

Psychosocial Resilience among Students with Disabilities in Higher Education: A Systematic Literature Review

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ABSTRACT:

Students with disabilities (SWDs) in higher education face psychological, social, academic, and institutional demands that may affect wellbeing and persistence. This systematic review synthesised evidence on psychosocial resilience and its implications for Malaysian higher education and scale development. Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and supplementary sources were searched following PRISMA 2020. Of 247 records, 19 duplicates were removed, 228 were screened, and 60 studies were included in narrative synthesis. Nine domains emerged: psychological distress; social support and belonging; coping and self-management; self-efficacy and agency; stigma and identity; institutional access; academic adjustment; measurement; and Malaysian and disability-specific evidence. Resilience reflected interactions among personal, interpersonal, and institutional resources, while disability-specific, culturally validated measures remained scarce. Findings support the development of a psychosocial resilience measure for SWDs in Malaysian HEIs.

Keywords: psychosocial resilience, students with disabilities, higher education, systematic review, Malaysia

1. INTRODUCTION

The number of students with disabilities (SWDs) entering higher education has grown steadily, both globally and in Malaysia. This growth reflects stronger international and national commitments to inclusive education, including the United Nations

Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Sustainable Development Goals (Mohammad Roose et al., 2025). However, gaining access to university does not always mean that SWDs experience a fully inclusive and supportive learning environment. Many still face challenges such

as psychological distress, stigma, social isolation, and barriers within the physical and institutional environment (Andreou et al., 2021; Klutsey et al., 2025). These challenges may also differ depending on the type of disability. For example, students with physical, visual, hearing, learning, or psychiatric impairments may each experience distinct difficulties related to mobility, communication, accessibility, and the attitudes of others within the university community (Chan et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2024).

Resilience provides a useful way of understanding how SWDs maintain their wellbeing and continue their studies despite the challenges they face (Ganguly & Perera, 2019). It is no longer seen simply as a personal trait that someone either has or does not have. Instead, resilience is increasingly understood as a dynamic process that develops through the interaction of personal strengths, supportive relationships, and the university environment, which is consistent with socioecological perspectives on psychosocial wellbeing (Akoto et al., 2022).

However, the existing literature is still somewhat fragmented. Mental health (Solís García et al., 2024), coping (Carballo & Cumming, 2025), self-efficacy (Jannah et al., 2025), stigma (Bartolo et al., 2023), and institutional access (Yusof et al., 2020) have often been examined separately rather than as interconnected aspects of psychosocial resilience among SWDs. A similar gap exists in the available measurement tools. Although general resilience measures such as the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale have been validated among postsecondary students with disabilities (Perera & Ganguly, 2018), very few instruments have been developed specifically for this population, particularly within Malaysian higher education. This highlights the need for a contextually relevant

measure that reflects how SWDs use psychological, social, and environmental resources to manage challenges and continue functioning effectively in university life.

The gap is significant within Malaysian higher education institutions. Existing studies show that SWDs continue to face challenges related to accessibility, suitable accommodation, and acceptance of their social identity (Che Rosli et al., 2025; Liu et al., 2024). There are also calls for stronger institutional support and more opportunities for resilience-building programmes (Mohd Zin et al., 2023).

Against this background, this review synthesised the available evidence on psychosocial resilience among SWDs in higher education, with particular attention to the Malaysian context and to the full range of disability categories represented in the literature. The review aimed to provide a foundation for developing a psychosocial resilience scale for SWDs in Malaysian HEIs. Specifically, it examined the psychosocial challenges experienced by SWDs (RQ1), explored resilience, coping strategies, and protective factors that may help them manage these challenges (RQ2), considered how institutional and wider Malaysian contextual factors influence their experiences and outcomes (RQ3), and assessed whether the existing evidence supports the development of a disability-specific psychosocial resilience measure for Malaysian higher education (RQ4).

