

BREAKING BARRIERS FROM CLASSROOM TO CAMPUS: ENHANCING HIGHER EDUCATION ACCESS FOR PWD STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES IN SELANGOR

¹Fazlilawati binti Fadzil, ²Norazlin binti Adan & ²Afifa Hanim binti Mohamad

¹*Selayang College Community, Malaysia*, ²*Polytechnic METrO Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia*

*zilatiros@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study examines the systemic barriers faced by students with Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD) in accessing higher education in Selangor, Malaysia. Students with SLD, the transition to post-secondary education can be difficult, particularly for those who do not possess formal academic qualifications such as the Malaysian Certificate Education (*Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia*) (Sowell & Miller Scott, 2019). Their aspirations are limited by structural barriers, lack of institutional access and pathways into further study and employment. On the other hand, this study investigates the key obstacles that Person with Disabilities (PWD) especially focus on SLD students in Selangor experienced in accessibility, academic and institutional preparedness. It explores how far colleges and universities are prepared to admit and accommodate these students through such measures as alternative admissions policies and inclusionary practices. This is then followed up by a discussion on the extent to which the industry is prepared to welcome SLD graduates and an exploration of workplace inclusivity and perceptions of both employers and employment support systems. These issues are proposed to be addressed, among others, through the establishment and institutionalisation of alternative credentialing, bridging programme and skills-based educational pathways in higher education institutions in the state of Selangor. These programs are aimed at supporting PWD learners more effectively and enabling them to access higher education by following distinct pathways, thereby enhancing their employment outcomes. These findings aim to guide policymakers, educators, and industry leaders in transforming practices and policies.

Keywords: Learning Disabilities; Accessibility; Exclusive Education; SLD Students; Higher Education Selangor, Malaysia; Alternative Credentialing; Institutional Readiness

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Background of the Study

While obtaining access to higher education remains a prominent issue for SLD students, this becomes even more pronounced for students who are educationally underprivileged or do not possess a formal qualification such as the Malaysian Certificate of Education (*Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia, SPM*). Students with SLD often get left behind despite Malaysia's key policies and blueprints to promote inclusive education. The system's limited adaptability, a lack of trained educators, and insufficient support services all contribute to this problem (Hashim & Azman, 2020).

Globally, education for PWD is recognized as a fundamental right. Concepts such as equitable and inclusive learning environments are vectors of international frameworks included in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and Sustainable Development Goal 4 (UNESCO, 2020). Although there have been laudable efforts made by Malaysia with the National Education Blueprint 2013–2025 and the Persons with Disabilities Act 2008 aim to address these rights, but implementation at the tertiary level remains inconsistent.

In Selangor, the issue is exacerbated by the urban–rural divide. Although the state has the highest number of secondary schools with Integrated Special Education Programmes (PPKI), access to post-secondary education is minimal. For instance, the Special Skills Certificate TVET programme is only offered at Selayang Community College, Ministry of Higher Education. Students with SLD are left behind in national strategies, and without alternatives like bridging programs or skills-based pathways, many are barred from higher education. The difference is even greater in areas that are a combination of city and village (Rahim & Kee, 2021).

1.1 Problem Statement

The transition from secondary to tertiary education transition is particularly complex for students with SLD who do not take the standard academic pathways. Although these services may be technically available, the level of implementation widely differs across the establishments in Selangor. This results in uneven access and misses opportunities for many who would seek to learn. Moreover, Malaysian higher education still recognizes conventional academic qualifications. Many of these students with diverse learning abilities are being sidelined because there isn't an alternative admissions program that's been created. Moreover, low public awareness and limited preparedness among employers to stand beside graduates with SLD also contribute to their fewer opportunities to acquire meaningful employment (Ismail & Abdullah, 2021).

Therefore, this study aims to explore and address these interconnected challenges in education, policy, and the employment of student with SLD in Selangor by identifying essential barriers, identifying evidence informed strategic interventions to facilitate access to higher education published.

1.2 Research Objectives

This study aims to:

- i. Identify the main challenges faced by students with SLD in accessing higher education in Selangor.
- ii. Assess the readiness of educational institutions and employers to support SLD students.
- iii. Examine employer perceptions of SLD graduates.
- iv. Propose TVET program improvements and special skills expansion.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This research has implications for several groups:

- i. Policymakers will gain valuable insights that can help shape more inclusive national education frameworks.
- ii. Educators and institutions can better understand the barriers students face and develop programs that provide real solutions.
- iii. Employers will become more aware of the capabilities of individuals with SLD and hiring benefits the broader workforce.
- iv. Students and their families will benefit from a clearer picture of what options exist, and how to navigate them.

