

Practices, Challenges and Coping Strategies Among Students with Physical Disability in a Higher Educational Institution: Basis for Proposed Measures on Accessibility

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Abstract

This study determined the practices, challenges, and coping strategies of students with physical disabilities in a higher education institution, with the goal of promoting measures that enhance accessibility. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the researchers conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews and employed thematic analysis to identify patterns and meanings from participant narratives. Three key themes emerged regarding institutional practices: the presence of physical accessibility features, responsive faculty and staff support, and an inclusive social environment supported by peers. Despite these positive aspects, participants identified ongoing barriers, including unsafe and inaccessible infrastructure, lack of comprehensive communication support, and insufficient disability awareness and sensitivity training among staff and faculty. In response to these challenges, students demonstrated resilience through three main coping strategies: drawing strength from others, adapting with initiative, and reframing disability. These findings reflect the dual reality of support and struggle experienced by students with disabilities, highlighting both advancements and gaps in inclusive education. The study recommends improving physical infrastructure, ensuring communication accessibility, training faculty and staff in disability awareness, and institutionalizing inclusive policies and peer support systems. It also emphasizes that legal provisions — such as Republic Act No. 7277, RA 11650, and Batas Pambansa Blg. 344 — remain inadequately implemented. Accessibility is framed not as a charitable act, but as a basic right that enables students with physical disabilities to fully participate, thrive academically, and feel a genuine sense of belonging within the academic community.

Keywords: accessibility, students with physical disabilities, inclusive education, coping strategies, higher education, proposed measures

1. Introduction

Every individual has the right to quality education in an inclusive and accessible environment. Inclusive education is now central to global discourse, supported by UNESCO (2020), the World Bank (2022), and UNICEF, recognizing education as key to personal growth, societal development, and human rights. Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) are no exception. While education fosters self-improvement, PWDs face barriers such as social stigma, infrastructure limitations, and lack of support services (Braun & Naami, 2019; Opoku Agyeman, 2022).

Despite global and national commitments — including the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and

Philippine laws such as the 1987 Constitution, RA 7277 (Magna Carta for PWDs), BP 344 (Accessibility Law), and RA 11650 (Inclusive Education Act of 2022) — students with disabilities still struggle with educational access. Barriers include poor physical infrastructure, inadequate assistive technology, and untrained educators (Morina, 2017; Mirador Lluz, 2021).

Theoretical underpinnings of this study include the Social Model of Disability, which views disability as a result of societal barriers rather than individual impairments (Oliver & Barnes, 1998); Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which promotes flexible teaching strategies and learning environments to accommodate diverse learners (Meyer & Rose, 2000); and Inclusive Education Theory (Booth & Ainscow, 2002), advocating equal access and engagement. Together, these frameworks inform the investigation of accessibility practices, challenges, and coping strategies in HEIs.

Despite progress, gaps in implementation remain. This qualitative study aims to explore the practices, challenges, and coping strategies of students with physical disabilities in a Higher Educational Institution. Specifically, it seeks to: (1) describe institutional practices on accessibility, (2) identify perceived challenges faced by students, (3) determine their coping strategies, and (4) propose measures to enhance accessibility implementation.

2. Methodology

Using interpretive phenomenological analysis, the study captures the lived experiences of students with physical disabilities. This approach focuses on how individuals make meaning of their daily lives and is grounded in the philosophies of Husserl, Heidegger, and Gadamer. The method enabled the researcher to gain rich, contextual insights into institutional and personal experiences, informing inclusive pedagogy and policy improvements.

The research was conducted at Saint Mary's University (SMU) in Bayombong, Nueva Vizcaya — a premier institution in Northern Luzon. SMU promotes inclusive education and provides accessibility services and facilities to students with physical disabilities across its academic units (Maslang, *et al*, 2021).

Participants were purposively selected and included students with various physical disabilities (e.g., mobility, visual, auditory, orthopedic), as well as three administrators and two faculty members involved in accessibility-related decisions. Criteria for inclusion required students to be currently enrolled, aged 18 and above, and able to communicate through speech, writing, or assistive technology. Faculty and administrators had to be actively engaged in supporting students with disabilities. Exclusion applied to individuals not meeting these conditions, including minors, those on leave, or staff not involved in accessibility services.

