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## Systematic Literature Review: University Community Awareness Toward Inclusive Education in Fostering Volunteerism Attitudes for Persons with Disabilities (PWD)

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**Abstract.** Public awareness within university communities regarding Persons with Disabilities (PWD) is pivotal in promoting inclusive education and fostering a culture of meaningful volunteerism. This study aims to synthesize empirical literature on the role of higher education institutions in cultivating awareness and volunteer attitudes toward PWD using a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach. Two reputable databases, Web of Science (WoS) and Scopus, were systematically searched for peer-reviewed articles published between 2014 and 2024. The review process followed the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram to ensure a structured and transparent selection of literature. From an initial pool of 1,794 articles, 21 studies met the inclusion criteria and were thematically analyzed. The results revealed that awareness of

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PWD among university communities remains limited, particularly in accessibility, empathy-driven engagement, and inclusive academic support. Three dominant themes emerged: awareness of PWD-friendly infrastructure in educational settings, awareness of social support structures, and understanding of inclusive teaching and learning practices. These themes highlight the need for targeted training, institutional commitment, and hands-on exposure within universities to nurture volunteerism grounded in inclusivity. The study recommends integrating disability awareness into university curricula, establishing sustainable volunteer programs, and reinforcing inclusive education policies. By empowering university students and staff with awareness and skills, institutions can contribute to a more inclusive and supportive environment for PWD, thus aligning with global inclusive education goals and sustainable development agendas.

**Keywords:** Public awareness; volunteerism; PWD; inclusivity; education

## 1. Introduction

Public awareness of Persons with Disabilities (PWD) plays a vital role in creating an inclusive environment and supporting their participation in society (Kruithof et al., 2021). Awareness goes beyond understanding disabilities—it includes recognising the rights of PWD and the collective responsibility of communities to ensure equitable access to opportunities and resources. In this context, volunteerism becomes a key aspect that helps PWD access equal opportunities in education, employment, and social life (Bakri et al., 2019). Volunteers often serve as bridges between PWD and mainstream society, helping to break down physical, social, and attitudinal barriers. However, studies show that awareness within the community, especially among members of higher education institutions, is still low, preventing PWD from thoroughly enjoying their rights and contributing meaningfully to academic and social spheres (Hasnah Toran et al., 2009).

Although the government provides various opportunities for PWD, including policies, educational access, and targeted financial assistance, community support through volunteerism is still needed to ensure their integration into daily life. The Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (2023) highlights that inclusive policies alone are insufficient if society remains unaware or uninvolved. Volunteer engagement complements existing policies and empowers PWD by promoting active social participation. Unfortunately, volunteer involvement is often hindered by a lack of knowledge and awareness among the public about the challenges faced by PWD, which limits the impact of volunteer efforts (Hazlin et al., 2015).

Education and training must be implemented at all levels to strengthen public awareness of PWD, especially in the education sector. Rosli and Takril (2022) emphasized that university communities must be trained to support PWD with empathy and awareness. Such preparation is essential to ensure that PWD are given equal opportunities to learn, work, and interact in a friendly and open environment. Addressing these gaps is particularly relevant in higher education,

where the presence of PWD continues to increase, yet institutional readiness and community awareness often lag. Therefore, this study aims to synthesize past studies on public awareness in volunteer involvement towards PWD, focusing on educational settings.

## 2. Problem Statement

The awareness regarding providing accessible facilities for PWD within Malaysian higher education institutions (HEIs) remains very low (Hasnah Toran et al., 2009). This is further supported by Hazlin et al. (2015), who stated that public involvement in volunteer activities is still lacking in Malaysia, especially at the university level. This shortfall can be seen in nearly every public and private HEI, resulting in PWD facing various challenges during their studies, including difficulties in extracurricular activities (Hasnah Toran et al., 2009). Therefore, the lack of public awareness about PWDs' needs, challenges, and rights, as well as the lack of standard facilities, pose a significant barrier to ensuring equitable access and support for this group.