This study contributes to building inclusive higher education pathways for SLD students without SPM qualifications that support learners of all backgrounds and abilities.

1.6 Scope and Limitations of the Study

This study focuses on the experiences of students with SLD in Selangor, Malaysia. It includes viewpoints from students, educators, institutional staff and employers. The data obtained is limited to students who completed the PPKI at the age of 19. However, there are also students who complete their schooling at the ages of 17 and 18. Nonetheless, no data was available for these age groups. While the study offers detailed insights within this regional context, its findings may not fully reflect the situation in other parts of Malaysia. Also, the study specifically addresses students with SLD and does not represent the full range of disability categories.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews both the global and local literature on access to higher education experienced for PWD generally, with particular reference to people diagnosed with a SLD. Through this, it intends to learn about the academic, institutional, and employment-related barriers experienced by these students. This chapter also outlines current frameworks, policies and practices available for Malaysia, specifically in Selangor that could help promote inclusivity. This review begins by defining SLD, followed by a discussion of the barriers faced in higher education, examples of successful international models, and a critical assessment of Malaysia's institutional and industry readiness.

Definition of Exclusive Education

While most academic literature emphasizes *inclusive education* as the standard for addressing the needs of persons with disabilities, this study introduces the concept of exclusive education to refer to education systems and pathways that are specifically designed for students with SLD, especially those without formal academic qualifications such as the SPM. In this context, exclusive education does not mean exclusion or segregation. Instead, it refers to targeted, differentiated, and supportive educational structures, such as bridging programmes, alternative credentialing, or special skills-based TVET tracks. These are tailored to the learning profiles and transition needs of students with SLD who are not well-served by conventional systems (Lim et al., 2020; Mokhtar & Tan, 2021).

This definition is aligned with emerging global models where non-traditional learners require customized educational scaffolding to access, succeed in, and transition from higher education (McConkey et al., 2018; Department of Education Australia, 2020). Unlike inclusive education, which focuses on integrating all learners into mainstream systems, exclusive education as conceptualized in this study emphasizes constructive differentiation by creating alternative but equitable pathways that ensure no learner is left behind.

2.2 Defining Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD)

Specific learning disability (SLD) refer to group of neurological disorders that impact an individual's ability to learn or use academic skills such as reading, writing, and mathematics (Lyon et al., 2020). Dyslexia, dyscalculia and dysgraphia are the most well-known types. This does not mean they are not intelligent but rather it shows people learn differently. In Malaysia, SLD is recognized as part of the Persons with Disabilities Act 2008, but awareness and support systems are often inconsistent across institutions (MOE Malaysia, 2021).

2.3 Barriers to Higher Education for Students with SLD

2.3.1 Institutional and Systemic Barriers

Some examples of institutional barriers include lack of exclusive or inclusive methods of teaching, poor implementation, and inadequate disability support services (Pereira et al., 2021). Many universities take a one-size-fits-all approach, ignoring the diverse learning requirements of students with SLI.

While exclusive or inclusive policies may be well articulated but, the actualization of these polices may extensively vary, particularly within Polytechnics and Community Colleges (Lee & Abdul Rahim, 2020). Moreover, many institutions do not have DSUs, or adequately trained staff (Yusof et al., 2022)

2.3.2 Academic and Psychological Barriers

Higher education academic culture around standardized assessment and cognitive performance further complicates the challenges faced by students with SLD who process information differently (Ng & Yahaya, 2019). They have been observed to exhibit low self-esteem, high stress levels, and fear of stigmatization, which lead to attrition and underperformance (Chong et al., 2023).

Peer and faculty awareness or the lack thereof increases psychological distress. Ahmad and Zulkifli (2020) find that SLD students tend to cover up their status due to stigma or embarrassment, making it less likely they will seek help.

2.3.3 Socioeconomic and Geographic Challenges

Socioeconomic trends compound exclusion, and especially for students from rural areas or low-income families, this becomes a barrier to furthering their education. In Selangor, students from low-income or rural areas face issues such as poor digital access, lack of public transport and insufficient funds. Beyond structural issues, students with SLD also face emotional and academic pressures due to rigid assessment systems and stigma from peers and faculty. These drawbacks are more essential for students with disabilities who already face exclusion on other fronts (Mahadzir et al., 2021). These socioeconomic constraints intensify exclusion for SLD students, particularly those from rural Selangor, who may already face multiple layers of disadvantage.

