

# Voices of Special Need Students at Public Higher Learning Institutions: A Wishlist to Ponder

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*Received: 15 January 2024*

*Accepted: 25 February 2024*

*Date Published Online: 1 June 2024*

*Published: 1 June 2024*

**Abstract:** *The global movement towards inclusive and equitable education has gained significant momentum in recent years. This study delves into the aspirations and challenges of special needs students in Malaysian public universities, aiming to provide insights into their expectations and experiences. Through qualitative research methods, via semi-structured online interviews and thematic analysis, this study uncovers several key themes. First, the study highlights concern regarding inadequate infrastructure and facilities within higher education institutions. Participants emphasized the need for infrastructure that caters to diverse disabilities, revealing a gap between policy and implementation. Secondly, equitable treatment emerged as a paramount concern. Special needs students desire fair and respectful treatment from peers, lecturers, and employers. Thirdly, the need for greater awareness and understanding of special needs students' unique needs and capabilities is emphasized. Fourthly,*

*participants highlighted the importance of robust support systems, including academic assistance and counselling services. Fifthly, fostering empathy among peers, family, and special needs students themselves is critical. E-learning is proposed as an intervention to support inclusivity of the special needs students at higher learning institution. E-learning provides equitable access to educational resources- it contributes to equal treatment by offering standardized interfaces and incorporating universal design principles, raises awareness through disability awareness modules and asynchronous communication, fosters greater understanding among peers and educators, integrates virtual support services, ensures tailored guidance for special needs students, and creates opportunities for collaborative learning experiences. Clear and enforced policies are crucial to safeguard the rights of special needs students and can facilitate policy dissemination and enforcement by serving as a centralized platform for communication.*

**Keywords:** *Expectations, E-Learning, Higher education, Inclusion, Special needs students*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

In recent years, the call for inclusive and equitable education has gained momentum across the globe. Central to this movement is the acknowledgment that education should be accessible to all, regardless of individual abilities or disabilities (Zhou, 2023). Within the realm of higher learning institutions, this principle of inclusivity extends to students with special needs, who aspire not only to acquire knowledge and skills but also to fully engage in the educational experience, access equal employment opportunities, and seamlessly integrate into the broader societal fabric. While legal frameworks and institutional policies have made strides in recognizing and accommodating the needs of special needs students, it is imperative to delve deeper into their perspectives and expectations to ensure that these aspirations are genuinely realized.

This study illuminates a tapestry of aspirations articulated by these students, transcending the mere desire for academic achievement. Within their narratives, participants express a profound yearning for a learning environment that acknowledges and accommodates their diverse disabilities. They seek educational facilities that are not just accessible but also tailored

to their specific needs, thereby enabling them to engage more effectively with the learning process (Duque et al., 2020; Kauffman & Hornby, 2020; Börnert-Ringleb, 2021). Beyond the classroom, special needs students emphasize their aspiration for equitable treatment within the job market, a desire for inclusivity that extends from society and family to the educational institutions themselves. They advocate for increased awareness of their unique needs, the creation of robust support systems, the cultivation of positive attitudes among peers and parents, and the unwavering enforcement of policies designed to promote inclusivity. These collective aspirations underscore the critical need to address pivotal factors that can enhance the educational journey and overall well-being of special needs students within the higher education landscape.

The primary objective of this research study is to comprehensively examine the expectations and hopes of special needs students enrolled in public universities and to conduct a thematic analysis of the interview data to identify common themes and patterns in the aspirations of special needs students. By synthesizing their narratives, this study aims to provide a comprehensive overview of their collective expectations. By addressing these objectives, the study endeavours to shed light on the multifaceted aspirations and challenges faced by special needs students in public universities, ultimately contributing to the development of inclusive educational practices and policies that can enhance their overall academic and societal experiences.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

The qualitative methodology employed in this study allowed for an in-depth exploration of the expectations and hopes of special needs students in Malaysian public universities. The use of standardized questions, online interviews, and thematic analysis facilitated the systematic collection and analysis of rich narrative data. The participants in this qualitative study consisted of eight special needs students enrolled in public universities across Malaysia. The selection of participants aimed for diversity in terms of disabilities, academic disciplines, and geographic locations. Inclusion criteria encompassed students who self-identified as having special needs, ranging from physical disabilities, sensory impairments, learning disabilities, to neurodiversity. Ethical considerations were prioritized throughout the

study, and all participants provided informed consent before participating. Data was collected through semi-structured online interviews conducted via the Google Meet platform. This approach allowed for flexibility while ensuring the safety and convenience of participants, especially given the diverse geographical locations. An interview protocol was developed, consisting of a set of standardized questions designed to explore the participants' expectations and hopes regarding their educational experience, employment prospects, and societal integration. The use of standardized questions ensured consistency while allowing for follow-up inquiries to probe deeper into participant responses.

