

# EMPOWERING SOCIAL INCLUSION OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES THROUGH STUDENT VOLUNTEERISM: AN EVENT-BASED STUDY IN MALAYSIA

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**Abstract:** *The persons with disabilities (PWD) community in Malaysia faces various challenges, including issues regarding access to education, employment, and facilities. From a social perspective, they continue to encounter discrimination and social stigma. Studies among university students with disabilities reveal that the challenges they face include non-conductive facilities and negative attitudes exhibited by those around them. University students should be encouraged to engage more with the PWD in order to increase their empathy and understanding of PWD peers and community at large. The act of volunteering for the PWD community brings them new knowledge and experience that may help empower the social inclusion of the PWD, thus bridging the barriers of inequality. Using an exploratory, event-based quantitative survey design with 56 student facilitators, this pilot study investigates university students' experience in volunteering with the PWD community. Findings indicated that while students are experienced as volunteers, majority of them never had the experience of volunteering for the PWD. The study also found three main motivation for their involvement with PWD which are the desire to help and support a vulnerable community, followed by gaining experience for career or future employment and wanting to build empathy, understanding and soft skills. The challenges in involving with PWD were also analysed in which three main challenges were identified namely fear of doing something wrong, lack of*

*knowledge and lack of confidence. Evidence showed an increase in confidence to engage with PWD after the experience of volunteering for them, signifying the importance of creating interaction with the PWD community to empower their social inclusion.*

**Keywords:** *Disability, social inclusion, volunteer*

## Introduction

Statistics have shown that in 2024, a total of 736,607 individuals, or 2.2 percent of Malaysia's population, were registered with the Social Welfare Department (JKM) as persons with disabilities (PWD). PWD is defined under section 2 of the Persons with Disabilities Act 2008 as “those who have long term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society”. Although their presence constitutes a substantial demographic segment of Malaysian society, the full realization and enforcement of their civil, economic, and educational rights require continued institutional enhancement and holistic support. The PWD community in Malaysia faces various challenges, including issues regarding access to education, employment, and facilities. From a social perspective, they continue to encounter discrimination and social stigma. Studies among university students with disabilities reveal that the challenges they face include non-conductive facilities and negative attitudes exhibited by those around them.

To redress these disparities, the creation and expansion of inclusive platforms are essential. In educational and community contexts, an inclusive platform encompasses both physical and virtual environments intentionally designed to accommodate diverse functional capabilities, ensuring equitable participation regardless of sensory, cognitive, or physical impairments. Inclusive social platforms play a vital role in ensuring that the rights, development, and well-being of the PWD community receive comprehensive attention. This directly aligns with the foundational tenets of Malaysia MADANI, specifically the core pillar of inclusivity, which dictates that every citizen must be afforded meaningful opportunities to participate in national development. Furthermore, MADANI emphasizes the ethical imperative of *ihsan* (compassion and benevolence), demanding active social care and mutual responsibility for vulnerable community members. This paper explores the engagement of university students as volunteers for the PWD in an inclusive platform setting, as interaction and experience are crucial to promote social inclusion and further understanding of the PWD community.

## Problem Statement

Although tertiary institutions actively promote service learning and community volunteerism, a clear empirical disconnect exists between general student volunteer enthusiasm and active engagement with PWD populations. While prior scholarship extensively documents the holistic benefits of youth volunteerism participation, there are limited literature investigating the engagement of the university students' volunteerism with the PWD community. More specifically, empirical inquiries rarely capture the impediments that inhibit initial contact between tertiary volunteers and PWD. This includes the documentation of student volunteers involvement with PWD in an inclusive platform. Without identifying and quantifying these empirical baseline factors in real-world community intervention contexts, educational institutions and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) remain unable to design targeted, evidence-based induction protocols to dismantle mutual alienation and foster genuine social inclusion.

### Research Objectives

To address this empirical gap, this event-based pilot study formulates four specific research objectives. Firstly, to evaluate the volunteering engagement profile of university students regarding disability-specific community initiatives in comparison to general volunteerism. Secondly, to identify and rank the primary motivations driving tertiary students to volunteer in inclusive PWD programs. Thirdly, to determine the perceived challenges that hinder university student from volunteering with PWD community. Finally, to examine the changes of volunteer confidence following their experience in volunteering with PWD children.