2.4 Best Practices and Models of Inclusion

2.4.1 Alternative Credentialing and Bridging Programs

Other countries have implemented successful alternative credentialing frameworks that better serve a wider array of learners. Australia is among the countries whose models on inclusive education include programs like the National Disability Coordination Officer (NDCO) (McConkey et al., 2018). It offers students with disabilities access to university education through tailored courses and alternative pathways to higher education, including micro-credentials and portfolios of evidence (Department of Education Australia, 2020).

Students with SLD in Malaysia are also having things like bridging programs, but it is still in narrow scope and not common (Mokhtar & Tan, 2021). Expanding such models in community colleges and technical institutions could enhance access without compromising academic standards.

2.5 Institutional Readiness in Malaysia

Higher education institutions in Malaysia vary significantly in terms of inclusivity. Studies have found that only 38% of higher education institutions in Malaysia have formal inclusion policies, and fewer than 25% provide disability-specific training for educators (Noraini et al., 2023). Moreover, most accommodations are reactive rather than proactive, often initiated only after student complaints.

The Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia has issued guidelines for inclusive education, but enforcement mechanisms remain weak. Resistance to change within institutions, budget limitations, and lack of awareness among top level administrators are key contributing factors (Rashid et al., 2021).

2.6 Employment and Industry Readiness

Even when students with SLD complete their studies, they encounter discrimination during employment. Employers often perceive these graduates as less capable, citing concerns over productivity and integration (Ghazali & Omar, 2020). However, inclusive employment studies show that hiring individuals with SLD contributes to innovation, team diversity, and social value (World Economic Forum, 2022).

Malaysia's Employment Retention Program and the OKU Talent portal are positive initiatives, but uptake among private sector employers remains low. Strengthening industry-academia partnerships is essential to address this gap (Talib & Hassan, 2023).

2.7 Research Gaps

Despite growing recognition of the issue, empirical studies focusing on higher education access for students with SLD in Malaysia especially from non-SPM pathways are limited. Most available research centres on primary and secondary levels, with limited exploration of structured transition programs, credential alternatives, and institutional benchmarking in higher education (Noor et al., 2021). Furthermore, the intersection of disability and rural socioeconomic status is underexamined. Most Malaysian research focuses on primary and secondary education. There is limited empirical evidence on how students with SLD without SPM qualifications can transition into higher education, and how institutions can benchmark alternative pathways.

2.8 Summary

The literature highlights persistent challenges in the access, retention, and post-graduation outcomes for students with SLD, both globally and in Malaysia. Although frameworks such as UDL and alternative credentialing have shown promise, their adoption in Selangor remains limited. Institutional readiness, policy enforcement, and employer engagement are crucial to improving educational and employment pathways. This study seeks to fill identified gaps and contribute to policy development, institutional reform, and exclusive practices in Malaysian higher education.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter analyses the global as well as local literature on access to higher education for PWD in general, with special consideration to those individuals diagnosed with a SLD. It is such that it hopes to learn about academic, institutional, and employment-related barriers faced by these students. This study uses a qualitative approach to understand things deeply. It focuses on how people experience the world and how schools, rules, and society affect access to higher education. This methodology is appropriate given the complexity of disability-related barriers and the need to understand meaning through participants' perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2021).

3.2 Research Design

A multiple case study design was used in a cross-stakeholder design (students, educators, administrators, and employers). This design offers a view into the multifaceted, interwoven nature of areas of struggle for many students with SLD, and how that plays out in their educational experiences. According to Yin (2020), case studies are useful for investigating specific circumstances in real-life settings associated with 'how' and 'why' questions.

The state of Selangor offers the highest number of mainstream secondary schools with PPKI in Malaysia. The following table presents the number of mainstream secondary schools with PPKI in Selangor by district as of 2024:

Table 1: Mainstream Secondary Schools with PPKI in Selangor by District (2024)

District	Number of School
Gombak	13
Hulu Langat	15
Hulu Selangor	9
Klang	15
Kuala Langat	7
Kuala Selangor	7
Petaling Perdana	17
Petaling Utama	9
Sabak Bernam	6
Sepang	6
Total	104