Each interview session was audio-recorded with the participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. The interviews were characterized by a participant-centred approach, wherein participants were encouraged to share their narratives, perceptions, and expectations in their own words. Thematic analysis was employed as the primary method for analysing the interview data. This qualitative analysis approach allowed for the identification and exploration of recurring themes and patterns within the dataset. The analysis proceeded through several systematic steps.

1. Familiarization: The transcripts were read and re-read to familiarize the researchers with the data, gaining an initial sense of the participants' responses.
2. Initial Coding: Initial codes were generated by segmenting the data into meaningful units, highlighting phrases or passages related to the research objectives. The coding process was both inductive, allowing for codes to emerge from the data, and deductive, guided by the research objectives.
3. Theme Development: Codes were then grouped into preliminary themes based on their relevance and connections to the research questions. This involved the identification of patterns and variations in participants' responses.
4. Review and Refinement: The emerging themes and their respective codes were reviewed and refined through iterative discussions among the research team. This process involved ensuring the alignment of themes with the research objectives and the data itself.

5. Finalizing Themes: Once consensus was reached, final themes were defined, and each theme was supported by illustrative quotations from the interview transcripts.

This research study adhered to ethical guidelines, including obtaining informed consent from all participants, ensuring the anonymity and confidentiality of participants, and seeking ethical clearance from the relevant institutional review board (REC). Participants were provided with information about the study's purpose, data handling procedures, and their rights as participants, including the option to withdraw from the study at any time without consequences.

The qualitative methodology employed in this study allowed for an in-depth exploration of the expectations and hopes of special needs students in Malaysian public universities. The use of standardized questions, online interviews, and thematic analysis facilitated the systematic collection and analysis of rich narrative data. This methodology aimed to provide a nuanced understanding of the aspirations and challenges faced by special needs students, ultimately contributing to the development of inclusive practices and policies in higher education.

### **3. INTERVIEW FINDINGS**

This qualitative research study delves into the multifaceted concerns of special needs students enrolled in higher education institutions, with a particular focus on Malaysian public universities. Through semi-structured online interviews and thematic analysis, this research uncovers a spectrum of challenges and expectations voiced by these students. The findings underscore the paramount importance of addressing concerns related to infrastructure, equitable treatment, awareness, support systems, empathy, attitudes, and policy to create an inclusive educational environment.

#### **3.1 INFRASTRUCTURE**

The primary concern articulated by special needs students in this study was the inadequacy of infrastructure and facilities within higher education institutions. Participants emphasized the need for accessible and tailored facilities that cater to diverse disabilities. Their experiences revealed a gap

between policy and implementation, where existing accessibility measures often fell short of meeting their needs. This finding underscores the urgency of investing in infrastructure upgrades to create a truly inclusive educational environment.

“There is already enough infrastructure, actually. So, if we can, we want to add more types, not just more of one type. What’s the reason? As I told you earlier, OKU is not just one type. So, we look at it based on what they need. It’s not the same as what I need because I’m physically disabled so that for me needs to be tackled based on what type of disability others have.”

“...the ramp is very steep, not safe for us. It has its measurement, but there are many people who do not follow the measurement. It’s like either it’s very steep or it’s not suitable.”

“If there is any plan, it is better to think about the disabled as well... I really hope that all places in Malaysia become disabled friendly.”

“It is my hope that the facilities that should be provided for disabled people can be found in all places, regardless of whether the place is in the city or outside the city, and if there are disabled people in a certain place in a certain organization or workplace or so on, the management needs to act quickly to provide the needs that should be there for the disabled.”

“I hope there are more facilities to make it easier for students, like if the elevator is broken, what is there? Maybe there is another option for students. Maybe make a class in a lower class to add it, like if there is a possibility of that, then the lecturer can use the class below to students who are like that.”

### **3.2 EQUAL TREATMENT**

Equitable treatment emerged as a paramount concern for special needs students. They expressed a strong desire for fair and respectful treatment not only from their peers but also from lecturers, administrative staff, and prospective employers. The findings illuminate the importance of fostering a culture of inclusivity and sensitivity, wherein special needs students are valued for their abilities and contributions rather than stigmatized by their disabilities.

