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Accessibility and Self-Esteem among Students with Disabilities in Higher Education: A Systematic Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

This study conducts a literature review to examine the impact of accessibility on university students' self-esteem. The findings are expected to serve as a reference for providing accessibility—not only in physical terms but also regarding psychological services—for students with disabilities and low self-esteem. The research employs a systematic literature review design based on the PRISMA model, utilizing the Scopus database. The review covers eight articles published between 2021 and 2026. The results indicate that accessibility encompasses three aspects: educational, physical, and psychological accessibility. The findings from the eight studies demonstrate an association between accessibility and the self-esteem of students with disabilities in higher education. Currently, physical and educational accessibility are the forms most commonly provided by universities. Challenges regarding accessibility for students with disabilities in higher education can be analyzed across the three aforementioned dimensions: physical, educational, and psychological. The study concludes that to support the self-esteem of students with disabilities, accessibility improvements must extend beyond physical and educational facilities to include psychological services.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In today's era of inclusion, one of the most important goals of higher education institutions is to provide quality education to all individuals, without exception or discrimination, to realize a fully just and inclusive society. The implementation of

inclusive practices in higher education aims to ensure that the educational rights of students with disabilities are upheld. The main dimensions of inclusive education in higher education are inclusive culture, inclusive policies, and inclusive practices [1]. Within the framework of inclusive education, accessibility for people with disabilities is paramount. This includes ease of access for students with disabilities across three areas: physical accessibility (buildings), educational accessibility (lectures), and psychological services. Accessibility in education includes flexibility in the presentation of materials, learning interactions, and student expression to accommodate the diverse needs of [2]. However, limited accessibility and numerous barriers prevent students with disabilities from pursuing higher education [3].

Inclusive universities must facilitate students through teaching, self-development, and psychological services for students with disabilities [4]. Students with disabilities often face various barriers to accessing and achieving higher education. The transition from primary and secondary (K-12) education to higher education for students with disabilities requires various accommodations and modifications to enable them to access it [5]. The challenges faced by students with disabilities include a lack of physical accessibility, minimal academic support, and social exclusion [6]. Research shows that most universities in Indonesia are still not inclusive in admitting students with disabilities. Furthermore, Indonesian universities are not yet ready to provide policy support and facilities that support the learning process and ensure campus environments are accessible to the needs of students with disabilities. Human resources in higher education, such as lecturers and teaching staff, are not yet ready to provide services and adapt learning for students with disabilities [7]. Accessibility for students with disabilities is key to successful university studies.

Findings indicate that this significantly impacts students with disabilities psychologically. Students with disabilities face significant psychosocial challenges, including social isolation (86.7%), bullying (48%), and low self-esteem (97.3%), all of which negatively impact their academic performance [8]. A common psychological problem is low self-esteem due to body image and appearance issues, which impacts social interactions [9]. The lack of accessibility and inclusion in higher education and social settings further exacerbates this [9]. More counseling services in higher education, awareness programs, and inclusive infrastructure are needed to support the holistic development of students with disabilities and low self-esteem [9].

Data from 72% of participants indicated a lack of accessibility to the educational environment, which complicates the social and academic adaptation of students with disabilities [10]. Furthermore, 45% of respondents reported problems with self-esteem and self-confidence that negatively affect social activities and academic performance [10]. A correlation was found between the level of socio-psychological adaptation and the availability of specialized support programs at universities. Students with disabilities who had access to psychological support and participated in social integration programs showed higher adaptation scores (30% higher) compared to those who did not have such access [10]. Self-esteem reflects an individual's assessment of their self-worth and self-acceptance or rejection, which is reflected in one's attitudes. Low self-esteem is a debilitating

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condition that prevents individuals from realizing their full potential and limits their involvement in social participation [11]. Self-esteem in people with physical disabilities is positively correlated with social participation [12], [13]. Several studies have examined the self-esteem and academic achievement of students with both physical and sensory disabilities [11].

