

Inclusive Education for Students with Disabilities: Perspectives from Indonesian and Malaysian Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to incorporate the perspectives and experiences of students with disabilities in higher education institutions by comparing the extent of awareness and representation of students with disabilities in Indonesian and Malaysian education systems. In this preliminary study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with university students from both countries to explore the challenges in implementing inclusive education policies and the role of media in shaping public perceptions on the issue. The study applied the foundation of Symbolic Interactionism Theory to analyse the complex interplay between societal attitudes, media representation, and educational practices. Findings reveal persistent barriers to inclusion, including limited teacher training, inadequate infrastructure, and societal stigma. The study highlights how media underrepresentation contributes to the lack of disability issues in public discourse, reinforcing existing stereotypes and hindering progress towards inclusive education. The application of communication theories provides insights into potential strategies for increasing awareness and fostering attitudinal change. These include targeted media campaigns, comprehensive educational programs, and the promotion of positive interactions between students with and without disabilities. The research underscores the need for a multi-faceted approach to address the awareness gap and promote inclusive education practices across Asia, emphasizing on the crucial role of media and communication in driving social change and policy implementation.

Keywords: *Individuals with disabilities, inclusive education, educational access, equal opportunity, symbolic interactionism.*

INTRODUCTION

Education is one of the important means to improve the quality of human resources. Based on data from the Central Bureau of Statistics in 2020, the number of people with disabilities in Indonesia reached 22.5 million, or about five percent of the total population of Indonesia (Biro Hubungan Masyarakat Kementerian Sosial RI, 2020). Furthermore, data from UNICEF shows that 0.8% of children aged 7 to 18 years have a disability (UNICEF, 2020). In Asia, there is a significant lack of awareness and proper representation of students with disabilities in both traditional and new media. Despite a population of almost 100 million, these individuals remain largely invisible in educational discourse and policy-making (Tomas, 2023). This issue is particularly evident in countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, and India. In Indonesia, despite

laws mandating inclusive education, awareness and implementation remain low. Many educators lack training in special needs education, and physical infrastructure in schools often fails to accommodate students with disabilities (Yusuf et al., 2021). Although the number of students with disabilities who successfully complete high school is still lower than the number of graduates without disabilities (UNICEF, 2020), appropriate accommodation is required to provide opportunities for high school graduates with disabilities to receive education at the tertiary level.

This is also supported by the Regulation of the Minister of Research, Technology and Higher Education of the Republic of Indonesia Number 46 of 2017 concerning Special Education and Special Service Education in Higher Education, which mandates universities to provide special education services in the form of inclusive education. Inclusive education is education that facilitates students with special needs and is carried out together with other students. A number of universities in Indonesia have provided inclusive education services, such as UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, Universitas Brawijaya, the State University of Surabaya, UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, and IAIN Salatiga. The development of inclusive education services in higher education certainly requires reforms in terms of culture, policies, and educational practices to be able to provide optimal support for students with disabilities. Several accommodations are needed, such as accessible infrastructure, inclusive learning modules and training for lecturers, and adequate learning supports.

Similarly, in Malaysia, while there have been policy efforts to promote inclusive education, societal awareness and acceptance of students with disabilities in mainstream schools remain limited (Nasir & Efendi, 2019). India, despite having one of the largest populations of people with disabilities in the world, faces significant challenges in providing inclusive education. The lack of awareness among educators and the general public often results in stigmatization and exclusion of students with disabilities from mainstream education (Sharma et al., 2022). Even in countries like Sri Lanka and Thailand, where there has been a slight increase in the enrollment of students with disabilities, they still constitute only a minuscule fraction of the total student population, reflecting a broader lack of understanding about their needs and potential (Seyi-Oderinde, 2020). The absence of inclusive support systems within Asian education systems stems from a general unawareness of the challenges faced by students with disabilities. Communication and media, which could play a vital role in elevating the voices of those with disabilities and bringing about positive changes, often overlook or misrepresent these issues (Lyner-Cleophas et al., 2014).

While many governments have established legal responsibilities and institutional mechanisms in higher education institutions, the lack of awareness has resulted in very few of these institutions in the Asian region actually implementing disability policies. This oversight leads to persistently unequal opportunities for students with disabilities (Emong & Eron, 2016). By addressing such limited knowledge among the community and working towards implementing truly inclusive measures along with the broader Asian region, this has the potential to lead the way towards a future where individuals with disabilities have equal access to educational opportunities, allowing them to thrive and contribute fully to society.

