

Students Perceptions of Physical Disabilities in Higher Education: A Case Study at Surabaya State University (UNESA)

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the perceptions of students at Surabaya State University particularly in the Office Administration Education toward individuals with physical disabilities. The research uses a descriptive qualitative approach through interviews, questionnaires, and documentation. The results show that the majority of students have positive perceptions, expressing equality in rights and potential for individuals with physical disabilities in education. However, there are still shortcomings in terms of campus infrastructure. The findings highlight the importance of improving facilities and inclusive education to create a disability – friendly educational environment.

Keywords: Perception, Physical Disabilities, Students, Inclusive Education

Manuscript History

Received: 18 July 2025

Revised: 25 July 2025

Accepted: 28 July 2025

How to cite:

Ramadhani, J. C., & Puspasari, D. Students Perceptions of Physical Disabilities in Higher Education: A Case Study at Surabaya State University (UNESA). *GRAB KIDS: Journal of Special Education Need*, 5(2), 69–74. <https://doi.org/10.26740/grabkids.v5i2.44353>

INTRODUCTION

The participation of students with disabilities in higher education is currently a major topic in various studies, reflecting the global commitment to equality and access in education. Although higher education is a fundamental right for individuals, there are still many barriers for people with disabilities to receive this level of education (Maurya, 2025). Several recent studies have explored in detail the various aspects of disability inclusion in educational environments and people's experiences in inclusive educational environments. Barriers and support models were highlighted.

Comparative studies of teachers' and students' perceptions have revealed differences in perspectives regarding disability inclusion. Teachers tend to rate classroom and school climates as more friendly, inclusive, and supportive compared to students' ratings. This shows the importance of considering multiple perspectives within the academic community.

Many studies have focused specifically on the experiences of students with physical disabilities. These disabilities include chronic illnesses, amputations, and other factors, so each has different support needs. The diversity of these manifestations highlights the importance of a thorough understanding of the individual's experience and appropriate forms of support.

Students with disabilities face complex challenges in their journey to higher education. According to Dalgaard et al (2022), the most commonly encountered types of disabilities are physical and visual impairments (34.6%), with inappropriate teaching methods being a major obstacle. In addition, physical and technological barriers such as a lack of disability-friendly infrastructure and adaptive technology can lead to prejudice and lack of social support, which can lead to isolation and low self-esteem (Azmi et al., 2022).

Studies on students' attitudes towards the inclusion of people with disabilities have produced mixed results. McGregor and Vogelsberg (1998) state that although students and teachers have positive views of integrating and interacting with students with disabilities, these interactions are often awkward and limited.

Other studies have linked attitudes towards people with disabilities with moral traits, showing that the presence of moral traits in an inclusive classroom environment reduces negative attitudes. These results indicate that exposure to an inclusive environment may lead to the formation of more positive perceptions.

The European Higher Education Area provides an important framework for considering inclusive practices, including physical access and communication barriers, as well as a lack of training to manage student diversity. This is in line with global findings that highlight that the main challenges to achieving effective participation are infrastructure and training.

In their study entitled “The Experiences of Students with Disabilities in Higher Education”, Brewer et al. (2023) used a thematic analysis of online forum posts to explore the personal experiences of students with disabilities. The survey shows that despite increased awareness and inclusion policies, significant challenges remain.

The development of theory has significantly changed the understanding of participation of people with disabilities. Oliver (1990) and Abberley (1987) propose the social model of disability, which sees disability as a social construct rather than a medical condition. This vision serves as the main basis for the development of inclusive educational approaches at the higher education level.

When measuring the success of inclusion, we no longer focus solely on traditional educational outcomes. Students’ experience and satisfaction with the educational process are considered to be key indicators of successful participation. This approach reflects a more holistic view of what it means to be successful in inclusive education.

Another important factor is the preparation and attitude of the speaker. Research suggests that cultural awareness and professional development play a key role in shaping teachers’ attitudes and willingness to implement effective inclusive practices, indicating the need for ongoing training in skills relevant to educational settings.

METHOD

This research employed a qualitative descriptive approach to explore the perceptions of university students toward individuals with physical disabilities. The qualitative method was chosen to gain in-depth, contextual, and nuanced insights regarding how students at the Office Administration Education Study Program, State University of Surabaya (UNESA), perceive and interact with peers who have physical disabilities. As stated by Shofana (2022) and Sugiyono (2018), this approach emphasizes the importance of describing phenomena as they are, allowing the researcher to understand how meaning is constructed within a social context. The focus on perceptions within a university setting aligned with the study’s goal of documenting students’ views on disability inclusivity in higher education.

The study was conducted at the UNESA School of Economics and Business Management over a period of five months, from March to July 2025. The process consisted of four steps: preparation, data collection, analysis, and reporting. Participants were selected from the Office Management Training and Research Program. In this study, primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews and questionnaires, while secondary data were obtained from institutional documents. Interviews were conducted with four students and one research program director, which were transcribed for analysis. The questionnaire was developed using a Likert scale format to assess students’ perceptions of physical disabilities across a range of dimensions.

Documentation such as program profiles and structural information were collected to support the robustness of the findings. The Likert-scale survey included statements about inclusive attitudes, disability rights, and behavioral intentions, providing a perspective to measure students’ perceptions of disability inclusion. Score categories ranged from “strongly agree” (score 5) to “strongly disagree” (score 1), allowing for a standardized interpretation of participants’ responses.