2. METHODOLOGY

This systematic review followed PRISMA 2020. The review was not registered in PROSPERO or any other prospective registry. Studies were eligible when they involved SWDs in higher education and examined at least one psychosocial construct, including resilience, coping, mental health, wellbeing, social support, self-efficacy,

stigma, institutional support, or academic adjustment. Empirical studies and relevant reviews were included; school-only studies, records without psychosocial content, records with insufficient extractable information, and duplicates were excluded. The included literature spanned 2004 to 2026. As the review analysed published literature only and involved no human participants or identifiable personal data, institutional ethical approval was not required.

The literature search was conducted using Scopus, Web of Science, and ERIC.

These searches were supported by an AI-assisted literature synthesis tool and additional records relevant to the Malaysian higher education context. The search strategy combined three main groups of keywords using Boolean operators: resilience and psychosocial factors, students with disabilities, and higher education. Truncation was used where permitted by the database to capture variations of relevant terms. Table 1 presents the complete search strings used for each database. The final literature search was conducted on 11 July 2026.

Table 1. Search Strings Applied by Database and Records Returned

Database	Search string	n
Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY (("psychosocial" OR "psycho-social" OR "mental health" OR "wellbeing" OR "well-being" OR "emotional challenges" OR "stigma" OR "discrimination" OR "barriers") AND ("resilient" OR "coping" OR "adaptation" OR "adjustment") AND ("student* with disabilities" OR "disabled student*" OR "students with special needs" OR "special educational needs" OR "SEN students") AND ("higher education" OR "university" OR "universities" OR "colleges" OR "tertiary education" OR "institutions of higher learning")) AND (LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , "SOC") OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , "MEDI") OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , "PSYC")) AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE , "ar")) AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE , "English"))	86
Web of Science	((("psychosocial" OR "psycho-social" OR "mental health" OR "wellbeing" OR "well-being" OR "emotional challenges" OR "stigma" OR "discrimination" OR "barriers") AND ("resilient" OR "coping" OR "adaptation" OR "adjustment") AND ("students with disability" OR "disabled student*" OR "students with special needs" OR "special educational needs" OR "SEN student") AND ("higher education" OR "university" OR "universities" OR "college" OR "tertiary education" OR "institution of higher learning"))	21
ERIC	(resilience OR psychosocial OR coping OR "mental health") AND ("students with disabilities" OR "visual impairments" OR "physical disabilities") AND ("higher education" OR "college students")	15

Records were checked for duplicates using titles and DOIs, then screened by title, abstract, and full text. Data were extracted into a structured matrix, and the heterogeneous studies were narratively synthesised by a single reviewer. This review analysed data from previously published and

publicly available studies. It involved no recruitment of human participants, no primary data collection, and no access to identifiable personal information, and therefore did not require approval from a research ethics committee. The authors

declare no conflicts of interest arising from the conduct or reporting of this review.

The searches identified 247 records; after removing 19 duplicates, 228 were screened and 168 excluded, leaving 60 studies for thematic synthesis. Designs included surveys, qualitative and mixed-methods studies, and reviews across Malaysia and

other contexts, covering physical, visual, hearing, learning, psychiatric, autism-spectrum, developmental, and mixed-disability samples. The study selection process is shown in Figure 1. Citations below are illustrative; all 60 studies informed the synthesis.

