

Research Article

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Exploring the Motivations and Impacts of Self-Advocacy: A Qualitative Study among Higher Education Students with Disabilities in Indonesia

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Abstract

Background/purpose. Self-advocacy is an important but underserved skill for students with disabilities in higher education, especially in Indonesia, where structural and social barriers persist. This study explores the reasons behind self-advocacy and the experiences of students with disabilities who actively advocate for themselves. The study fills the gap in understanding student agency in navigating higher education environments that are not fully inclusive.

Materials/methods. The study employed an online survey targeting students with disabilities across Indonesian universities. A total of 103 respondents participated, with 50 students (48.5%) reporting experiences of self-advocacy on campus. The survey included both closed- and open-ended questions, which were thematically analyzed to explore the reasons and perceived impacts of the self-advocacy practices.

Results. Four main reasons as motivations for self-advocacy emerged: encountering barriers on campus, awareness of disability rights, motivation for self-development, and seizing opportunities. The reported impacts reflected a combination of success and challenges, including positive changes, self-benefits, unmet expectations, and uncertainty. These findings suggest that self-advocacy is a purposeful, goal-driven process shaped by both institutional conditions and individual agency.

Conclusion. While self-advocacy can empower students and catalyze institutional change, it should not substitute for systemic responsibility. The study emphasizes the need for proactive institutional support and contributes new insights into disability agency in the Global South, particularly within the Indonesian higher education context.

1. Introduction

Access to education is a fundamental human right enshrined in international human rights frameworks. Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) grants persons with disabilities the right to inclusive education and access to adequate support for achieving equal educational opportunities (Broderick, 2018). Education functions as both a means for self-development and a tool for achieving social equity, empowerment, and inclusion (Shaeffer, 2019; Spiel et al., 2018).

As a signatory to UNCRPD, Indonesia has made progress upon the rights of persons with disabilities through Law No. 8/2016 concerning Persons with Disabilities. This law acknowledges the rights of persons with disabilities to receive an education at all levels, from primary to higher education, while also advocating for reasonable accommodation and accessibility (Amnesti et al., 2023; Paramita et al., 2024; Rrofiah et al., 2023). Every higher education institution must establish Disability Service Units as per Regulation No. 48/2023 issued by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology during 2023. The national government runs special scholarships for disabled students through programs that seek to minimize financial obstacles to education (Rahajeng et al., 2024; Rrofiah et al., 2023).

Despite these legal and political advances, practicing inclusive education in Indonesia continues to face challenges. A recent study by Amnesti et al. (2023) stated that the number of Indonesian universities that support students through their DSUs remains considerably lower than what is observed in universities across the United States or Singapore. Current implementing practices demonstrate major variations between institutions even though there is formal support for inclusion through policy statements. The existence of DSUs cannot ensure productive support independently as variations in funding, staff expertise, and institutional commitment (Paramita et al., 2024).

In Indonesia, students with disabilities encounter major obstacles in various forms, including significant social barriers during their educational journey. Students experience discrimination from both their academic peers and their faculty members. They report that these groups lack awareness, which restricts their access to educational activities and social experiences. Students face various accessibility problems, including facilities that are unable to accommodate students with disabilities (Paramita et al., 2024; Rrofiah et al., 2023). They often receive what Wertans & Burch (2022) referred to as "better or nothing" educational services.

Students with disabilities make self-advocacy a vital strategy to navigate systemic barriers and claim their rights (Bruce & Aylward, 2021). Self-advocacy practices provide students with the ability to describe their needs while requesting accommodations and influencing policy making regarding disability inclusion. Students have greater power through self-advocacy since it shifts authority from institutional efforts to student's hands.

Globally, self-advocacy has been recognized as a vital component of academic persistence and student empowerment (Bruce & Aylward, 2021; Kimball et al., 2016; Pfeifer et al., 2021). However, most of this scholarship originates from Western or Global North contexts, where institutional support and disability awareness are often more developed. In contrast, empirical studies from the Global South, including Indonesia, remain limited (Rahajeng & Hendriani, 2022). Existing research in Indonesia has largely focused on policy implementation and general accessibility issues in higher education (Amnesti et al., 2023; Rismawati et al., 2024; Rrofiah et al., 2023) while offering little insight into the self-advocacy strategies students actually use or the systemic dynamics they must navigate.