Based on the background of the problem, this study will conduct a literature review to determine the effect of accessibility on students' self-esteem in higher education. The results of this study are expected to provide a reference for providing accessibility, not only physically, but also in psychological services for students with disabilities who have low self-esteem. The description of this study can serve as a reference for improving self-esteem, which impacts the academic success of students with disabilities in higher education. Therefore, the aim of this study is to employ a systematic literature review approach using the PRISMA model to address the challenges faced by students with disabilities in higher education. More specifically, this study aims to answer the following objectives: (1) mapping the concept of accessibility for students with disabilities in higher education, (2) assessing the number of publication trends on accessibility towards improving self-esteem of students with disabilities in higher education, (3) identifying the most influential countries and publishers that contribute to global knowledge production, (4) examining key journals, and influential authors, in research on the effectiveness of accessibility on self-esteem of students with disabilities in higher education, and (5) exploring the challenges of accessibility on self-esteem faced by students with disabilities in the context of higher education.

2. METHOD

2.1. Design

This study was a systematic literature review conducted using the PRISMA model. This study aims to determine the effect of accessibility on student self-esteem in higher education. The results are expected to serve as a reference for improving accessibility, not only physically but also in psychological services, for students with disabilities and low self-esteem.

2.2. Sources of Data and Techniques for Searching

The data sources for the articles were published between 2021 and 2026. The articles searched examined the effect of accessibility on students' self-esteem, which in turn impacts their academic achievement in higher education. The article search was conducted in the Scopus database. To obtain relevant articles, a search was conducted for English-language articles and correlational/experimental research results. The search included article titles, including keywords such as the following:

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Table 1. Search term

Language	Search Term	Data base	Document type
English	Effect OR impact AND accessibility AND self-esteem OR Self-confidence AND students with disabilities AND campus OR university	Scopus	Article (correlation/experimental research results)

2.3. Selecting the Literature

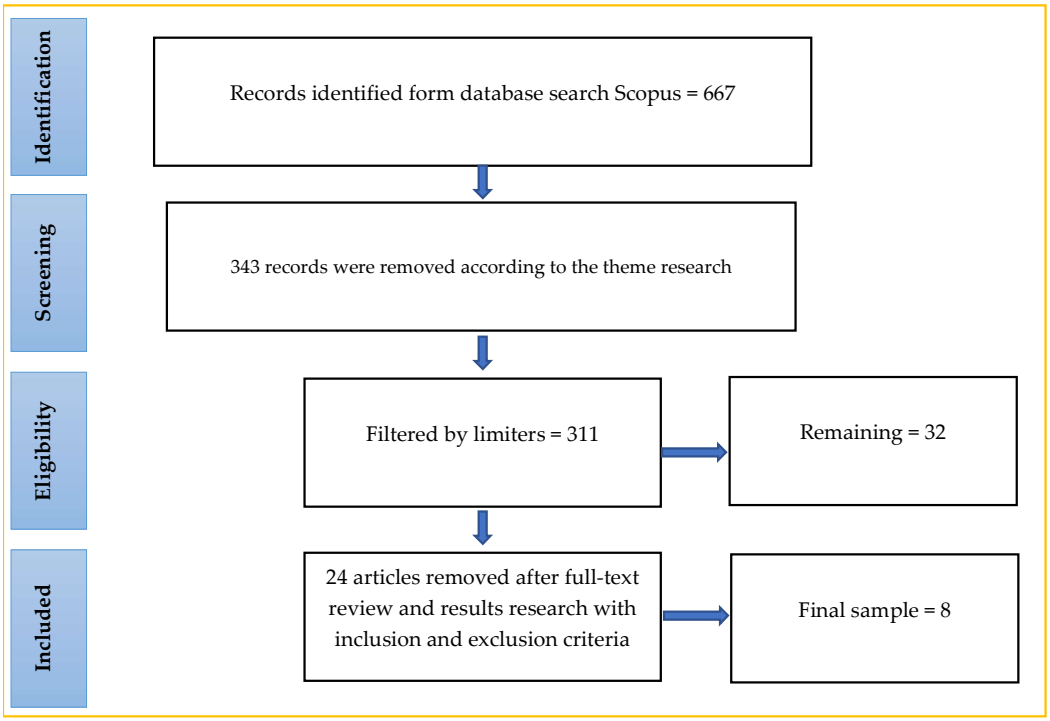


Figure 1. PRISMA diagram for selecting the literature.