However, various studies show that this process is not easy. Studies conducted in various countries have identified various opportunities and challenges in the development of inclusive education and services for students with disabilities in higher education (Lopez-Gavira, et al., 2019; Moriña, 2016). Some of the challenges faced were the negative perception and attitude of the academic community towards these students, and the lack of learning facilitation in accordance with their needs (Lopez-Gavira, et al., 2019; Moriña, 2016).

This study is specifically aimed at collecting empirical data on the opportunities and challenges of developing inclusive education at the higher education level, considering the urgency of improving the quality of human resources with special needs who are ready to enter the community and the work force. This study first examines the current situation of accessibility and inclusion in higher education through opinions and perceptions from Indonesian and Malaysian students. In doing so, the research objectives seek to; 1) examine the extent of awareness about students with disabilities in higher education, and; 2) analyse the role of media in creating inclusive education.

The results of this study will be the basis for making recommendations for the development of inclusive education at the higher education level in Indonesia and other Asian countries. This research topic is in line with SDGs 4 and 10, i.e., ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education, increasing lifelong learning opportunities for all, and reducing inequalities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Inclusive Education

Inclusive education is increasingly perceived as broader than merely an approach to including students with disabilities in general education settings. Inclusive education is viewed as a reform that supports diversity among all learners (Ainscow et al., 2013; Hassanein et al., 2021; Mezzanotte, 2022). This approach suggests that schools should provide effective education for the majority of students and eliminate exclusions. The development of inclusive education requires the process of restructuring schools to be able to respond positively to the diversity of the students (Ainscow et al., 2013). Along with the development of inclusive education practices at the school level, there has been growing international interest in supporting the learning of students with disabilities in higher education. This may create challenges, as inclusive education approach was originally developed for younger students. Despite government legislation around this issue, there are still many barriers to be addressed to align educational practices in higher education with the principles of inclusive education (Moriña, 2016; Lopez-Gavira et al., 2021; Nilholm, 2021; Wulan and Sanjaya, 2022).

Challenges and Opportunities of Developing Inclusive Higher Education

The social model of disability argues that it is not always the impairment that is disabling or hindering an individual with a disability from participating in society; the environment and society may also create barriers to the individual's participation, in the form of discrimination, oppression, etc. Thus, from the perspective of the social model, higher education must restructure the educational experience so that all students including those with disabilities can participate (Moriña, 2016; Carballo et al., 2021; Nilholm, 2021). It is acknowledged that many of the barriers for higher education students with disabilities may also be experienced by their typically developing peers. For example, adapting to different teaching methods and learning styles, developing more independence, thinking about future options, and improving motivation to study may be issues faced by all students. However, these issues may be more complex and demanding for students with disabilities (Adams & Holland, 2006).

Barriers for higher education students with disabilities may occur at many levels: behavioural, attitudinal, structural, and organizational. These barriers are commonly underpinned by a society that has not fully supported the inclusion of students with disabilities (Adams & Holland, 2006). Some specific challenges that may be faced by students

with disabilities may include the lack of reasonable adjustments to support learning, and lack of support to improve academic, social skills, and transition processes, untrained faculty and negative attitudes and perceptions (Adams & Holland, 2006; Moríña, 2016). A study done in the United Arab Emirates also found that many typically developing higher education students showed feelings of negativity towards peers with disabilities (Alzyoudi et al., 2021).

Previous research has identified a series of good practices that can be drawn upon to develop more inclusive higher education settings. However, more information is required in terms of challenges and strategies for supporting the accessibility and inclusion of students with disabilities in Asian higher education institutions, namely Indonesia, Malaysia, and India which represent the perspectives and experiences of the stakeholders. The result of this study will provide a foundation for further studies specifying the key strategies for supporting the inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education.

Symbolic Interactionism

George Herbert Mead and Herbert Blumer (Blumer, 1969), offered a valuable theoretical lens through which perspective could be interpreted in the context of disability awareness and representation in education across Asia. This theory posits that people act towards things based on the meanings they ascribe to them, and these meanings are derived from social interactions and modified through interpretation (Carter & Fuller, 2015). In the context of disability and education in countries like Malaysia, Indonesia, and India, symbolic interactionism illuminates how societal attitudes, cultural symbols, and interpersonal interactions shape the experiences of students with disabilities and the implementation of inclusive education policies.

