

The Need for Inclusive Communication Strategies in Higher Education: Quantitative and Qualitative Analysis on the Voice of PWD Community at Universiti Islam Selangor (UIS)

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DOI Link: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARPED/v14-i3/26450>

Published Online: 15 September 2025

Abstract

Inclusive communication in higher education is a critical aspect in ensuring meaningful engagement with PWD (Persons with Disabilities) students. This research studied the need for strategic plan design for inclusive communication at Universiti Islam Selangor (UIS) by combining mixed method approach. Quantitative data was obtained through a survey involving 52 respondents from among campus members i.e. academic and support staffs, while qualitative data was obtained through eight in-depth interviews with registered PWD students. The qualitative finding showed the communication between UIS academic and administration staffs with PWD students is at a positive level however not entirely inclusive. There is still experience gap amongst UIS lecturers and administration staffs. Analysis on min score showed moderate positive inclination from the respondents for inclusive awareness from campus members towards communication with PWD students (Min = 3.63, SP = 0.43), while in the aspect of PWD-inclusive support, significant gap still exists in provision of PWD-friendly facilities (Min = 2.60, SP = 0.69). As for the Need of Communication Strategy Design and PWD-Inclusive showed moderate positive inclination from the respondents for supporting the existence of suitable strategy to support this community (Min = 3.93, SP = 0.54). Meanwhile the extract from respondents through qualitative finding stresses the need for empathetic communication, accessible information channels, and peer support as major factors. The implication of this research emphasizes strategic communication plan formation based on universal design principle, two-way mechanism, as well as the university's policy coordination. This research contributes to the reinforcement of inclusive communication literature by connecting the quantitative and qualitative data in addition to giving practical suggestions for a more responsive and equal higher education in building higher education ecosystem which is truly inclusive.

Keywords: Inclusive Communication, Strategic Plan, PWD, Higher Education, Universiti Islam Selangor

Introduction

Higher education at present is confronted with the desperate need in following the current development of principles of inclusivity in all aspects of academic management and delivery. While many institutions have opened the access to Persons of Disabilities (PWD) students via various policies and support programmes, the challenges in building inclusive communication environment remain significant (Becker et al., 2021 and Mortimore, 2003). Physical admission is not a guarantee for social and psychological inclusiveness, especially when the communication between PWD students and campus community does not happen effectively nor emphatically (Moving the Needle on Ableism, 2022). In this context, communication is not simply an information delivery process; it also acts as social interaction medium which support engagement, active involvement, and togetherness amongst students with special needs.

Past studies emphasized the communication gap in higher education is rooted from the lack of understanding towards the need of PWD students, limited information accessibilities, as well as the absent of inclusive communication training among academic and administration members according to South Africa and US Case, 2022, and Goldsmiths, 2019. In an increasingly complex environment, strategic communication must be designed holistically and strategically, considering social equality, Universal Design for Learning as well as the usage of adoptive technology which support students' involvement equally (Inclusive Campuses, 2020 dan Accessible Communication in the Workplace, 2021).

Universiti Islam Selangor (UIS), as an institution which integrates Islamic values in higher education is confronted with the need to build an inclusive communication strategic plan which not only fulfils the legal and policy requirements but also honours the principles of *ihsan* and *rahmah* in the interaction with PWD students. In this context, this research is carried out to design a strategic plan which focuses on inclusive communication development that is effective and sustainable in UIS.

Hence, the main objective of this research is to survey the need in building one strategic plan design which focusses on inclusive communication and support for PWD students at Universiti Islam Selangor (UIS). This research intends to identify the need of communication required by PWD students. Hopefully the research outcome could provide the platform which is based on real proofs and true applications in policy formulation as well as inclusive communication practice which is more sustainable in the higher education environment in Malaysia. The motivation of this study arises from the urgent need to bridge the gap between accessibility policies and actual communication practices in higher education. While PWD students are increasingly admitted to universities, the lack of inclusive communication continues to undermine their participation, belonging, and overall educational experience. Emphasizing this area of research is therefore crucial, as it not only highlights the barriers faced by PWD students, but also provides universities with actionable strategies to build an empathetic and inclusive academic environment.