Article selection used the PRISMA diagram, with articles collected from Scopus through four main stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. The identification process using the Scopus database yielded 667 articles. Furthermore, the screening process identified 343 articles aligned with the research theme. This result is still based on keyword eligibility; 32 of 311 articles did not meet the requirements. In the final selection process, to view the full text and research results aligned with the theme of this study, 8 articles were deemed appropriate: those examining the effect of accessibility on student self-esteem, which, in turn, impacts their academic achievement in higher education. This article meets the exclusive and inclusive factors: the language is English, as indicated by the keywords (Effect OR impact AND accessibility AND self-esteem OR Self-confidence AND students with disabilities AND campus OR university), and the type of document is an article (correlation/experimental research results).

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3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of a systematic literature review using the PRISMA model. This study aimed to determine the effect of accessibility on the self-esteem of students with disabilities in higher education. The results provide data on the impact of accessibility on students with disabilities in higher education, as follows:

3.1. Concept Map: Accessibility Issues of Students with Disabilities in Higher Education

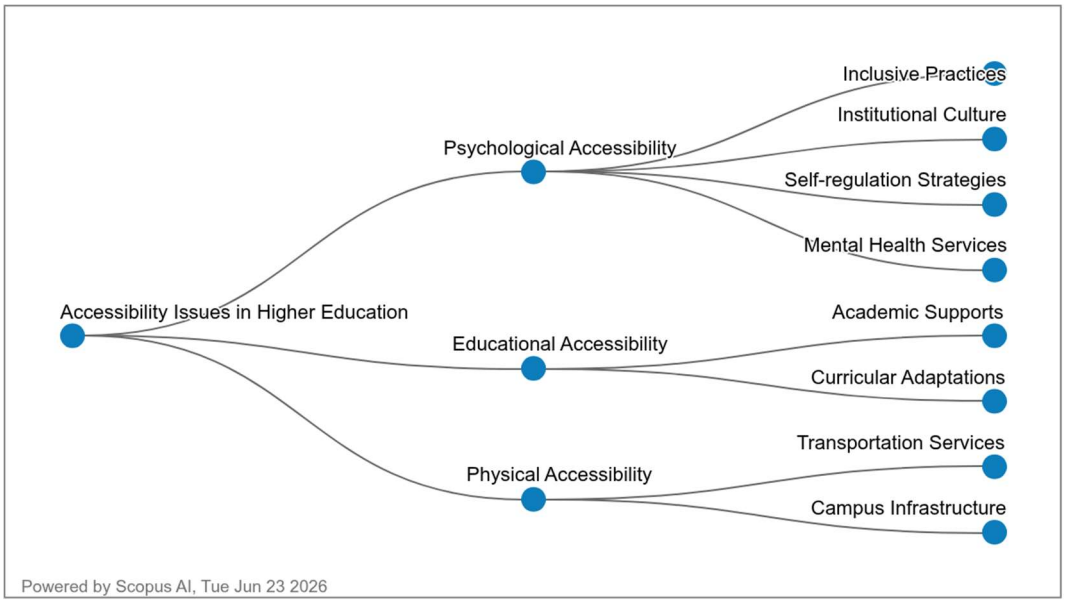


Figure 2. Concept map Accessibility

The mapping of accessibility concepts that universities must have in place to accommodate students with disabilities reveals three forms of accessibility: physical, educational, and psychological. Physical accessibility, which can facilitate students with disabilities and create a more inclusive campus environment, must meet standards, including transportation services for students with disabilities and campus infrastructure that is easily accessible to them. The minimum standard for physical accessibility is the availability of accessible building infrastructure, such as ramps, elevators, Braille signage, guiding blocks, and special toilets for people with disabilities.

