
Access to Higher Education for Persons with Disabilities: A Document Study and Thematic Analysis of Structural Barriers and Reasonable Accommodations

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ABSTRACT

Access to higher education for people with disabilities still faces structural and multidimensional barriers, as access does not stop at student admission but encompasses academic access, support services, information, and campus social participation. This study aims to map the main barriers and directions for improving higher education access policies for people with disabilities by referring to the non-discrimination and reasonable accommodation mandates in the CRPD. The method used is qualitative research based on document studies through thematic analysis of normative documents and authoritative reports (CRPD, OECD), as well as evidence of national and cross-country educational inequality (UNICEF Indonesia, World Bank). The results show that access to higher education is influenced by (1) uneven support and accommodation across institutions, which often makes meeting needs dependent on campus capacity; and (2) pipeline issues resulting from inequalities at previous levels, marked by low participation and graduation rates for groups with disabilities, thus narrowing opportunities to advance to higher education. These findings emphasize the need for an integrated access policy through minimum standardization of academic accommodations, strengthening disability service units, simplifying support procedures, and transition strategies from secondary education to higher education so that equal access can be achieved sustainably.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Access to higher education for persons with disabilities remains a serious issue in the educational inclusion agenda because "access" does not stop at student acceptance into higher education, but includes physical access, academic access (lecture/exam rules), access to support services, access to information, and social participation in the campus environment (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2003; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2020). Normatively, the right to higher education without discrimination has been affirmed in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), including the obligation of the state to provide reasonable accommodation so that persons with disabilities can learn equally (United Nations, 2006). The operational affirmation of inclusive education as a right and obligation of the state is also strengthened through General Comment No. 4, which emphasizes the transformation of the education system to be responsive to the diverse needs of students, including at the higher education level (Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016). In a global context, this commitment to educational inclusion is also in line with the spirit of the Salamanca Statement, which emphasizes the provision of education that welcomes all learners and rejects exclusionary practices (UNESCO, 1994).

However, in many contexts, this access has not been consistently realized because institutional capacity and support systems are often uneven, so the experiences of students with disabilities depend heavily on the readiness of policies and services at each university (OECD, 2003). This situation needs to be addressed urgently because unequal access to higher education is not merely an administrative issue at universities but also directly impacts employment opportunities, social inclusion, and poverty reduction—three dimensions also emphasized as strategic benefits of higher education for people with disabilities (OECD, 2003; World Health Organization & World Bank, 2011). Furthermore, unequal access to services and support can exacerbate the broader health and well-being of people with disabilities, as underscored by the global report on disability (World Health Organization & World Bank, 2011) and a WHO factsheet, which emphasizes that inequalities are often created by environmental barriers and service systems, not simply individual circumstances (World Health Organization, 2023).

Furthermore, barriers to higher education are not isolated; they are connected to the pipeline problem. UNICEF data in Indonesia shows that nearly 30% of children with disabilities have never attended school, and graduation rates decline sharply at higher levels. This means that many prospective students with disabilities are already "impeded" even before they enter university (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2020). Cross-national findings also indicate that gaps in educational attainment and literacy between disabled and non-disabled groups can widen over time, indicating that this problem is structural and recurrent if not addressed systemically (Male & Wodon, 2017). Therefore, the solution needs to be directed at improving the integrated access ecosystem, rather than a partial approach, through strengthening campus policies, standardizing minimum accommodations, and managing disability services to ensure consistent access to reasonable accommodation (Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016; OECD, 2003; United Nations, 2006). In the Indonesian context, this direction is also relevant to the mandate to protect the rights of persons with disabilities in the Disability Law and the ratification of the CRPD, as well as the latest regulations regarding reasonable

accommodation, including in higher education (Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia, 2023; Republic of Indonesia, 2011, 2016).

Building on the general framework of rights and inclusion to empirical evidence of inequality across levels, this study examines access to higher education for people with disabilities through a qualitative, document-based analysis to identify key barriers (e.g., inequities in accommodation and support, and administrative burdens), while mapping policy needs for sustainable equal access (Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016; OECD, 2003; UNESCO, 2020).

2. METHODS

This research uses a qualitative approach with a document-based qualitative study design to analyze access to higher education for persons with disabilities. The research data are sourced from credible and traceable secondary documents, including the normative rights document (CRPD) which affirms the principles of non-discrimination and reasonable accommodation (United Nations, 2006), along with the operational interpretation of the right to inclusive education through General Comment No. 4 (Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016). The data also include reports on higher education policies/practices related to disability (OECD, 2003), national reports on disability and education in Indonesia (UNICEF, 2020), and summaries of cross-country evidence on educational attainment and literacy gaps (Male & Wodon, 2017). To strengthen the context of health and structural inequalities, this study also references the World Report on Disability and WHO fact sheets on disability and environmental barriers (World Health Organization & World Bank, 2011; World Health Organization, 2023), as well as the global educational inclusion framework, which serves as a policy reference (UNESCO, 1994, 2020). At the national policy level, the study links findings to Indonesian regulations on disability and reasonable accommodations, including in higher education (Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia, 2023; Republic of Indonesia, 2011, 2016).