### Literature Review

Volunteerism fosters social inclusion, enhances empathy and communication and boosts psychological well-being. The act of volunteerism itself brings several positive impacts for university students. There are several types of volunteering including student-led activities, NGO participation, social enterprise initiatives and university-run society or volunteering bureaux (Holdsworth & Brewis, 2013). Volunteering provides a powerful combination of practical skills, professional advantage, and personal growth for them. Beyond immediate community impact, research highlights several key benefits across career, academic, personal, and social domains (Cronje, 2015).

Volunteerism is a form of community engaged education and it helps students understand community needs better, improve empathy and cultural sensitivity, promotes social accountability and build advocacy for social justice and change (Plessas et al., 2024). Studies consistently show that meaningful, purpose-driven community engagement lowers stress, boosts self-esteem, and increases overall life satisfaction. Volunteerism can also be considered as part of service learning program in universities. According to a study involving 11,837 students, students participating in service-learning programs demonstrated significant gains in five outcome areas: attitudes toward self, attitudes toward school and learning, civic engagement, social skills, and academic performance (Celio et al., 2011).

Empowering students as volunteers to engage and promote social interaction with the PWD may eliminate systemic barriers and discriminatory attitudes that frequently hinder the full participation of PWDs. Volunteering alongside or in support of individuals with disabilities yields significant social, psychological, and personal benefits for the volunteers, the participants, and the community at large. It reduces stigma and misconceptions by breaking down the societal stereotypes. In addition, it also shifts the perspectives on the perceived limitations to a recognition of individual strengths and agency. According to Miller et al. (2002), in a programme involving volunteers from PWD and non-PWD backgrounds, both participants received positive impacts in which the former noted pride, skill development and generalization, empowerment, and increases in social interaction and verbal communication while the latter experienced positive attitude change, increased social interaction, and professional development. It also inculcates the values of shared humanity.

Positive social interaction plays a vital role in creating awareness and further ensuring that the rights, development, and well-being of the PWD community receive comprehensive attention. In the context of education, social integration, and personal development, an inclusive platform may include physical and virtual environments designed to meet the needs of all individuals regardless of their abilities, aligning with the principles of social justice and equality. However, Kim et al. (2023) suggested that disability has a negative association with engagement in socializing and leisure activities. It is important that social interactions are created between the

outcome metrics, alongside notable methodological constraints society can further enable and help them overcome the barriers in daily life.

While there is vast literature on the positive impacts of students' engagement in structured community service and substantial advantages across academic, professional, and psychosocial dimensions, there are limited studies on the engagement of student volunteerism with PWD. In the Malaysian context, a study involving 165 undergraduate dental students in a voluntary program with 124 visually impaired children indicates positive impact on professional knowledge, professional skills, professional behavior and value-added learning (Ahmad et al. (2020). They have also shown willingness to manage, and comfort in managing PWD, and expressed support for future educational programs.

Studies in Malaysia however, is limited thus necessitating further analysis into the global landscape. In Egypt, a study on 307 university students' attitudes towards autistic individuals found that media exposure and contact quantity are significant predictors of attitudes towards the community, thus signalling the importance of creating positive interactions with PWD (Alsaman, 2023). Another study found that a ten-week physical service-learning program conducted between college students and PWD has shown effectiveness in improving students' attitudes toward PWD (Park et al., 2024). Furthermore, Lin et al. (2026) discussed higher college students volunteerism in sports-based disability assistance volunteer services.

