

Empowering SDG 10 at UKM: Bridging Institutional Demands and the Imperative for Inclusive Policy Reform

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ABSTRACT

Higher Education Institutions are now at a point where institutional inclusivity is both a structural need and an operational requirement to navigate the ever-increasing complexity of diversity within their ecosystems effectively. This paper examines the strategic and practical challenges faced by Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) in promoting Sustainable Development Goal 10 (SDG 10), primarily through creating more inclusive policies that focus on individuals with disabilities (PWDs) and other vulnerable populations within the university community. While UKM has formally stated its commitment to inclusion as part of its sustainability strategic plan 2030, initial evaluation indicates a large gap between formal statements of intent and actual practice, specifically in the deployment of staff resources and the provision of services to support individuals with disabilities. Utilizing a data-driven action research methodology, this study employs policy document analysis, survey and interview data, and a web-based monitoring tool (inclusive dashboard) to assess how effectively existing policy frameworks are being implemented; identify gaps in implementation; and offer more responsive, intersectional, and evidence-driven institutional practices. Preliminary findings indicate that the principal barriers to mainstreaming inclusivity include both the physical/structural barriers to accessibility and ineffective mechanisms for monitoring. This paper suggests a new policy framework, developed collaboratively with key stakeholders across the university, and a live data system that would ensure the principles of social justice are not only recorded but also made transparent and sustainable. This study contributes significantly to the broader literature on academic discourse while offering substantial policy implications for transformative efforts to achieve equity and inclusivity within institutions.

Keywords: inclusivity, institutional policy, SDG 10, PWD, public universities, UKM, social justice

INTRODUCTION

Public policy has seen a significant increase in calls for social inclusion. The increased pressures on higher education to be both a provider of knowledge and to offer fairer educational experiences, opportunities, and outcomes have led to a much greater emphasis being placed on social inclusion. In the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), goal 10, "Reduce inequality within and among countries," has called on institutions such as universities to take a more progressive approach to developing socially just frameworks for equitable social structures (UN, 2015).

The pursuit of inclusiveness in publicly funded universities involves access to education and the structural policies that support it, including governance, representation, and participatory mechanisms for marginalized communities. As a national university based on humanistic principles, UKM has committed to inclusivity

through its UKM Sustainability Strategic Plan 2030 (UKM, 2024). This plan identifies the need to develop human resources, expand access for People With Disabilities (PWDs), and improve services for all members of the campus community. A significant barrier to creating effective, transformative, inclusive practices at most institutions is the gap between well-intentioned policies and their actual implementation. Well-intended inclusive policies may appear symbolic unless accompanied by robust data-based monitoring systems, tangible implementation pathways, and an intersectional analysis of campus culture (Fraser, 2009; Crenshaw, 1991).

As noted by Amartya Sen (1999), real development occurs when opportunities are provided to people so they can use their capacity for substantive freedoms to pursue lives they value. Therefore, university inclusion policies should not only focus on access but also on meaningful participation, adequate support services, and responsive governance mechanisms for diverse identities and backgrounds. For example, students who are PWDs or come from low-income (B40) backgrounds, along with minority faculty, continue to experience systemic barriers to success. As a result, there is a pressing need for new, inclusive, and adaptable institutional policies.

The purpose of this paper is to examine UKM's current policy approaches to inclusivity by drawing on data from community experiences and social justice values to develop evidence-based policies. Using an action research methodology, this paper will present preliminary results and propose a holistic reform model of policy creation regarding human capital development and PWD empowerment. Additionally, a preliminary design of a digital inclusivity monitoring platform will be presented. It is proposed that this platform could be used as a basis for developing more transparent and adaptive policy governance mechanisms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The notion of inclusivity has moved beyond its traditional role as "moralistic" rhetoric to become a foundational element of global development; the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are one such effort, particularly Goal 10, which addresses reducing inequalities. Within the realm of higher education, inclusivity means that all individuals, regardless of their physical, economic, social, or identity-based backgrounds, participate equally in the university's spaces and systems. Thus, it includes elements of access, participation, service delivery, and fair decision-making processes (UNESCO, 2020).

