The Role of Interpersonal Communication in Supporting the Inclusivity of Students with Disabilities in Universities: A Systematic Review

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Abstract
Effective interaction facilitated by interpersonal communication is crucial among students, lecturers, and administrators; however, it presents a significant challenge for inclusivity, particularly for students with disabilities. While interpersonal communication serves as the bedrock of educational engagement, for students with disabilities, it also unveils barriers that hinder their full participation in academic life. However, for the Persons with Disabilities (PWD) community, communication challenges are often a major barrier to an inclusive learning process. This systematic literature review (SLR) study aims to identify, analyse, and synthesize the latest research related to inclusive communication issues, experiences of PWD, and interpersonal communication strategies in the context of higher education. The analysis was conducted using articles published between 2016 and 2025, with a specific focus on barriers, facilitators, perceptions, and support mechanisms for students with disabilities at universities. The results of this SLR show four main themes: (i) communication barriers and attitudes, (ii) institutional responsiveness and support strategies, (iii) policy gaps and staff training needs, and (iv) the importance of mainstreaming inclusive communication in building a university culture that respects diversity. The study asserts that universities need to not only provide physical facilities but also implement communication strategies that recognize the rights, voices, and needs of the PWD community in the university. These findings have implications for policymaking, curriculum design, and social awareness programs at the university level, particularly in fostering a truly inclusive learning environment.
Keywords: Interpersonal Communication, Inclusive Communication, Students with Disabilities, Higher Education, University Inclusivity

Introduction

Communication is the foundation of human interaction and plays a critical role in shaping social relationships, self-identity, and mutual understanding. In the context of higher education, communication does not only take place in the lecture room between lecturers and students, but also involves various layers of interaction, such as peer relations, administrative staff, and university support networks. For students with disabilities (PWDs), interpersonal communication is an important mechanism to ensure access to knowledge, emotional support, and equal learning opportunities.

However, the reality faced by the PWD community is that communication is often a significant barrier. Negative attitudes, lack of understanding, stereotypes, and failure to adapt communication styles to the needs of individuals with different abilities affect the effectiveness of engagement at universities. According to Osuna-Juárez et al. (2024), students with disabilities face academic, social, and infrastructural barriers, which are often influenced by institutions' failure to provide inclusive communication strategies. This raises the question of whether universities are truly implementing the principles of inclusive education or merely meeting the policy requirements.

In Malaysia, policies related to PWD have been implemented through the Persons with Disabilities Act 2008, PWD Action Plan 2016–2022, and the Ministry of Education's Inclusive Education policy. Despite these guidelines, their implementation at the university level still faces various challenges, particularly in terms of interpersonal communication issues. Effective communication involves not only the delivery of information but also empathy, identity recognition, and appreciation of diversity. Without these elements, students with disabilities risk being marginalized in their academic and social experiences.

Literature Review

Previous studies have highlighted various aspects of the experience of PWD students at universities. Witham and Brewer (2023) emphasize that disabled students often face issues of identity and legitimacy, especially when they have to prove their disability status to the university. Lack of understanding from staff and peers adds to the challenges of adapting to campus life.

A study by Osuna-Juárez (2024) through an SLR found that the main barriers faced by students with disabilities can be divided into three categories: academic, social, and infrastructure. The coping strategies used include psychological, behavioral, and academic aspects. These findings emphasize that PWD students are not passive but actively develop their own strategies to adapt to the challenges of communication and inclusive learning environments. In a more conceptual discussion, Zhou (2025) emphasizes the need to shift the paradigm of inclusive education from an "accommodation" approach to a social model that emphasizes the elimination of structural barriers. This is in line with the suggestion of Naranjo Crespo (2022), who found that university administrators and lecturers still lack training, updated policies, and awareness of the need for inclusive communications.

A study by Paz-Maldonado et al. (2025) which also uses the SLR approach emphasizes the perspective of PWD students themselves. They identified major barriers in physical or architectural forms, academics, attitudes and communication. This study reinforces the view

that communication is a critical dimension often overlooked in efforts to build an inclusive university environment for students with disabilities.

Several other studies have addressed different contexts. Pottmeier et al. (2019) examined the experiences of university staff with special needs, finding that communication and linguistic barriers also impact their job prospects. On the other hand, Hazlin Falina et. al (2024) emphasized that the experiences of support and barriers at university can influence the self-development of disabled students as well as their academic success.