Source: Ministry of Education website

3.3 Data Collection

This study uses a qualitative method by using an interview protocol to data collection. The interview will be on the questionnaire questions, which have been modified to the form of interview sentences. Questions are in Malay, which respondents with SLD easily understand. The recorded interview data are grouped and analyzed based on the study's findings and translated into statements.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 26 participants, including 18 SLD students, 1 institutional representative, 2 policymakers, and 5 employers. Interviews were conducted using an interview protocol developed from prior literature and translated into Malay to ensure accessibility. All sessions were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymised. Data collection focused on five key areas: accessibility, institutional support, psychological challenges, employment readiness, and policy gaps. Interview guides are developed based on the literature review, covering themes such as accessibility, support structures, admission criteria, perceptions of exclusion, and career readiness. Interviews are audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Although there are numerous mainstream secondary schools offering PPKI in Selangor, the number of students who successfully pursue further education remains low. Specifically, the number of students who complete their schooling at age 19 in mainstream secondary schools with PPKI and subsequently enroll in the Special Skills Certificate Programme at Selayang Community College does not exceed 18 individuals annually. This figure is relatively small when compared to the total number of students completing their education at the age of 19.

The following table presents data from 2022 to 2024:

Table 2: Progression of PPKI Students from Mainstream Secondary Schools in Selangor (2022–2024)

Year	Completed Schooling at Age 19 (Selangor)	Applied for Admission			Enrolled in Kolej Komuniti Selayang		
		Outside Selangor	Selangor	Total	Outside Selangor	Selangor	Total
2022	121	30	60	90	8	10	18
		30	40	70	11	7	18
2023	130	25	30	55	9	9	18
2024	147	30	45	75	5	13	18
		30	45	75	8	10	18

Source: Data from Student Welfare Unit, Selayang Community College

3.3.1 Target Population

The study involved four key groups:

- i. Students with SLD who are either currently enrolled in or attempting to access higher education in Selangor.
- ii. Academic staff and support officers from public and private higher learning institutions.
- iii. Policymakers from the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) and Polytechnics and Community College Education Department (PolyCC).
- iv. Employers engaged in exclusive hiring practices.

3.3.2 Sampling Strategy

Data is collected using purposive sampling to achieve the information-rich participants (Etikan et al., 2019). Participants were selected based on their knowledge, role or lived experience related to inclusive education for students with SLD. This approach enabled the researchers to capture rich, targeted data from those most knowledgeable about the issue.

To promote representativeness:

- Students are selected from different education entry backgrounds.
- Selayang Community Colleges.
- Employers from both public and private sectors are included.

3.4 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns and insights across cases. Following Braun and Clarke's (2021) six phase approach; familiarisation, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and reporting. The data were manually coded into five overarching themes that aligned with the research objectives.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics committee. All participants were informed of the purpose of the study and their rights. Informed consent was obtained, and anonymity and confidentiality were strictly observed. Participants were free to withdraw at any stage. The study complies with Malaysia's Personal Data Protection Act (PDPA) 2010 and follows best practices for research involving vulnerable groups.

3.6 Limitations of the Methodology

The study's focus on Selangor may limit how widely the findings can be applied. Also, the reliance on self-reporting may introduce bias, and purposive sampling could exclude students who have disengaged entirely from the system. Nevertheless, the insights gained offer valuable groundwork for future, broader investigations. However, the study provides rich qualitative insights that can inform future mixed methods or national scale investigations.

4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents and discusses the findings from interviews on enhancing higher education access for PWD students with SLD in Selangor. The results are organized following the structure of the research objectives and supported with direct quotations from participants. Themes are discussed in relation to prior literature and national or international frameworks. The findings are presented thematically and aligned with the research objectives; institutional barriers, inclusive readiness, student experiences, bridging models, and employment readiness.

4.2 Profile of Respondents

This study involved **26 participants** from four key stakeholder groups: students with SLD, institutional representatives, policymakers, and employers. The breakdown is as follows:

Table 3: Number of respondents from stakeholder group

Stakeholder Group	Number of Respondents
Students with SLD	18
Institutional representatives	1
Policymakers (MOHE, PolyCC)	2
Employers from exclusive hiring programs	5

The students with SLD were between 19 to 23 years old, mostly recent completers of PPKI secondary school programmes. A majority had not obtained the SPM certificate, and several were actively exploring or enrolled in skills-based programmes.

The institutional representative came from Selayang Community College, one of the few institutions offering special skills certification. The two policymakers were from the Ministry of Higher Education and the Department of Polytechnic and Community College Education, both responsible for inclusive education policies. The five employers represented small-to-medium enterprises and one GLC involved in limited exclusive hiring.

This diverse sample ensured a balanced representation of perspectives across education and employment ecosystems, providing a holistic view of the transition from school to higher education and work.