Literature Review*Inclusive Communication Strategy in Higher Education*

The need for inclusive communication strategy in higher education, especially for PWD (Persons with Disabilities) community at Universiti Islam Selangor (UIS), is crucial to cultivate

a learning environment that is fair. Not only inclusive communication would improve education experience for all students, it would also overcome the unique challenges faced by marginalized group. This overview would explore the importance of evaluating diversity, the role of educator, and the need for institutional commitment for inclusivity.

Educators play the focal role in implementing inclusive strategies; going beyond traditional teaching methods to cultivate welcoming environment (Poly & Harishma, 2023). Training teachers to tackle inequality and support diverse students is essential for effective inclusive education (Williams, 2024). Universities must be committed to consistent improvement in inclusiveness; allocating resources to support the involvement of all students (Mori Reima, 2022). Policies must be created in ensuring the need of PWD community is fulfilled; promoting their presence and success in academic environment (Mori Aduma, 2022).

Inclusive community is defined as information delivery which is accessible, comprehensible, and recognized by all parties without discrimination (WHO, 2011). In the context of higher education, that includes social interaction, digital information access, and service delivery system.

Inclusive support should not only focussed on support equipment, but also on the need for interpersonal communication that is empathetic and responsive (Booth & Ainscow, 2016). Communication strategy design must take into account cultural context, organisation structure, and target community involvement (Cornelissen, 2020).

Although the drive for inclusivity is important, it is equally imperative to realise how permanent challenges, such as deep-rooted bias and systemic barriers, could hinder the effectiveness of this strategy. Overcoming these issues requires consistent effort and commitment from all stakeholders in higher education.

Barriers and the Need of PWD Community

In the era of higher education which increasingly stresses inclusivity, the need to provide environment which support inclusive communication for PWD becomes increasingly critical. Universities must not only provide physical facilities which are PWD-friendly, but also communication strategy which could deliver information, services, and support effectively. According to Hallahan et al. (2007), strategic communication is the main tool in connecting institutional policy with user experience. The goal of this research is to study the need of PWD community for inclusive communication strategy at Universiti Islam Selangor (UIS) as well as to propose early framework for strategic plan based on empirical findings.

Meanwhile psychological barriers refer to challenges related to social interaction, stigma, and discrimination encountered by students with disabilities. Research has indicated how negative attitude from peers and academic staffs would potentially obstruct PWD students from accessing available support (Paz-Maldonado et al., 2025). Barnes dan Mercer (2010) has emphasized that this stigma is commonly rooted from the misconception from the society in which disabilities are individual weakness and not the product of social structure that is exclusive. In the context of higher education, such stigma could be detrimental to the emotional wellbeing, motivation, and academic achievement of PWD students. Therefore,

the effort to increase civic awareness and empathy of campus members is crucial in building a truly inclusive environment.

Besides social stigma, attitude barrier from administrators and policy makers has become a significant challenge. Misconception about disabilities often causing support provision and involvement opportunity underprovided (Navarro, 2023). Shakespeare (2014) has explained how deficit-oriented view, which perceives disabilities as individual issue, still dominates the educational institution approach. This has produced support policy which is simply symbolic, without concrete execution which could provide tangible effect for PWD students. Instead, the approach based on social model on disabilities demands universities to change their culture, attitude, and support system to be more responsive towards students' needs. This attitude shift is a significant foundation in ensuring inclusivity is not simply a discourse, instead being practiced in all aspects in campus life.

Dimension of Inclusive Community

The implementation level of inclusive communication in universities differs; some institutions practice specific policies, while others depend on initiatives which are isolated in nature. Disabled community encounters a variety of barriers, for example physical, technology, psychological, and attitude. In addition, the perception of university staffs towards the need of students with disabilities would also affect the effectiveness of the inclusive efforts which are being implemented.

Inclusive communication in the context of higher education refers to communication approach which takes into account the diversity of students' abilities, including persons with disabilities (PWD). According to Moriña (2017), inclusive communication demands information provision in accessible form, such as braille, alternative text, video caption, as well as the use of sign language for students with hearing difficulty. Failure in providing PWD-friendly communication materials would not only affect the access to knowledge, but also create gap in learning experience (Seale, 2014).