Educational accessibility for students with disabilities requires an adapted curriculum and support during lectures (assistive technology and mentoring). Current accessibility measures at universities include the use of sign language interpreters during lectures, the use of assistive technology (JAWS), and modifications to lectures for material that students with disabilities may struggle to master. This is not enough to provide a sense of safety and inclusiveness for students with disabilities. Therefore, there is a need for psychological awareness that provides services for students with disabilities so they can access mental health services to improve self-esteem. These services aim to foster psychological readiness among students with disabilities so they can study comfortably alongside other regular students in classes. The existence of psychological support can

strengthen the mental state of students with disabilities in facing pressure, whether in the form of bullying or an unsupportive environment, so that students with disabilities still have high self-esteem to continue studying until they complete their studies.

3.2. Publication Trend of Accessibility Issues of Students with Disabilities in Higher Education

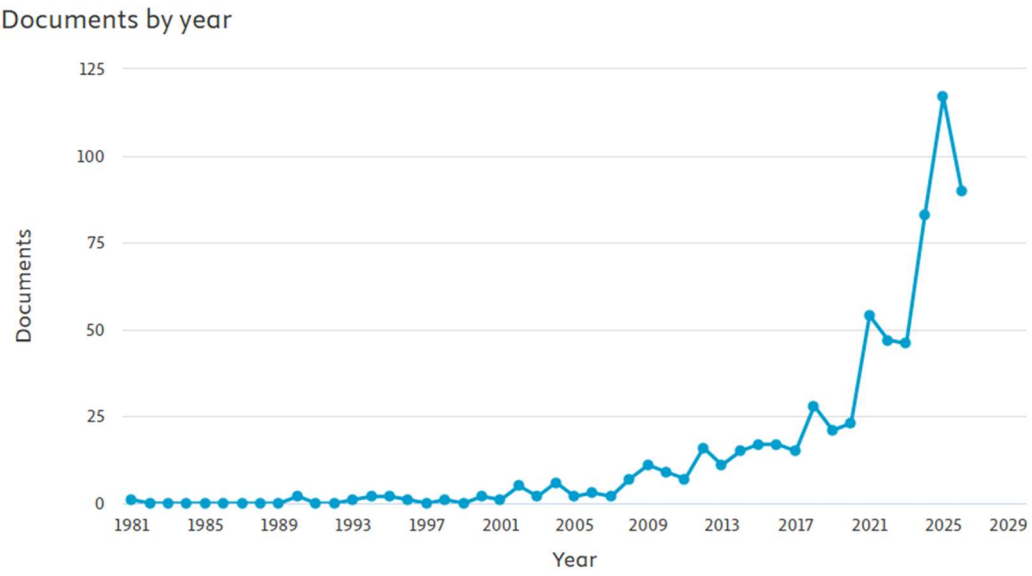


Figure 3. Publication Trend

To assess publication trends on accessibility and improving the self-esteem of students with disabilities in higher education, this analysis examines all published publications on this topic and arranges them chronologically. The number of publications on a topic can indicate shifts over time within a research study. Furthermore, this can be used to predict research patterns, which is very useful for determining the direction of future studies and identifying analytical gaps and topic-level study trends. Figure 2 illustrates the publication trend of articles published from 1981 to 2026. In general, there is an upward trend in the number of publications. Articles show a gradual increase starting in 2009, peaking in 2025. The number of publications increases significantly in the 2021–2025 period. However, in 2025, publications peaked at 117. For 2026, the publication process is still ongoing, but the trend is likely to continue, with 90 Scopus-indexed publications on this topic currently.

3.3. Country Publication Trend

Figure 4 displays the country names of corresponding authors who have contributed to this topic. A significant number of corresponding authors are from the United States and the United Kingdom. To identify the most influential countries and publishers contributing to global knowledge production, and the leading affiliations in research on accessibility and improving the self-esteem of students with disabilities in

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higher education, a table summarizing the number of publications by journal, author, and affiliation was created through bibliometric analysis.

