

# Obstacles and Challenges Students with Disabilities Experience in Higher Education Institutions: A Systematic Review

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to systematically review the obstacles and challenges that students with disabilities encounter in higher education institutions; a systematic review of 20 articles published between 2000 and 2020 relevant to the subject of this study, which analyzing the experiences of students with disabilities in higher education institutions from all over the world. Results indicate that there is still much support and efforts to be provided for students with disabilities to facilitate their integration in HE, and the necessity of enacting binding legislation for educational institutions with the necessity of providing the necessary facilities and services in a manner that guarantees the realization of the "inclusive university" concept. The results also showed that there is consensus on the most common obstacles that the students with disabilities experiences in HEIs, which include environmental barriers and access to services, educational access barriers include teaching and evaluation strategies, information and communication barriers, barriers related to staff attitudes and lack of awareness of the educational needs and characteristics of students with disabilities. The results of this review recommend the importance of raising awareness among staff and students, and the necessity of finance HEIs, to enable them to make the necessary environmental accommodations, activating the implementation of laws and regulations and increasing the level of awareness among students with disabilities about their rights.

**Keywords** Obstacles; higher education; Access; Disabilities.

## Introduction

More recently, attention to the necessity to create opportunities and formulate policies to ensure the integration of individuals with disabilities into society has increased [1]. With this interest, the percentage of students with disabilities (SWD) entering institutions of higher education increased, and at the beginning of entrance to HEIs, there was no full awareness of the obstacles that these students may face, and with the fact that when HEIs were established originally for typical students, and as a result universities and all their facilities and services, have been established under assumption of normality.

With the beginning of hearing the voices of individuals with disabilities and the emergence of the difficulties they encounter within HEIs, educators and those concerned with the affairs of individuals with disabilities began to conduct quantitative and qualitative investigations in order to reveal the obstacles and barriers that SWD face when enroll universities.

In a study aimed of explore enhancing and creating civil rights for SWD in HEIs, the study indicates that SWD have previously been discriminated against because of disabilities, due to the absence of legislation for long time, where it was SWD received unequal treatment, starting from university admission, services, teaching and learning, physical environment, and graduation procedures, unlike what was happening at the time in the United States of America [2]. The Disability Discrimination Act, 1995 did not effectively guarantee the rights of SWD in HEIs, while the American Persons with Disabilities Act 1990 to a certain

extent was able to guarantee legislation that affirmed the protection of the rights of SWD within HEIs.

Brandt [3] conducted a study exploring the experiences and obstacles of SWD in universities in light of the legislation in Norway, this study indicates that the educational system in Norway has endeavored to enable inclusion of SWD to HEIs, especially after the year 2003, the quality reform Initiative appeared, but a group of obstacles still suffered by students were represented by policies, educational amendments, and staff awareness of the disabilities characteristics. Another study conducted in Northern Ireland, result indicated that SWD experience many obstacles due to physical environment, difficulty to participate and to access information, in addition to staff attitude and the poor awareness of SWD needs and addressed that the HEIs designed for typical students [1]. Tinklin & Hall (1999) aimed to explore the experiences of SWD in HEIs in Scotland, in which researchers interviewed 12 SWD about the obstacles and barriers they face, the results showed that there were five obstacles that impedes integration of SWD are the entrance to higher education, access to information, the physical environment, assumption of normality and level of awareness[4].

In the United States, a study aimed to evaluate the experiences of 173 SWD in teaching, learning and assessment, and to outline practices that can support the inclusion of SWD in HEIs, the results showed that 44% of them face learning challenges, including difficulties due to the speed of teachers speaking, the lack of visual materials, and recording of lectures, and 34% face problems in examination procedures in addition to the difficulty of

access to information and staff attitude [5].

In India, a study was conducted aimed at exploring the challenges, facilities and accommodations needed to facilitate the integration of SWD in HEIs. The results showed that there is a poor in planning, and a gap between legislation and practices, in addition to limited services [6].