The widespread lack of awareness and representation of students with disabilities in Asian media and educational discourse can be understood as a reflection of the limited symbolic resources available for constructing positive meanings around disability (Tomas, 2023). This scarcity of positive symbols and interactions related to disability in education contributes to the perpetuation of stigma and misunderstanding. For instance, in Malaysia, the separation of special education from mainstream education can be seen as a symbolic reinforcement of the idea that students with disabilities are fundamentally different and unable to participate in regular educational settings (Lee & Low, 2020; Nilholm, 2021).

This symbolic separation influences how teachers, parents, and students without disabilities interact with and perceive students with disabilities, often leading to lowered expectations and reduced opportunities for meaningful inclusion. Similarly, in India, the limited representation of successful individuals with disabilities in media and public life restricts the symbolic resources available for challenging prevailing negative stereotypes (Sharma et al., 2022). Through the lens of symbolic interactionism, we can see how changing these interactions and introducing new symbols—such as positive media representations, inclusive language in policy documents, and visible accommodations in school environments could gradually shift societal interpretations of disability (Dolgon et al., 2019).

This shift in symbolic meaning could, in turn, lead to more inclusive behaviors and attitudes in educational settings. Furthermore, the theory highlights the importance of direct, positive interactions between students with and without disabilities in shaping mutual understanding and respect (Carter & Fuller, 2015). By fostering such interactions within inclusive educational environments, new shared meanings around disability can emerge, potentially challenging long-held societal assumptions and stereotypes. Thus, symbolic interactionism provides a framework for understanding both the current challenges in

disability awareness and inclusion in Asian education systems, and the potential pathways for fostering more inclusive attitudes and practices through deliberate changes in symbols, language, and social interactions (Nasir & Efendi, 2019; Yusuf et al., 2021).

METHODOLOGY

The aim of this study was to examine the extent of awareness of the challenges and strategies supporting accessibility and inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education institutions in Indonesia and Malaysia. In order to gauge their experiences upon entry into their higher education studies, the informants were chosen due to embarking on their first year of studies to participate in semi-structured interviews. Therefore, the sampling of students with disabilities was based on their enrolment in polytechnic institutes, colleges, and universities, and their age range is between 18 to 30 years old. In so doing, several difficulties were met, namely locating students with disabilities who were willing to participate or were able to participate due to their respective conditions.

Henceforth, the snowball method was applied, where the researchers used social networking and campus visits to identify informants who met the inclusion criteria above. Public and private higher education institutions were approached; firstly, 1) Indonesian students from Surabaya, Jakarta, Bandung, Kalimantan and Malang. Secondly, 2) Malaysian institutions from Klang Valley, Perak, Kedah, Johor, Perlis, Sabah, Sarawak and Negeri Sembilan. In sum, a total of 15 students from Indonesia and 15 students from Malaysia were approached for the preliminary round of data collection. The full list of interviewees can be found in Table 1 is the list of Indonesian and Malaysian student informants.

Table 1: List of Indonesian & Malaysian student informants

Indonesian Informant ID	Age	Gender	Malaysian Informant ID	Age	Gender
INA01	22	F	MAL01	20	M
INA02	22	F	MAL02	27	M
INA03	23	F	MAL03	22	M
INA04	22	F	MAL04	20	F
INA05	30	M	MAL05	22	M
INA06	22	M	MAL06	21	F
INA07	25	M	MAL07	23	M
INA08	25	M	MAL08	22	F
INA09	22	F	MAL09	24	M
INA10	19	F	MAL10	19	F
INA11	21	M	MAL11	21	M
INA12	25	M	MAL12	25	F
INA13	21	M	MAL13	21	M
INA14	25	M	MAL14	20	M
INA15	18	M	MAL15	24	M

Through the process of inductive coding, the identified themes will be discussed in relation to the implementation of inclusive education practices in higher education and their implications for future research. The thematic analysis was conducted on responses to the open-ended questions and literature. Due to the range of qualitative questions and the responses of interviewees, Atlas.ti 24 was deployed to analyse the answers. Analysis occurred at two levels: first to identify how informants experienced education as a person with disability, and second, to identify what they discussed in terms of perception and interaction among peers and their level of awareness.