Furthermore, inclusive communication puts emphasis on the existence of two-way communication channel between PWD students and the university. This channel is important as it allows the voice of Persons with disabilities (PWD) should be directly involved in decision-making processes and the implementation of institutional policies (Bessant, 2012). When two-way communication is established, PWD students are no longer seen merely as passive recipients of university policies, but as active stakeholders in creating a responsive and inclusive learning ecosystem.

One key dimension of inclusivity is the level of civic awareness within the campus community regarding PWD diversity. Hughes et al. (2019) argue that inclusive communication goes beyond the mere transmission of information; it also involves behavioural and value-based changes within the campus culture to genuinely embrace diversity. A high level of civic awareness fosters positive social interactions, reduces stigma, and increases acceptance of PWD students as equal members of the academic community, alongside their mainstream peers.

Interpersonal Communication Theory

Interpersonal Communication Theory emphasizes two-way communication between individuals, including the exchange of verbal and non-verbal messages to achieve mutual understanding (DeVito, 2019). In the context of higher education, the effectiveness of interpersonal communication is a fundamental element in building relationships among students, lecturers, and administrative staff. Communication needs are particularly critical for PWD students, who face multiple challenges related to information access, social perception, and academic support.

Therefore, an inclusive strategic communication plan at UIS should be grounded in Interpersonal Communication Theory, which highlights empathy, openness, and the establishment of responsive communication platforms. Interpersonal communication provides PWD students with a direct channel to express their needs to the university. As Burleson (2010) further explains, interpersonal communication not only conveys information but also serves as a medium for emotional and social support.

Within the UIS context, the needs of PWD students such as Braille-friendly learning materials, the use of sign language, and technological assistance are effectively addressed through consistent interpersonal communication between students and lecturers. Hence, the inclusive strategic communication plan should embed interpersonal communication as a foundational approach for identifying, understanding, and responding to the unique needs of the PWD community.

Also, this theory emphasized on building a quality relationship through characteristics of trust, empathy and openness (Knapp, Vangelisti, & Caughlin, 2014). As part of UIS's efforts to develop a strategic plan for inclusive communication, this approach may be implemented by strengthening communication networks among PWD students, their peers, lecturers, facilitators, and administrative staff. Establishing strong interpersonal relationships plays a critical role in reducing stigma, fostering collaboration, and cultivating a campus environment that is more inclusive and supportive of persons with disabilities. This strategy is essential not only for addressing students' educational needs, but also for enhancing their psychosocial well-being.

From a strategic perspective, the application of Interpersonal Communication Theory implies that UIS must develop a systematic mechanism for two-way communication. This may include initiatives such as PWD student forums, regular feedback sessions, and the appointment of dedicated liaison officers. This strategy aligns with the perspective of Littlejohn and Foss (2011), who argue that effective interpersonal communication depends not merely on the transmission of messages, but on the co-construction of meaning. Therefore, the inclusive communication strategic plan at UIS should not be limited to the provision of physical or technological facilities alone, but must also institutionalise a culture of interpersonal communication that is inclusive, empathetic, and participatory.

Interpersonal Communication Theory provides a robust theoretical foundation for developing an inclusive communication strategic plan at UIS. It emphasizes the importance of two-way interaction, empathy, and quality relationships as core elements in delivering holistic support

to PWD students. Without the integration of this theory, the strategic plan risks becoming mechanical and unresponsive to the lived experiences of the PWD community on campus.

Research Gap

Effective communication is a critical component in education; however, PWD students with hearing and visual impairments face significant challenges in accessing information. Zabala (2005) highlights that hearing-impaired PWD students often lack equitable access to verbal learning materials such as lectures and classroom instruction. Similarly, research by Lynch and Irvine (2009) indicates that visually impaired PWD students encounter difficulties accessing learning resources, including textbooks, multimedia content, and online materials that are not designed to be accessible. Therefore, accessible formats such as Braille texts, sign language interpretation, and digital screens adapted for PWD students are essential to ensure equitable access to educational content.