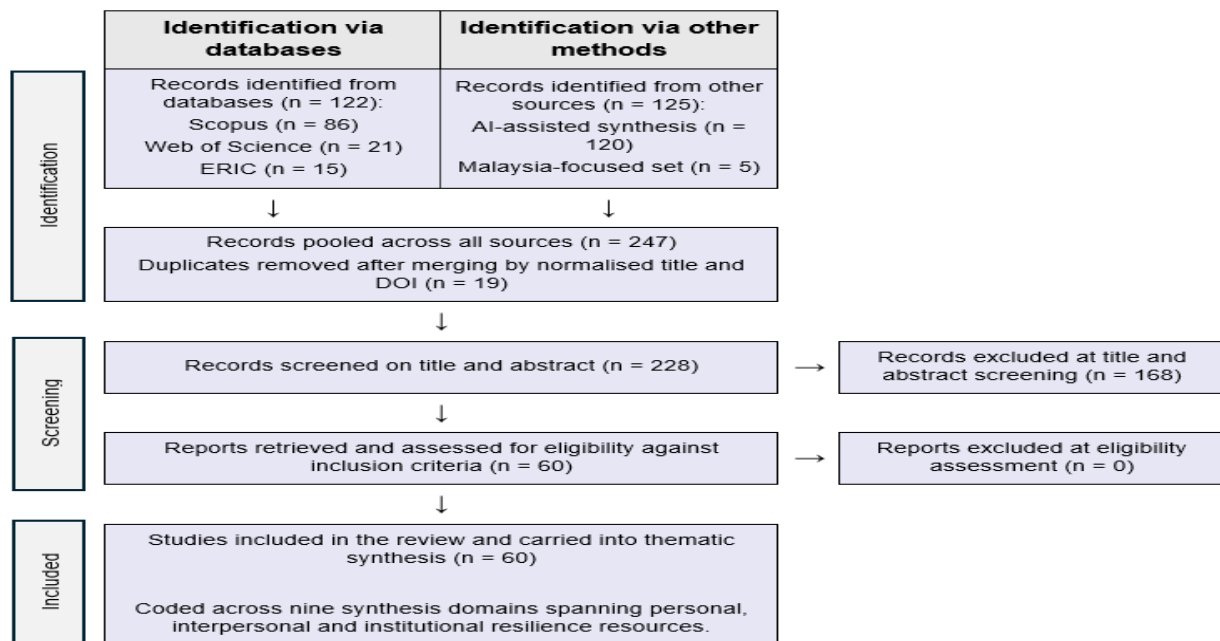


Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram of Study Selection

RESULTS

The 60 studies included cross-sectional surveys, qualitative interviews and phenomenological studies, mixed-methods case studies, and scoping or systematic reviews. Malaysia was the most frequently represented single national context, reflecting the relevance weighting applied during screening, alongside the United States, Ghana, Indonesia, and Spain. Disability foci included physical or mobility, visual, hearing,

learning, psychiatric, autism spectrum, and intellectual or developmental disability, alongside mixed SWD samples; several records reported samples combining multiple impairment types within a single psychosocial framework (Akoto et al., 2022; Klutsey et al., 2025). Table 2 summarises the nine synthesis domains, together with illustrative studies and the implications each carries for scale development.

Table 2. Synthesis Domains, Illustrative Studies, and Implications for Scale Development

Domain	Synthesis of findings	Illustrative studies	Implication for the scale
Mental health and distress	Elevated stress, anxiety, depression and distress, often	Klutsey et al. (2025); Andreou et	Frame items as adaptive capacity,

Domain	Synthesis of findings	Illustrative studies	Implication for the scale
	alongside participation barriers; distress is buffered rather than absent where resilience resources are present.	al. (2021); Solís García et al. (2024)	not absence of symptoms.
Social support and belonging	Peer, family, faculty and institutional support recur as protective resources linked to wellbeing, adjustment and lower distress.	Akoto et al. (2022); Du et al. (2025)	Strong candidate dimension; specify whether support is resource, outcome or antecedent.
Coping and self-management	Students draw on problem solving, reframing, initiative and help seeking, with strategy repertoire developing over time.	Carballo & Cumming (2025); Wolfner et al. (2023); Martins & Moríña (2022)	Represent as a flexible repertoire including recovery after setbacks.
Self-efficacy and agency	Self-efficacy, self-advocacy, autonomy and psychological capital predict resilience-related outcomes, sometimes above peer support.	Jannah et al. (2025); Bartolo et al. (2023)	Retain as a dimension distinct from coping and support.
Stigma, disclosure and identity	Stigma, microaggressions and disclosure decisions intensify strain and shape help seeking and participation.	Chen (2021); Andreou et al. (2021); Che Rosli et al. (2025)	Support self-worth without individualising structural discrimination.
Institutional support and access	Accessibility, accommodations and inclusive practice shape participation and persistence, with uneven provision across campuses.	Chan et al. (2023); Yusof et al. (2020); Liu et al. (2024); Ghazali et al. (2024)	Treat institutional resources as ecological resilience resources.
Academic adjustment	Resilience factors are studied alongside adjustment and retention; adjustment differs by impairment type.	Tansey et al. (2018); Wang & Kway (2023)	Use academic functioning as context or outcome, not the construct itself.
Measurement and psychometrics	General resilience instruments have been validated in SWD samples, but few tools were built for this population.	Perera & Ganguly (2018); Ganguly & Perera (2019); Tansey et al. (2018)	Adapt established constructs while generating context-specific items.