While previous studies substantiate the value of contact, existing scholarship exhibits noticeable variances across study populations, disability types, outcome metrics, alongside notable methodological constraints. The empirical dimensions may be summarised in Table 1 below:

**Table 1: Comparative Dimensions of Existing Literature**

| Study               | Target Population                         | Type of Disability                      | Primary Outcome Measures                                | Methodological Limitations                                      |
|---------------------|-------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|
| Ahmad et al. (2020) | Undergraduate dental students in Malaysia | Visual impairment                       | Professionalism, clinical comfort, behavioral readiness | Specialized medical/dental cohort                               |
| Alsaman (2023)      | Egyptian university students              | Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)          | Attitudinal indices toward ASD                          | Cross-sectional correlational design.                           |
| Park et al. (2024)  | Kinesiology college students              | Physical and developmental disabilities | Explicit attitudes toward individuals with disabilities | Discipline-specific academic requirement                        |
| Lin et al. (2026)   | College students in China                 | General disability assistance           | Awareness levels & behavioral participation intentions  | Hypothetical intention rather than actual volunteer deployment. |

Source: Developed by authors

Prior empirical works have predominantly evaluated homogeneous cohorts within professional clinical degrees such as dental undergraduates (Ahmad et al., 2020) or kinesiology students (Park et al., 2024). Studies rarely evaluate multidisciplinary volunteer facilitators assisting young children across diverse academic disciplines. Furthermore, on the types of disability, the empirical literature remains segmented by single-impairment categories. For example, Ahmad et al. (2020) focused exclusively on visually impaired children, and Alsaman (2023) measured attitudes toward autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Multi-disability contexts involving simultaneous interaction with both neurodevelopmental (ASD) and physical/neurological (cerebral palsy) conditions remain understudied. As for the primary outcome measure, aside from one specific professional capability assessments, the rest of the studies had focused on the attitude towards PWD. With regards to the methodological aspect, many prior investigations are constrained by cross-sectional self-report bias, small localized samples, self-selection bias among students already possessing pro-social inclinations, and a lack of comparative baselines differentiating general volunteer experience from disability-specific exposure. Given the above analysis, there is a gap on data involving university volunteers with multidisciplinary background and their involvement with PWD children. Furthermore, there need to be more research on volunteer outcomes, measuring their prior engagement, motivation, barriers and confidence shifts.

## Methodology

This study adopted an exploratory, descriptive cross-sectional quantitative survey design. Data collection was embedded within the KIND Children Summit, held in December 2025 in Malaysia, organized by Pertubuhan Kanak-kanak Idaman Nasional. The summit was conceived as an inclusive community initiative fostering positive peer interaction between children with and without disabilities aged 5 to 17 years old. The event comprised three interactive modules: an adaptive outdoor explorace, structured creative educational workshops, and an interactive youth forum. Executing these activities necessitated the direct, hands-on physical involvement of student volunteers who served as event facilitators, team guides, and activity supervisors for children presenting with autism spectrum disorder and cerebral palsy.

This study is explicitly designated as a descriptive pilot investigation of an event-specific volunteer cohort, and its empirical findings are not generalized to the broader tertiary student population of Malaysia. The sample size of  $n = 56$  reflects a complete census of the volunteer facilitators mobilized for the operational execution of the KIND Children Summit. A total of 56 university student volunteers completed the survey. Non-probability convenience sampling was applied, governed strictly by participant enrollment as active facilitators.

The facilitator cohort was recruited across four higher education institutions: Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Malaysia (UIAM), University of Wollongong Malaysia (UOWM), and Universitas Islam Indonesia (UII). The participant pool comprises a cross-border regional volunteer sample operating within a host event executed in Malaysia. As UII student participants were enrolled via an international university mobility and community service-learning initiative, their survey responses were analyzed jointly as a consolidated summit facilitator cohort. For the demographic profile, the age of the students ranged between 18 to 24 years old, consisting of 20 males and 36 females in their first, second, third and fourth year of study. The multi-background of the students is further reflected through the various fields of studies including muamalat, food technology, Islamic studies, accountancy and psychology.

The survey instrument was designed to capture baseline volunteer experiences, underlying motivations, perceived situational barriers, and post-activity confidence. Survey items were derived and contextualized from youth volunteerism frameworks but adapted to reflect the specific operational realities of facilitation during children's summit activities. The structured questionnaire administered via Google Forms comprised four focused sections: (1) General and disability volunteering history (frequency, previous exposure); (2) Primary motivators, utilizing a forced-choice top-three selection format across nine validated intrinsic/extrinsic items; (3) Perceived challenges and interaction barriers, evaluated across eight operational statements; and (4) Pre-to-post situational confidence assessment on a categorical rating scale.