3. Results and Discussion

Section 1. Institutional Practices on Accessibility for Students with Physical Disabilities

(1) Presence of Physical Accessibility Features

Respondents noted that the institution has made efforts to provide access through ramps, handrails, and widened doorways — basic requirements under Batas Pambansa Blg. 344. Jerald, a wheelchair user, shared: “*Maganda may rampa at railings na din kahit papaano. Hindi gaya dati na halos wala talaga sa mga buildings, pero ngaun at least may mga ramp sa ibang building.*” (“It’s good that there are ramps and railings already. Unlike before that it was almost non-existent, but now at least some buildings have them.”)

Although there’s no comprehensive manual addressing the needs of students with disabilities, accessibility policies are included in the university’s five-year strategic plan. Admin Marco stated, “*These guidelines and policies emanate from the 5-year strategic plan of the University under physical infrastructure which provides access to students with physical disability.*” Old buildings are also being upgraded. Admin Marcel said, “*We acknowledge that there are still things that we need to improve to be considered an inclusive institution, but the good thing is that we have started, and we will do more.*”

This reflects Morina’s (2017) view that inclusive education must be systemic and proactive, and Kiuppis’ (2014) assertion that inclusive infrastructure does not guarantee inclusive outcomes without clear policies. The university’s steps show movement toward RA 7277’s vision of a “barrier-free environment,” but continued improvements, including regular audits and student consultations, are essential.

(2) Responsive Faculty and Staff Support

Students appreciated the support and responsiveness of faculty and staff. These included flexible deadlines, changes in classroom location, and emotional support. David shared: “*Nakikinig sila kapag may kailangan kami. May mga teacher na kusa nang nagtatanong kung okay lang ako sa room.*” (“They listen when we need something. Some teachers even ask on their own if I’m okay with the classroom setup.”)

Such responsiveness highlights the importance of relational accessibility — access rooted in care and attentiveness. Karen, visually impaired, remarked: “*Yung ibang teacher talaga, nag-aadjust para sa amin.*”

Pinapadala nila agad yung lesson sa Messenger.” (“Some teachers really make adjustments for us. They immediately send the lesson through Messenger.”) This aligns with RA 7277, which mandates schools to help students with disabilities in ways appropriate to their needs and dignity. Research (Valle Flórez et al., 2021; Gheysens et al., 2022) supports the role of inclusive educators in improving student performance and sense of belonging.

(3) Peer Support and Inclusive Social Environment

Students emphasized how peers played a key role in daily accessibility, from assisting with mobility to bridging communication gaps. Jone, who is deaf, said: *“I have friends who are always ready to help. Even without an interpreter, they help me understand the lesson.”*

Though not institutionalized, this peer support contributes to an inclusive campus culture. Karen noted: *“At least hindi pa man perpekto, ramdam ko na gusto ng school na i-consider kami. Seems like we have a place here.”* (“Even though it hasn’t gotten there yet, I can feel that the school wants to consider us. So, it’s like we have a place here.”)

These interactions reflect Lane’s (2020) and Serafica *et al.* (2023) findings that peer-led inclusion enhances retention and student well-being. Institutions could formalize such support through mentorship programs and inclusive student organizations, helping to reduce over-reliance on informal assistance.

Section 2. Perceived Challenges Encountered by Students with Physical Disabilities Relative to Accessibility

Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), participants’ narrative was explored in detail to identify the essence of their lived experiences of the challenges they encountered. Themes emerged as they were read and re-read across categories, with prior themes identified not just as a recurring issue but became part of how they constructed their reality. The following themes reflect the depth and complexity of their challenges, as experienced personally and shaped by their interactions with the institutional environment. Specifically, three major themes emerged: (1) unsafe and inaccessible infrastructure (physical barriers), (2) lack of total communication support, and (3) inadequate disability awareness and sensitivity training. Each of these themes is different from the others, but they are interrelated in terms of accessibility for students with physical disability.

(1) Unsafe and Inaccessible Infrastructure (Physical barriers)

Many initiatives have been undertaken to guarantee the accessibility of university buildings. Some areas have ramps, but many are too steep, narrow, and slippery, which makes them dangerous for wheelchair users and blind learners to use alone, thus deviating from BP 344 criteria. *“The ramps are there, but they are dangerous, they are too steep and slippery. It is really dangerous, especially when I am alone.”* Jerald said. Moreover, the lack of elevators limits access to higher floors, depriving students with physical disabilities of equal access to learning environments.

