possible,*

can we have more elevators… it always full of normal (people)." Besides that, the building identification using colour codes issue is stated by Informant F and Informant E,

"Faculty area... it is spacious... All just like a same and I've got lost because all the corridors are all the same colour. there is no indication where the building (class) is… everything (building) is white and grey."

In the large hall, hearing-impaired students found it difficult to follow lectures, especially when hearing aids were not being worn "*I can only concentrate on one voice (sound) once I'm in the class. There are certain lecturers who speak too slowly, so I can't hear much. Sometimes, when I can't hear, I'll ask my friend to repeat it for me. I used to wear a hearing aid, but it's broken and no longer can be used. It costs RM7,000. Can I apply for help to buy it?*"

Inadequate infrastructure for the disabled is undoubtedly not acceptable and conducive to supporting students with disabilities, and thus shows that infrastructure factors contribute to the occurrence of barriers for such students.

Table 2: Summary of Infrastructure and Facilities Support Needed by SWD

No	Infrastructure and Facilities Support Needed by SWD
1	Need to improve ramps, rails and lifts
2	Need more ATMs
3	Suggest to have special transport for SWD from college to campus
4	Make building identification using colour codes
5	Financial aid to get hearing aid
5	Relationship between emotion and motivation with religion components among SWD
6	Severe lack of infrastructure system for SWD

Support for Teaching and Learning Programs
It gives a comfortable and appropriate space to study and aids impaired students in maintaining their motivation to study and complete tasks. Lecturers and fellow students are friendly and understanding.

"I am a student with physical disabilities and a slow learner. sometimes, when faced problem with studying, there are friends who are willing to teach one by one… but when they are busy. we can't force others. So, whether to like it or not, I must ask (request) my sister to teach me or just to learn by myself." (Informant C)

Moreover, Informant F reported that SWD are permitted to respond to exam questions in their preferred language, *"Despite the fact that CTU (courses at the faculty) were taught in Malay, my ustazah (lecturer) says I can use English as my preferred language. So, I suppose having bilingualism is quite helpful."*

In some cases, instructors show consideration for SWD by providing some flexibility, such as extending presentation times, using a language that they prefer, and granting extra time for assignment submission. Informant D and Informant F both concurred that the lecturer always

allots extra time for exams: "*In term of university's help, I guess we have the extra time… because, for example, for our presentation, we (students) can only go for seven minutes but for we (SWD), madam say can go for 10 minutes…*"

However, the learning constraints factor is closely related to SWD. The informants stated that the obstacles faced at university in the various forms. Students with physical disabilities expressed their difficulties in terms of comfort in the classroom, resulting in unable to focus on learning. Informant B insisted that,

"At the faculty level, there are lecturers who are not helpful. We are asked to take care of lecturers and so on. But when I try my best to keep my heart and respect to the lecturer, but... the lecturer doesn't understand my problem. Not understanding our problems and supporting our emotions... it's hard for us when there are lecturers who don't want to understand our emotions. But not all faculty lecturers are like that…only a few…"

He added, *"But at the branch level (university), and in terms of learning support, lecturers still lack to understanding disabled students. There are lecturers who don't want our problems brought up, don't want outsiders to interfere. So, it's like a barrier. That barrier should not be there. If necessary, the lecturer need to ask for help from his superiors on how to help the students…but the barriers from lecturers… sometimes the result is out of our ability..."*

Informant F reported that she had trouble remembering information, and that she also found it difficult to identify number and letter codes on the internet or on designated platforms. She also believes that the features of the student portal are not SWD-friendly. She acknowledges that training to strengthen memory is needed to help.

"It saddens me that I have no concept how technology functions. I was unable to open U-Future and locate the course materials. All kinds of words and numbers modified. I must randomly click buttons all over the place to locate course work to complete. So, after giving up, I just asked my pal. (smiling)."

Table 2: Summary of Support for Teaching and Learning Needed by SWD

No	Support for Teaching and Learning Needed by SWD	Category
1	Lecturers and fellow students are friendly	Advantege
2	They are permitted to answer examination in their preferred language	Advantege
3	Lecturers allow extra time for presentation, assignment and examination	Advantege
4	Some lecturers are not helpful and do not understand problems faced by SWD	Disadvantage
5	Internet platforms/student portal is not SWD-friendly	Disdvantege

Emotional and Motivational Element Support
The difficulty and pressure are released by releasing emotions such as crying (Informant I and Informant J), planning in learning, discussing to obtain lecturers motivate consideration and doing group work with positive and empathetic friends. It is important to maintain emotional stability when faced with challenging and unpleasant situations. The following are findings regarding the importance of SWD emotional and motivational support.

"To be successful, of course I need help from others to help. Because not all disabled students can do something on their own. Although my spirit is burning and I don't want to give up, but if there is something I can't do, I still give up. Sometimes for me, I am disabled not because I am disabled. But because other people don't make efforts, prevent or don't help or support me." (Informant B).

Informant B continued,
"I really hope for support and motivation from the faculty and the university. "If there is help, it will increase my motivation to not give up and go further... Whatever happens to me, my target is not to graduate in a short period of time, my target is for me to work hard and complete my studies until the end."

"The learning process may affect my decision to continue my studies, so if the lecturer finds it difficult to help me, how can I help myself? I truly need support in terms of facilities, but aside from that, I wish, please, that all the instructors work with impaired students." (Informant B)
"The feeling of not being able to speak up is still there... My hope is that there are other people who support and help, so that only then will the struggles faced by SWD be heard more and more, and I will have a wider opportunity to change and improve the situation. Not just for me but for my juniors. So that they don't face the same challenges or problems. I don't want this problem to continue and become a tradition. I hope that these problems do not happen."
(Informant B)

"I understand what was discussed earlier about reasonable accommodations. Just know that I really hope for help and attention from all parties. Thank you also for the help that has been given so far. In sha Allah, I will try hard to finish my studies." "This time I am determined to finish my studies because I am tired of changing courses and so on. I can... I will not give up."
(Informant B)

Conclusion

In this study, researcher tries to address the basic objective of the study, which is to identify the support received as well as the challenges faced by SWD in a public institution of higher learning in Malaysia. The findings of this study will contribute to the existing body of knowledge in related fields and provide valuable implications for the education industry, government and NGO bodies responsible for the matter.

Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge potential research limitations that may affect the interpretation and application of results from this study. First, a small sample size may not be able to fully describe the overall results, but will be able to show more detailed results. Second, this study focuses on SWD registered with UiTM UPO only. Thus, the problems faced by SWD in other IPTAs have not yet been identified. However, despite some limitations, this study on the other hand emphasizes the need for further research efforts to refine and validate the present findings.

It is recommended that a similar study be carried out in all IPTAs and also private IPTs involving all SWD groups from various categories. This is to ensure that the rights and needs of all SWD can be implemented. The results of this study are expected to channel information about the support received by SWD at UiTM to be an example to other IPTAs in addition to

identifying the challenges faced so that efforts towards solving the problem can be implemented immediately.

The authors expect that future research in this field will continue to build on the results of this study. Specifically, the author hopes that this study will benefit all parties, especially for the SWD group in IPTA throughout Malaysia. By referring to this study, future researchers can strive to overcome the limitations identified here and continue to advance the understanding of the challenges faced by SWD as well as the support they need so that more highly educated SWD can be born in Malaysia and be able to contribute to the progress of the country.

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