Prior to data collection, the draft questionnaire underwent expert face and content validation by a five-member panel of academic researchers and senior NGO field administrators from Pertubuhan Kanak-kanak Idaman Nasional. The panel reviewed item phrasing, clarity, ethical appropriateness, and alignment with summit activities. Minor revisions were implemented to streamline wording for multilingual tertiary students. A preliminary pre-test was conducted with a convenience group of 5 student volunteers prior to the main summit to confirm questionnaire readability, technical accessibility and completion time.

### Findings and Result

Findings are divided into four themes. The first theme is on their engagement as volunteer as reflected in Table 2.

**Table 2: Engagement as Volunteer**

| Item                                | Percentage %                                                                         | Findings                                                                         |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Participation as volunteers         | 69.6 Yes<br>30.4 No                                                                  | Majority of the volunteers have experience as volunteers                         |
| Engagement in volunteering with PWD | 55.4 Never<br>30.4 Once a year<br>12.5 A few times a year<br>0 Monthly<br>1.7 Weekly | Regular or high frequency volunteering is absent                                 |
| First event volunteering with PWD   | 85.7 Yes<br>14.3 No                                                                  | Majority of the volunteers are having the first experience as volunteers for PWD |

Source: Developed by authors

The second theme is on their motivation in which they have to choose top three selection from the nine choices given, namely the desire to help and support a vulnerable community, personal values or ethical responsibility, religious values or faith-based motivation, gaining experience for career or future employment, wanting to build empathy, understanding and soft skills, influence from friends, family, lecturers or peer groups, to fulfil course requirements or compulsory university credits and opportunity to meet new people and build networks, personal connection (family member or friend with disability). The result is shown in Figure 2 below, which indicates the highest motivation is the desire to help and support a vulnerable community, followed by gaining experience for career or future employment and wanting to build empathy, understanding and soft skills.

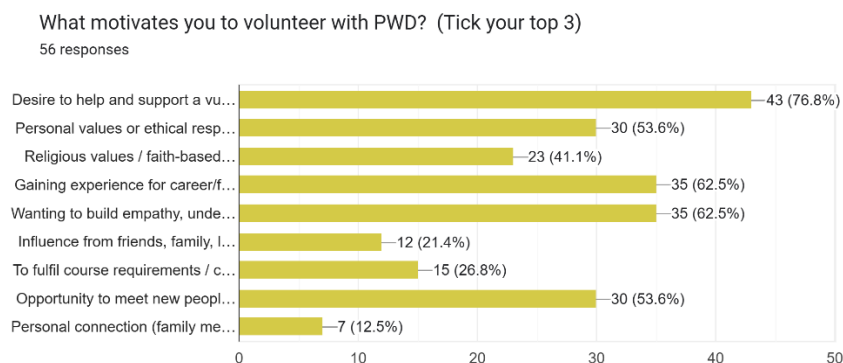


**Figure 1: Volunteering Motivation**

The third theme is on the challenges that they face when volunteering with PWD. Eight choices were given in to the respondents, namely, lack of knowledge on how to assist PWD, fear of doing something wrong, limited time due to academic workload, lack of accessibility awareness or training, not enough volunteering opportunities available, communication barriers, transportation or distance issues, and lack of confidence or discomfort at first. The result is shown in Figure 2 below of which the main challenge is fear of doing something wrong, followed by lack of knowledge on how to assist PWD and lack of confidence or discomfort at first.