Research by Mitchell (2005) indicates that academic staff in higher education institutions are often inadequately prepared, lacking training and knowledge to effectively communicate with PWD students. Lecturers are frequently untrained in adapting classroom activities to accommodate the specific needs of these students. Similarly, university administrative staff often demonstrate a limited understanding of PWD students' requirements, as evidenced by the insufficient provision of effective support services. Without targeted training and capacity-building initiatives for both academic and administrative personnel, creating an inclusive and accessible environment for PWD students remains a significant challenge.

Many universities have established dedicated PWD (persons with disabilities) support centres and implemented structural measures to enhance accessibility for the disabled community (Darvishy et al., 2024). However, a significant portion of these initiatives remain sporadic and are not sufficiently supported by comprehensive strategies capable of addressing the diverse needs of the disability community (Pottmeier et al., 2019).

University Staff Perceptions

Although most university staff acknowledge the importance of inclusive policies, many still lack of deep understanding of specific needs of students with disabilities and the support resources available to them (Navarro, 2023). Therefore, training and awareness programmes are essential to fostering a more inclusive university culture while addressing the barriers faced by the disabled community (Pottmeier et al., 2019). Overall, while several universities have taken steps towards promoting inclusivity, the persistence of structural barriers and the varying perceptions among staff members highlight the need for a more unified, systematic, and informed approach to effectively support persons with disabilities.

Research Objectives

(i) To identify the need for strategic plan design of PWD for inclusive communication in UIS.

Research Questions

(i) What is strategic plan design of PWD for inclusive communication in UIS.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant as it offers both theoretical and practical contributions to the field of inclusive higher education. On the theoretical level, it enriches existing literature by connecting quantitative and qualitative perspectives on the voices of PWD students. On the practical level, it benefits universities, lecturers, administrators, and policymakers by providing a framework for inclusive communication strategies that are empathetic, responsive, and effective. By addressing these needs, the study contributes to building a higher education ecosystem that values equity, accessibility, and diversity

Methodology

This study examines the need for designing an inclusive communication strategic plan at Universiti Islam Selangor (UIS) by employing a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. A total of 52 respondents, comprising academic and administrative staff, participated through a structured questionnaire. In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted with seven PWD students. This methodological approach was selected as it aligns with the research objective of identifying the requirements for developing an inclusive communication-based strategic plan at UIS.

A purposive sampling technique was employed. From a population of 600, only 52 valid responses were obtained. Although this figure falls short of the ideal sample size, the data are utilised as exploratory or pilot findings to gain preliminary insights. The sample size was determined based on Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sample size determination table, with a confidence level set at $p < .05$. The survey data were analysed in relation to the research objectives and questions.

Table 1.0

Analysis selection for Objective and Research Question

No	Research Question	Research Objectives	Analysis
1.	What is the strategic plan design of PWD for inclusive communication in UIS.	To identify the need for strategic plan design of PWD for inclusive communication in UIS.	Descriptive Min

Research Instrument

This study employed a questionnaire as its primary research instrument. The questionnaire consisted of five main sections:

Section A: Respondents' demographic profile (Gender, Age, Marital Status)

Section B: Interaction with persons with disabilities (PWD)

Section C: Inclusive support for PWD

Section D: The Needs for Strategic Plan Design for PWD Inclusive Communication.

Section E: PWD related policies and support frameworks

The questionnaire comprised a total of 30 items. Sections B, C, D, and E utilised a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Results and Discussions

Explanations regarding PWD Inclusive Communication by UIS Academic and Administration Staff.

Table 2.0

Analysis result of PWD interaction, PWD Inclusive Support and The Needs for Strategic Plan Design for PWD Inclusive Communication.

	Interaction with PWD	PWD Inclusive Support	The need for strategic plan design for inclusive communication (PWD)
N	52	52	52
Mean	3.63	2.60	3.93
Std. Deviation	0.433	0.69	0.542

The findings presented in Table 2.0 indicate that the level of interaction with the PWD community among academic and administrative staff at UIS is moderately high ($M = 3.63$, $SD = 0.433$). This aligns with the study by Patsayeva et al. (2024), which emphasizes that interpersonal interaction is a fundamental basis for fostering inclusive communication within higher education environments. From the perspective of Interpersonal Communication Theory, the effectiveness of such interactions depends on the degree of empathy, message clarity, and the willingness to listen to feedback from the PWD community. Therefore, these results suggest that UIS staff demonstrate a positive inclination towards engagement, but this should be further strengthened through more systematic inclusive communication skills development.