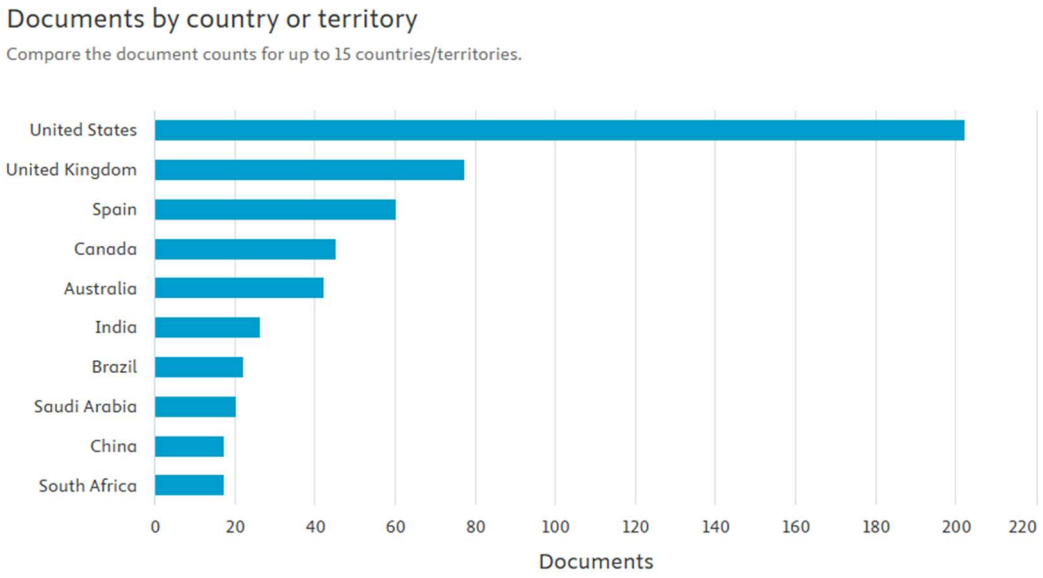


Figure 4. Country Publication Trend

Table 2. Journal Publication Over Time

Journals Name	Document
Disability and Society	14
International Journal of Disability Development and Education	13
Disability and Rehabilitation Assistive Technology	10
Plos One	10
International Journal of Inclusive Education	9
Universal Access in the Information Society	9
Disability and Health Journal	8

According to Table 2, the publisher with the most publications is Disability and Society. This is the most influential publisher contributing to research on accessibility to improve the self-esteem of students with disabilities in higher education. The publisher producing this journal discusses accessibility for students with disabilities, including physical accessibility, educational accessibility, and psychological services that influence the self-esteem of students with disabilities in higher education. All publishers are indexed in Scopus, thereby ensuring high-quality articles in terms of scientific substance, in line with the topics discussed in this study.

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3.4. Summary of Included Studies

Table 3. Summary of Includes Studies

No	Author and Year Publication	Sample (N)	Results
1	Dhavan et al. (2026)	50 students who will be representing all types of disabilities, such as physical, sensory, cognitive, and learning disabilities	Additional educational services can improve self-esteem for students with disabilities.
2	Alnajdi, et al. (2025)	395 visually impaired undergraduates	Increased self-esteem is influenced by the accessibility of assistive technology use for visually impaired students.
3	Bystrova, et al. (2025)	230 students with disabilities	Increased self-esteem is influenced by support for educational and psychological accessibility, such as inclusive classes.
4	Chronopoulou & Polychronopoulou (2025)	26 higher education students with mobility impairments	Physical accessibility support that eases lectures can increase self-esteem among students with physical disabilities.
5	De Vos et al. (2025)	1281 students with disabilities	Improving physical accessibility by facilitating travel can affect the self-esteem of students with disabilities.
6	Alhumaid & Said (2023)	582 individuals with physical disabilities	Physical accessibility support that eases lectures can increase self-esteem among students with physical disabilities.
7	Jung et al. (2022)	3329 students with disabilities	Accessibility of psychological services helps people accept their disabilities to maintain a healthy level of self-esteem for students with disabilities.
8	Barnes et al. (2021)	44 students with disabilities	Accessible education services can improve the self-esteem of students with disabilities.

Citation: [14], [15], [16], [17], [18], [19], [20], [21]

The analysis revealed eight studies relevant to the topic under discussion: accessibility and the improvement of the self-esteem of students with disabilities in higher education. The students with disabilities in this study, most of whom attended higher education, experienced physical disabilities, hearing impairments, and visual impairments. All studies concluded that accessibility impacted the self-esteem of students with disabilities in higher education. The accessibility measures most frequently implemented by universities to provide an inclusive environment were physical accessibility and educational accessibility. This was intended to provide students with disabilities with a sense of security and comfort and to improve their self-esteem during their studies. Currently, accessibility related to psychology has not been widely implemented. While the unit exists, service optimization has not been widely utilized by students with disabilities.