Thematic Findings

Theme 1: Systemic Barriers and Lack of Clear Pathways to Accessing Higher Education

Students described feeling “lost” due to unclear admission options after secondary school:

“I didn’t have SPM, and there was no clear route to enter polytechnic and community college... I felt stuck.”

There is no formalised alternative admission policy, leaving students without SPM at a disadvantage. This aligns with Ismail & Abdullah (2021) who emphasized a lack of structural access in Malaysia Higher Education Institution.

Theme 2: Emotional and Psychological Stress

Students with SLD face high emotional stress, especially due to peer rejection and perceived stigma:

“Group work is difficult because they don’t want me in their group once they know I’m slow.”

These findings mirror research by Ahmad & Zulkifli (2020), highlighting the role of stigma in undermining learning motivation and confidence.

Theme 3: Inconsistent Disability Support Services (DSUs)

“We don’t have a unit specifically for disabled students. They are handled like any other student.”

Most institutions lack dedicated support units or trained personnel. As noted by Noraini et al. (2023), less than 25% of Malaysia Higher Education Institution offer targeted exclusion services.

Theme 4: Limited Exclusive Pedagogy

“We were never trained in exclusive teaching. We improvise as we go.”

While the MOHE provides guidelines, staff are generally not trained in UDL or differentiated instruction. This leads to reactive rather than proactive exclusion.

Theme 5: Employer Misconceptions and Low Confidence

“Employers think SLD means unfit to work. We need to change that mindset.”

Most employers lacked understanding of SLD and feared operational disruption. Only a few understood the value of exclusive hiring.

Theme 6: Lack of Structured Employment Support

“Many employers are unaware of how to accommodate SLD. They fear it will disrupt work.”

Even though platforms like OKU Talent exist, their adoption is limited, as employers do not know how to integrate such graduates meaningfully.

Theme 7: Demand for Bridging and Non-SPM Pathways

“If there’s a way to prove myself without SPM, I will try. I just want the chance.”

Students showed strong interest in bridging programmes. However, only Selayang Community College currently offers a relevant track in Selangor.

Theme 8: Institutional Willingness but Policy Gaps

“We support bridging programs, but there’s no clear policy or funding to implement them widely.”

Institutions are open to innovation but lack structural funding or guidelines. A formalised, state-wide Special Skills Certification Programme under PolyCC is needed.

To ensure clarity and alignment between the study's findings and its original research objectives, the following summary table maps each research objective to the corresponding themes that emerged during data analysis. This alignment helps to demonstrate how the thematic findings address each objective and provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges, institutional gaps, and strategic solutions relevant to students with SLD in Selangor.

Objective	Key Themes Identified
Objective 1	Theme 1, Theme 2
Objective 2	Theme 3, Theme 4, Theme 8
Objective 3	Theme 5, Theme 6
Objective 4	Theme 7, Theme 8

4.3 Discussion

4.3.1 Misalignment Between Policy and Practice

Although policies exist to promote inclusion (Persons with Disabilities Act 2008; Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013 until 2025), implementation lags behind. Institutions operate with insufficient guidance on alternative admissions, inclusive curricula or resource allocation. This misalignment deprives SLD students of the support systems they need to access and succeed in higher education.

4.3.2 Critical Role of Bridging Programs

Alternative education pathways such as bridging programs are essential for expanding access. These models offer opportunities for students who learn differently to demonstrate their capabilities and enter higher education through non-traditional routes. Adopting frameworks like UDL and RPL can systematize inclusivity without compromising quality (Meyer et al., 2019; Mokhtar & Tan, 2021).

The provision of TVET learning opportunities for students with disabilities is critically important, as it contributes significantly to their career and economic transition. As part of the Malaysian population, these individuals require continuous support from all stakeholders. Furthermore, the number of persons with disabilities is expected to increase each year, making inclusive education and skills development an urgent national priority.

4.3.3 Industry Partnerships as Ecosystem Support

Efforts to promote inclusive education must extend into the workforce. Collaboration between educational institutions and employers is needed to create more inclusive work environments and support transitions from education to employment.

The Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, Ministry of Human Resources, Ministry of Youth and Sports, Ministry of Education, and Ministry of Higher Education must coordinate efforts to address the educational needs of students with disabilities, particularly those who complete their education at the exclusive level. A holistic and collaborative approach is essential to ensure that the welfare and developmental needs of this underserved group are met. Moreover, the industry requires the support of all stakeholders to create an inclusive ecosystem that safeguards their well-being and facilitates their transition into the workforce.