One of the dominant theoretical approaches to social justice is Sen's Capability Approach (1999); it postulates that development is meaningful only if individuals enjoy the ability to create lives that reflect what is valuable to them. Therefore, when designing policy systems at the institutional level, policymakers cannot simply assess whether sufficient resources or opportunities are available (e.g., access to education or employment), but must also assess how effectively individuals can use those opportunities. Furthermore, because people have different needs depending on where they come from (i.e., based upon their identity), policy design and institutional support must recognize these differences.

Building upon Sen's (Capability Approach) perspective, Fraser (2009) provided a second conceptual basis for thinking about issues of social justice that include not only the distribution of material resources (i.e., goods and services) but also the degree to which individuals' dignity and social identities are recognized. As an example, when societal systems do not formally acknowledge the existence of PWDs (people with disabilities) in either policy discourse or practice, then inequality exists. Likewise, inequality occurs when the voices of marginalized groups (minority students or staff) are regularly excluded from formal institutional decisions.

Finally, another important lens used in analyzing the dynamics of inequality in higher education is Intersectionality Theory, originally proposed by Crenshaw (1991). Intersectionality Theory recognizes that individual social identities do not exist independently. For example, a woman student with a disability from a B40 family may experience multiple and intersecting forms of disadvantage more than her male counterpart with no disabilities from similar socio-economic circumstances. If policies are developed without accounting for these intersections, they will likely be less effective or could potentially exclude some individuals altogether.

National policies related to promoting inclusion in higher education institutions were established in Malaysia. Two examples are the National Policy for Persons with Disabilities (JKM, 2007) and the Guidelines for Disability Friendly Facilities in Public Universities (MOHE, 2011). However, the implementation of both

national policies depends heavily on each institution's capacity to translate normative principles into practical, measurable plans. Recent research by Abdullah et al. (2019) indicates that although many public universities have attempted to provide consistent support services to students with disabilities, most still lack adequate human resources to develop a supportive environment for employees.

Clearly, the current literature illustrates that developing policies that promote inclusion requires grounding in justice-oriented theoretical frameworks; consideration of intersectional identities; and the establishment of strong, data-driven monitoring mechanisms. Moreover, institutions of higher learning need to develop policy systems that not only increase opportunities for access to educational programs and other benefits but also empower individuals to fully engage in growing within the campus community and contributing meaningfully.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a mixed-methods action research design to examine the implementation of inclusivity policies at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). The use of action research is particularly appropriate as the study not only evaluates existing institutional practices but also seeks to generate practical, evidence-based improvements through iterative engagement with stakeholders. The research design was operationalized through multiple complementary phases, including policy document analysis, a quantitative survey, qualitative interviews, and the development and validation of an inclusivity monitoring tool. This integrated approach enables data triangulation, thereby enhancing the credibility and robustness of the findings.

The study began with a thematic content analysis of key institutional documents, such as the UKM Sustainability Strategic Plan 2030, disability service guidelines, and human resource policies. The aim was to identify stated inclusivity principles, examine implementation mechanisms, and highlight gaps between policy intention and operational practice. These insights were then complemented by quantitative data collected through a structured online survey administered to 100 respondents ($n = 100$), comprising students and staff from identified vulnerable groups, including persons with disabilities (PWDs) and individuals from B40 (low-income) backgrounds. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that the perspectives of marginalized populations were adequately represented. The survey instrument was developed in accordance with established inclusivity and accessibility frameworks and reviewed by subject-matter experts to ensure content validity. It measured perceptions of accessibility and the effectiveness of institutional policies, as well as areas for improvement. The collected data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), focusing on descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, and cross-tabulations to identify patterns and trends.

To provide a deeper contextual understanding, the study also conducted semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, including university administrators, human resources personnel, and PWD students and staff. These interviews explored lived experiences of inclusion, perceived institutional barriers, and challenges in policy implementation. All interviews were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis, following the approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), thereby identifying recurring themes and nuanced insights that complemented the quantitative findings.