From the 30 interviews done, a total of 57 themes were coded and identified whilst 148 quotations were derived from the coding process. However, out of the 57, only the top 10 codes prioritised due to their frequencies and significance towards the research objectives in question. For the purpose of this study, the top 3 themes were highlighted and discussed for this paper.

Table 2: Frequency list of themes coded

Theme	Frequency of quotes	Percentage (%)
Accessibility	40	27
Communication difficulties	25	16.9
Challenges	17	11.5
Inequality	17	11.5
Diversity	16	10.8
Discrimination	14	9.5
Social Support	14	9.5
Assistive technology	12	8.1
Disability	11	7.4
Inclusion	9	6.1
Education	8	5.4

FINDINGS

An analysis of the narratives from students with disabilities in Malaysian and Indonesian higher education institutions reveals a nuanced landscape of inclusivity, characterised by both progress and persistent challenges. These accounts elucidate the multidimensional nature of educational inclusion, encompassing physical accessibility, institutional support mechanisms, and societal attitudes.

Accessibility

The transition from secondary to tertiary education, as articulated by informant MAL09, underscores the necessity for enhanced self-advocacy skills and adaptability in navigating more autonomous learning environments. The dichotomous experiences with inclusive design initiatives and supportive mentorship, contrasted with infrastructural barriers and microaggressions, exemplify the inconsistent implementation of inclusive practices and communications within educational institutions. INAO1 further corroborates this duality, highlighting progressive institutional policies such as disability-specific scholarships that are being promoted, while simultaneously pointing to a pervasive lack of disability awareness among the student body in the media. This juxtaposition of institutional support and social barriers is indicative of the complex interplay between policy implementation and cultural attitudes in shaping inclusive educational spaces.

...On this campus, there are 60 people with disabilities with various obstacles. While I was studying at this University, I had many benefits, especially the free scholarship provided by the campus for all disabilities. However, many fellow students here are still unfamiliar with disabilities, so sometimes they still receive inappropriate treatment. (INAO1)

INAO3 comparison analysis of special education and mainstream university environments provides insight into the psychological and motivational aspects of inclusion, demonstrating how competitive academic settings can catalyse personal growth and challenge societal perceptions of disability. MAL03 offered a specific lens on the experiences

of visually impaired students, elucidating the critical role of assistive technologies and specialised support services, while also exposing ongoing challenges in curriculum accessibility and faculty awareness. Collectively, these illuminate the incremental nature of progress towards inclusive higher education in these Asian contexts, while also accentuating the imperative for more comprehensive and consistent approaches to awareness-raising, accessibility enhancement, and support provision to foster genuinely inclusive academic environments.

...when I was at a special school with disabilities, it was said that the teachers were very pampered by their teachers, especially in terms of learning and grades. But when I felt like a student and entered a lecture environment, that's where I felt what is called individualism and competition in obtaining or achieving achievements. And that spurred me to continue and continue to learn so that I could compete with non-disabled people and be able to show them that disabled people can also study just like them and that we are equal. (INAO3)

...I have a visual impairment that affects my ability to read printed materials and navigate campus independently. The university has provided me with assistive technology and mobility training, which has been very helpful. However, I sometimes face challenges with inaccessible course materials and a lack of understanding from some professors about my accommodation needs. (MAL03)

These comparisons suggest that while both Indonesian and Malaysian students face challenges in higher education, there may be differences in the nature of institutional support, the specifics of accessibility issues, and the focus of students' concerns. Indonesian accounts seem to highlight more institutional financial support but ongoing social integration challenges, while Malaysian accounts emphasise physical accessibility issues and the need for more consistent understanding from faculty and peers. However, it is important to note that these observations are based on a limited number of accounts and may not be representative of all students' experiences in these countries.

Communication Difficulties

In analysing the transcripts from students with disabilities in Malaysian and Indonesian higher education institutions, a critical theme emerges regarding the role of media and communication in fostering awareness and inclusivity. These narratives elucidate the significant impact of societal understanding, or lack thereof, on the educational experiences of students with disabilities.