“...society’s view will also hopefully change, like they will not treat us differently.”

“I hope to be able to give us the opportunity and space to be on par with others later in employment. I think that’s what is lacking in Malaysia, less in terms of getting a job, the disabled people have a little difficulty or lack of confidence from the parties involved.”

“I hope that the authorities reduce the gap between pwd and non-pwd in terms of economy, health, education, social and so on.”

“...it has to be balanced, it has to be balanced, what is available to be shared equally between each community even if the community is small.”

### **3.3 AWARENESS AND UNDERSTANDING**

Participants highlighted the pressing need for greater awareness and understanding of their unique needs and capabilities. They often found themselves in situations where family members, peers, lecturers, and institutional management lacked awareness of the challenges they faced. This lack of awareness hindered their ability to access the support they required. The findings highlight the necessity of comprehensive disability awareness programs within educational institutions and the broader community.

“...the management can provide a briefing on pwd to students involving everyone. There they can explain about the rights provided for people with disabilities in a certain place... the issue will be the lack of misuse of facilities or infrastructure provided for people with disabilities.”

“Parents often perceive slow learners as appearing somewhat bewildered.”

“...awareness is the most important. awareness towards the community, taking care of disabled is not the same as a normal person.”

### **3.4 SUPPORT SYSTEMS**

Special needs students express a need for robust support systems that encompass academic assistance, counselling services, and emotional support. They emphasize the pivotal role of such systems in helping them

navigate the challenges of higher education successfully. These findings emphasize the importance of developing and strengthening support networks tailored to the specific needs of special needs students.

“...it is necessary to make a program like this (dialogue) through casual chat to know what the disabled people need... for now there is no dialogue in terms of maybe we have a WhatsApp group to ask like; just let me know the latest information.”

“...there needs to be moral support...”

“... maybe, erm, the party ... can arrange my internship, I think that kind of thing is difficult, how difficult can you maybe be able to convince, kind of letter to convince this student that he can do the tasks.”

### **3.5 EMPATHY**

The study revealed the significance of fostering empathy and positive attitudes, not only among peers but also within the family and among special needs students themselves. Participants cited instances where understanding and supportive attitudes positively impacted their educational journeys. These findings feature the role of empathy-building initiatives in creating a more inclusive educational environment.

“I think what we need is the community out there that is more sensitive and more aware of the disabled.”

“...example of good management, they are alert regarding the disabled and the needs of the disabled.”

“I hope that the needy disabled people are given more attention by various parties, not only HEPA Counseling and so on, but parties at various levels.”

### **3.6 POLICY FRAMEWORK**

Participants noted the importance of clear and enforced policies that safeguard the rights and interests of special needs students. They highlighted instances where policy enforcement was lacking, leading to disparities in



treatment and support. This finding underscores the need for robust policy frameworks that promote inclusivity and ensure compliance within higher education institutions.

“Maybe the government can put a policy where everyone, no matter the government or private sector, needs to provide mandatory services, provide services for their employees according to the necessary facilities.”

“I hope the government obligates every party, whether private or government, for example, there is an employee who is, an example of a normal employee, then suddenly the employee had an accident and need to use a wheelchair, they cannot terminate them at will, instead they need to provide facilities.”

#### **4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The findings of this study shed light on the multifaceted concerns and aspirations of special needs students in higher education, offering valuable insights into the challenges they face and the potential avenues for improvement. In this discussion, we delve into each of the identified themes and propose potential solutions with a focus on how e-learning can play a pivotal role in addressing these concerns.

The inadequacy of infrastructure emerged as a primary concern among special needs students. While some participants acknowledged existing efforts to provide accessible facilities, they stressed the need for tailored infrastructure that caters to diverse disabilities. This gap between policy and implementation calls for immediate action. E-learning can serve as a transformative solution by providing a platform where content can be made accessible to all students, regardless of their physical or sensory impairments. E-learning materials can be designed with accessibility features, such as text-to-speech options, closed captioning, and customizable interfaces, ensuring that all students have equitable access to educational resources. Infrastructure plays a crucial role in ensuring the inclusivity of special needs students at higher learning institutions. Moraña et al., (2020) noted that treating a comfortable and conducive learning environment is essential for effective teaching and learning for these students. This includes providing appropriate learning spaces, such as classrooms that are accessible and strategically located to facilitate students' mobility (Awang-Hashim et

al., 2019). This also supported by Yasin et al. (2012) that special education programs should be equipped with facilities like toilets for the disabled, special walkways, and teaching aids to support the needs of these students. In addition, inclusive pedagogy, which involves integrating technology, adopting culturally responsive materials, and promoting collaborative learning, can also contribute to addressing the differences among students with special needs (Utami et al., 2020). By ensuring that the infrastructure is designed to meet the specific requirements of special needs students, higher learning institutions can create an inclusive environment that supports their learning and participation.