Conversely, inclusive support for the PWD community is perceived to be relatively low ($M = 2.60$, $SD = 0.691$). This finding reflects a gap in policy implementation and infrastructure provision. The relatively large standard deviation also indicates divergent views among respondents, suggesting an imbalance in awareness and experience regarding the actual support needed by PWD students. These results are consistent with Papadopoulos et al. (2024), who argue that higher education institutions frequently face challenges in providing consistent support, particularly concerning assistive technologies, digital accessibility, and instructor training. This underscores the necessity for a more comprehensive policy approach grounded in the principles of equitable access.

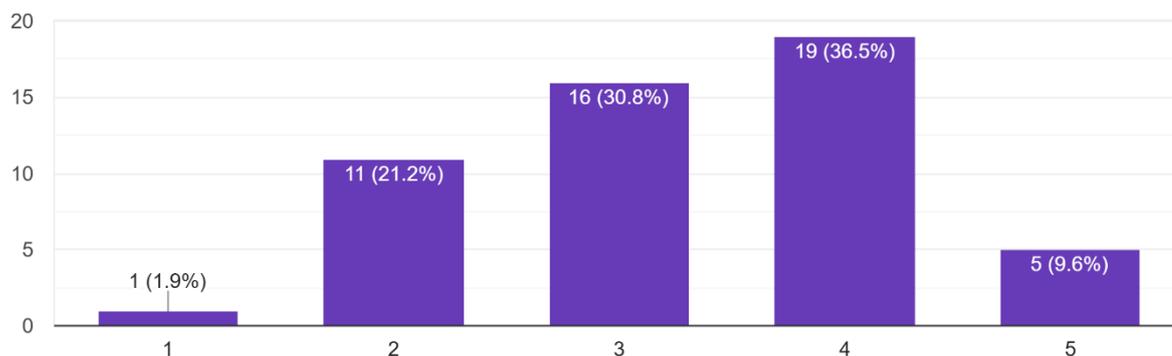
The findings show the highest mean value for the need to design an inclusive communication strategy ($M = 3.93$, $SD = 0.542$), underscore that the majority of respondents recognize the importance of a dedicated strategic plan to address the communication challenges faced by PWD students at UIS. Simultaneously, these results support the framework of Interpersonal Communication Theory, which emphasizes two-way communication and message adaptation according to audience needs. Therefore, this finding presents a significant opportunity for UIS to develop an inclusive communication strategy that not only exists as a policy document but is also operationalized through daily interactions, digital support systems, and enhanced inclusive literacy training for the campus community.

Table 3.0

The percentage distribution of academic and administrative staff in interacting with PWD students

I find it easy to communicate with students.

52 responses



The results for the question item “*I find it easy to communicate with students*” indicate that the majority of respondents selected ratings within the moderate to high range. Specifically, 19 respondents (36.5%) chose a rating of 4, while 16 respondents (30.8%) selected a rating of 3. Nevertheless, 11 respondents (21.2%) rated communication ease at level 2, and only a small proportion rated it as very easy (5 respondents, 9.6%) or very difficult (1 respondent, 1.9%).

This distribution suggests that most respondents perceive communication with students as relatively easy; however, there remains a gap in experience among academic and administrative staff. These findings align with the principles of Interpersonal Communication Theory (Gudykunst & Kim, 2017), which emphasize that communication effectiveness depends significantly on an individual’s adaptability in understanding the needs and backgrounds of message recipients. In the context of students with disabilities (PWD), communication requires heightened sensitivity to differences in abilities and the use of appropriate communication mediums.