While some services are easily reachable and accessible, others are difficult to reach, even if the administration is trying their best to cater to and meet the needs of students with physical disabilities and other types of handicaps, due to the absence of elevators and steep ramps. There are accessible offices and restrooms but lacking accessible features. Gina, who is blind, said, *“The computer laboratories are on the fourth floor of the JVD building; it is too steep and dangerous to go up; Most of the offices that offer academic support are also on the higher floors, for me, that is really a challenge”*. Restrooms and offices lack major accessibility elements, including accessible counters, wide doors, or grab bars. The lack of elevators and the inadequate construction of ramps point to discrepancies in accessibility criteria stated in Batas Pambansa Bilang 344, otherwise known as the Accessibility Law in the Philippines. Lack of tactile paving strips and audio cues makes campus navigation difficult and dangerous for visually impaired respondents, which increases their reliance on others. Karen noted, *“I struggle with navigating the campus because there are no tactile paving strips or audio cues to guide me.”* Lykourioti and Milioti (2020) claim that blind individuals’ orientation and mobility skills are much diminished in public areas without tactile cues, which forces them to rely mostly on sighted help.

The results highlight that there is an important gap between the policy intentions and the actual implementation of accessibility within the university. Despite being seen as the most common form of progress, providing ramps and other physical modifications does not make buildings accessible if the challenge of accessing higher floors entails significant risks. This is often due to the reliance on others. This means that, even good faith infrastructure, when out of sync with technical and safety standards needed by students with physical disability, entails exclusion. As another maintained: *“Badly designed ramps are a hindrance rather than a help, particularly in poor weather.”* This failure perpetuates the idea from WHO (2011) that an environment that fails to be accessible can disable a person and then exclude them.

(2) Lack of Total Communication Support

The university lacks comprehensive communication support and assistive technologies for students with sensory disabilities. Visually impaired students reported the absence of braille and audio materials. Pablo shared, *“Walang audio materials, kaya kailangan ko talagang maghanap ng paraan para masundan yung lesson.”* (“There are no audio materials, so I really have to find ways to follow the lesson.”) Similarly, deaf students cited the absence of sign language interpreters in classrooms, offices, and libraries as a major barrier.

Malou shared, *“I don’t have trouble with buildings, but when I’m in class, it’s difficult to follow without an interpreter or captions.”* This highlights how communication, more than physical access, is essential to academic success and social inclusion. Yet, real-time captioning, assistive listening devices, or interpreters are rarely provided. Ana added, *“I often feel like an outsider even though I can physically enter the classroom. I feel cut off from my peers and miss the conversation without an interpreter.”*

Mandy further noted, *“I try to visit different offices, but when no one can communicate with me properly, I just leave.”* These testimonies reflect how limited communication support hampers both academic performance and day-to-day university interactions. According to Marschark et al. (2015) and Foster & MacLeod (2004), lack of interpreters leads to feelings of exclusion and isolation among deaf students.

Visually impaired students face similar struggles. Dave shared, *“Sana po may audio materials din na maibigay, kasi hassle pa po kapag kami ang magpaconvert.”* (“I hope audio materials can also be provided, because it’s a hassle for us to have them converted ourselves.”) The absence of braille signage, tactile paving, and audio cues reduces independence and violates the intent of RA 7277 and RA 11650.

Despite legal mandates for reasonable accommodation, such as RA 7277 and BP 344, the implementation remains inconsistent. Studies (Dela Cruz & Tolentino, 2020; Stone & Mayne, 2001) emphasize that inclusive communication is not only a legal requirement but a moral imperative. Without institutionalized support systems, students are forced to rely on peers, leaving them marginalized and underserved.

(3) Inadequate Disability Awareness and Sensitivity Training

Although some administrators have undergone disability sensitivity workshops, the university lacks consistent and structured training programs for faculty and staff. Many remain uncertain about how to properly support students with disabilities. John, a deaf student, shared, *“Some teachers want to help, but they don’t know what kind of support we need.”*

While individual efforts exist, the absence of a campus-wide framework leads to inconsistent accommodations. Jerald observed, *“It depends on who you speak with. Some staff members and professors employ empathy, others lack actual means of assistance.”* This inconsistency discourages students from fully engaging in academic and extracurricular activities for fear of unmet needs.