### Importance of study

- Asserting the right of SWD to learn in appropriate environment to their educational needs through hearing their voices and knowing their experiences in HEIs.
- Highlighting the most common obstacles faced by most SWD in HEIs in different countries.
- Promote evidence-based practices, to enhance the inclusive universities concept.
- Determine the factors that contribute to the failure of SWD in HEIs.
- Addressing the important of training program that enhance the positive practices expected from universities employees that would supports SWD in academic and social success.

### Objectives

There is no doubt that the level of facilities provide to SWD varies according to the type of disability, that the level of facilities provided to students with motor disabilities is greatly affected by accessibility due to physical environment compared to other disability types, but it shares with it some challenges such as others' reactions and attitudes of university employees, as well as the severity of the disability, as well as the hearing disability [7], [8] results of the Denhart study [9] indicated that the difficulties that students with learning disabilities may face can be overcome by raising awareness among university staff and workers.

Hence, efforts had to be made in order to collect information, explore experiences, and conduct research, which will, based on its results, draw up policies and legislation that guarantee the rights of SWD in HEIs. The main purpose of this study was to systematically review studies investigating the obstacles and challenges that SWD encounter in HEIs, HEIs, in particular to:

### Methods

Systematic review is the qualitative method was used in this study, by reviewing the international and indexed articles that published in peer-reviewed journals relevant to the subject of this study, which analyzing the experiences of SWD in international HEIs from all over the world, the following steps represent the review process:

## Methodology

### Search strategy

A comprehensive search was performed in order to identify relevant articles with regard to the obstacles and barriers SWD face in HEIs. Data bases ISI web of knowledge, Scopus, Google scholar, Taylor and fancies, science direct and sage was searched for studies with regard to the study aims and limited to studies had been published between 2000 and 2020, to identify relevant articles, the researcher of this study used title related keywords which include: higher education, accessibility, students with disability, obstacles, and barriers.

### Criteria for inclusion

To be eligible for this review, studies had to be:

- Published between 2000 and 2020 in peer-reviewed journals
- Were based on qualitative methods
- Were based on interviews in collecting data
- Limited to articles written in English.

## Data Analysis

### Data extraction and synthesis

The researcher of this study recorded the characteristics of reviewed studies which include: years and the author's name of publication, participants, data collection tools, the country, and the main findings, then reading each study multiple times to ensure a deep understanding and familiarity, a data extraction form was checked and reviewed by both authors and another two reviewers.

## Results

### Data base search

The search of database identified 3,767 records to be screened, with 20 studies meet the inclusion criteria, Figure 1 presents the full searching process.

### Description of studies

Results of this study were extracted from 20 studies. All the reviewed articles reported via qualitative methodology, specifically utilize semi-structure and in depth interviews, sample in evaluated articles consisted of students with different types of disabilities except for two articles the first all the participants were with visual impairment [10], whereas the second for students with learning disabilities [9], the articles were conducted in 13 countries.. Summary of studies characteristics and its main result is presented in Table 1.

## Environment and physical obstacles

Result indicated that environmental and physical access to HE consider one of the first barriers for students with disabilities, in particular students with motor disabilities,

cerebral palsy and chronic diseases, that physical challenges prevents them from participates and benefit from university services [8], [12,17,16]. Tuomi, Lehtomaki & Matonya (2015) indicated to the importance of prior prepare of the infrastructure as well as the adequate equipment in facilitating entrance and success, in accessible infrastructure and transport one of the common challenges students face [5], however these challenges varies according to disability types, for students with visual impairment who usually experience difficulties due to narrow doors and lack of traffic-lights, uneven steps, lack of ramps. Students with physical disabilities who addressed the lack or inadequate ramps, lack of accommodation on the ground floor, narrow corridors and heavy doors [5,21], many studies also demonstrated access difficulties like being able to go around the university' buildings and inability to navigating the library most common difficulties [1,15,21,24]. Dangerous barriers such as holes in floor, low-hanging branches which hit the student while walking on the sidewalk, had been experienced by students with visual impairments who experience negative emotions when walking independently [8].