Domain	Synthesis of findings	Illustrative studies	Implication for the scale
Malaysia and disability type specificity	Malaysian evidence documents access, facilities and identity challenges but no validated resilience construct across disability types.	Mohd Zin et al. (2023); Md Nor et al. (2024); Mohammad Roose et al. (2025)	Test measurement invariance across disability types.

Nine interrelated domains emerged from the 60 included studies. Citations within each subtopic are illustrative; all included studies informed the synthesis.

3.1 Mental Health and Psychological Distress

Psychological distress was a recurring concern across disability groups and national contexts. Klutsey et al. (2025) reported psychological distress among 75.5% of students with hearing, visual, and physical impairments in their Ghanaian sample, while stronger social support and academic resilience were associated with lower distress. Microaggressions were associated with poorer psychosocial adjustment (Andreou et al., 2021), and systematic evidence indicates substantial mental-health challenges among university students with disabilities (Solís García et al., 2024). Al-Shaer et al. (2024) further showed that social connectedness and religiosity could buffer the effects of stress, depression, and anxiety on quality of life. Peipei et al. (2026) similarly found that mental-health levels among visually impaired, hearing-impaired, and non-disabled university students were broadly comparable, while social support emerged as an important protective factor for students with disabilities. Resilience is therefore better understood as adaptive functioning in the presence of stress than as the absence of symptoms.

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3.2 Social Support and Belonging

Social support and belonging repeatedly functioned as protective resources. Family, peers, faculty, and institutional support were associated with wellbeing, adjustment, persistence, and lower psychological distress (Akoto et al., 2022). Du et al. (2025) likewise linked social support with better mental health among students with hearing impairment. Malaysian evidence also shows that stigma and non-inclusive environments may weaken interpersonal participation and social identity (Che Rosli et al., 2025). Belonging therefore operates as a resilience resource that can sustain engagement with university life.

3.3 Coping and Adaptive Self-Management

Coping and adaptive self-management involved problem solving, reframing, initiative, help-seeking, emotional regulation, and adjustment over time. Carballo and Cumming (2025) emphasised that SWDs use varied coping repertoires and that institutions have a role in enabling these strategies. Wolfner et al. (2023) similarly documented behavioural, relational, and mental coping strategies among students and postdoctoral fellows with disabilities, while Martins and Moriña (2022) identified the personal and contextual factors that supported resilience among SWDs at a Portuguese university.

3.4 Self-Efficacy, Agency, and Self-Determination

Self-efficacy and agency were related but distinct from coping and support. Academic self-efficacy predicted resilience among SWDs (Jannah et al., 2025), while autonomy, self-advocacy, and identity development were highlighted as important for equitable participation (Bartolo et al., 2023). Coping concerns how students respond to demands, whereas agency reflects their confidence in making decisions, communicating needs, and advocating for support.

3.5 Stigma, Disclosure, and Disability Identity

Stigma, disclosure, and disability identity shaped psychosocial strain, self-esteem, participation, and help-seeking (Andreou et al., 2021; Che Rosli et al., 2025; Chen, 2021). Resilience measurement should therefore acknowledge students' capacity to maintain self-worth without implying that they are responsible for overcoming discrimination.