As Meekosha (2011) emphasized, disability studies must account for the socio-political and cultural differences between the Global North and South. Without local research, dominant discourses may marginalize southern experiences. Therefore, reproducing and recontextualizing self-

advocacy research in Global South settings is essential to enrich global understanding and build more inclusive theoretical frameworks.

Due to this research gap, this study aims to investigate students with disabilities in Indonesian higher education institutions and their way of advocating for navigating higher education challenges. It contributes to the emerging body of knowledge on student agency in non-Western contexts and provides empirical insights that can inform both institutional reform and national policy on inclusive education. Specifically, this study focuses on students with disabilities who have engaged in self-advocacy, exploring their motivations and how these efforts influence their academic and social experiences within the Indonesian higher education context. Rather than merely mapping institutional barriers, the research foregrounds student voices and agency as central to understanding inclusion from the ground up.

The study is guided by the following questions:

- What motivates students with disabilities to engage in self-advocacy?
- What are the perceived impacts of self-advocacy on their academic and social experiences?

To understand self-advocacy in this context, this study is informed by two key theoretical frameworks: the Social Model of Disability and Causal Agency Theory. Under the Social Model of Disability, researchers demonstrate how external barriers rather than personal conditions produce social exclusion (Goodley, 2005; Oliver, 2013). Meanwhile, the Causal Agency Theory helps explain how students with disabilities develop the agency to advocate for their needs (Shogren et al., 2015). Together, these perspectives provide a holistic lens to explore the individual and systematic elements of self-advocacy in students with disabilities.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Self-Advocacy

Self-advocacy refers to the students' skill to communicate their needs and assert their rights (Goodley, 2005; Test et al., 2005). Self-advocacy is an important skill for students with disabilities to have because it empowers them to ask for the reasonable accommodation they need to support their academic experience. Studies have shown that self-advocacy contributes to academic success (Rahajeng et al., 2023).

Self-advocacy involves taking proactive measures with surrounding communities and institutions to create necessary reforms (Kimball et al., 2016; Nikolarazi et al., 2021; Pfeifer et al., 2021). As students with disabilities assert their rights and manage their needs, they become active participants in their education. This ability to self-advocate helps them overcome systemic barriers and make informed decisions regarding their academic and personal needs. In this sense, self-advocacy serves as a foundation of student empowerment and academic inclusion (Bruce & Aylward, 2021; Kimball et al., 2016). Through self-advocacy, students become empowered agents in shaping their educational experiences, fostering greater participation, autonomy, and confidence.

In higher education, accommodations are often not automatically provided unless students actively disclose their disabilities and advocate for the necessary resources. As pointed out by (Pfeifer et al., 2021), students with disabilities frequently need to request support not only from instructors but also from their peers. Without self-advocacy, they risk being marginalized from the full educational experience.

Self-advocacy is based on students' understanding of their rights and their readiness to assert that their needs are being met (Test et al., 2005). When students understand their rights and are confident in asserting them, they are more likely to succeed academically and socially. Self-advocacy is an essential feature of transition programs for students with disabilities, which prepares students

for both academic and personal challenges they may face as they move to higher education (Ju et al., 2017; Schena et al., 2022).

However, self-advocacy is not without its challenges. It requires students to confront authority and demand some changes to the system (Bruce & Aylward, 2021). In Indonesia, where collectivist and harmonious values are upheld, it can be even more difficult for students with disabilities to articulate their rights (Rahajeng et al., 2024). In this sort of setup, self-advocacy would easily be misperceived as confrontational or even disruptive and would clash with students' needs with the broader social norms. The request for accommodation would be impossible due to lack of awareness regarding disability in the community because what they are requesting would seem "far-fetched" or "not necessary." Thus, advocating for one's needs is made even more complex by the social challenges with which students with disabilities must deal (Bruce & Aylward, 2021).

2.2. Social Model of Disability

The Social Model of Disability provides vital frameworks for examining systemic barriers that hinder full participation of persons with disabilities. According to this model, disability is not simply a function of an impairment in the person's body or mind; rather, various environmental and societal barriers are paramount. It challenges the traditional Medical Model of Disability, which views disability as an inherent personal deficit that must be corrected or rehabilitated. The Social Model would focus not on individuals but rather on social structures (Oliver, 2013).