### **Obstacles to participation and access information**

That students have to do a self-research that takes a lot of effort and time consuming in order to reach the information and systems available at the university[12-13,17] The lake of sufficient information, and the limited communication provided also reported as common obstacles that students encountered [13,17].

### **Obstacles to educational access**

Which include Challenges due to traditional teaching methods, lack of curriculum adaptation, assessment methods, and note recording [5, 10, 13, 14, 15, & 16]

Brandt (2011) define educational accessibility as students' experiences with the changes in teaching, methods, evaluation and assessment methods and study materials [p.114].

Learnings access barriers may also include, inadequate assistive technology, difficulty to record lectures' note [26], Strnadova , Hajkova ,& Tonova (2015) reported disabilities specific learning barriers, which mean that disability type impose specific challenges , for sensory disability students may struggle with teaching methods and communication, as for hearing disabilities student experience difficulty to lipread instructors, students with visual impairment can't access information that instructors write on the board and not explain it verbally. Learning access require changes to educational and learning settings [21-22] , studies result reported that limited adequate equipment and adapted materials needed, and poor evaluation options , was the most common difficulties.

### **Obstacles related to staff awareness and attitudes**

Studies result showed that poor academic achievement of

SWD is not due to their inability or incapacity, but because of social obstacles and negative attitudes towards them [3, 15, & 27].

Academic staff and other professional should have positive attitudes towards students with disabilities, this in turn can contribute to the student's success as well as increase staff expectation of students with disabilities. Providing scientific information in different ways to staff play a vital role of their awareness, and it is important to increase instructors self-efficacy which impact their motivation in general [28]. Workshop, training and using media can be used to enhance appropriate knowledge for staff and typical students in HEI [1,9-10,15,19,21,23-25].

### **Discussion**

The current study aimed to systematically review of literature that have investigated the experiences of SWD in HEIs, and to identify challenges and obstacles that they face while learning at university, where the results of many studies indicated that there are many provisions and regulations support and enhancing the inclusion of SWD in HEIs , most students are not aware of these instructions due to the limited communication and participation, which explain by the absence of a clear philosophy for communication authorities , and the lack of sufficient information for the SWD upon entering the university to facilitate disabilities characteristics, and how to deal with SWD [12-13,17 & 20]. The results of this review also indicated that there was agreement between reviewed studies about the unprepared physical environment is one of the most important obstacles facing SWD, so students 'access to various university facilities, particularly students with motor disabilities, visual impairment, cerebral palsy and chronic diseases, is a real challenge that prevent their ability to move within the university's facilities,