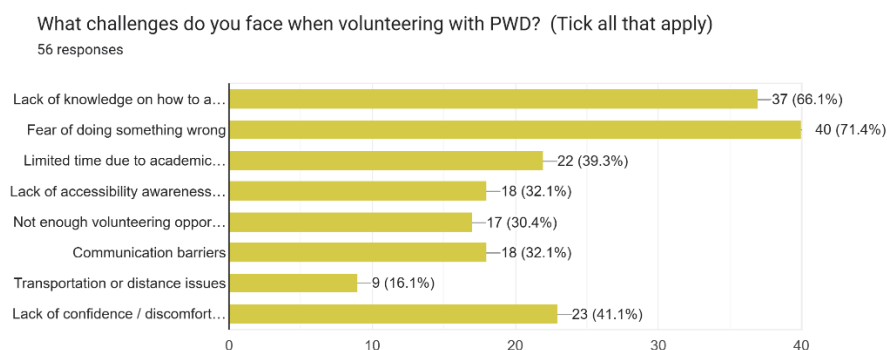


**Figure 2: Challenges in Volunteering**

The fourth theme is confidence level. Respondents are asked whether their confidence level has increased through the experience of volunteering with PWD children. Figure 3 below shows the findings of which majority of the respondents expressed an increased level of confidence after their experiences of volunteering.

Rate your confidence level as a volunteer with PWD in KIND Children Summit:

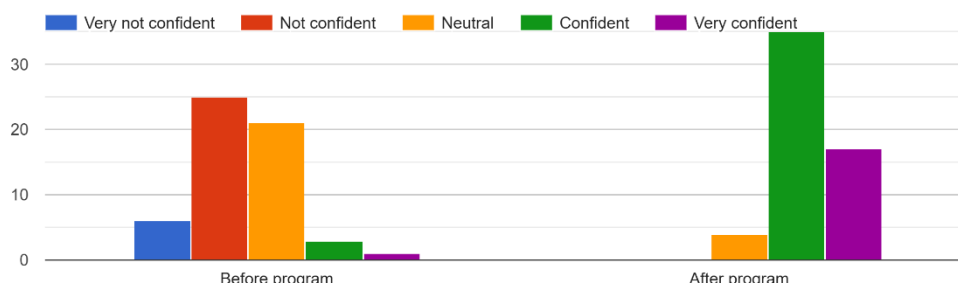


**Figure 3: Confidence Level As A Volunteer**

### Discussion

This paper highlights the importance of volunteer engagement with PWD in order to promote social inclusion and provide a supportive environment for the disabled. In examining university students' engagement as volunteers for PWD community, the results have shown that while students are experiences as volunteers, majority of them never had the experience of volunteering for the PWD. For the majority of them, this is their first experience. It is suggested that university students should be more exposed to the PWD community in order to cultivate awareness and improve attitudes towards the community. According to Youniss et al. (1997), students who participated in high school government or community service projects are more likely to join community organizations in the future, hence emphasizing the importance of youth volunteerism in order to create a sense of agency and social responsibility in sustaining the community's well-being.

Three main motivational factors for their involvement are identified, namely the desire to help and support a vulnerable community, followed by gaining experience for career or future employment and wanting to build empathy, understanding and soft skills. This indicates a high level of social accountability and inclination for personal growth improvement. In order to encourage their participation with PWD, it is important to examine the barriers to their involvement. The main challenges identified were fear of doing something wrong, lack of knowledge and lack of confidence. This barrier can be eliminated if the students are given adequate knowledge, training and exposure to the PWD including the normalisation of PWD visibility and interaction in the university or college. As this study has proven, the level of confidence to engage with the PWD has increased significantly after the experience of volunteering for them, signifying the importance of creating interaction with the PWD community to empower their social inclusion.

Given the interest of the students, the higher education institutions play a vital part in organizing awareness program or programs that include PWD and non-PWD participants, whether formally through their educational framework or informally through student society activities. For example, Rashid et al. (2025) has suggested 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. (Rashid et al., 2025)

## Conclusion

This paper promotes the involvement of university students as volunteers for PWD in order to empower PWD social inclusion. Institutions and organizations must adopt a multifaceted approach that addresses the structural, psychological and knowledge barriers. It is examined that while students are highly motivated, they hesitate to volunteer due to the fear of doing something wrong. This can be eliminated through inventing collaborative inclusive social platforms and training programs, to increase their interaction and confidence with PWD. Government bodies, academic institutions, non-governmental organizations and student societies can provide introductory training programs for volunteers for PWD via peer-mentorship programs, event-based volunteering, or virtual advocacy initiatives. This would encourage the university students to be the bridge, not the barrier for social inclusiveness.

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