The experience of MAL04 as student with hearing impairment underscored a crucial gap in public awareness about diverse communication needs. This student's observation that classmates are not exposed to or have not read about the mannerisms associated with hearing impairments points to a potential deficiency in media representation and public education on disability issues. Similarly, MAL07's experience with autism spectrum disorder reveals the complexities of social interactions and the preference for selective disclosure, indicating a need for more nuanced media portrayals of neurodiversity.

...I still face challenges with social interactions and sensory overload. My friends and colleagues are accepting, but social situations can be awkward or overwhelming for me. I prefer to discuss my needs with a few trusted individuals rather than disclosing my diagnosis to everyone. It's good if they learn about it via different channels.. maybe TV? Rather than asking awkward questions about our disabilities. (MAL07)

In the Indonesian context, experience of INA03 as the first blind student at their university illuminates the challenges of pioneering inclusivity in higher education, particularly in terms of infrastructure and learning accommodations. This situation underscores the potential role of media in promoting the need for universal design in educational settings from many perspectives.

... the campus does not yet provide infrastructure that can make it easier for the blind to carry out their activities independently, especially walking. I may still be able to understand this because I am in fact the first and only blind student at [omitted] University [omitted] that I know at the moment. When I'm in class and taking part in learning activities, I rely more on the recording method and then ask my friends who have complete notes. (INA03)

Similarly INA04 posits that miscommunication in the classroom further emphasises the importance of raising awareness about diverse learning needs and communication strategies among both faculty and students. These situations collectively demonstrate how media and communication strategies could play a pivotal role in bridging awareness gaps, fostering empathy, and promoting inclusive practices in higher education settings.

...not really able to catch all of the lecturer's explanations. Lots of miscommunication [...]. Everyone is still tolerant. I first talk about my personal situation so that we both understand each other and try to understand each other. (INA04)

This comparison of student experiences in Malaysia and Indonesia reveals distinct challenges in creating inclusive higher education environments. Malaysian institutions face issues related to nuanced understanding and social integration of students with disabilities, while Indonesian institutions grapple with more fundamental awareness and infrastructure concerns. These findings underscore the critical role that media and communication strategies could play in both contexts. In Malaysia, there is a need for more sophisticated and diverse representations of disabilities to enhance peer understanding and social inclusion. In Indonesia, media efforts should focus on raising basic awareness about disability rights and the necessity of inclusive educational environments.

Challenges

The analysis of experiences between Indonesian and Malaysian students with disabilities reveals distinct patterns in awareness, attitudes, and support systems within higher education institutions. In the Malaysian context, there appears somewhat increased awareness levels

among faculty and staff. This range spans from professors who are proactively accommodating, as noted by the experience of MAL04 with those are willing to provide accommodations like written notes or captioned videos to those who demonstrate a lack of understanding about disability needs.

However, MAL012 account further illustrates this polarization by describing situations where lecturers did not understand needs of students with disability and refused to make reasonable accommodations. This inconsistency in awareness and support suggests a need for more comprehensive and uniform awareness campaigns within Malaysian institutions. Such initiatives could aim to standardise understanding of disability issues across all levels of the university community, from administration to faculty and support staff.

...The transition from high school to university was initially quite difficult because I had to adapt to a new environment and learn how to obtain the support I needed. I have experienced situations where lecturers did not understand my needs and refused to make reasonable accommodation, but I had a good support system with friends and university support staff.
(MAL012)

In contrast, the Indonesian perspective presents a more binary division in attitudes towards students with disabilities. INAO14 observation of two groups, those who accept him in assignment tasks and those who accept it because it is the right thing to do points to a clear delineation between genuine acceptance and compliance-driven behavior. This highlights an opportunity for targeted media interventions in Indonesian higher education settings. Such interventions could focus on bridging the gap between surface-level acceptance and deeper understanding, promoting a culture of genuine inclusion rather than mere tolerance.

The nature of institutional support also differs between the two countries. In Malaysia, the accounts suggest the existence of formalised support systems, albeit with inconsistent implementation. MAL012 experience of receiving good support from friends and university staff indicates that some structures are in place, even if they are not uniformly effective. This scenario calls for improved communication strategies to better inform students about available services and how to access them. In Indonesia, the narratives focus more on peer acceptance and individual adaptation, as exemplified by INAO11 emphasis on learning to have power over oneself, be responsible and independent. This focus suggests a potential lack of comprehensive, institutionalised support systems in Indonesian universities, highlighting a need for awareness campaigns that not only promote acceptance but also advocate for the development of formal support structures.