Research Gap
Past studies have found a huge gap between the policies enacted and the reality of their implementation. Although universities provide PWD support services, issues such as staff's lack of understanding of inclusive communication needs, professional training constraints, and prejudice persist (Witham & Brewer, 2023; Zhou, 2025). Ineffective interpersonal communication can create a sense of isolation, affect motivation, and reduce the level of satisfaction of PWD with their university experience.

Furthermore, most studies on inclusive education emphasize physical access aspects, such as building facilities, while less attention is paid to interpersonal communication. This has led to a knowledge gap regarding how communication can be a catalyst for a more holistic and inclusive experience. This systematic literature review (SLR) was conducted to fill this gap, with a specific focus on the relationship between interpersonal communication and inclusive support for PWD students at universities.

While the existing literature has discussed a wide range of issues related to disabled university students, some important gaps need to be noted. First, many studies focus more on physical access and policy, while the aspects of interpersonal communication are still poorly explored, particularly in the context of student-lecturer and student-peer relationships. Second, most studies have been conducted in developed countries, while studies in the context of developing countries, such as Malaysia, are still limited. This has led to a lack of empirical data that can reflect the reality of PWD in local universities in Malaysia.

Additionally, there is a lack of studies incorporating multi-stakeholder perspectives, including those of students, academic staff, and administrators. Most studies focused on only one group, whereas inclusive communication requires collaboration among different layers of university communities. This gap opens up space for further research that emphasizes interpersonal communication as a key factor in supporting inclusive learning for the PWD community.

This study is important because it contributes to the academic and practical understanding of inclusive communication in higher education. From an academic perspective, the findings of this study enrich the literature on interpersonal communication by emphasizing inclusivity and social justice. This study also fills the knowledge gap that exists, particularly in the context of Malaysia and other developing countries, where the issue of PWD communication is less focused on in mainstream academic discourse.

In practical terms, this study provides guidance for universities, policymakers, and education practitioners in formulating communication strategies that are more PWD-friendly. By understanding the real experiences of PWD students, universities can improve their support services, train their staff, and develop a campus culture that respects diversity. Finally, it contributes to global efforts to build an inclusive society based on human rights and social justice.

Research Objectives
i.   Identify the main themes in the literature related to interpersonal communication and inclusivity of PWD in universities.
ii.   Analyse the form of communication barriers experienced by students with disabilities.
iii. Identify effective interpersonal communication strategies to support   inclusive learning.
iv.   Assess the implications of interpersonal communication on the policies, institutional practices, and experiences of PWD students at universities.

Research Questions
i.   What are the interpersonal communication barriers experienced by PWD students in the university context?
ii.   How can interpersonal communication strategies support an   inclusive learning process?
iii. What is the knowledge gap in the literature related to interpersonal communication and the PWD community in universities?
iv.   How can higher-education institutions use the implications of these SLR findings to strengthen   an inclusive culture?

Theory and Concept
Interpersonal communication is a fundamental process in the formation of social interactions and relationships among humans. Interpersonal Communication Theory emphasizes that effective communication involves cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions, which directly impact the construction of an individual's self-identity and social relationships. In the context of students with disabilities, interpersonal communication is the primary medium through which they voice their needs, seek academic support, and build a healthy social network.

Additionally, the *Social Model of Disability* theory (Zhou, 2025) rejects the traditional view that places disability as a purely individual problem, instead emphasizing that the real barriers lie in social structures, societal attitudes, and the failure of institutions to provide an inclusive environment for people with disabilities. This theory provides an important basis for understanding that communication is not just the delivery of a message but also a reflection of the recognition of the rights and identity of the disabled.

The *Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)* (Petty & Cacioppo, 1980) is also relevant in this context, as it explains how messages conveyed through communication channels can influence a person's acceptance as well as changes in attitude. When communication is inclusive, the message conveyed is more effective and can build understanding between PWD and non-PWD communities. Furthermore, *Cultivation Theory* asserts that continuous exposure to inclusive messages can nurture positive perceptions of the PWD community, thereby reducing stigma.

Methodology

This study uses a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach to identify, analyse, and synthesize the findings of past studies on the role of interpersonal communication in supporting the inclusivity of Persons with Disabilities (PWD) students in higher education institutions. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to combine evidence from various academic sources in a structured and transparent manner, resulting in a comprehensive synthesis of knowledge (Osuna-Juárez et al., 2024; Paz-Maldonado et al., 2025).