Volunteerism is a critical foundation in supporting and empowering PWD, involving voluntary actions without coercion aimed at helping those in need, aligned with social and ethical values (Normah et al., 2019). This volunteer support is highly significant as most members of the PWD community sincerely hope for and require support from academic and non-academic staff and students and administrators (Bakri et al., 2019; Hamzah et al., 2022). Studies by Hasnah Toran et al. (2009) and Hazlin et al. (2015) found that 80% of university communities still lack confidence in engaging with PWD. A study by Anderson and Loynes (1987) revealed that although 82% of respondents had interacted with PWD, only 21% were willing to understand and assist them. This indicates that society's awareness and readiness to engage with PWD still require further exploration.

The increasing number of PWD in education should encourage community involvement in volunteerism, as evidenced by the growing enrollment of disabled students in public universities from 2009 to 2016 (Nasir & Efendi, 2020). Education also plays a key role in shaping societal development, including for PWD, who have the right to equal access to education (World Health Organization, 2023).

The rising number of PWD in education demands inclusive community support to ensure their rights, opportunities, and full participation as outlined in the national PWD Policy, which covers 15 key areas (Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, KPWKM). Although university admission opportunities have been opened to PWD, many university staff still lack the knowledge and training needed to support them, resulting in doubts about the ability of PWD to learn and work (Rosli & Takril, 2022).

Thus, based on the issues outlined, it is evident that there is a lack of community awareness in volunteer involvement for PWD. Therefore, it is essential to enhance

public awareness to create a more inclusive educational environment and provide the necessary support for PWD.

**This study aims to:**

1. Examine the characteristics of empirical studies related to volunteerism for PWD awareness.
2. Identify public awareness through the necessity of volunteer involvement in supporting PWD.

### **3. Methodology**

This Systematic Literature Review (SLR) aims to analyze high-quality studies related to public awareness and volunteer involvement in supporting Persons with Disabilities (PWD). Two central databases, Web of Science (WoS) and Scopus, were used for the literature search. These databases were selected for their ability to provide relevant, diverse, and high-quality academic sources. WoS was chosen due to its significantly broad and adequate coverage of high-impact journals (Singh et al., 2021).

Furthermore, WoS is recognized as one of the oldest and most authoritative databases for research publications and citations (Birkle et al., 2020). Scopus, on the other hand, was selected for its wide coverage across various disciplines and its indexing capability of many unique sources compared to other databases (Wouters et al., 2015). Scopus also offers trend analysis tools that help identify key studies in fields such as social sciences, education, and health, making it one of the largest databases for academic research (Pranckute, 2022).

The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework was used as a guideline to evaluate past studies. The analysis process was carried out through the following steps: identification, screening, and eligibility.

#### **3.1 Identification**

The identification phase is the initial and critical step in the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) process, guided by the PRISMA 2020 (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework. This phase involves the comprehensive and systematic retrieval of articles potentially relevant to the research objectives. To ensure the search strategy was both inclusive and focused, a combination of controlled vocabulary and Boolean operators was employed to formulate search strings that captured the study's core themes—volunteerism, disabilities, and social inclusion.

Two leading academic databases, Web of Science (WoS) and Scopus, were selected due to their wide coverage of peer-reviewed journals across multidisciplinary fields and their reliability in indexing high-quality publications. The keywords were developed based on standard terminologies found in previous literature, and the descriptors were aligned with the study's scope. The Boolean connectors "AND" and "OR" were used to link related terms to expand the search and

capture comprehensive results. The following search strings were used in each database (Table 1):

**Table 1: Keyword Search in Databases**

DATABASE	KEYWORD
<i>Web of Science (WoS)</i>	- (Volunteering OR community participation) AND (disabilities OR differently abled) AND (social inclusion OR empowerment)
<i>Scopus</i>	- (Volunteering OR community participation) AND (disabilities OR differently abled) AND (social inclusion OR empowerment)

### 3.2 Screening

In this study, five main criteria were applied to conduct the initial screening of the literature: type of publication, language, year of publication, country of publication, and disciplinary focus. Only journal articles related to volunteerism and Persons with Disabilities (PWD) were considered and had to be published in English or Malay. Publications falling outside of these languages were excluded.