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3.5. Key Challenges and Solutions

Table 4. Key Challenges and Solutions

Dimension	Challenges	Solutions
Physical	Inaccessible infrastructure, limited mobility aids	Universal design, campus upgrades, and assistive technologies
Educational	Lack of adapted curricula, vague policies, and untrained faculty	Inclusive curricula, faculty training, and resource centers
Psychological	Social exclusion, attitudinal barriers, and lack of peer support	Awareness programs, counseling, peer mentoring

Accessibility challenges for students with disabilities in higher education can be seen across three dimensions: physical, educational, and psychological. Physical accessibility currently faces challenges, including difficult-to-access infrastructure and limited mobility aids. This is due to some university buildings being older and less accessible, as well as the ongoing challenges of procuring mobility aids. Universities can address this by implementing universal design, improving campus infrastructure, and encouraging research and development of assistive technology for students with disabilities. Educational accessibility challenges for students with disabilities include a lack of tailored curricula, unclear policies, and under-trained teaching staff. Currently, educational accessibility at universities is addressed by providing training to lecturers and staff on educational services for students with disabilities. Lecturers are expected to design curriculum materials that address the disabilities of students with disabilities. Universities have issued policies on inclusive classroom learning and established Disability Services Units. This is intended to address the challenges faced by students with disabilities in their studies, from the use of learning media to assessment. The final psychological dimension also faces numerous challenges. The underlying problems are social exclusion, bullying, behavioral barriers, and a lack of peer support. The current solution employed by universities is the establishment of counseling service units to provide support and mentoring to students with disabilities to maintain high self-esteem.

3.6. Discussion

Accessibility in higher education has historically been understood primarily in terms of physical and educational accessibility, which have been the focus of inclusive campus development. However, other research suggests that accessibility requires a much more nuanced, multidimensional approach that integrates physical, academic, social, and psychological dimensions [22]. A study examining student and faculty perceptions found that, while physical and communicative accessibility barriers were significant, the most persistent challenges were the absence of an inclusive institutional culture and inadequate coordination among support services [22]. These findings highlight the importance of physical accessibility, alongside educational and psychological accessibility, for enhancing self-esteem among students with disabilities [23].

Research shows that students with disabilities identified eight essential support services: a supportive campus climate, mental health counseling, mobility support, note-taking services, advocacy and communication support, extra time for exams, accessible

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exam rooms, and awareness of individual student needs [24]. These services should accommodate the physical, educational, and psychological needs of students with disabilities, requiring a comprehensive institutional support system. Furthermore, the same study identified six support services that students with disabilities considered essential in education: faculty understanding of disabilities, mental health counseling, learning support, career counseling, broader support systems, and online support [24]. This gap between available and needed services suggests that many institutions have not yet achieved the integrated, holistic approach to accessibility that research indicates is necessary to enhance self-esteem and academic success.

The provision of well-coordinated support services has had a significant positive impact on the self-esteem and academic outcomes of students with disabilities [23]. A study examining targeted support interventions found that students with disabilities who received additional academic support achieved higher grade point averages and experienced a 55–60% increase in graduation rates compared to their peers [25]. These results suggest that comprehensive institutional support directly impacts not only academic achievement but also retention and completion of studies—outcomes closely linked to the self-esteem of students with disabilities. Furthermore, research on learner support services and retention indicates that academic support services significantly impact academic achievement and student engagement through the implementation of assistive technology in the classroom [26].

Assistive technology plays a crucial role in academic accessibility for students with visual impairments. Digital Braille devices, for instance, offer significant benefits in fostering inclusivity for these learners [27]. Such devices enhance educational access, promote learner independence, and expand learning opportunities. Physical accessibility challenges significantly affect students with visual impairments' ability to navigate the campus environment independently. Essential physical accessibility features for these students include tactile paving (guiding blocks), Braille signage in every room, tactile campus maps, and mobile technology-based navigation for moving around the campus [28].