Study Design

This study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA), which consists of several phases: (i) determination of study questions, (ii) search strategy, (iii) article screening process, (iv) eligibility assessment, and (v) analysis and synthesis of data. This process was designed to ensure the transparency, reliability, and repeatability of our findings.
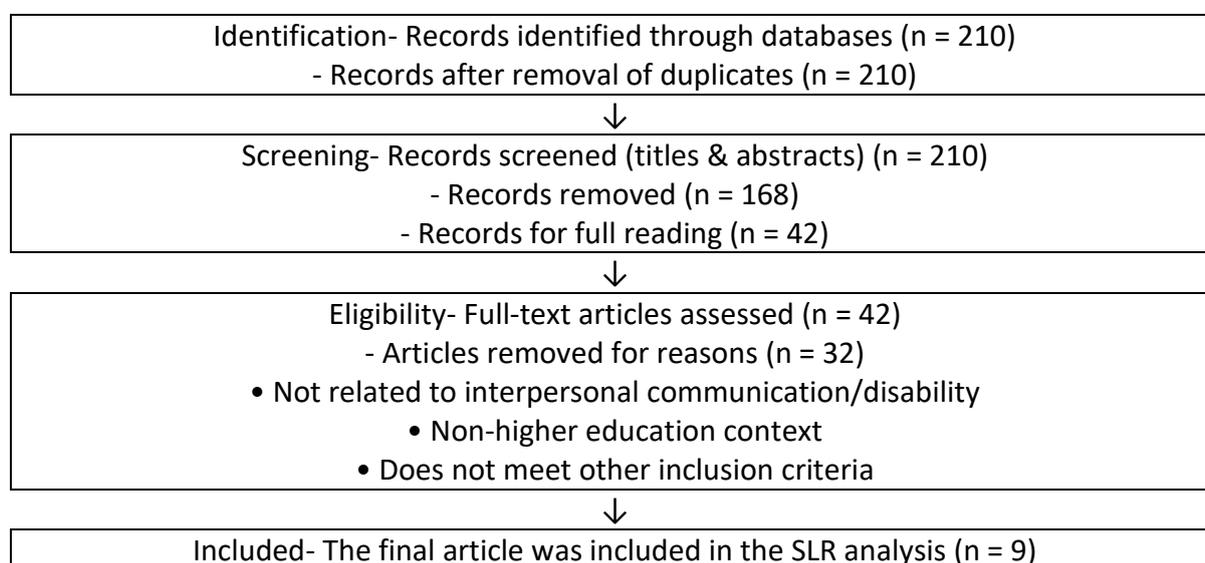
Identification- Records identified through databases (n = 210)
- Records after removal of duplicates (n = 210)

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Screening- Records screened (titles & abstracts) (n = 210)
- Records removed (n = 168)
- Records for full reading (n = 42)

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Eligibility- Full-text articles assessed (n = 42)
- Articles removed for reasons (n = 32)
• Not related to interpersonal communication/disability
• Non-higher education context
• Does not meet other inclusion criteria

↓

Included- The final article was included in the SLR analysis (n = 9)

Figure 1.0: Flow diagram of the proposed searching study
Source: Moher et. al. (2009)

Database Sources

Literature searches were conducted using several major databases, namely Scopus & Web of Science. This database was chosen because it has extensive coverage in the fields of communication, social sciences, and education. The search was conducted for articles published between 2016 and 2025. The selection of this year's range was to ensure that the latest data were used while also considering influential seminar articles in the field of inclusive education and interpersonal communication.

Search Strategy

Keywords were used in various combinations with Boolean operators (AND, OR) to ensure comprehensive search results were obtained. The main keywords used were as follows:
- *"interpersonal communication"* OR *"inclusive communication"*
- *"students with disabilities"* OR *"persons with disabilities (PWD)"* OR *"OKU"*
- *"higher education"* OR *"university"* OR *"tertiary education"*

- *Examples of combinations: ("interpersonal communication"* AND *"students with disabilities"* AND *"higher education")*

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To ensure the suitability of the articles for the study objectives, the following criteria were established:

Inclusion Criteria

1. Articles published between 2016–2025.
2. Articles published in peer-reviewed journals.
3. Studies that examined interpersonal communication, inclusive communication, or the experiences of PWD students at university.
4. The articles were written in English or Malay.
5. Studies used empirical methods (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed) or systematic literature reviews.