Social and institutional structures have historically been engineered primarily to serve the needs of the majority populations, which are often indifferent to the needs of persons with disabilities. This exclusion manifests in all walks of life, from education to employment to public participation (Shakespeare & Watson, 2001). The Medical Model considers the needs of the individual first so that the needed intervention takes the form of medical treatment to fit into a pre-existing structure (Koon, 2022; Zaks, 2023). However, the Social Model argues that true inclusion requires transforming these structures, as opposed to expecting students with disabilities to submit themselves to an unyielding system (Oliver, 2013; Shakespeare & Watson, 2001).

In the context of higher education, the Social Model posits that conventional educational environments frequently exhibit discriminatory tendencies towards students with disabilities. Conventional teaching methods, such as lecture-based courses and paper-based assessments, assume that all students process information in the same manner. It engenders an inherent disadvantage for students with sensory, cognitive, or mobility impairments. For instance, deaf students may encounter difficulties accessing auditory information during lectures if sign language interpreters or real-time captioning are not present, while blind students face obstacles when course materials are not available in accessible digital formats. Likewise, students with learning disabilities encounter challenges in examinations that lack the flexibility to accommodate an array of different cognitive processing styles.

Higher education institutions using the Social Model framework prioritize universal design in education, ensuring that accessibility becomes part of the policies and practices instead of an afterthought (Pratiwi et al., 2018). Inclusive teaching and learning strategies, integration of assistive technologies into standard learning modalities, and instilling an institutional culture of disability awareness can go a long way towards minimizing the students' need to self-advocate. The Social Model strengthens the argument that equal education means restructuring the environments to enable the fullest participation of all students, not compensating for a student's impairment (Kamperman, 2020).

From this perspective, the study applying the social model conceives self-advocacy as an essential reaction to structural inequity rather than just a matter of personal initiative. Inaccessible

environments leave students with disabilities compelled to assume the responsibility of advocating for their rights and accommodations (Yssel et al., 2016). Using the Social Model, this study seeks to explore how structural barriers relate to advocacy and what institutions can do to create a more welcoming environment for students with disabilities to advocate for themselves.

2.3. Causal Agency Theory (CAT)

Causal Agency Theory (CAT) provides a theoretical framework that explains how individuals actively shape their lives through self-directed actions to achieve desired outcomes (Shogren et al., 2015). As an extension of self-determination theory, CAT posits that individuals are not passive recipients of external circumstances but are capable of making choices, setting goals, and taking strategic actions to influence their environment.

CAT identifies three key components of causal agency: (1) volitional action, where individuals make intentional decisions based on their needs and aspirations; (2) agentic action, which refers to deliberate efforts to influence outcomes; and (3) action-control beliefs, which reflect individuals' perceptions of their ability to effect change (Shogren et al., 2015). These elements are directly related to self-advocacy, as students with disabilities must recognize their rights, develop strategies, and take action to secure accommodations and support within their academic institutions. For example, a student seeking assistive technology or extended exam time must assess university policies, identify potential barriers (e.g., lack of awareness among faculty) and resources (e.g., peer support system), and strategically communicate their needs (Pfeifer et al., 2021). This demonstrates agentic action, as students proactively work toward achieving educational equity rather than passively accepting limitations.

Moreover, CAT is particularly relevant in the study of self-advocacy among students with disabilities, as it highlights the intersection of personal agency and systemic structures in determining access and opportunities in education (Wehmeyer et al., 2017). While self-determination plays a central role, external structures—such as university policies, faculty attitudes, and peer support—also influence the effectiveness of self-advocacy efforts. In contexts where disability awareness is low, students may face additional resistance or stigma when asserting their rights (Bruce & Aylward, 2021; Yssel et al., 2016). On the other hand, when the environment is disability-friendly and supports disability inclusion, self-advocacy becomes less difficult and less burdensome. By applying CAT, this study examines not only the motivations behind self-advocacy but also the broader institutional dynamics that shape students' experiences.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design and Data Collection Procedure

Using a qualitative method, this study examined students with disabilities' experiences of self-advocating on campus. Participants were actively enrolled students with disabilities studying at universities across Indonesia. Participants were recruited through an invitation to complete an online survey link, shared on social media and circulated by our collegial network across multiple Disability Service Units (DSUs) and Disabled People's Organizations (DPOs). This strategy was chosen to reach students with verified disability backgrounds and varied advocacy experiences, leveraging existing support networks to ensure diverse participation. Data collection took place during August 2023.