The transition experience from secondary to tertiary education emerges as a significant theme in the Malaysian context, with MAL012 explicitly mentioning the difficulties of adapting to a new environment and learning to obtain necessary support. This highlights a critical juncture where media and communication strategies could play a vital role in easing this transition. By providing comprehensive information about university life, available support services, and strategies for self-advocacy, media campaigns could better prepare students with disabilities for the challenges of higher education.

In Indonesia, while the transition experience is not explicitly addressed in these accounts, there is a notable emphasis on independence and self-reliance. The perspective of INAO11 on adapting to visual impairment while maintaining independence presents an

opportunity for media to showcase the diverse capabilities of students with disabilities. This approach could help challenge stereotypes and promote a more nuanced understanding of disability experiences in higher education.

...My daily life is not that difficult with the condition of my eyes, but there are some things that I cannot see, such as seeing or recognizing someone's face from a distance, not being able to see the lips of someone speaking, etc. But we can learn to have power over oneself, be responsible and independent.
(INA011)

These differences underscore the need for tailored media and communication strategies in each country. In Malaysia, efforts might focus on creating more consistent awareness across university communities and improving information dissemination about support services. For Indonesia, media initiatives could aim at fostering deeper understanding and acceptance beyond surface-level compliance, while also highlighting the capabilities and resilience of students with disabilities. In both contexts, strategic media and communication initiatives have the potential to play a transformative role in creating more inclusive, informed, and supportive academic environments for students with disabilities.

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to examine the extent of awareness about students with disabilities in higher education and analyse the role of media in creating inclusive education in Indonesia and Malaysia. The findings, organised around the themes of *Accessibility*, *Communication Difficulties*, and *Challenges*, reveal a complex landscape of inclusivity in higher education, characterised by both progress and persistent barriers. The theme of Accessibility highlights the multifaceted nature of inclusivity in higher education settings. As evidenced by the experiences of students like MAL09 and INA01, the transition from secondary to tertiary education presents significant challenges for students with disabilities. These challenges are not merely physical but also encompass the need for enhanced self-advocacy skills and adaptability in more autonomous learning environments. This aligns with recent research by Moriña et al. (2020), which emphasises the importance of self-determination skills for students with disabilities in higher education.

The inconsistent implementation of inclusive practices within educational institutions, as reported by students, reflects the ongoing struggle to align higher education practices with the principles of inclusive education. This corroborates findings by Sánchez-Fuentes et al. (2020), who identified significant gaps between inclusive education policies and their practical implementation in higher education settings. The juxtaposition of progressive institutional policies, such as disability-specific scholarships, with a pervasive lack of disability awareness among the student body, underscores the complex interplay between policy implementation and cultural attitudes in shaping inclusive educational spaces. From the perspective of Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Carter & Fuller, 2015), these experiences can be understood as a reflection of the limited symbolic resources available for constructing positive meanings around disability in higher education settings. The separation of special education from mainstream education, as noted in the Malaysian context (Lee & Low, 2020), serves as a symbolic reinforcement of the idea that students with disabilities are fundamentally different and unable to participate in regular educational settings. This symbolic separation influences how teachers, peers, and society at large interact with and

perceive students with disabilities, often leading to lowered expectations and reduced opportunities for meaningful inclusion.

The theme of *Communication Difficulties* further illuminates the crucial role of media and communication in fostering awareness and inclusivity. The experiences of students like MAL04 and MAL07 highlight a significant gap in public awareness about diverse communication needs and the complexities of neurodiversity. This aligns with Tomas's (2023) observation of the widespread lack of awareness and proper representation of students with disabilities in both traditional and new media across Asia. The potential deficiency in media representation and public education on disability issues points to a critical area for intervention, as highlighted by recent studies on media representation of disability (Ellis & Goggin, 2022).