Exclusion Criteria

1. Articles are in the form of technical, editorial, or summary reports without empirical data.
2. Studies that focus on non-higher education contexts (e.g., primary and secondary schools).
3. Articles that are not available in full text.

Article Selection Process

The initial search yielded 210 articles that were screened. After filtering the titles and abstracts, only 42 articles were fully read. Finally, 9 main articles were selected for the final analysis. Second, the titles and abstracts were filtered based on the inclusion/exclusion criteria. Third, a full reading was performed to assess the suitability of the questions. Finally, 9 articles were selected for the final analysis. These articles were then formulated in the form of a matrix table containing information on the author, year, title, study problem, methodology and key findings.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis. The selected articles were carefully read, and the initial code was developed based on the focus of the study (interpersonal communication, obstacles, strategies, and perceptions). These codes were further grouped into several key themes that illustrated the patterns of findings in the literature. This process allows researchers to identify the similarities, differences, and knowledge gaps in existing studies.

Ethical Considerations

As this study was an SLR and did not involve respondents directly, ethical issues such as confidentiality and consent did not arise. However, researchers emphasize the principle of academic integrity by ensuring that all literature sources used are fully credited through citations and reference lists in APA style.

Table 1.0
Number and details of Primary Studies (PS) Database

No	Author / Years	Title	Scopus	WoS
1	Brewer et al. (2025)	Disabled student experiences of Higher Education		√
2	Zhou et al. (2025)	The use of generative AI by students with disabilities in higher education		√
3	Paz-Maldonado, Calvo-Álvarez & Silva-Peña (2025)	Perspective of Students with Disabilities on Barriers, Facilitators, and Mechanisms for Inclusion at University: A Systematic Review		√
4	Osuna-Juárez & González-Castellano (2024)	Understanding Professors' and Students with Disabilities' Perceptions of Inclusive Higher Education: A Systematic Review		√
5	Naranjo-Crespo (2022)	Perspectives and Discourses on Diversity and Inclusion in the University Community	√	
6	Pottmeier, Miesenberger & Faltin (2019)	Inclusion of Staff with Disabilities in Higher Education Institutions		√
7	Witham, B., & Brewer, G. (2024)	*Giving the People Who Use the Service a Voice*": Student Experiences of University Disability Services.		√
8	Bartolo et al.(2025)	Students with Disabilities in Higher Education Call for Personal Empowerment, Equitable Inclusive Systems, and Individualized Accommodations		√
9	Hazlin Falina et.al.(2016)	The role of media as a tool of social awareness among people with disabilities in Malaysia.	√	

Findings

A systematic analysis of ten selected articles identified four main themes related to the role of interpersonal communication in supporting the inclusivity of Persons with Disabilities (PWD) in universities. The themes were as follows: (i) communication barriers and attitudes, (ii) PWD student resilience strategies, (iii) policy gaps and staff training needs, and (iv) support mechanisms and facilitators of inclusive communication.

Critical Analysis of Existing Strategies
Previous strategies have often failed because they emphasized physical accommodation without addressing the attitudinal and communicational barriers faced by PWD. This study proposes solutions that directly target these shortcomings through staff training, peer support and institutional policy reform.

Communication and Attitude Barriers
One of the most dominant issues found was communication barriers stemming from negative attitudes, stereotypes, and a lack of understanding of the needs of people with disabilities.

Brewer et. al. (2025) found that disabled students had to repeatedly prove their disability identity to the university, an experience that created emotional distress and a sense of illegitimacy. This attitudinal barrier is also supported by the findings of Zhou (2025), who argues that the *Social Model of Disability* still dominates people's thinking, resulting in communication being more instructive and accommodating than empathy and recognition.

Paz-Maldonado et al. (2025) identified four main categories of barriers: physical, academic, attitudinal, and communicational. Communication barriers include the failure of staff and peers to use inclusive language and the lack of formal communication channels to voice their needs. These barriers not only affect the social experience of PWD students but also impact their academic achievements.

Action Strategy for Students with Disabilities
Despite facing various obstacles, students with disabilities develop coping strategies to adapt to university environments. Osuna-Juárez et al. (2024) found that the strategy can be categorized into three aspects, namely psychology, behavioral, and academic. Psychologically, students strive to maintain their motivation and self-confidence. In terms of behavior, they try to build close relationships with supportive peers. From an academic perspective, they use assistive technology and adapt learning methods according to their abilities.