3.6 Institutional Support, Access, and Accommodations

Institutional support, accessibility, and accommodations were consistently linked with participation. Malaysian studies identified dissatisfaction with physical accessibility, uneven safety features, and the need for stronger services, policies, awareness, and disability-friendly facilities (Chan et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2024; Yusof et al., 2020). Ghazali et al. (2024) likewise highlighted the importance of adequate academic support, physical and digital accessibility, psychological and counselling services, and transition support for special-needs students in Malaysian higher education. Institutional provision therefore forms part of the ecology of resilience rather than merely background context.

3.7 Academic Adjustment, Persistence, and Success

Academic adjustment varied across impairment groups. Tansey et al. (2018) demonstrated the relevance of wellbeing to college-life adjustment, while Wang and Kway (2023) reported different adaptation challenges for students with visual and physical disabilities. Academic functioning is therefore an important context and outcome of resilience, rather than the resilience construct itself.

3.8 Measurement and Psychometrics

Psychometric research remains limited. General resilience measures have demonstrated construct validity among SWDs (Perera & Ganguly, 2018), and resilience profiles have been associated with wellbeing and academic outcomes (Ganguly & Perera, 2019). However, these instruments were not developed from the specific psychosocial realities of Malaysian SWDs.

3.9 Malaysia-Specific Evidence and Relevance Across Disability Types

Malaysian evidence consistently highlighted accessibility, institutional support, emotional regulation, social skills, identity, and participation (Mohammad Roose et al., 2025; Mohd Zin et al., 2023; Yusof et al., 2020). Md Nor et al. (2024) further reported limited training and tailored resources for supporting autistic students entering higher education and technical and vocational pathways. No validated multidimensional psychosocial resilience measure specifically designed for SWDs in Malaysian HEIs was identified. Although selected studies are cited as illustrative examples, all 60 included records contributed to the thematic synthesis and identification of the nine domains.

4. DISCUSSION

Across the nine domains, psychosocial resilience among SWDs is best understood as a multi-level process rather than a solely individual characteristic. Self-efficacy and adaptive coping matter but operate within relationships and institutional conditions that can enable or restrict participation (Akoto et al., 2022; Bartolo et al., 2023). This distinction is important because a measure focused only on personal strength risks individualising difficulties that arise from inaccessible environments or discriminatory practices.

The findings have direct implications for measurement. A Malaysian psychosocial resilience scale for SWDs should capture adaptive coping and self-management, self-efficacy and agency, supportive relationships and belonging, and the capacity to navigate or access institutional resources. Psychological distress and academic adjustment are better treated as related outcomes or contexts than as resilience itself. Stigma and identity should inform item development without implying student responsibility for structural discrimination. Because experiences differ across impairment groups, validation should test

measurement equivalence rather than assume it (Chan et al., 2023; Wang & Kway, 2023).

The review has limitations. No formal risk-of-bias or certainty assessment was undertaken, and screening and extraction were conducted by one reviewer. The supplementary AI-assisted discovery component was not fully reproducible because the tool name, prompts, and complete retrieval log were not prospectively archived. The search also deliberately weighted evidence relevant to Malaysia, disability type, and measurement. The synthesis should therefore be interpreted as a purpose-oriented evidence base for scale development rather than an exhaustive cross-section of higher-education disability research.

5. CONCLUSION

Psychosocial resilience among SWDs reflects interacting personal, interpersonal, and institutional resources. Culturally grounded disability-specific measurement remains underdeveloped in Malaysian higher education. Future scale development should involve SWDs and experts and test reliability, construct validity, and measurement equivalence across disability groups.

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8. AUTHOR DECLARATION

The authors confirm that this manuscript reports original work that has not been published previously and is not under consideration elsewhere, and they declare no conflicts of interest.