Challenges of Accessing Information

The results indicate that students with disabilities (PWD) frequently encounter challenges in accessing information, primarily because the available materials are not compatible with assistive devices. Learning resources are often unavailable or provided late, and in some cases, materials that should be offered in accessible formats such as Braille, audio, or compatible with reading devices are lacking. These issues were consistently highlighted by informants, as echoed in the following statements:

“Sometimes, I were not informed by any opportunities because the information sent was not in the format that I can access.” (R1)

“Lecturers often upload notes late, I have visually-impaired problems. It takes even longer to access the materials in a usable format.” (R5)

This gap highlights a communication barrier that hinders students with disabilities (PWD) from accessing equitable information and fully participating in their learning activities

Staff Attitude and Awareness

Issues related to inclusive communication are also influenced by the level of empathy within the university environment, particularly among lecturers. PWD students reported that some lecturers still lack understanding of the need for appropriate communication methods, including the use of simplified language, extended time for tasks, and visual aids. This concern is reflected in the following statement from the informants:

“Some lecturers do not fully understand that I need extended time or simplified language.” (R2)

“Academic staff aren’t always patient when I ask for help; sometimes I feel like they think I’m being a burden.” (R5)

These findings indicate that communication literacy, particularly in the context of inclusive communication, is a critical factor in fostering a positive and supportive climate within an inclusive university environment.

Peer Support

Although formal communication is often limited, peer support has emerged as a significant alternative medium of communication for students with disabilities (PWD). It not only facilitates the understanding of academic content but also serves as a social support mechanism that helps to reduce feelings of isolation. This was reflected in student responses, as illustrated by the following statement:

“Most of the time, I rely on my friends to explain what the lecturers said or to share past information with me. (R7)

“My friends often underestimate me when it comes to tasks. Maybe they think I’m slow (R4)

These findings demonstrate that inclusive communication depends not only on institutional policies but also significantly on the social re among students

Technology and Communication Accessibility

The utilization of educational technology is recognized as one of the key university initiatives to support inclusive communication. However, the findings indicate challenges related to training on the effective use of appropriate technological systems. For instance, informants reported:

“The university does provide some tech equipment, but I don’t really know how to use it, and no one’s really helped me learn. (R5)

“The online system isn’t always screen-reader friendly, which makes it hard for me to communicate or access information”. (R3)

The absence of systematic guidance results in the underutilization of technology.

The Impact on Participation and Personal Development

Ultimately, the constraints in inclusive communication have a direct impact on the level of engagement of students with disabilities (PWD) in both learning process and campus life. In effective information dissemination results in these students feeling marginalized. As expressed by one respondent:

“When I don’t get information on time or in a way I can understand, I feel left out from the whole class.” (R5)

I feel disappointed. I want to participate like everyone else, but the way communication is handled makes me feel like an outsider. (R4)

This suggests that inclusive communication is not solely a technical matter, but also encompasses psychosocial dimensions that influence students' sense of belonging and personal development.

Conclusion

Overall, the need to develop an inclusive communication strategic plan at Universiti Islam Selangor (UIS), grounded in Interpersonal Communication fundamental element, underscores that effective support for students with disabilities (PWD) should not rely solely on the provision of physical infrastructure or technological tools. Rather, it must prioritise the development of communication that is high in quality, empathetic, and responsive. Interpersonal communication serves as a foundational element, as it enables the identification of needs, facilitates meaningful feedback, and helps establish a more inclusive and supportive network for PWD students.

Communication with students at UIS is generally perceived as positive; however, it is not yet fully inclusive. Therefore, interventions such as awareness training, the development of inclusive communication modules, and the use of alternative mediums including sign language and assistive technologies are urgently needed.

In addition, the strategic communication plan plays a critical role in addressing persistent barriers whether physical, technological, psychosocial, or attitudinal. With the implementation of a two-way communication mechanism, PWD students are no longer positioned solely as passive recipients of university policies, but as strategic partners in co-creating a more inclusive learning ecosystem. This is in line with the social model of disability, which frames disability-related challenges as outcomes of structural and attitudinal constraints, rather than individual deficiencies.

In conclusion, the inclusive communication strategic plan at UIS should serve as a guiding document to ensure that the university not only fulfils its obligations in providing equitable access to education but also fosters a campus culture rooted in justice, empathy, and the appreciation of diversity. The integration of Interpersonal Communication Theory into the design of this strategic plan adds significant value, as it emphasizes human relationships, participatory dialogue, and mutual understanding as the foundation for a truly inclusive university.

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