3.2. Survey Instrument

The survey consisted of several sections. The first section collected demographic data related to participants' identity (e.g., age, gender, type of disability, major, year of study, and university name). The second section included open-ended questions regarding participants' self-advocacy

experiences. To ensure a shared understanding, we provided an explanation of self-advocacy, defining it as "the act of voicing opinions, making requests, and negotiating for accessibility and reasonable accommodations for lectures and other campus activities." Participants were asked to indicate whether they had ever engaged in such actions. If they had, they were instructed to respond to two open-ended questions: 1) Why do you self-advocate? and 2) What is the impact of your self-advocacy? Therefore, data on self-advocacy were obtained only from those participants who indicated that they had undertaken self-advocacy activities on campus.

To enhance credibility, the survey instrument was reviewed by two alumni—one with visual impairment and one with a physical disability (upper limb loss)—both of whom had recently graduated (within the past year) and remained closely connected to their campus communities. Their input focused on refining language to ensure clarity and accessibility across different disability types. In response, we revised some phrasing and prompts to align better with student experiences. The survey was created in Google Forms, tested with NVDA screen readers, and designed without time limits to accommodate motor impairments.

3.3. Participants

A total of 103 students with disabilities responded to the survey. However, only 50 students (48,5%) reported having engaged in self-advocacy on campus. The sample was equally divided by gender, with 25 females and 25 males, aged 19-41 years old ($M = 23.26$, $SD = 4.01$). Among these, 22 students had visual disabilities, 16 had physical disabilities, 9 had hearing disabilities, 3 had mental disabilities, and 1 had an intellectual disability. Most of the participants were undergraduate students ($n = 47$), while 2 were enrolled in diploma programs, and 1 was a postgraduate student. Regarding campus background, most participants came from universities with Disability Service Units (DSUs) ($n = 30$), while 12 participants came from campuses without DSUs, and 8 participants were unaware of the existence of a DSUs at their institution. This diverse sample provided a wide spectrum of experiences regarding self-advocacy and institutional contexts.

3.4. Data Analysis

Responses were downloaded in spreadsheet format and analyzed using Atlas.ti. We followed the steps outlined by Thomas and Harden (2008) for conducting thematic synthesis: 1) coding the text, 2) developing descriptive themes, and 3) synthesizing analytical themes.

In the first step, we carefully read each participant's response and assigned one or more codes that captured key aspects of their experiences. In the second step, we reviewed the codes and grouped them into clusters based on similarities, providing each cluster with descriptive labels. In the final step, we engaged in further analysis to find relationships between themes and ensure that they addressed the research questions.

To enhance analytic rigor, reflexive memos were maintained throughout the process using the comment and memo feature in Atlas.ti. This helped the researcher track analytic decisions, remain aware of personal biases, and ensure that emerging themes stayed grounded in participants' perspectives.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

This study was reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Nursing, Universitas Airlangga, with approval number 2899-KEPK on May 31, 2023. Participation in the study was voluntary. At the beginning of the survey, participants were fully informed about the research objectives, procedures, risks, and benefits. Only after providing informed consent could participants proceed with the survey. To maintain confidentiality, participants were not required to provide

identifying information. As a token of appreciation, those who completed the survey received an IDR 20,000 (approximately USD 1.3) e-wallet transfer.

4. Results

The responses to the first question varied between 2 words and 126 words. For the second question, participants provided responses ranging between 2 words and 103 words. We selected participants' responses based on relevance, meaning that participants' responses should express the motivation for self-advocacy or illustrate the impact of self-advocacy. We identified 62 responses to the first question and 60 responses to the second question met the criteria for further analysis.

4.1. *Motivation for self-advocacy*

To enhance transparency, Table 1 presents how participant narratives were coded and synthesized into four overarching themes reflecting students' motivations for self-advocacy. While quotes illustrating these themes appear in the table, this section provides an interpretative account of how each theme was represented across responses.