Building on the results from document analysis, survey data, and interviews, a web-based Inclusivity Dashboard was developed as a prototype tool for institutional monitoring. The dashboard integrates key indicators, including physical accessibility, participation of marginalized groups, diversity in staffing, and access to support services. It is designed to support data-driven decision-making, enhance transparency, and provide a centralized mechanism for tracking institutional progress toward inclusivity. To ensure the relevance and feasibility of the proposed framework, a policy validation workshop was conducted involving a diverse group of stakeholders, including students, academic staff, administrators, and representatives from the PWD community. Feedback from this workshop was systematically incorporated into the final policy recommendations and dashboard design.

Overall, data from all sources were integrated using a triangulation approach, whereby quantitative findings provided an overview of trends and patterns, while qualitative data offered explanatory depth and contextual

understanding. This combined analytical strategy strengthens the study's reliability and supports a comprehensive evaluation of inclusivity challenges within the university. The data collection instruments and analytical framework, including the use of tabulated data in this study, were reviewed and approved by the UKM SDG 10 Committee Ethical Review Board (Workshop of UKM SDG 10 Committee, 19th to 21st September, 2025), ensuring compliance with institutional ethical standards.

Research Findings

These results derive from a triangulated research methodology incorporating document analysis, campus-wide surveys, and semi-structured interviews with selected key stakeholders. Thematic coding was employed to categorize data, with dominant themes identified by recurring patterns and issues articulated across the university community.

At the heart of the results, there exists an obvious disconnect between policy intentions and real-world application, specifically concerning the promotion of equity and inclusion for people with disabilities (PWDs) and other vulnerable populations. Currently, there do not exist robust, data-driven tracking systems or structural frameworks within UKM that continue to hinder the University's ability to create a truly inclusive campus environment.

A key finding from the thematic coding was the difference between institutional policy and real-world practice. UKM has incorporated inclusive language into all of its strategic plans; however, terms such as “equity,” “access,” and “opportunity” have been used in university literature, yet they are not adequately explained in terms of how they will be implemented, tracked, or evaluated. There is no single institutional framework that articulates how these values will translate into actionable strategies across employment, accessibility for PWDs, or student service sectors.

As argued by Fraser (2009), this type of disconnect represents a form of justice that is normatively articulated through discourse but institutionally superficial, resulting in policies that, although they appear progressive, lack the structural support needed to produce tangible outcomes.

In addition to the disconnect between institutional policy and real-world practice, the research identifies persistent barriers to access and participation experienced by members of the PWD community. Survey data and interview responses demonstrate consistent problems regarding accessibility and participation. Specifically, common examples include inaccessible infrastructure (lecture halls, bathrooms, pathways, etc.), limited availability of assistive technology (hearing aids, visual supports, etc.), no formal process for filing complaints regarding discrimination against PWDs, and limited knowledge/training provided to employees about disability needs.

Although many respondents felt that UKM had a strong commitment to promoting diversity/inclusivity, approximately 80% of all PWD participants reported continuing to face systemic barriers daily in their experiences at UKM, this data echoes that found by Abdullah et al. (2019), which indicates that while inclusivity efforts exist within Malaysia's public universities, they remain largely superficial and unreliable.

To further illustrate the key barriers experienced by respondents, Figure 1 presents the distribution of reported challenges.