Additionally, only articles published between 2014 and 2024 were selected to ensure the relevance and recency of the findings. The geographical scope of the studies was global, with a specific focus on countries such as Malaysia, the United States, and the United Kingdom. Regarding discipline, the selected articles addressed issues related to volunteerism, community involvement, and support for PWD. Publications such as books, book chapters, conference proceedings, and blogs were excluded from the analysis to maintain the focus on peer-reviewed journal content.

**Table 2: Selection and Exclusion Criteria**

Criteria	Selection Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Type of Publication	- Journal articles	- Books - Book chapters - Proceedings
Language	- Malay - English	- Other languages
Publication Year	- 2014-2024	- <2014
Country	- Global (especially Malaysia, United States, United Kingdom)	-
Disiplin	- Volunteerism - PWD-related community involvement - Persons with Disabilities	- Studies not involving volunteerism and PWD

### 3.3 Eligibility

The eligibility phase involved a rigorous assessment of the full-text articles to ensure that only studies meeting the predefined inclusion criteria were retained for analysis. This step followed the initial screening and was conducted through **close reading and content evaluation** of each article's abstract, methodology, findings, and discussion sections. Articles were assessed based on their direct relevance to the core themes of the study: volunteer involvement, public awareness, and support for Persons with Disabilities (PWD). Studies that merely mentioned disability or volunteerism were excluded without explicitly addressing their interrelation or implications for social inclusion.

Special attention was given to articles that presented empirical data or critical reviews that could contribute meaningfully to the synthesis. Conceptual clarity, methodological rigour, and practical or theoretical implications were also considered indicators of article quality. The objective of this step was not only to filter out irrelevant or low-quality publications but also to ensure that the final pool of studies could offer rich, evidence-based insights into the dynamics of volunteerism and public awareness in the context of disability inclusion.

As a result of this thorough evaluation, a limited number of articles were deemed eligible for inclusion in the final analysis. This reflects the **specificity of the research focus** and the **stringent quality standards** applied throughout the review process, per SLR best practices.