Karen, visually impaired, noted, *“Kung may sapat na kaalaman lang yung iba, mas magiging madali siguro ang lahat.”* (“If others only had enough awareness, maybe everything would be easier.”) The lack of understanding can reinforce stigma and create barriers that go beyond infrastructure. Teachers like Angel try to adapt: *“We accommodate them, modify our materials if needed, but still, it is a challenge when we have learners with disabilities.”*

Without formal training, faculty may unknowingly exclude students. This institutional gap fosters uncertainty, frustration, and disengagement. Research (Tinklin et al., 2004; Burgstahler & Doe, 2004; Ainscow, 2005) shows that coordinated policies and capacity-building are key to fostering inclusive learning environments. RA 7277 mandates such support but, as respondents indicate, full implementation is lacking across departments.

From an interpretive phenomenological perspective, these inconsistencies are internalized by students as marginalization — not necessarily through direct intent, but through institutional unpreparedness. As Garcia (2021) and Santos & de la Cruz (2020) assert, disability awareness training is crucial for empowering teachers to meet diverse needs. Without it, student support remains informal, fragmented, and emotionally burdensome for those most in need.

Section 3. Coping Strategies of Students with Physical Disabilities in Relation to the Encountered Challenges

This section explores how students with physical disabilities cope with institutional and daily challenges. Guided by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the narratives reveal acts of resilience and self-agency as students assert their place in academic life, despite systemic barriers. Their coping strategies range from seeking support to cultivating independence.

(1) Drawing Strength from Others

Peer support plays a vital role in helping students manage physical and communication barriers. Students with mobility impairments rely on classmates, siblings, and friends for assistance. Jerald shared, “I’m really glad that

my siblings also studied here; in that way, I just call them if I need to move from one room to another.” While helpful, overreliance on peers can compromise autonomy (Fossey et al., 2017).

Emotional support also counters social stigma. Pablo, who is blind, shared, “*Mahalaga talaga na may mga kasama po ako, minsan po family, minsan naman mga classmates at kalaunan po nagging kaibigan na din naman po namin sila.*” Peer assistance sometimes substitutes for formal support — e.g., classmates interpreting for Deaf students in the absence of professionals (Darcy et al., 2017). These informal networks, while imperfect, foster belonging and communication access.

(2) Adapting with Initiative

Students adapt creatively to limited infrastructure and communication tools. Some alter routes or schedules for safety. Jane said, “*Minsan, ako na mismo ang nagtatanong kung anong pwedeng gawin... Iikot na lang kaysa mauli sa klase.*” They also use assistive tools — canes, apps, audio materials — to reduce reliance on others (Mehtap et al., 2020; Abner & Lahm, 2019).

Karen, who is visually impaired, noted, “*Sinasamahan po ako ng mga kaibigan ko... nakahawak po ako sa balikat nila.*” Deaf students, lacking interpreters, use messaging apps or lip-reading, though the latter is often ineffective. Mandy shared, “I do lip-reading, but when the person is fast, I can’t follow.” Flexibility in academic arrangements (e.g., online classes, adjusted deadlines) is another key coping mechanism. Rommel said, “They adjust the schedule when I really can’t come, especially when it’s raining and the path becomes dangerous.”

(3) Reframing Disability

Self-advocacy and a positive disability identity help students navigate stigma. Peter asserted, “*Oo, may kapansanan ako, pero hindi ibig sabihin nun na hindi na ako makakagawa ng mga bagay na gusto ko.*” Dave, who is blind, reflected, “*Dati, nahihiya ako, pero natutunan kong tanggapin yung sarili ko. Ngayon, mas confident na ako.*”

Students often educate faculty about their needs. Mandy shared, “We have to prove that our disability hasn’t won. You really have to believe in yourself.” Resilience — fueled by self-worth and a growth mindset — helps students reinterpret hardship. Rommel emphasized, “*Ang kapansanan ay hindi dahilan para hindi makapag-aral. Ang kailangan lang ay pantay na oportunidad.*”

Participating in advocacy initiatives, such as disability awareness campaigns, further empowers students and breaks social barriers. These efforts promote a culture of inclusiveness and encourage administrators to align support systems with students’ lived realities.