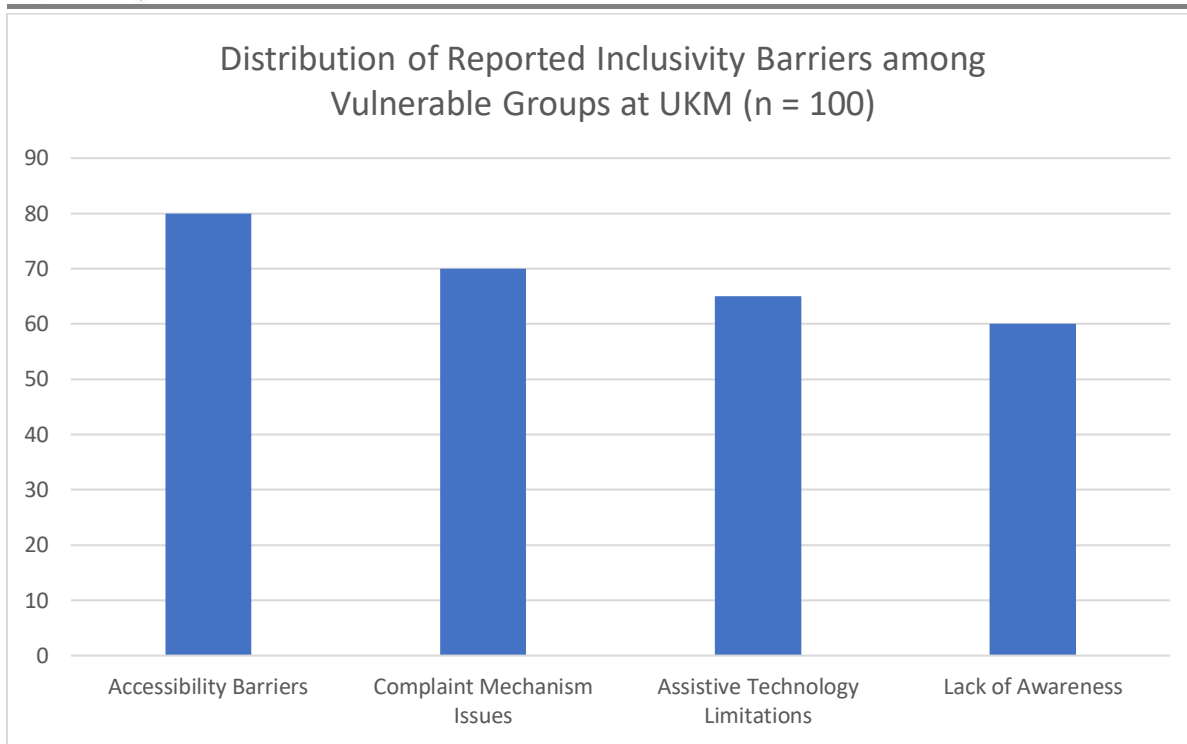


Figure 1. Reported Barriers to Inclusion among Respondents (n = 100)

As shown in Figure 1, accessibility barriers were the most frequently reported challenge, affecting approximately 80% of respondents. This is followed by weaknesses in complaint and grievance mechanisms (70%), limitations in assistive technology (65%), and a lack of awareness among staff and peers (60%). The distribution of responses indicates that inclusivity challenges at UKM are not confined to physical infrastructure alone but extend to institutional processes and support systems. These findings reinforce the argument that achieving meaningful inclusion requires a more comprehensive and integrated approach that addresses both structural and systemic barriers within the university environment.

Additionally, intersectional inequality was identified as a significant factor affecting students who experience marginalization due to intersecting identity categories. Interview responses highlighted the unique challenges faced by female PWD students from low-income families (B40). Students from low-income backgrounds reported experiencing compounded forms of marginalization. Female PWD students reported difficulty in obtaining essential services (healthcare, on-campus housing, financial assistance) that are available to students with non-disabling characteristics. However, these issues remain unacknowledged in current policy structures. Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1991) concept of intersectionality provides a theoretical lens for understanding the dynamics at play when policies intended to promote equity and fairness do not account for the experiences of individuals whose identities are composed of multiple intersecting factors of disadvantage.

Finally, one of the most compelling findings of the study relates to the lack of a central database to monitor compliance with existing inclusion policies. While each department/unit/college maintains records related to student services, HR functions, and physical plant maintenance, there is no integrated method for collecting and analyzing data on how well the University is meeting its goals in these areas. Consequently, UKM employs a reactive model of policy development, primarily based on individual complaints or employee-initiated projects rather than on aggregated data from a variety of sources to inform policy decisions. Without a comprehensive longitudinal dataset, it becomes extremely challenging for administrative personnel to identify systematic trends in discrimination or to develop specific intervention programs. In essence, without a central database of some sort to measure progress toward inclusion, measuring inclusion and holding faculty/administrators accountable for achieving it becomes virtually impossible.