Equitable treatment, as voiced by special needs students, is essential for fostering an inclusive educational environment. E-learning platforms can contribute to equal treatment by offering a standardized interface and learning experience for all students. Additionally, incorporating universal design principles into e-learning course development ensures that content is accessible to everyone. Faculty training on inclusive teaching practices within e-learning environments can further promote equal treatment. Perceptions of equality can impact the inclusivity of special needs students at higher learning institutions. Hamid et al. (2022) claimed that it is important for mainstream students to have positive attitudes towards students with special needs, as negative attitudes can hinder their inclusion. In order to ensure full inclusion, a consolidated framework needs to be implemented in higher education institutions, focusing on equity, access, and reasonable accommodation for students with disabilities (Pretorius et al., (2028). Mahlangu (2019, in addition, proposes that engaging students and listening to their needs is crucial for achieving equality and diversity in higher education. Misinterpreting and stereotyping the educational needs of students with learning disabilities and attention disorders can lead to ineffective accommodations, highlighting the need for personalized and student-centred approaches (Sokolová et al., 2022).

The need for greater awareness and understanding of the unique needs and capabilities of special needs students is evident. E-learning can play a crucial role in raising awareness through the incorporation of disability awareness modules within courses. These modules can provide insights into the challenges faced by special needs students and offer guidance on creating an inclusive and supportive learning environment. Moreover, e-learning

allows for asynchronous communication, enabling students to engage in dialogue and share their experiences, fostering greater understanding among peers and educators. Awareness is important to ensure inclusivity of special need students at higher learning institutions. Teachers and regular students need to be aware of the needs of students with special needs and be sensitive towards them. It is important to recognize needs and to obtain information on a blended learning model in higher education in order to achieve appropriate teaching with the use of information technology, in particular the Internet (Utami et al., 2020). Additionally, the use of cooperative learning approaches can promote the integration of students with special needs and create a supportive classroom environment (Rossetti & Seno, 2015). Inclusive institutions should also evaluate their academic practices including implementing a collaborative working relationship is crucial for enhancing students' access and success in online learning and create tools for self-evaluation to identify and address barriers that may hinder the inclusivity of all students (Meda & Albukhari, 2023).

Individual awareness is crucial for ensuring the inclusivity of students with special needs at higher learning institutions. Self-awareness can be used to ensure inclusivity of special needs students at higher learning institutions by addressing their interpersonal challenges and providing supportive services. Improving self- and social awareness strengthens their ability to navigate social relationships (Adams & Farmer, 2022). Students with special educational needs (SEN) in higher education face vulnerabilities and increased psychological distress, so supportive services should be provided to help them cope with the challenges (Ng & Boey, 2022). In self-paced online learning courses, sentiment analysis and visualization of students' affective states can enhance self-awareness and encourage adjustments to engagement levels (Farahmand et al., 2023) and educators' awareness of fine motor skills is important for impactful teaching and learning sessions for students with special education needs, and self-awareness plays a vital role in improving this awareness (Musa & Ahmad, 2019).

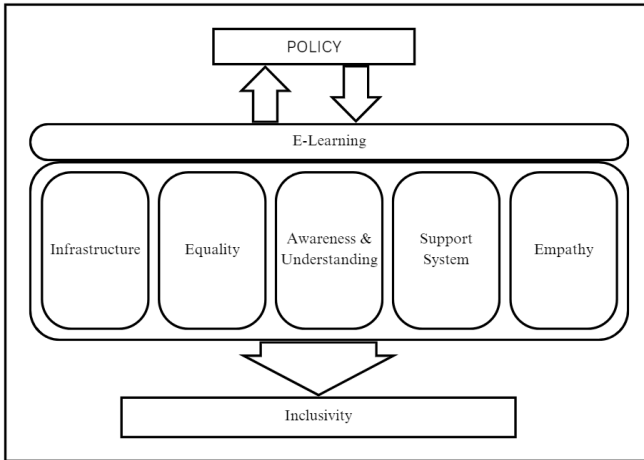
Special needs students emphasize the importance of robust support systems. E-learning platforms can integrate virtual support services, including online counselling, peer mentoring programs, and academic support resources. These services can be tailored to meet the specific needs of special needs students, providing them with the necessary guidance and assistance to