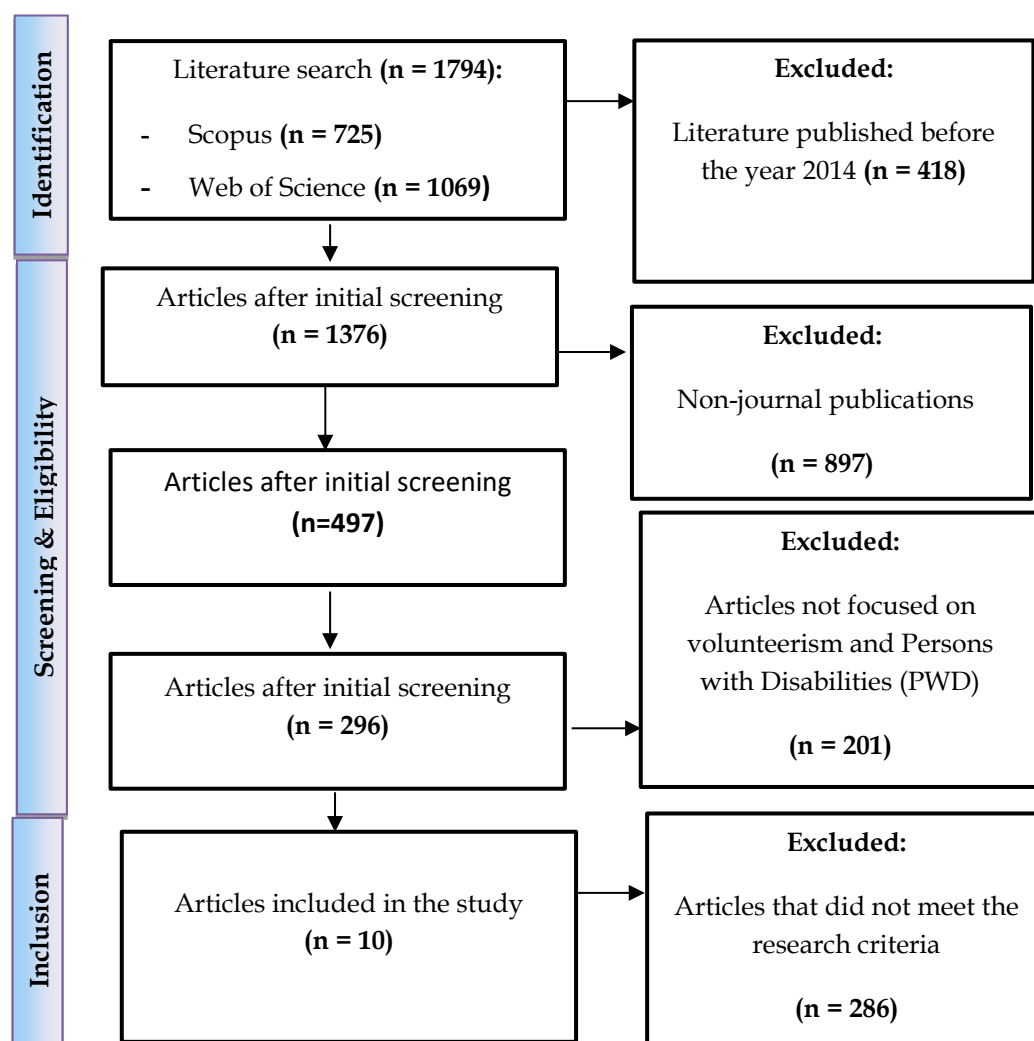


Figure 1: PRISMA 2020 Systematic Literature Flow Diagram

### 3.4 Data Collection and Data Analysis

This study employed a rigorous and transparent data collection and analysis process guided by the PRISMA 2020 (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework. The application of this protocol allowed the researchers to maintain systematic standards throughout the review process. The process is visually summarised in Figure 1 (PRISMA Flow Diagram), which consists of four key stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion.

In the identification phase, 1,794 records were retrieved from two leading academic databases: Scopus (n = 725) and Web of Science (n = 1,069). These databases were chosen because of their broad indexing coverage of peer-reviewed journals and multidisciplinary relevance in education, social sciences, and health. During this phase, 418 articles published before 2014 were excluded to ensure the recency and relevance of the studies analysed. This inclusion window (2014–2024) was justified based on the need to understand recent trends, policies, and scholarly discussions on volunteerism and Persons with Disabilities (PWD).

Following this, 1,376 articles progressed to the screening phase. Here, 897 records were excluded for not meeting the type-of-publication criterion; only peer-reviewed journal articles were retained. Other forms of literature, such as books, book chapters, conference proceedings, and grey literature, were deliberately excluded to maintain methodological rigour and academic quality. After this step, 497 articles remained.

In the eligibility phase, abstracts and full texts of the remaining articles were carefully reviewed. 201 articles were eliminated because they did not explicitly address volunteerism and PWD. A further 286 articles were excluded for not meeting more specific research criteria, such as lack of empirical basis, absence of thematic relevance, or methodological weaknesses. At the end of this process, 10 articles were deemed eligible and included in the final synthesis.

For each of the 10 selected articles, a structured data extraction process was conducted. The data collection involved identifying and tabulating the following metadata: article title, authors, year of publication, country of study, research objectives, sample size, study category (e.g., intellectual, physical, multiple disabilities), and key findings relevant to public awareness and volunteerism for PWD. These elements were organized into a matrix table to facilitate comparison across studies.

The data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, a qualitative approach that identifies, analyses, and reports patterns (themes) within the data. This approach was selected based on its flexibility and appropriateness for synthesizing findings across diverse empirical studies (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022). The analysis was carried out by three independent reviewers, who coded the articles based on a standardized protocol. They focused on seven key dimensions: research purpose, theoretical framework, literature context, participant/sample details, methodology, findings, and implications.

The thematic analysis followed six phases: familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing a final report. These themes included volunteer awareness concerning infrastructure accessibility, social support systems, inclusive education, and broader characteristics like study location, publication year, and sample population.