Overall, these results provide a clear illustration of the challenges present and the opportunities that exist for UKM moving forward. It appears that while institutional rhetoric is becoming increasingly inclusive, there is

still much work to be done to build an inclusive culture by establishing an inclusive infrastructure, developing inclusive processes/systems, and creating an inclusive culture. The study clearly illustrates the need for strategic reform initiatives (informed by empirical data collected from members of the university community) to help close the gap between institutional intent and institutional action.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The commitment to inclusion is universally regarded as a cornerstone of higher education; however, the results of this study demonstrate that operationalizing that ideal is far more complex than the rhetoric surrounding it. Inclusion is clearly stated in official documents at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), including the Sustainability Strategic Plan 2030. However, the findings indicate a significant disconnect between the institution's aspirational language regarding inclusion and the actual lived experiences of members of the university community.

That disconnect is emblematic of a recurring problem, the lack of specific mechanisms to implement inclusionary ideals. In the absence of defined paths to implement inclusive ideas, well-meaning policies may remain abstract concepts. Specifically, Nancy Fraser (2009) makes an especially pertinent point here. She argues that genuine justice extends beyond redistributive measures, which address the recognition of needs and identities that have historically been structurally marginalized. For UKM, the lack of recognition is not merely theoretical, but also organizational.

Perhaps most immediately and visibly affected by the disconnect between the aspirational language and the lived experiences of members of the UKM community are individuals with disabilities (PWDs), whether as students or employees. Although PWDs are formally recognized as members of the UKM community, many report experiencing exclusion in their daily lives. PWDs were found to frequently experience exclusion related to inaccessible facilities, inadequate assistive technology, and unreliable grievance procedures. Additionally, respondents report that faculty/staff often fail to recognize diversity-related needs because UKM does not provide adequate training/instruction on recognizing/ addressing the needs of diverse students/staff. Many respondents acknowledge the existence of inclusion commitments at UKM, but they feel excluded from decision-making processes. Respondents report that some have never been asked/consulted about policies intended to benefit them. Those omissions reflect broader problems in inclusive governance.

The situation is further exacerbated when viewed through an intersectional lens. Female students with disabilities from B40 (poor income) families experienced multiple layers of exclusion based upon poverty, gender, and disability. The combined effects of exclusion experienced by female PWD students from low-income backgrounds rarely appear in written policy documents. Those types of exclusions require institutions to consider the interplay of identity categories (e.g., race/gender/disability) and how those interactions exacerbate disadvantage. Crenshaw's (1991) theory of intersectionality specifically identifies how seemingly neutral policies can result in injustices when they fail to recognize how different identity categories interact to produce disadvantages.

A second important consideration is the lack of a comprehensive, data-driven evaluation system to measure the success of inclusive efforts. As currently implemented, decisions at UKM regarding inclusion issues are generally reactive — triggered by a complaint or other ad hoc incident — rather than proactive and informed by predictive or longitudinal data. Currently, UKM has no centralized "dashboard" or single platform for collecting relevant data across departments. Thus, while the institution's inability to collect systematic data obscures patterns of structural inequality and allows for uncoordinated/unintended interventions, it also limits the institution's capacity to anticipate/ prevent gaps from expanding.

In summary, creating meaningful inclusion will require more than just declarations or strategic commitments. It will require a major shift in how institutions are organized, how decisions are made, and whose voices are heard in the decision-making process. Inclusion must evolve from a top-down model into a contextualized, bottom-up approach. To facilitate that evolution, policies should be developed collaboratively with the communities they

are intended to serve, especially those who have traditionally been excluded. Through that collaboration, inclusion can transition from an administrative exercise into a collective institutional ethos.

This study extends existing scholarship on inclusive higher education by demonstrating that the primary challenge lies not in the absence of policy, but in its institutional operationalization. While previous studies (e.g., Abdullah et al., 2019) have emphasized resource limitations and institutional commitment, the present findings reveal that fragmented governance structures and the absence of centralized monitoring mechanisms significantly constrain effective implementation. This suggests that inclusivity should be reframed not merely as a normative policy objective, but as an institutional performance issue requiring measurable indicators, accountability systems, and continuous evaluation. By highlighting the roles of data-driven governance and stakeholder participation, this study contributes a more operational, practice-oriented perspective to the implementation of SDG 10 within higher education institutions, particularly in the Malaysian context.