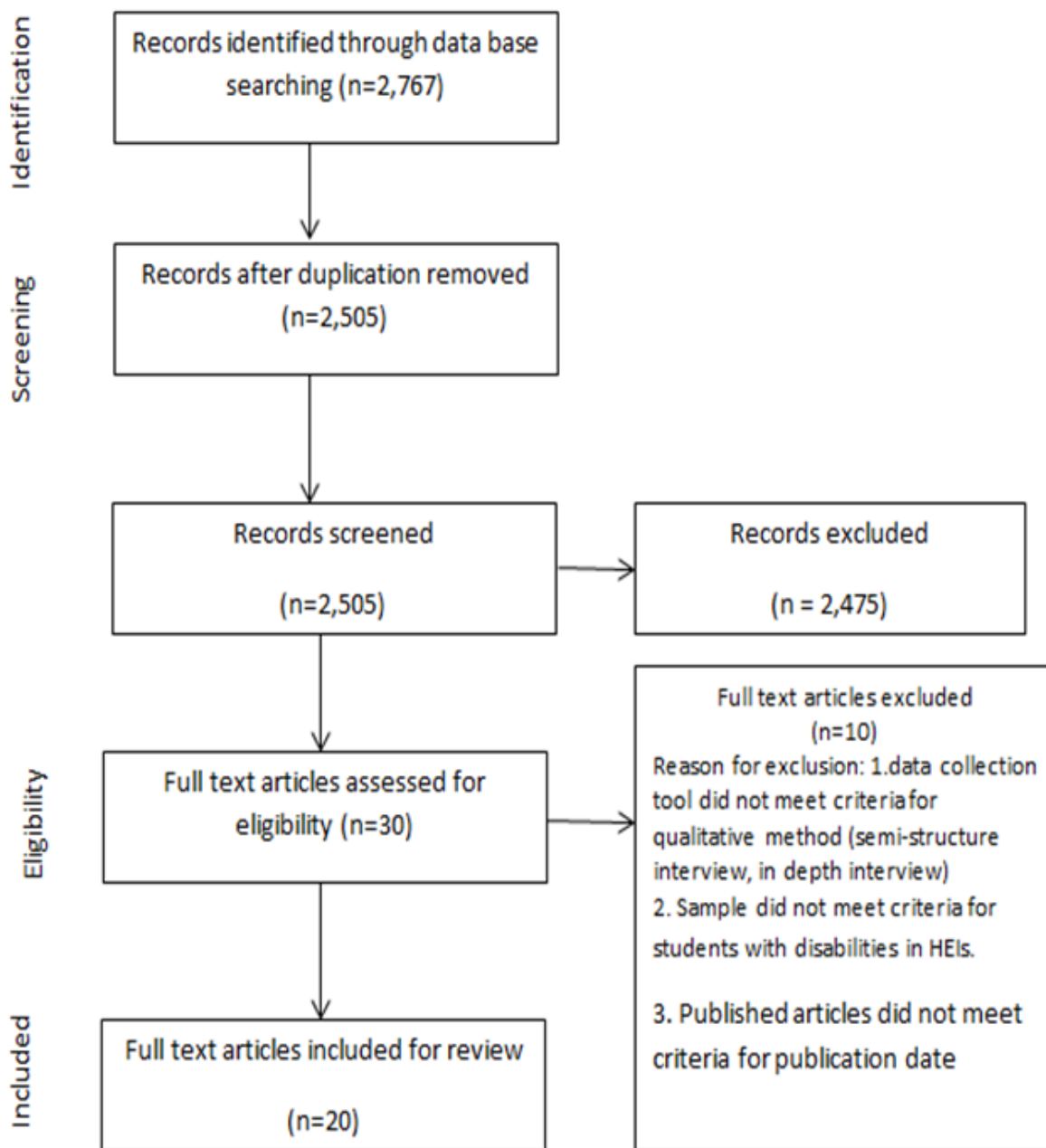


Figure 1. search result and selection process

therefore, making simple changes in legislation such as the necessity of having a taxi to transport students to facilitate their access to services, and providing facilities for students when they need to go to the library, as some students indicated that because of physical, motor, or visual disabilities they are forced to delay Lectures, and although many universities make some accommodations in the physical environment, they remain in the eyes of SWD insufficient, and do not meet their needs [8], [21-23], noted that the difficulty to access and to approach the halls and classes the major obstacles faced by SWD in the UK.

The results of the review also revealed to many studies that SWD are forced to carry out self-research that takes a lot of effort and fatigue in order to reach information and systems available at the university that facilitate many issues, this is in the case of such instructions and facilities exist. At Gluscher University [6], as well as in Scotland, [22] students indicated their needs to a employee who would contact them regularly who would be available when needed for counseling and advice and assistance. Access to information and services consider one of the most important obstacles facing students in German universities [27].

With regard to barriers to the university entrance, the students indicated that their entry to the university is not related to their desire [15], [1], but to the university in which services are better provided, and to their places of residence. Some students were also prevented from entering scientific laboratories due to the lack of public health and safety related amendments that are appropriate to the students' health status. Participants in the Tuomi, lektomaki, and Matonya study, indicated that, had it not been for the financial support provided to them by their families, they would not have been able to enroll in university [8].