The extracted themes were then synthesized narratively and in tabular format to support interpretation and discussion aligned with the study's objectives. This systematic process ensured that only high-quality, relevant research was considered and enhanced the credibility, transferability, and analytical depth of the review.



Table 3: Summary of Previous Studies

No	Author(s)	Sample Size	Study Location	Volunteer Awareness Toward PWD	Research Findings	Study Category
1	Boland & Guerin (2022)	40 organizations	Ireland	Awareness of social inclusion support for adults with disabilities	Examined neighborhood social inclusion initiatives by government-funded service providers for adults with intellectual disabilities.	Intellectual Disability
2	Corby et al., (2022)	112 staff	Ireland	Institutional and community awareness of rights and potential for higher education	Inclusion of individuals with intellectual disabilities in higher education benefits both individuals and campus communities.	Intellectual Disability
3	Eide et al., (2022)	186 children and youth	Norway	Awareness of environmental barriers faced by youth with disabilities	Raising public awareness enhances volunteer participation and social inclusion.	Multiple Disabilities
4	Udici et al., (2019)	193 participants	Italy	Volunteer and community perception shaped through discourse	Community discourse influences how individuals with disabilities are perceived and treated.	Multiple Disabilities
5	Kehayia et al., (2014)	45 projects	Canada	Awareness of the needs of physically disabled individuals	Discussed development of RehabMaLL to simulate real-world inclusive environments.	Physical Disability
6	McClintock et al., (2018)	27 participants	USA	Awareness and knowledge of healthcare system challenges for	Highlighted the importance of advocacy and engagement to improve healthcare access.	Multiple Disabilities

				disabled individuals		
7	Shandra , (2020)	234,053 participants	USA	Awareness of volunteer activity involvement for PWD	Non-disabled volunteers more likely to engage in professional/mentorship roles than in distribution tasks.	Multiple Disabilities
8	Saloviita , (2020)	1,764 teachers	Finland	Volunteer awareness in teaching students with disabilities	Teachers are generally positive about inclusive education but face support and resource challenges.	Intellectual Disability
9	Orosco & O'Connor, (2014)	Teachers and parents	USA	Awareness in teaching special needs students	Success in special education for ELLs depends on culturally responsive teaching practices.	Intellectual Disability
10	Saloviita , (2018)	2,276 teachers	Finland	Volunteer awareness in teaching students with disabilities	Teachers need to adopt more versatile strategies to address diverse student needs.	Multiple Disabilities

#### 4. Research Findings

The research findings are discussed based on the research questions and objectives stated in the introduction section. A thematic analysis was conducted to synthesize the data obtained from selected previous studies.

##### 4.1 Characteristics of Empirical Studies

For the first research objective, the analysis of empirical study characteristics covered four aspects: year of publication, country of publication, study sample, and study category.

##### Year of Publication

Table 4 below shows the years of publication ranging from 2014 to 2024. There is a noticeable trend of increasing research on awareness of Persons with Disabilities (PWD). Two studies were conducted in 2014, 2018, and 2020, respectively. However, only one study was carried out in 2019, likely due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which decreased research activities. Finally, three studies were conducted in 2022.

**Table 4: Year of Publication of Studies**

Year of Publication	Number	Authors
2014	2	Kehayia et. al; Orosco & O'Connor
2015	0	-
2016	0	-
2017	0	-
2018	2	McClintock et. al; Saloviita
2019	1	Udici et. al
2020	2	Shandra; Saloviita
2021	0	-
2022	3	Boland & Guerin ; Corby et. al ; Eide et. Al
2023	0	-
2024	0	-

#### 4.2 Country of Publication

Table 5 shows that a total of six countries were involved and identified from the ten journal articles reviewed. The United States was the country with the highest number of studies on awareness towards PWD, with a total of three studies. This was followed by Finland and Ireland, each contributing two studies. Meanwhile, only one study was conducted in Canada, Norway, and Italy.