1. *Encountering barriers on campus*

Many students were prompted to self-advocate after encountering both physical and social barriers in their academic environment. These included inadequate infrastructure (such as the absence of wheelchair ramps or closed captioning), negative attitudes, and a general lack of disability awareness among peers and lecturers. Students expressed frustration with having to repeatedly explain their needs and feeling invisible or infantilized. These experiences reinforced their need to assert themselves in order to participate equally in campus life.

2. *Awareness of disability rights*

Participants demonstrated a strong awareness of their legal and educational rights as persons with disabilities. This awareness often acted as a catalyst for advocacy. Students emphasized their entitlement to equal treatment, accommodations, and recognition—both for themselves and for the wider disability community. The presence of rights-based language in many responses reflects an internalized sense of justice and a desire to hold institutions accountable to inclusive values.

3. *Motivation for self-development*

For some students, self-advocacy was driven by a desire to grow personally and academically. This included aspirations such as graduating, improving self-confidence, participating more actively in campus life, and building interpersonal skills. These students framed self-advocacy as part of their broader developmental journey, not just as a response to external barriers.

4. *Seizing opportunities*

Some participants engaged in self-advocacy primarily because opportunities were presented to them. They received these opportunities through faculty invites and student organization platforms that enabled them to present their concerns and requirements. Student bodies and lecturers organized meetings that included various participants to discuss the needs of students with disabilities. These structured platforms enabled students to articulate their needs and represent the concerns of the disability community on campus.

Table 1. Motivation Theme Coding Table

Analytical Theme	Descriptive Category	Example Quote
1. Encountering Barriers	Limited accessibility	There is no wheelchair access or ramp in the faculty building" (F, 20 years old, Physical disabilities).
	Negative attitudes	I often witness discrimination against autistic people, and their opinions are not heard even when they speak out. (F, 20 years old, Blind and Autistic)
	Lack of disability awareness	Because as lecturers, they need to understand how to interact and communicate with blind people as well as how to provide effective and comprehensive explanations of lecture material and also how to assign assignments to blind students (M, 22, Blind)
2. Awareness of Disability Rights	Seeking rights fulfillment	Because I have the feeling that I have rights that must be fulfilled (M, 22 years old, Physical disabilities).
	Demanding equality	I want to be treated equally in terms of tasks (F, 21 years old, Blind).
	Fighting for collective rights	I believe that participating in disability forums is an effective way to raise awareness, share experiences, and contribute to fighting for the rights of deaf students and the disability community more broadly (M, 20 years old, Deaf).
3. Self-Development	Desire for academic success	To get a diploma (M, 23 years old, Autistic).
	Desire to improve oneself	Because I want to improve myself (F, 20 years old, Physical disabilities).
	Desire to engage	Because I want to help with the group work (F, 22 years old, Deaf)
4. Seizing Opportunities	Being invited to speak up	To be sure, at the beginning of the 3rd semester meeting, precisely when the offline class began, I was called to the guardian lecturer's room to be asked for information regarding teaching methods for students with disabilities, especially blind students, considering that I was the first blind student on campus. (M, 20 years old, Blind)
	Having a privilege or formal role	Since, at that time, I was part of the student association committee in the department, I had the opportunity to deliver the program. (F, 22 years old, deaf)

4.2. Impact of self-advocacy

The impacts of self-advocacy as reported by participants were categorized into four major themes: positive change, self-benefits, unmet expectations, and uncertainty. These themes, along with descriptive subcategories and illustrative quotes, are presented in Table 2. The following section

elaborates on these themes and highlights how participants perceived the outcomes of their advocacy.

1. Positive Changes

Many students described tangible improvements in their academic environments as a result of their self-advocacy efforts. Participant initiatives resulted in improved understanding between themselves and their lecturers as well as their classmates. Furthermore, the campus environment responded to participants' needs, providing accommodations such as an accessible website display. These changes represent institutional acknowledgment of disability-related concerns, albeit on a case-by-case basis.

2. Self-Benefits

In addition to structural improvements, self-advocacy yielded personal gains. Many participants reported an increased sense of empowerment, pride, and usefulness on campus as a result of their advocacy efforts. Advocacy experiences helped some participants build stronger self-esteem and develop a sense of personal agency. Participants also found that their self-advocacy helped them build support networks. In certain cases, advocacy even led to access to resources, such as financial aid or exam modifications, that directly improved their academic functioning.