These findings suggest that positive interpersonal communication with peers and lecturers can improve the effectiveness of coping strategies for stress management. On the other hand, without supportive communication, PWD students are at risk of social isolation and decreased academic performance.

Policy Gaps and Staff Training Requirements
A study by Naranjo Crespo (2022) revealed that administrative staff and lecturers remain less sensitive to inclusivity. Lack of training, outdated policies, and the absence of clear and inclusive communication guidelines create a gap between the aspirations of universities and the reality of their implementation. These barriers were also identified by Pottmeier et al. (2019), who emphasized that linguistic communication and negative attitudes in the workplace are the main factors affecting the experience of PWD employees.

In the context of students, this policy gap makes the inclusive experience dependent on the individual initiatives of lecturers or peers rather than as part of an organized communication system at the university level. This situation creates inconsistencies in the experience of PWD students, where some receive good support, while others continue to face discrimination.

Support Mechanisms and Facilitators of Inclusive Communication
Several studies have highlighted effective support mechanisms for strengthening inclusive communications. Hazlin Falina et al. (2024) shows that support through informal focus groups can provide space for PWD students to voice their experiences and challenges and receive support from their peers. Similarly Brewer et. al. (2025) emphasized the importance of providing a safe communication space to allow students to express their views without fear of being judged.

Meanwhile, Bartolo et al. (2025) emphasized through academic guidelines that inclusive communication needs to be supported by institutional policies, staff training, and adaptive instructional delivery practices. This approach not only helps students with disabilities but also benefits all students by improving the quality of interactions in the learning environment. Overall, the SLR findings show that interpersonal communication plays a significant role in determining the level of inclusivity of PWD students at universities. Communication barriers and attitudes remain key challenges, but responsiveness strategies, peer support, and responsive university policies can be decisive factors in the success of inclusive education in higher education. However, policy gaps and a lack of staff training remain recurring issues that demand urgent attention from universities and policymakers alike.

Discussion

Integration of Findings with Theory

The findings of this study clearly support the Social Model of Disability, which asserts that disability does not stem from an individual's lack of individuality but from the social and communication barriers built by the environment (Zhou, 2025). The attitudinal and communication barriers found in the studies by Brewer et. al. (2025) and Paz Maldonado et al. (2025) suggest that the biggest challenge is not the physical ability of students with disabilities but the failure of the university community to provide an inclusive space for communication.

Interpersonal Communication Theory emphasizes the importance of empathy, responsiveness, and openness in fostering social relationships. This is evident in the findings of Osuna Juárez et al. (2024), who found that disabled students use interpersonal communication strategies with peers and lecturers to overcome academic and social challenges. Positive interpersonal interactions help PWD build self-confidence, increase their motivation, and strengthen their social relationships. These findings not only reinforce the Social Model of Disability but also extend Interpersonal Communication Theory by showing that empathy and recognition are as important as information exchange.

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) can be used to explain how consistently conveyed inclusive messages can influence university staff's attitudes towards PWD students. Messages conveyed through formal (Hazlin Falina et al., 2016) and informal communication channels can nurture inclusive awareness in university communities.

Comparison with Other Literature

These findings are also relevant in the Malaysian context, where studies by Yusof (2020) and Zaki et al. (2021) show that PWD students in public universities still face interpersonal communication issues and a lack of formal support. Therefore, successful inclusive communication strategies in developed countries must be adapted to the context of local institutions that face challenges in terms of resources, culture, and levels of awareness (Pridham, 2015; Selisko et al., 2024). Universities that successfully build a culture of inclusive communication not only benefit students with disabilities but also encourage intercultural interaction, reduce stigma, and foster global citizenship among students.

However, the results of this SLR also show that many universities, including those in developing countries, are still in the early stages of creating inclusive communications.

Compared to universities in developed countries that are more systematic in managing support for people with disabilities (Lissi et al., 2007), most universities in developing countries are still bound by the minimum accommodation approach. This creates an imbalance in the experience of PWD across countries and institutions.

Academic Implications
Academically, this study fills a gap in the communication literature by emphasizing the role of interpersonal communication in the context of inclusivity in higher education. Most previous studies have focused on physical or policy access, whereas these findings prove that interpersonal communication is equally important for ensuring the sustainability of inclusive learning experiences. The study also asserts that communication theory must be expanded to integrate social justice and human rights dimensions.