Most universities are established prior to the concept of an inclusive university, where students feel that they must exist in environments designed for students without disabilities. Devcher, Kauer, Liebert & Wappermann, [27] emphasized the importance of having legislations and policies related to the importance of training the administrative staff concerned to increase awareness of the characteristics of individuals with disabilities and their need for different information and facilities [4], [14], [1]. Redpath, Kearney, Nicoll, Mulvenna, Wallace & Martin [1] recommend and encourage the necessity of conducting training programs for staff with the aim of raising awareness of the characteristics of SWD and their different needs, and the strategies how to deal with them in the light of their disabilities, and taking into account that in teaching methods, Class participation, adapted examination. In a study conducted in five universities in the Czech Republic, America, and Sweden, it was shown that the poor academic achievement of SWD is not due to their inability or disability, but rather due to social obstacles and negative attitudes towards them [13,15].

Students pointed to challenges related to their ability to benefit from educational services [10, 17], [1,26], as a result of teaching methods, or traditional assessment methods, students also indicated that group teaching

methods and cooperative learning contributed to their sense of belonging within the class. The students also pointed that the alternatives evaluation methods are rarely accepted by faculty members [9], in addition to their need for special equipment in administering the final exam, which is rarely adjusted at the university, as they need more time, special environmental facilities. As well as providing educational material in appropriate time. The biggest challenge is that the faculty and staff are not obligated in the name of law to provide this for SWD within the university. It is clear that all legislation guaranteeing the right of SWD to HEIs is not comprehensive, so these legislations must be reviewed, and staff and academic and administrative staff are obligated to apply them.

### Global Recommendations and Trends

The following are some of global recommendations and suggestions that aim to enhance the integration of SWD in HEIs [2,6].

- Ensure that the necessary financial resources are provided for the accommodations and equipment needed by SWD in HEIs.
- The university must provide experts with a sufficient degree of knowledge of the characteristics of disability in order to consult them in making decisions related to amendments and providing services.
- Provide the necessary training for the administrative and academic staff to provide awareness and a mechanism for dealing with SWD
- Provide a clear policy to hear the voice of SWD.
- Provide a clear policy and effective mechanism to increase the interaction of SWD with the University's Student Care Center in the university and other university facilities and services
- Providing mental health programs through counseling programs provided by the counseling center with the aim of providing students with psychological immunity skills and increasing their ability to self-manage and solve problems.
- Partnerships with external institutions to support and care for individuals with disabilities in universities
- The government should provide the universities with the necessary financial support to make the necessary accommodations to facilitate the mobility and movement to receive services.
- The necessity of adjustment and accommodation of physical environment which facilitating students' access to services
- The necessity of taking into account the different principles of evaluation and examination
- The necessity of the participation and hearing the voice of SWD when preparing policies.

- The necessity of adjustment and accommodation of physical environment which facilitating students 'access to services
- The necessity of taking into account the different principles of evaluation and examination

The importance of training programs for staff, participants, have shown difficulty in accessing information and participation, and the lack of programs guiding them when they enroll the university, and not providing them with their rights and how to benefit from the available services. The results of this review recommend the importance of raising awareness among staff and students, and the necessity of finance HEIs, to enable them to make the necessary environmental adjustments, activating the implementation of laws and regulations and increasing the level of awareness among SWD about their rights.

## Conclusion

In this systematic review of 20 studies aimed at exploring the experiences of SWD in HEIs, the results revealed that the level of support provided to SWD is still limited, and the results of the reviewed studies revealed that SWD across the world encounter many of common challenges and obstacles, that when the universities were established, were designed for students without disabilities, and the necessary environmental accommodations and accommodation were not in consideration. The results of the studies agreed on the difficulties in accessing university facilities due to the physical environment for majority of students, and the results also showed difficulties due to the absence of awareness of disability characteristics among academics staff and administrative, and therefore their lack of acceptance to make the necessary accommodations to conduct exams and record lectures, which reflects the increasing the level of awareness among SWD about their rights.

## Suggestions for future studies

- There is no doubt that the obstacles and experiences vary according to the type of disability, so it's important to investigate the experiences of individuals for specific types of disabilities, preferably through interviews with students who suffer from the same type of disability or disorder.
- The need to study the factors related to the attitudes of staff towards SWD in HEIs.
- Conduct studies related to the challenges faced by staff and instructors with students with disabilities in HEIs.

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