Section 4. Proposed Measures Enhancing the Operationalization of Accessibility

Based on the lived experiences of students with physical disabilities and analyzed through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, this section outlines strategic, systemic measures to enhance accessibility in both the academic and physical environments of HEIs. These proposals support inclusive practices aligned with RA 7277 (Magna Carta for Disabled Persons), BP 344 (Accessibility Law), and RA 11650 (Inclusive Education Act).

(1) Enhancing Physical Infrastructure

Limited access to buildings, restrooms, and upper-floor services restricts mobility and social participation. Improving infrastructure ensures safer, more independent academic engagement.

Proposed Measures:

- Retrofit ramps and circulation routes for safety and compliance.
- Relocate key services (e.g., guidance, student affairs) to accessible ground-floor locations.
- Renovate restrooms to include grab bars, widened doors, and adequate maneuvering space.
- Install braille signage, tactile paths, and audio cues for visually impaired students.

Justification:

Accessible environments reduce stigma and improve student participation (Darcy et al., 2017; Lombardi et al., 2018).

(2) Improving Communication Accessibility

Visually and hearing-impaired students face significant communication barriers, limiting academic participation.

Proposed Measures:

- Hire qualified Filipino Sign Language (FSL) interpreters.
- Provide braille and screen-reader compatible materials.
- Create a Disability Resource Center with assistive technologies.

- Ensure LMS and digital tools are accessible.

Justification:

Effective communication tools increase academic engagement and independence (Hodges et al., 2019; Rosenblum et al., 2018).

(3) Faculty and Staff Training on Disability Awareness

Lack of awareness among educators can lead to inconsistent accommodations and unintentional exclusion.

Proposed Measures:

- Provide ongoing training on inclusive education and disability sensitivity.
- Develop an inclusive teaching guidebook.
- Promote Universal Design for Learning (UDL).
- Partner with NCDA or PDAO for technical training support.

Justification:

Trained faculty are more responsive and inclusive (May & Stone, 2010).

(4) Institutionalizing Disability-Inclusive Policies and Peer Support

Students often rely on informal peer networks due to absent institutional frameworks. A formal policy framework is needed to standardize inclusive practices.

Proposed Measures:

- Create an institutional policy on accessibility aligned with national laws.
- Designate a Disability Focal Person to coordinate accommodations and services.
- Launch a formal Peer Support and Mentorship Program.
- Involve students with disabilities in policy planning.
- Recognize peer support through academic credits or incentives.
- Integrate disability training within institutional policies.

Justification:

Clear institutional policies increase inclusion and reduce accessibility-related complaints (Fleming et al., 2020).

These measures aim to shift accessibility from ad hoc adjustments to an institutional culture of inclusion. By enhancing infrastructure, communication tools, staff training, and policy frameworks, HEIs can ensure the full participation, dignity, and independence of students with physical disabilities.

4. Conclusion

This study examined the practices, challenges, and coping strategies of students with physical disabilities in higher education, aiming to propose measures to enhance accessibility. While positive practices such as accessible facilities, supportive faculty, and peer networks exist, they remain inconsistent and rely on individual initiative rather than policy. Challenges persist, particularly in unsafe infrastructure, limited communication support, and inadequate disability awareness. Despite these, students demonstrate resilience through personal coping strategies, though this highlights the need for systemic support. To address these gaps, the study proposes enhancing infrastructure, improving communication accessibility, training faculty and staff, and institutionalizing inclusive policies — shifting support from individual efforts to sustained institutional commitment.

5. Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations aim to strengthen accessibility and inclusion for students with physical disabilities in higher education institutions. First, to address inconsistencies in implementation, the university should establish a system-wide accessibility and inclusion policy with clear standards for institutional, physical, and communication accessibility. This should be backed by strategic planning, regular monitoring, and accountability across all departments. Second, the university must conduct an accessibility audit — guided by students with physical disabilities — to ensure all facilities comply with BP 344 and RA 7277, and align with universal design principles. Third, disability-inclusive policies should be institutionalized, including classroom accommodations, assistive technology use, and standardized support services. Faculty and staff must undergo regular disability awareness and sensitivity training to embed inclusive teaching and service practices. Finally, comprehensive reforms are needed to embed inclusion in all aspects of university life — starting with improved infrastructure, better communication accessibility, training for

personnel, and the establishment of peer support systems.

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