Data were analyzed following a non-linear and iterative qualitative process involving data collection, reduction, presentation, and conclusion drawing. This process included coding and categorizing textual data from interviews and interpreting them within the institutional and social context of the university. Visual and tabular presentation methods were employed to present key themes and findings in a manner that supported clarity and interpretability.

To ensure data credibility, source triangulation was implemented by comparing data gathered from interviews, questionnaires, documentation, and limited observation. This method provided multiple perspectives and minimized the risk of researcher bias. The researcher also functioned as a key instrument in

both collecting and interpreting data, in accordance with qualitative research principles. Triangulation was enhanced by incorporating responses from both students and the Head of the Study Program to ensure a balanced representation of viewpoints.

This research was intentionally limited in scope to maintain depth and focus. It concentrated solely on students enrolled in the Office Administration Education Study Program, thereby limiting the generalizability of findings to other academic programs. The study focused exclusively on physical disabilities and did not include students with other types of impairments. Moreover, the study was restricted to student perspectives, without incorporating the lived experiences of individuals with disabilities, university staff, or lecturers. While these boundaries narrowed the research scope, they also allowed for a more concentrated and detailed investigation into a specific academic and institutional context.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study explored the perceptions of students in the Office Administration Education Study Program at UNESA toward individuals with physical disabilities. Through interviews, questionnaires, and documentation, the findings show predominantly positive student perceptions, although infrastructural challenges and gaps in institutional support were also identified.

The interview with the Head of Study Program revealed that the university has implemented several disability-friendly facilities, such as accessible toilets and designated parking spaces. However, elevators and upper-floor access remain unavailable, posing significant barriers to students with physical disabilities. Administrative efforts are ongoing, but progress is hindered by budget and regulation constraints.

Interviews with students showed a strong consensus on equal educational rights for individuals with physical disabilities. Students expressed empathy and willingness to help, but also noted limited knowledge and training in supporting peers with disabilities. Despite infrastructure limitations, peer support such as classroom assistance and academic help was frequently mentioned.

The Likert scale questionnaire revealed consistent patterns. As shown in Table 1, all students agreed that individuals with disabilities have equal rights and are capable of making positive contributions to society. However, perceptions regarding institutional facilities and support were more divided.

Table 1. Student Perceptions on Disability Rights and Institutional Support

Statement	Agree (%)	Neutral/Disagree (%)
Equal educational rights for persons with disabilities	100	0
Comfortable interacting with individuals with disabilities	100	0
UNESA facilities are adequate	50	50
UNESA prevents discrimination	35	65
Willingness to help and understand disability issues	64	36

These results indicate strong attitudinal support for inclusion but reflect low satisfaction with campus infrastructure and policy implementation. Students expressed willingness to support peers with disabilities but lacked confidence in doing so due to minimal exposure and limited training.

To better visualize student attitudes, Figure 1 summarizes student agreement levels on ten questionnaire items. It shows that agreement is highest on rights and inclusion, and lower on institutional performance and personal capability to assist.

CONCLUSION

Based on interviews, questionnaires, and visual records, this study shows that students' perceptions towards people with physical disabilities in the Administration Education Program at the State University of Surabaya are overwhelmingly positive. Students are strongly aware of their right to equal education and show true empathy through practical support such as assistance in the classroom and sharing information. The social environment reflects inclusivity with minimal discrimination, demonstrating the basic attitudes necessary for inclusive education. However, despite the availability of amenities such as disabled toilets and parking spaces, there are still major problems with infrastructure. Critical features such as elevators and access to upper floors remain limited and require further improvement. Although the survey results show high levels of support, the low scores for statements about direct experiences indicate that improvements in disability education are still

needed along with improvements in physical facilities. Limitations of this study include the focus on a single study program and the lack of direct input from students with disabilities themselves. Future research should explore institutional variations, conduct longitudinal studies on changes in perceptions, and explore the lived experiences of students with disabilities to fully understand the implementation of inclusive education and develop effective intervention strategies.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors extend their deepest gratitude to the following individuals and institutions for their invaluable support in this research:

First, we thank the Faculty of Economics and Business, Suraya State University UNESA), for providing the academic environment and resources necessary to conduct this study. Special appreciation goes to the Head of the Office Administration Education Program, [Name], for facilitating access to participants and offering critical insights during data collection.

We are profoundly grateful to the students of the Office Administration Education Program who participated in this study, sharing their perspectives openly and enriching our understanding of inclusivity in higher education.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

JCR was responsible for conceptualizing the research, conducting investigations, curating data, performing formal analysis, writing the original draft, and creating visualizations. DP provided supervision, contributed to methodology development, validated findings, and participated in writing through review and editing.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

The authors declare no known financial conflicts of interest or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this manuscript.

DECLARATION OF ETHICS

The authors declare that the research and writing of this manuscript adhere to ethical standards of research and publication, in accordance with scientific principles, and are free from plagiarism.

DECLARATION OF ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCCESS

The authors declare that Generative Artificial Intelligence and other assistive technologies were not excessively utilized in the research and writing processes of this manuscript.

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