4.4 Summary

This chapter highlighted the main findings from the study, organized into five major themes. The voices of students, educators, administrators, and employers provide a nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by PWD students with SLD. Thematic insights reveal systemic gaps in institutional access, emotional barriers among students, a demand for alternative education pathways, and low readiness among employers. These findings highlight the need for integrated reform across higher education, policy, and employment sectors to support the aspirations of students with SLD in Selangor.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.0 Introduction

This final chapter summarizes the key findings of the study and outlines targeted recommendations for addressing the barriers faced by students with SLD in accessing higher education in Selangor especially in TVET programmes under PolyCC. It also discusses the broader implications of the research, acknowledges limitations, and suggests areas for future exploration.

5.1 Conclusion

This study explored the barriers and opportunities in enhancing higher education access for students with Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD) in Selangor, particularly those without formal academic qualifications such as SPM. Drawing from interviews with students, educators, institutional leaders, policymakers, and employers, the study revealed persistent systemic, institutional, and societal gaps.

Key findings revealed that students with SLD face limited alternative admission routes, psychological stress due to stigma, and inconsistent institutional support. Higher education institutions often lack trained personnel, disability support units (DSUs), and exclusive teaching frameworks. Additionally, employer perceptions remain largely uninformed, contributing to limited job opportunities even for qualified graduates.

Despite these challenges, the study identified a strong willingness among educational institutions and employers to adopt inclusive practices, provided there is clear policy direction, targeted funding, and inter-ministerial collaboration. There is also high demand from students for bridging programmes and alternative credentialing options that recognize their diverse learning needs and potential.

By aligning findings with practical recommendations, this study contributes valuable insights to the development of more equitable education policies, institutional reforms, and inclusive employment pathways. It highlights the urgent need to reimagine higher education as a flexible, skills-based ecosystem that serves all learners, regardless of academic background or ability.

This study explored the multifaceted barriers faced by PWD students with SLD in accessing higher education in Selangor, particularly those from non-traditional educational pathways lacking formal qualifications such as SPM. The research revealed a significant disconnect between national exclusive education policies and their implementation at the institutional level. Although there are supportive frameworks like the Persons with Disabilities Act 2008 and the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025, execution remains fragmented and underfunded.

Key conclusions include:

- Alternative pathways such as bridging programs are critically lacking, yet deeply desired by students with SLD.
- Institutional readiness is limited, especially in terms of trained personnel, inclusive infrastructure, and proactive disability support services.
- Students experience psychological stress, stigmatization, and isolation, often without adequate mental health or academic counseling support.
- Employers show a general lack of preparedness and understanding of how to accommodate graduates with SLD, leading to limited employment opportunities.

Despite these challenges, stakeholders across institutions, government, and industry expressed a willingness to improve, if provided with strategic policy direction, structured funding, and capacity building tools.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, the following multi-level recommendations are proposed to enhance higher education access and employment outcomes for students with SLD in Selangor:

5.2.1 Policy-Level Recommendations

- Institutionalize bridging programs for non-SPM students under the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE), focusing on practical skills and workplace readiness.
- Revise national quality assurance frameworks (e.g., MQA standards) to mandate inclusive benchmarks, such as DSUs, UDL, and assistive technologies.
- Encourage inter-ministerial collaboration (e.g., MoHE, MoHR, KBS, KPWK) to integrate exclusive pathways across all relevant sectors.
- Allocate targeted grants to community colleges and polytechnics to build inclusive infrastructure and staff capacity.

5.2.2 Institutional Recommendations

- Establish DSUs in every polytechnic and community college, with trained staff providing academic accommodations, counseling, and career support.
- Train all academic and support staff in inclusive teaching strategies tailored to the needs of SLD students.
- Adopt flexible teaching and assessment models, grounded in Universal Design for Learning (UDL), to accommodate diverse learning profiles.

5.2.3 Industry and Employment Recommendations

- Run awareness campaigns with industry partners to promote inclusive hiring practices and debunk SLD-related misconceptions.
- Incentivize employers through tax benefits or certification programs for inclusive workplaces.
- Establish a Higher Education–Industry Inclusion Council to co-design internships, mentorships, and employment pipelines for SLD graduates.

5.3 Contribution to Knowledge

This study contributes valuable insights on:

- The educational and employment gaps for students with SLD in Malaysia,
- The structural barriers in higher education access for non-SPM pathways,
- The practical design of bridging programmes and exclusive education models in a Malaysian context.