Documents were selected based on the following criteria: they discussed disability and education (specifically access/support in higher education or its prerequisites), contained data-based findings/arguments or clear references, were published by authoritative institutions, and were relevant to the research focus. Data collection was conducted through a desk study, which involved searching, thoroughly reading, and extracting relevant sections of documents into a summary matrix (document identity, context, key findings, and policy implications). The research unit of analysis was a text segment or statement of findings that described barriers to access (e.g., variations in accommodation, administrative burdens, limitations in support services) and recommended solutions. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, starting with repeated readings to understand the context, followed by open coding of relevant text segments, grouping codes into subthemes (e.g., academic access, service access, information access, and bureaucratic barriers), and then synthesizing them into main themes that explained patterns of access to higher education for persons with disabilities. Interpretation of findings was carried out by linking themes to the principles of reasonable accommodation and inclusive education as emphasized in the CRPD and its General Comment (Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016; United Nations, 2006), as well as evidence of cross-level inequality reflected

in UNICEF and World Bank reports (Male & Wodon, 2017; UNICEF, 2020). The validity of findings was maintained through source triangulation (comparing normative documents, policy/practice reports, and national and cross-country statistical evidence) and an audit trail consisting of records of the document selection process, an extraction matrix, and a code-theme list. Because this document-based research did not involve participants, ethical issues focused on academic integrity and citation accuracy. A limitation of the study was its reliance on the scope of available documents, so the findings are positioned as a mapping of barriers and policy directions that can be further developed through fieldwork to deepen the experiences of students with disabilities at the institutional level (OECD, 2003; UNESCO, 2020).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Results

Document analysis shows that access to higher education for people with disabilities is a multidimensional issue, encompassing physical campus access, academic access (lecture/exam rules), access to support services, access to information, and access to campus social life (OECD, 2003; UNESCO, 2020). The OECD emphasizes that higher education is important for people with disabilities because it opens up employment opportunities, social inclusion, and poverty reduction, but also emphasizes that there is still a "long way to go" for universities to fully respond to the needs of students with disabilities (OECD, 2003). Similarly, the human rights norms in the CRPD require that people with disabilities have access to general higher education without discrimination and that states ensure reasonable accommodation is provided (United Nations, 2006), and the interpretation of the right to inclusive education emphasizes systemic adjustments and effective support to ensure that students with disabilities are not excluded from the general education system (Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016).

On the implementation side, OECD documents illustrate that the support and accommodations needed by students with disabilities are often heterogeneous across institutions and depend on organizational capacity and local policies (OECD, 2003). This heterogeneity becomes even more problematic when viewed as part of a pipeline problem. UNICEF Indonesia data shows that nearly 30% of children with disabilities have never attended school, and graduation rates decline sharply at higher levels (UNICEF, 2020), while cross-country findings suggest that educational/literacy gaps can widen over time (Male & Wodon, 2017). Thus, access to higher education is at the end of a chain of inequalities that already exists before university entry (UNESCO, 2020; World Health Organization & World Bank, 2011).

3.2 Discussion

Interpretatively, the above findings demonstrate that barriers to access to higher education for people with disabilities are more accurately interpreted as structural and governance issues, rather than simply individual limitations. The CRPD's mandate on equal access to higher education and the obligation to provide reasonable accommodation places universities (and the state) in charge of ensuring their systems are inclusive (United Nations, 2006). This emphasis is reinforced by General Comment No. 4, which calls for the transformation of education systems and the provision of effective support to ensure inclusive education at all levels (Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016). However, evidence from the OECD indicates that successful "access" is largely determined by institutional preparedness: flexibility, service

strategies, support mechanisms, and how the university interprets access as a guaranteed right (OECD, 2003). The qualitative implication: if support is not standardized and proactive, access becomes a "negotiated right" for students, increasing administrative burdens and the risk of academic lag (OECD, 2003; UNESCO, 2020).

The discussion also emphasized that higher education access policies will not be effective on their own, as inequalities are already established at earlier levels. UNICEF data indicates a significant "bottleneck" before higher education (UNICEF, 2020), while the World Bank shows a tendency for the education/literacy gap to widen over time (Male & Wodon, 2017). From a health and inequality perspective, environmental barriers and service systems also play a role in deepening exclusion (World Health Organization, 2023; World Health Organization & World Bank, 2011). Therefore, access to higher education needs to be positioned as part of an inclusion ecosystem: strengthening the transition from secondary education, standardizing minimum accommodations on campus, and strengthening disability services units so that academic and social access is not dependent on the "fate of a particular institution" (Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016; OECD, 2003; UNESCO, 1994, 2020). In the Indonesian context, this framework is in line with the mandate of the Disability Law, the ratification of the CRPD, and regulations on appropriate accommodation, including for higher education (Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, dan Teknologi Republik Indonesia, 2023; Republik Indonesia, 2011, 2016).

CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this study confirms that access to higher education for persons with disabilities is a structural and multidimensional issue, as access does not only mean being accepted into higher education, but also includes affordability of support services, academic/exam adjustments, access to information, and equal social participation in the campus environment (OECD, 2003; UNESCO, 2020). Normatively, the mandate of non-discrimination and the obligation to provide reasonable accommodation have been affirmed in the CRPD and clarified in General Comment No. 4, so that failure to provide consistent support can be understood as a systemic barrier to the fulfillment of the right to inclusive education at all levels (Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016; United Nations, 2006). The findings also indicate that access to higher education is inextricably linked to the pipeline problem: low participation and graduation rates of children with disabilities at earlier levels of education narrow opportunities for higher education (UNICEF, 2020), and this pattern aligns with cross-country evidence that educational/literacy gaps between disabled and non-disabled groups can persist and even widen over time (Male & Wodon, 2017). Therefore, strengthening access to higher education requires more integrated campus and national policies, through standardizing minimum academic accommodations, strengthening disability service units, simplifying support procedures, and implementing transition strategies from secondary education to higher education to break the chain of educational exclusion sustainably (Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, dan Teknologi Republik Indonesia, 2023; OECD, 2003; Republik Indonesia, 2016; UNESCO, 1994, 2020; World Health Organization & World Bank, 2011).

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