Creating an inclusive "real-time" tracking dashboard is offered as a practical first step toward facilitating inclusive practices at UKM. That tool would enable continuous tracking of accessibility, support, participation, and representation of underrepresented groups throughout all levels of the university. Importantly, the dashboard must not only track metrics but also inform evidence-based decision-making and promote institutional transparency. Furthermore, it should be supported by the creation of a Special Committee on Inclusivity (Jawatankuasa Khas Keterangkunan, JKK). The special committee would function across departments and be responsible for monitoring compliance with inclusion policies and recommending changes as necessary to ensure that voices representing marginalized groups continue to be heard.

Ultimately, building an inclusive policy framework requires tangible structural reform. Therefore, a new, inclusive policy framework, i.e., UKM's Inclusion Policy 2.0, must include formal structures for shared governance and participatory democracy. Vulnerable groups on campus, e.g., PWD students/staff, ethnic minorities, and low-income populations, must participate in policy formulation not only as recipients but as contributors/authors of policy. All university personnel, administrators, faculty, and staff must receive role-specific training on inclusion to ensure cultural transformation occurs in tandem with policy transformation.

When UKM aligns its structural elements with its intentions, several benefits follow. It will establish a more transparent governance model; promote greater equity in hiring staff; create more comprehensive student experiences; enhance the international reputation of the university; and ultimately fulfil SDG 10 not simply as a bureaucratic checklist item but as a driver of institutional transformation that envisions universities not only as spaces of learning but as spaces where dignity, justice and shared humanity flourish.

CONCLUSION

Higher education institutions in the 21st century must be structurally inclusive to achieve legitimacy and sustainability. This study reinforces that inclusive development will need to be embedded not only in institutional policy declarations but also in university governance systems, institutional culture, and mechanisms that shape campus life. Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia's (UKM) Adoption of SDG 10 offers a critical lens through which to evaluate both UKM's stated commitments to reduce inequality and its structural readiness to do so. While the Sustainability Strategic Plan 2030 clearly articulates a vision for equity and access, the research reveals significant gaps between UKM's stated intentions and their implementation, primarily in physical accessibility infrastructure, policy functionality, and integrated monitoring mechanisms.

Through participatory data-driven action research methods used throughout this study, it was possible to document systemic challenges experienced by persons with disabilities (PWDS) and other vulnerable groups within the university. While these challenges extend beyond the barriers to physical accessibility experienced by people with disabilities (PWDS), they are often compounded forms of marginalization related to gender, socio-economic status, and identity, issues that are often unaccounted for in top-down policy frameworks.

Moreover, the absence of integrated data systems at UKM hinders its ability to track outcomes relative to inclusivity, reducing the potential for proactive interventions by the university and weakening institutional accountability. One of the major contributions of the study is the proposal for a reimagined model of inclusive

policy development, one that is contextually grounded and co-created with affected communities. The creation of a university-wide inclusion dashboard is a step toward operationalizing this model, offering an opportunity to monitor progress across key domains, including accessibility, participation, support services, and representation. Additionally, the dashboard is conceived not as a static reporting tool, but rather as a dynamic foundation for evidence-based, transparent policymaking.

Further, the study demonstrates the necessity of establishing a cross-departmental special committee on inclusion (Jawatankuasa Khas Keterangkuan). Such a body would serve as an institutional anchor for inclusive governance processes, tasked with overseeing policy implementation, recommending improvements thereto, and ensuring that the voices of marginalized communities remain integral to decision-making processes.

In addition to the technical recommendations above, the study emphasizes that transformation toward inclusivity requires both cultural and structural change. Equipping all levels of university personnel, from administrators and academic staff to front-line support teams, with role-specific training in inclusive practices can align institutional behaviors with values of equity and foster an environment where equity is a lived reality. Transformation of UKM into a truly inclusive institution is not only achievable but imperative. Findings indicate that with continued political will, collaborative leadership, and active participation by the university community, UKM may evolve as a national model for inclusive higher education. SDG 10 should not be viewed as a distant benchmark or compliance metric, but rather as a catalyst for deep institutional renewal, an opportunity to re-imagine the university not simply as a space for teaching/learning, but as a space for dignity, justice, and collective human flourishing.

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