5.4 Limitations and Future Research

The focus on Selangor may limit generalizability to other regions. Future studies should include:

- Quantitative, longitudinal studies on the impact of bridging programs,
- Comparative state-level analyses of inclusive education readiness,
- Exploratory research on digital learning accessibility for students with SLD.

5.5 Final Reflection

Breaking the barriers from classroom to campus is both a moral and strategic imperative. With proper alignment between policy, practice, and public will, Malaysia can create an inclusive higher education ecosystem where every learner, regardless of academic background or ability, can thrive and contribute meaningfully to national progress.

Policy and Government-Level Recommendations

- i. Formalize Bridging
 - The Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) should institutionalize bridging programs for students without SPM, with a strong focus on skills, digital literacy, and soft competencies in Selangor.
- ii. Exclusive Education Mandates
 - Amend existing higher education quality assurance guidelines (e.g., MQA standards) to include mandatory inclusivity benchmarks such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL), assistive technologies, and inclusive pedagogy.
 - Open exclusive pathway in other ministry such as Ministry of Human Resources and Ministry of Youth and Sports.
- iii. Strategic Budget Allocation
 - Allocate targeted funding through *special inclusion grants* for community colleges, polytechnics, and universities to build Disability Support Units (DSUs) and inclusive infrastructure.
 - The role of the Selangor state government, in collaboration with the federal government, is crucial in providing appropriate educational facilities for this group. This includes expanding institutional access for students with Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD) and enhancing the availability of Special Education TVET teachers within higher education institutions offering Special Skills Programmes. Such initiatives are essential to ensure equitable access to quality education and skills training, ultimately supporting the long-term development and employability of students with disabilities.

5.3.2 Institutional Recommendations

- i. Capacity Building for Academic Staff
 - Develop mandatory training modules on learning disabilities and exclusive education for all teaching and support staff, co-developed with special education experts.
- ii. Establishment of Disability Support Units (DSUs)
 - Create fully resourced DSUs with trained personnel to provide screening, accommodations, counseling, and progress monitoring for SLD students.
- iii. Flexible Assessment and Instruction
 - Promote the use of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles to diversify learning materials, extend assignment deadlines, and adapt assessments based on learner profiles.

5.3.3 Industry and Employment Recommendations

- i. Awareness and Sensitization Workshops
 - Conduct industry outreach programs in collaboration with government and NGOs to educate employers about SLD and inclusive workplace practices.
- ii. Incentivize Exclusive Hiring
 - Strengthen and publicize existing government incentives such as training subsidies under programs like OKU Talent and create a certification for exclusive employers.
- iii. Public Private Sector Collaboration
 - Establish a Higher Education–Industry Inclusion Council to co-design internship placements, mentorships, and job portals specifically for SLD graduates.

5.6 Contribution to Knowledge and Practice

This study contributes new insights into:

- The unmet needs of students with SLD from non-SPM backgrounds,
- Institutional and policy implementation gaps within Malaysian higher education,
- The absence of industry preparedness for exclusive employment,
- Practical frameworks to align education and employment pipelines for PWD with SLD.

This study serves as a baseline for improving existing institutions and guiding the establishment of new ones, while also promoting broader employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities in both the public and private sectors. Although several policies have been developed to support the education of this group, they are not adequately acknowledged or implemented by key stakeholders involved in addressing these issues.

5.5 Limitations of the Study

While the research provides rich qualitative insights, its focus on Selangor limits broader national generalizability. Further, due to the purposive sampling method, the findings may not fully capture the views of students who have entirely disengaged from the system. Also, the lack of disaggregated data by disability type in many institutions posed a challenge in comparative benchmarking.

5.6 Suggestions for Future Research

- Quantitative longitudinal studies to track the impact of exclusive programs such as bridging pathways on academic and employment outcomes.
- Comparative studies across different Malaysian states to identify regional variations in inclusivity practices.
- Exploratory studies on digital inclusion and accessibility technologies for students with SLD in tertiary education.

5.7 Final Reflection

Inclusive education is not merely an ethical imperative, it is a strategic investment in the human capital of Malaysia. To break the barriers from classroom to campus, we must dismantle exclusionary systems and build equitable structures that recognize, support, and empower all learners. With the right policies, institutional leadership, and industry collaboration, PWD students with SLD can thrive in higher education and beyond, contributing meaningfully to the nation's development.