The challenges faced by students like INAO3, who pioneered inclusivity as the first blind student at their university, underscore the potential role of media in highlighting the need for universal design in educational settings. This aligns with the social model of disability, which argues that it is often the environment and society, rather than the impairment itself, that creates barriers to participation (Moriña, 2020). Through the lens of Symbolic Interactionism, these experiences highlight how changing interactions and introducing new symbols; such as positive media representations and visible accommodations in educational environments, could gradually shift societal interpretations of disability (Dolgon et al., 2019). The theme of *Challenges* reveals distinct patterns in awareness, attitudes, and support systems within higher education institutions in Malaysia and Indonesia. The inconsistency in awareness and support among faculty and staff in Malaysian institutions, as reported by students like MAL04 and MAL012, suggests a need for more comprehensive and uniform awareness campaigns. This aligns with recent research by Lombardi et al. (2022), which emphasises the importance of faculty training and attitudinal change in creating inclusive higher education environments.

In the Indonesian context, the binary division in attitudes towards students with disabilities, as observed by INAO14, highlights an opportunity for targeted media interventions. This finding resonates with recent studies on peer attitudes towards students with disabilities in higher education (Lipka et al., 2020). The emphasis on independence and self-reliance in Indonesian narratives, exemplified by INAO11, presents an opportunity for media to showcase the diverse capabilities of students with disabilities, challenging stereotypes and promoting a more nuanced understanding of disability experiences in higher education. These findings underscore the critical role that media and communication strategies could play in both contexts. In Malaysia, there is a need for more sophisticated and diverse representations of disabilities to enhance peer understanding and social inclusion. In Indonesia, media efforts should focus on raising basic awareness about disability rights and the necessity of inclusive educational environments. This aligns with recent research on the role of media in shaping disability perceptions and promoting inclusive education (Kearney et al., 2019).

CONCLUSION

This study has provided valuable insights into the experiences of students with disabilities in higher education in Indonesia and Malaysia, shedding light on the extent of awareness about these students and the role of media in creating inclusive education. The findings reveal that

while progress has been made in terms of institutional policies and support systems, significant challenges remain in terms of accessibility, communication, and overall inclusivity.

The first objective of the study is to examine the extent of awareness about students with disabilities in higher education, has been met through the analysis of student narratives. The findings indicate varying levels of awareness among faculty, staff, and peers, with inconsistencies in understanding and accommodating the needs of students with disabilities. This underscores the need for more comprehensive awareness-raising efforts across all levels of higher education institutions, as highlighted by recent research on disability awareness in higher education (Lombardi et al., 2022).

The second objective, to analyze the role of media in creating inclusive education, has been addressed through the examination of student experiences and the application of Symbolic Interactionism theory. The findings highlight the potential of media to play a transformative role in shaping societal attitudes, challenging stereotypes, and promoting inclusive practices. However, the current lack of positive representation and awareness-raising content in media contributes to the perpetuation of barriers and misunderstandings, as noted in recent studies on media representation of disability (Lopez-Gavira et al., 2021; Ellis & Goggin, 2022). Through the lens of Symbolic Interactionism, this study has demonstrated how societal attitudes, cultural symbols, and interpersonal interactions shape the experiences of students with disabilities and the implementation of inclusive education policies. The limited symbolic resources available for constructing positive meanings around disability in higher education settings contribute to the challenges faced by students with disabilities.

Moving forward, there is a clear need for tailored media and communication strategies in each country. These strategies should aim to create more consistent awareness across university communities, improve information dissemination about support services, and foster deeper understanding and acceptance beyond surface-level compliance. By introducing new symbols and promoting positive interactions, media can play a crucial role in shifting societal interpretations of disability and fostering more inclusive educational environments (Kearney et al., 2019; Mezzanotte, 2022). Future research should explore the effectiveness of targeted media campaigns in improving disability awareness and inclusion in higher education settings. Additionally, investigations into the role of social media and digital platforms in facilitating peer-to-peer understanding and support could provide valuable insights for developing more inclusive academic communities in both countries, as suggested by recent studies on digital media and disability inclusion (Sweet et al., 2020; Mezzanotte, 2022). In conclusion, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on inclusive education in higher education, particularly in the Asian context. By highlighting the experiences of students with disabilities and the role of media in shaping awareness and attitudes, it provides a foundation for developing more effective strategies to promote inclusivity in higher education. As societies strive to create more equitable and inclusive educational environments, the insights gained from this study can inform policy, practice, and media representation, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive future for all students.

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