Developing visual-based digital learning media specifically designed for deaf students—addressing challenges in accessing and interacting with course materials—constitutes a form of academic accessibility for this group [29]. Audiovisual media have been shown to substantially improve the motor skills of deaf students in adaptive physical education, confirming that technology-based learning effectively supports the educational process for students with hearing impairments [29]. Furthermore, academic accessibility requires sign language interpreters to assist with the understanding of material during lectures. Physical accessibility for deaf students involves easy-to-understand visual signage in areas such as parking lots, restrooms, building names, and classrooms.

Physical accessibility for students with physical disabilities encompasses designated parking spaces, ramps, restroom facilities, library access, and transportation [30]. Universities can facilitate academic accessibility by providing elevators for access to classrooms, libraries, and laboratories, as well as by scheduling classes on the ground floor. Students with disabilities face challenges regarding learning and academic

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accessibility. Educational and assistive technologies in inclusive practices for individuals with autism demonstrate that structured interventions, social behavior modeling, enhanced communication, and emotional understanding can foster social interaction, self-regulation, and active participation [31]. Assistive technologies facilitate content personalization, pacing adjustments, sensory regulation, and continuous feedback, thereby reinforcing independence and meaningful learning. Physical accessibility may not be a significant issue, allowing students with disabilities to function much like their non-disabled peers.

Psychological accessibility—a key component of inclusive universities—includes counseling services tailored to students with disabilities. Research highlights five central themes in this area: an urgent, unmet need for disability-specific counseling; systemic accessibility barriers, such as the lack of sign language interpreters; inadequate facilities and a scarcity of adaptive technologies; concerns regarding academic and career paths; and low self-esteem among students with disabilities [32]. Support services have been shown to be crucial during the transition from secondary to higher education [23]. A longitudinal study of college students with disabilities found that self-esteem decreased significantly from the beginning of the academic year to the following academic year, while symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress increased [33]. These findings highlight that the transition to higher education presents distinct psychological challenges for students with disabilities, and that institutional support services are crucial not only for academic success but also for maintaining psychological well-being [23]. This study explicitly recommends that support services be proactively provided to help students with special educational needs navigate the challenges of the transition and manage the demands of higher education [33].

Challenges such as a lack of physical accessibility, less accommodating learning, and limited psychological services require appropriate accommodations for students with disabilities [34]. For people with disabilities, self-esteem is often impacted by additional challenges, such as social stigma, limited accessibility, and psychological barriers [35]. The analysis shows that accessibility support plays a significant role in enhancing self-esteem, whereas stigma and a lack of equal opportunities can be barriers that lower it [35]. Ultimately, the majority of respondents (82%) reported average levels of self-esteem, while a small proportion (18%) reported lower levels [36]. This may be due to academic success [37]. The transition to university presents several adaptation challenges for young people, particularly for students with disabilities [38], [39]. Furthermore, we explored the role of academic support in the adaptation and academic achievement of students with disabilities, as well as their perceptions of the psychological intervention package [40].

4. CONCLUSION

A systematic literature review indicates that accessibility comprises three components: educational, physical, and psychological accessibility. Findings from the eight studies analyzed highlight the importance of self-esteem for students with disabilities. Currently, physical and educational accessibility are the forms most commonly provided by higher education institutions. The study concludes that to foster high self-esteem among students with disabilities, accessibility must extend beyond physical and educational

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aspects to include psychological support services. Physical accessibility currently faces challenges regarding infrastructure accessibility and the limited availability of mobility aids. Issues concerning educational accessibility include a lack of adapted curricula, unclear policies, and insufficiently trained teaching staff. Lecturers are encouraged to design instruction that adapts curricular materials to the specific needs of students with disabilities. Universities are implementing inclusive classroom policies and establishing Disability Service Units to address academic challenges, including instructional media and assessment methods. The psychological dimension also faces significant challenges, primarily social exclusion, bullying, attitudinal barriers, and a lack of peer support. To address this, universities are establishing counseling units to provide guidance and mentoring, helping students with disabilities maintain high self-esteem.

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