3. Unmet Expectations

However, not all advocacy efforts led to the desired outcomes. Some participants expressed frustration that their advocacy did not lead to the changes they had hoped for, either because no changes were made or because the changes were insufficient. Others mentioned feeling ignored by the university, which led to dissatisfaction. These experiences contributed to feelings of discouragement and raised questions about the institution's genuine commitment to inclusion.

4. Uncertainty

Some participants were unsure whether their advocacy efforts had any impact. A number of participants expressed uncertainty about whether their self-advocacy efforts had led to concrete changes. Some were unsure if their concerns had been followed up. This uncertainty often stemmed from a lack of feedback or visible policy change.

Table 2. Impact Theme Coding Table

Analytical Theme	Descriptive Category	Example Quote
1. Positive Change	Accessibility and accommodation	The university where I study has created an accessible website and e-learning that is accessible to all students, including those with visual difficulties (M, 24, Blind)
	Improved disability awareness	(My) Classmates can understand and care about blind people (F, 20, Blind)
	Campus responsiveness	The impact is <i>alhamdulillah</i> better than before (F, 20, Blind)
2. Self-Benefits	Support network	(It's) Creating a strong network between deaf students and disability advocates (M, 20, Deaf)
	Positive feelings	Feeling relieved and satisfied (F, 20, Deaf)

	Increased self-esteem	I'm currently (feeling) more useful on campus (F, 21, Blind)
	Other functional benefits	I received social funding for a hearing aid allowance of 1.5 million (F, 22, Deaf)
3. Unmet expectations	Partial or unsatisfactory response	Lecture support facilities for students with disabilities have not all been fulfilled (F, 23, Blind)
	Being ignored	There is no change, my information is ignored (F, 23, Physical disabilities)
4. Uncertainty	Lack of clarity on impact	I don't know if it was formulated into a campus policy or not (M, 24, Blind)

5. Discussion

This study successfully developed the MOPjBML platform as an interactive learning medium for the Introduction to Business course, explicitly focusing on marketing materials. The platform was designed with an engaging, intuitive, and interactive visual approach, enabling students to learn

This study identified four themes related to the motivations of students with disabilities to engage in self-advocacy: encountering barriers on campus, awareness of disability rights, motivation for self-development, and seizing opportunities. Additionally, the impacts of self-advocacy included positive institutional change and self-benefit, as well as unmet expectations and uncertainty. These findings offer empirical support for the Social Model of Disability and Causal Agency Theory (CAT) while also contributing to a Global South perspective that is underrepresented in current literature.

5.1. Motivation for Self-Advocacy

This research study verifies that students with disabilities at Indonesian higher education institutions predominantly base their self-advocacy efforts on physical, infrastructure, and social barriers. This aligns with previous studies in Western contexts that highlight structural obstacles as key catalysts for student advocacy (e.g., Kimball & Thoma, 2019; Valle-Flórez et al., 2021). However, the Indonesian context adds nuance—many institutions lack functional Disability Service Units (DSUs), and students often face the added burden of initiating support themselves. This supports the Social Model of Disability's assertion that societal structures—not impairments—produce exclusion (Oliver, 2013; Shakespeare & Watson, 2010).

Students were also driven by awareness of their rights and the desire to advance disability inclusion not only for themselves but for the broader community. This sense of collective empowerment echoes findings by Pfeifer et al., (2021) and Bruce & Aylward (2021), yet in Indonesia, where advocacy may be viewed as confrontational, this represents a significant cultural negotiation (Rahajeng et al., 2024). The findings affirm that rights consciousness can serve as a critical enabler of agency, even in challenging environments.

The research also highlights the agency of students with disabilities in driving self-advocacy. Students practice self-advocacy because they have defined aims concerning disability rights while simultaneously recognizing that academic progress and personal growth and meaningful participation are essential for their success. These findings challenge deficit-based assumptions by demonstrating that students with disabilities maintain their independent initiative instead of receiving only modified educational resources. This reflects CAT's emphasis on volitional and agentic action, where individuals intentionally shape their environments to achieve valued outcomes. (Madaus et al., 2021; Shogren et al., 2015).