navigate their educational journeys successfully. Additionally, e-learning can facilitate easy access to support materials and resources, reducing barriers to seeking help. The inclusivity of special needs students at higher learning institutions can be influenced by the support system in place. Providing personalized psychological and pedagogical support, as well as creating inclusive groups, can help meet the diverse needs of these students (Jenčík et al., 2022) and to complement, competent educators who have knowledge and understanding of the diverse needs of students play a crucial role in supporting their learning and achievement (Kravchenko et al., 2021). Involving students with special needs in the selection and design of behavioural support plans can also contribute to their inclusivity (Prudnikova, 2019). By investing in hard work, utilizing flexible learning opportunities, and promoting collaboration, students with special needs can participate, engage, and achieve equally with their peers (Johnson et al., 2022). Ensuring equal opportunities and active participation for individuals with special needs is an important indicator of a country's democracy and sustainable development (Rozenfelde, 2018).

Fostering empathy among peers, family, and special needs students themselves is critical. E-learning can create opportunities for collaborative learning experiences that promote empathy. Group projects, discussion forums, and virtual team activities encourage students to work together, fostering a sense of community and understanding. Moreover, incorporating real-life stories and testimonials of special needs students into e-learning courses can humanize their experiences, eliciting empathy from their peers. Empathy plays a crucial role in promoting inclusivity for special needs students in higher learning institutions (Smolyaninova et al., 2020). It helps to prevent interpersonal conflicts and create a supportive environment for all students (Botticello, 2020). It brings learners together, reduces aggressive tendencies, and blocks competitive attitudes towards students with special needs (Moriña et al., 2020). By developing empathic capacity, students majoring in mediation can contribute to preventing conflicts and fostering neutral relations between conflicting parties. Creating multiple voiced environments that validate the range of students' experiences and cultural diversity can make higher education more meaningful, inclusive, and expansive for both students and educators (Kousalya & Aruna, 2022).

Faculty members' perspectives on disability in higher education also highlight the value of attitudes and qualities of students with disabilities. Overall, empathy can enhance the inclusivity of special needs students by fostering understanding, reducing conflicts, and promoting a supportive and diverse learning environment.

The importance of clear and enforced policies to safeguard the rights of special needs students cannot be overstated. E-learning can facilitate policy dissemination and enforcement by serving as a centralized platform for policy communication. Institutions can use e-learning platforms to ensure that all stakeholders, including faculty, staff, and students, are aware of and compliant with policies related to special needs students' rights and accommodations. Policy plays a crucial role in promoting inclusivity for special needs students at higher learning institutions. Inclusive education policies in colleges need to be strengthened to ensure that students with special needs have access to educational services and rights and can interact and learn alongside nondisabled students (Norwich, 2021). However, there are challenges in implementing inclusive policies and acts, such as the need for improved accessibility of the campus physical environment, architectural barriers, and social environment (Amka, 2018). Faculty members' perspectives on disability in higher education also highlight the importance of attitudes and qualities of university students with disabilities in promoting inclusivity (Tugli et al., 2016). According to Janet (2019), policies supporting learners in minority serving institutions require decisions about equity, quality, cost, impact on national economic performance, and international global relationship. Relevant authorities should consider allocating funding to higher education institutions to support the implementation of universal design for learning : training for the faculty should be set as a priority to prepare the faculty members in handling and assisting the special needs students and form collaboration among public higher education with an international university to provide standardized support (Zaki & Ismail, 2021).



**Fig. 1** Public Higher Education Inclusivity

In conclusion, the findings of this study underscore the critical role of e-learning in addressing the concerns of special needs students in higher education. E-learning offers a versatile and inclusive platform for delivering education and support services while fostering awareness, empathy, and equal treatment. By harnessing the potential of e-learning and integrating it with comprehensive policy frameworks, higher education institutions can create an environment where special needs students can thrive academically and socially, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and equitable educational landscape. E-learning platforms can be customized for special needs students by considering core acceptance constructs, social norms, sense of belonging, and enjoyment elements (Ferhan et al., 2022).

## 5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work was supported by the Fundamental Research Grant Scheme awarded by the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia (FRGS/1/2019/SS03/UiTM/02/5) and Arshad Ayub Graduate Business School, UiTM.

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