Practical Implications
From a practical perspective, the findings of this study highlight some important needs that universities must address. First, the provision of inclusive communication training modules to lecturers and administrators is important so that they become more sensitive to the needs of disabled students. Second, university management must formulate a clear and inclusive communication policy, including guidelines for the use of PWD-friendly language, the provision of complaint channels, and systematic support procedures. Third, peer support should be strengthened through mentoring programs to foster positive interactions between PWD and non-PWD students. Finally, the use of assistive technologies, including the adoption of accessible digital communication platforms, needs to be strengthened to ensure that an inclusive learning experience can be achieved more effectively.

Policy Implications
In terms of policy, these findings signal that universities should not only emphasize the provision of physical facilities but also pay attention to the communication dimension. The Ministry of Higher Education and policymakers related to PWDs can use these findings to update inclusive education guidelines, with an emphasis on communication training, monitoring mechanisms, and involving the PWD community in the decision-making process.

Conclusions and Recommendations
This systematic literature review (SLR) study examined the role of interpersonal communication in supporting the inclusivity of Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) in higher education institutions. Based on an analysis of ten main articles obtained from academic databases, four major themes were identified: (i) communication barriers and attitudes, (ii) PWD student responsiveness strategies, (iii) policy gaps and staff training needs, and (iv) inclusive communication support.

These findings affirm that interpersonal communication is not just a medium of information delivery but also plays a critical role in the formation of identity, social recognition, and academic support for students with disabilities. Empathetic, responsive, and inclusive communication can reduce feelings of isolation and increase student engagement in the university experience. In contrast, communication influenced by stereotypes, prejudices, and a lack of understanding perpetuates the gap between PWD and non-PWD communities.

The study also found that universities still face significant challenges in making inclusive communication a part of their culture. Lack of staff training, lagging policies, and inconsistencies in communication practices across faculties cause the experiences of PWD students to vary according to context. Therefore, inclusive communication must be mainstreamed comprehensively and integratively. By critically reflecting on why earlier approaches were insufficient, this study underscores the need to embed sustainable solutions not only in policy but also in everyday interpersonal interactions at universities.

Contributions

This study makes significant contributions in three dimensions: academic, practical, and policy. From an academic perspective, this study expands the communication literature by highlighting the role of interpersonal communication as a core element in inclusive education, thus filling the knowledge gap that remains unexplored. From a practical perspective, this study offers concrete recommendations, including providing training to staff, formulating inclusive communication policies, strengthening peer support mechanisms, and applying assistive technologies in universities. From a policy perspective, this study provides an evidence base that can be leveraged by ministries and policymakers to strengthen inclusive education guidelines by emphasizing communication as the main medium for building a university culture that is friendly and responsive to the needs of students with disabilities.

This study advances theoretical understanding by extending the application of Interpersonal Communication Theory, the Social Model of Disability, and persuasive models such as the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) and Cultivation Theory to the higher education context of students with disabilities. The findings reveal that interpersonal communication functions not only as a conduit for information exchange but also as a mechanism for identity recognition, empathy, and empowerment. This broadens the existing theoretical discourse by incorporating dimensions of inclusivity and social justice. Contextually, this study addresses a significant gap in the literature by providing insights into inclusive communication practices within the university setting, particularly in Malaysia and other developing countries where this issue remains underexplored. The focus on policy gaps, staff training, and peer support strategies underscores the practical challenges faced by universities and offers an evidence-based foundation for institutional reform. Overall, this research enriches current knowledge by linking theory with practice, offering both academic advancements and actionable recommendations that reinforce inclusive communication as a fundamental component of higher education.

Limitations

This limited number of articles may not comprehensively represent the inclusive communication experiences of PWD students globally or locally. Moreover, most articles are from international contexts, making comparisons with Malaysian realities somewhat difficult. This may affect the generalization of the findings, depending on the strict inclusion criteria. Second, this analysis only focused on the context of higher education; hence, it may not reflect the communication experience of PWDs at other levels of education.

Recommendations

Based on the limitations identified, several recommendations are proposed for future research. First, empirical field studies should be conducted in local universities to gain a

deeper understanding of the communication experiences of PWD in the Malaysian context. Second, cross-country comparative studies should be conducted to identify the best global inclusive communication practices. Third, further research should focus specifically on the dimensions of interpersonal communication between PWD and their peers, lecturers and university administrators. Fourth, the use of mixed methods is recommended to obtain a more comprehensive picture of inclusive communication. Finally, future studies should explore the role of digital communication technologies as a new medium for supporting more effective and responsive inclusive learning experiences.

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