**Table 5: Country of Publication**

Country	Number	Authors
United States	3	McClintock et. al (2018), Shandra (2020), Orosco & O'Connor (2014)
Finland	2	Saloviita (2018), Saloviita (2020),
Canada	1	Kehayia et. al (2014),
Ireland	2	Boland & Guerin (2022), Corby et. al (2022),
Norway	1	Eide et. al (2022)
Italy	1	Udici et. al (2019)

#### 4.3 Study Sample

Table 6 displays the number of respondents from all the articles found. Due to the varied approaches used in the studies, there is a wide range of respondent categories. Specifically, three articles had sample sizes between 1 and 50 respondents and 201 or more respondents. Additionally, two articles had sample sizes between 151 and 200, and only one involved a sample of 101 to 150 respondents.

**Table 6: Study Sample**

<b>Respondent Size</b>	<b>Number of Articles</b>
1 – 50 persons	3
51 – 100 persons	-
101 – 150 persons	1
151 – 200 persons	2
201 and above	3
Not identified	1

#### 4.4 Study Categories

Table 7 shows the categories of studies identified from the reviewed articles, which include intellectual disabilities, multiple disabilities, and physical disabilities. The most frequently studied category was multiple disabilities, represented in five articles. This category refers to individuals with various conditions, such as physical, intellectual, hearing, and visual impairments. This was followed by four articles focusing on intellectual disabilities, which refer to individuals with cognitive impairments ranging from mild to severe. Lastly, only one article focused on physical disabilities, specifically involving individuals who use wheelchairs.

**Table 7: Study Categories**

<b>Study Category</b>	<b>Number of Articles</b>
Intellectual Disabilities	4
Multiple Disabilities	5
Physical Disabilities	1

#### 4.5 Public Awareness Through the Need for Volunteer Involvement for PWD

To answer the second research question, thematic analysis revealed three types of awareness identifiable from public consciousness regarding the need for volunteer involvement toward Persons with Disabilities (PWD).

The first type of awareness pertains to facilities and infrastructure essential for PWD to live their lives. Two previous studies discussed this aspect. Kehayia et al. (2014) noted that physical facilities provided in shopping centers can optimize PWD participation and social inclusion. This view aligns with Eide et al. (2022), who found that increasing public awareness about the barriers faced by PWD can significantly enhance their engagement with the community.

The second type of awareness relates to social support provided to PWD. Several differences were identified in previous studies. Boland & Guerin (2022) examined initiatives that support social inclusion within neighborhoods, particularly by government-funded service providers for adults with intellectual disabilities. Udici et al. (2019) explored how communities form perceptions of disability through discourse, influencing how individuals with disabilities are perceived and treated in society. McClintock et al. (2018) emphasized the importance of advocacy to improve access and quality of healthcare services for individuals with disabilities. Lastly, Shandra (2020) found that non-disabled volunteers were more likely to engage in professional or mentoring roles, having greater access to

leadership positions and skill development opportunities than roles focused on distribution or logistics.

The third type of awareness is related to education for PWD. Three studies focused on teachers who work with students with special needs. Two studies discussed using versatile teaching strategies to strengthen student capabilities (Saloviita, 2018) and how culturally responsive instruction can meet the linguistic and cultural needs of English Language Learners with disabilities (Orosco & O'Connor, 2014). Another study by Saloviita (2020) found that while teachers in Finland faced challenges, they maintained a positive attitude toward inclusive education. Additionally, Corby et al. (2022) showed that including individuals with intellectual disabilities in higher education benefits both the individuals and the campus community.

## 5. Discussion of Findings

The findings of this systematic review demonstrate that public awareness plays a pivotal role in enhancing volunteer involvement towards Persons with Disabilities (PWD), particularly in fostering inclusion and improving their quality of life. In response to the first research question, the review of ten empirical studies revealed key characteristics relating to publication year, study location, sample size, and disability category. The studies reviewed were published between 2014 and 2022, with an upward trend noted in 2022, where three studies were published, reflecting increasing scholarly attention to the issue.