REFERENCES

- Ahmad, S., & Zulkifli, N. (2020). Psychosocial experiences of students with learning disabilities in Malaysian tertiary institutions. *Journal of Special Needs Education*, 10(1), 45– 58.
- American Psychiatric Association. (2022). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed., text rev.). Washington, DC: Author.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. Sage Publications.
- Chong, A., Goh, C. F., & Hameed, A. (2023). Emotional resilience of Malaysian undergraduates with learning disabilities. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 27(2), 134–152.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2021). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Department of Education Australia. (2020). *NDCO program: National Disability Coordination Officer overview*. <https://www.education.gov.au>
- Etikan, I., Musa, S. A., & Alkassim, R. S. (2019). Comparison of convenience sampling and purposive sampling. *American Journal of Theoretical and Applied Statistics*, 5(1), 1–4.
- Ghazali, N., & Omar, M. (2020). Employer perception towards graduates with disabilities in Malaysia. *Malaysian Journal of Employment Studies*, 16(1), 33–47.
- Hashim, N., & Azman, H. (2020). Barriers to inclusive education in Malaysia. *Malaysian Journal of Learning and Instruction*, 17(2), 101–123.
- Ismail, R., & Abdullah, N. A. (2021). Inclusive education in Malaysian higher institutions: Implementation and challenges. *Journal of Educational Leadership, Policy and Practice*, 36(1), 23–40.
- Lee, S., & Abdul Rahim, R. (2020). Inclusive practice in Malaysian polytechnics: A policy-practice gap. *ASEAN Journal of Education*, 3(1), 59–75.
- Lim, W. H., Mokhtar, F., & Tan, C. (2020). Towards universal design for learning in Malaysia's higher education. *Journal of Education & Practice*, 11(28), 89–96.
- Lincoln, Y. S., Lynham, S. A., & Guba, E. G. (2018). Paradigmatic controversies, contradictions, and emerging confluences, revisited. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (5th ed., pp. 213–263). Sage.
- Lyon, G. R., Shaywitz, S., & Shaywitz, B. (2020). A definition of dyslexia: Psychological

- science in the public interest. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice*, 35(3), 149–157.
- Mahadzir, N., Sidek, R., & Noraini, S. (2021). Digital divide and access to higher education among students with disabilities. *Journal of Southeast Asian Education*, 12(1), 78–92.
- McConkey, R., Dowling, M., Hassan, D., & Menke, S. (2018). Promoting social inclusion through Unified Sports for youth with intellectual disabilities: A five-nation study. *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research*, 62(1), 62–72.
- Meyer, A., Rose, D. H., & Gordon, D. (2019). *Universal design for learning: Theory and practice*. CAST Publishing.
- MOE Malaysia. (2021). *Inclusive education implementation guidelines*. Ministry of Education Malaysia.
- Mokhtar, M., & Tan, Y. C. (2021). Recognition of prior learning for Malaysian TVET graduates. *Skills Malaysia Journal*, 5(2), 101–115.
- Ng, M. L., & Yahaya, N. (2019). Academic struggles of learners with SLD in Malaysian universities. *Journal of Malaysian Higher Education*, 14(3), 23–37.
- Noor, M., Aminuddin, Z., & Halim, F. (2021). Underexplored pathways: Post-secondary education access for students with SLD. *Malaysian Education Review*, 17(4), 67–82.
- Noraini, S., Mahmud, M., & Rashid, H. (2023). Institutional inclusivity in Malaysia's higher education: A survey of policy implementation. *Journal of Special Education Research*, 8(2), 119–137.
- Pereira, A., Silva, C., & Wong, M. (2021). Barriers and facilitators to higher education for students with disabilities. *Disability & Society*, 36(9), 1450–1472.
- Rashid, A. R., Mokhtar, N., & Aziz, A. (2021). Inclusive higher education: What needs to change in Malaysia? *Journal of Educational Policy*, 9(1), 55–73.
- Talib, R., & Hassan, S. (2023). Closing the gap: Enhancing employability for disabled graduates in Malaysia. *Malaysian Journal of Human Capital*, 13(1), 90–106.
- UNESCO. (2020). *Inclusion and education: All means all – Global education monitoring report*. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000374248>
- World Economic Forum. (2022). *The value of inclusive hiring: A global perspective*. <https://www.weforum.org>
- Yin, R. K. (2020). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Yusof, M. N., Jamaluddin, M., & Fauzi, S. (2022). Disability support services in Malaysian higher education: Current practices and challenges. *International Journal of Educational Development in Asia*, 1(2), 33–47.