Geographically, the studies originated mainly from the United States (three studies), followed by Finland and Ireland (two studies each), and one study each from Canada, Norway, and Italy. This distribution highlights the global concern over PWD awareness, although no study in the selected set originated from Southeast Asia, indicating a research gap.

The sample sizes varied across the studies, with three involving more than **201 respondents**, two between **151 and 200**, one between **101 and 150**, and three using **small qualitative samples (1-50 respondents)**. The participant profiles included teachers, youth, service providers, and community members, indicating a diverse stakeholder base. The reviewed articles also covered various types of disabilities, with **multiple disabilities** being the most studied (five studies), followed by **intellectual disabilities (four studies)** and **physical disabilities (one study)**. These patterns suggest the need for broader exploration of underrepresented disability groups in future research.

The analysis identified three dominant awareness themes for the second research question necessary for effective volunteer involvement. First, **awareness of infrastructure and accessibility** emerged in studies by Kehayia et al. (2014) and Eide et al. (2022), which found that when physical environments are inclusive and accessible, PWD are more likely to participate actively in society. Second, **awareness of social support systems** was reflected in studies such as Boland and Guerin (2022), Udici et al. (2019), McClintock et al. (2018), and Shandra (2020), highlighting the influence of community perceptions, advocacy, and

differentiated volunteer roles on the integration of PWD. Third, **awareness in the context of education** was discussed in studies by Saloviita (2018, 2020), Orosco and O'Connor (2014), and Corby et al. (2022), which emphasized the significance of inclusive teaching strategies and the benefits of integrating PWD into higher education institutions.

These international findings are consistent with local Malaysian studies, where awareness was shown to impact the effectiveness of volunteerism and the overall experience of PWD in higher education. Bakri et al. (2019) and Hamzah et al. (2022) found that volunteer engagement nurtures soft skills and empathy among students, while Hamid and Johari (2021) and Esa and Ismail (2020) identified challenges related to inaccessible campus infrastructure.

Furthermore, Khir and Zakaria (2023) and Guleng et al. (2020) reported unequal treatment and exclusion in university settings, and Rosli and Takril (2022) highlighted that staff members often lack the knowledge and confidence to support PWD. Without strong public awareness, these gaps risk exacerbating the isolation and discrimination experienced by PWD. As Kruithof et al. (2021) and Shum et al. (2023) emphasized, the absence of awareness contributes to social exclusion, whereas high awareness fosters empowerment, dignity, and meaningful participation among PWD in all facets of life.

## 6. Conclusion

Public awareness is pivotal in encouraging meaningful volunteer involvement towards Persons with Disabilities (PWD). This review has revealed that although numerous policies exist to support PWD, actual implementation is still lacking due to limited understanding, low empathy, and insufficient exposure among the public, particularly in higher education institutions (HEIs). The systematic analysis has identified three key areas where awareness is most impactful: accessibility to facilities and infrastructure, the importance of social support, and equitable access to education for PWD. These themes show that a lack of awareness not only limits opportunities for PWD but also reinforces existing societal barriers and stigma. Moreover, the findings suggest that environmental and personal factors, such as attitude, knowledge, and institutional support, determine how inclusive a setting can be for PWD. Therefore, future initiatives must prioritize structured awareness training, inclusive curriculum design, and exposure to real-life experiences with PWD among university communities. Future research should also explore effective volunteer engagement models and evaluate long-term outcomes of awareness campaigns to ensure that inclusion is not merely aspirational but achievable and sustainable.

## 7. Implications and Recommendations

The findings of this review imply that limited public awareness continues to hinder meaningful volunteer involvement toward Persons with Disabilities (PWD), especially within higher education institutions. This gap calls for systemic policy, education, and community engagement reforms. To address this, it is recommended that universities integrate disability awareness into academic curricula and co-curricular programs, conduct structured campaigns and

volunteering initiatives that involve fundamental interactions with PWD, and collaborate with NGOs and advocacy groups to design inclusive training modules. Furthermore, longitudinal research is needed to evaluate the sustained impact of such interventions. These efforts are crucial to fostering a culture of empathy, inclusivity, and social responsibility that empowers volunteers and PWD.

## 8. Acknowledgment

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