Additionally, the study found that advocacy was facilitated when institutional environments demonstrated both inclusivity and support towards them. The presence of Disability Service Units (DSUs), responsive staff, and inclusive peers made a significant difference. Previous results presented by Kimball & Thoma (2019), Madaus et al. (2021), and Pfeifer et al. (2021) mirror findings that institutional climate plays a key role in developing self-advocacy. Students acquire self-advocacy skills in supportive environments, which provide them with safety and the necessary power to demand their rights, highlighting how institutional inclusivity can spark self-advocacy.

Our survey results showed that self-advocacy occurs among 48.5% of the respondents, which implies that many students with disabilities do not adopt this behavior as a standard practice. The behavior of self-advocacy seems complex, and encounters multiple barriers that prevent its occurrence more frequently (Kamperman, 2020; Yssel et al., 2016). In the Indonesian context, this may reflect both a lack of disability rights education and institutional cultures that do not encourage student voices from marginalized groups.

5.2. Impacts of Self-Advocacy

The multiple effects of self-advocacy demonstrated both positive outcomes together with difficulties which students encountered. They also described both institutional and personal gain.

At the institutional level, students managed to bring about institutional progress through faculty and the creation of disability advocacy structures. Through their accomplishments, students improved academic settings for their current accessibility as well as for students with disabilities who will come after them. The research findings demonstrate that student self-advocacy creates broad-reaching effects that boost campus climate (Bartolo et al., 2025; Kimball et al., 2016).

At the individual level, self-advocacy leads students to develop higher self-esteem which demonstrates how advocacy serves as an empowering practice. The findings validate the relationship between self-advocacy practices and personal objectives that focus on learning development and personal progress (Bartolo et al., 2025).

However, challenges remained. Students met resistance as specific campus officials, together with faculty members, refused to recognize or deliver arranged accommodations for students with disabilities. Students feel burnt out because they need to fight for their rights in institutions that continuously provide inadequate official support systems. Self-advocacy can also be emotionally and physically exhausting when institutions fail to respond adequately (Yssel et al., 2016). The emotional burden was compounded by uncertainty, many students did not know whether their advocacy resulted in policy change, reflecting a lack of transparency in institutional processes. The need to establish formal institutions with inclusion and accessibility policies becomes crucial because they should reduce the need for individual struggle in Indonesian higher education.

6. Conclusion, Limitations, and Future Research

This study explored the motivations and perceived impacts of self-advocacy among students with disabilities in Indonesian higher education. The findings demonstrate that self-advocacy emerges not only as a response to barriers but also as a proactive effort driven by rights awareness, personal growth, and institutional opportunity. According to both the Social Model of Disability and Causal Agency Theory, the research shows that students' self-advocate stems from structural barriers, the pursuit of their rights, a desire for personal development, and the presence of enabling environments. Self-advocacy develops as a deliberate action that allows students to direct their educational process after facing challenges. The practice of self-advocacy produces different effects, which include useful societal improvements together with personal transformation, and also leads to exhaustion and dissatisfaction. Self-advocacy brings transformation to students; however, such changes do not eliminate the need for institutional responsibility (Kamperman, 2020).

The study contributes to the literature by offering a Global South perspective that remains underrepresented in discussions of disability and higher education. The results affirm that self-advocacy is both a personal and structural phenomenon. On the one hand, it reflects students' volition, persistence, and sense of justice. On the other, it reveals the uneven institutional responses to disability inclusion. While self-advocacy can lead to empowerment and systemic improvements, it also exposes students to emotional fatigue and unmet expectations—especially in settings where support structures are weak or inconsistent. These findings reinforce the need for higher education institutions to shift from reactive to proactive inclusion, embedding advocacy support into campus culture and systems.

Furthermore, the finding that only half of the students surveyed were self-advocates underscores systemic limitations in fostering inclusive academic cultures. Previous research suggests that self-advocacy should be fostered through early support, access to information, and opportunities for expression (Daly-Cano et al., 2015), followed by the development of an inclusive campus climate for persons with disabilities. The absence of these enabling conditions may prevent students from recognizing their rights, understanding available mechanisms, or feeling safe enough to voice their needs. Institutions must, therefore, not only provide accommodations but also cultivate an environment that normalizes advocacy as a constructive and expected part of the educational process.

There are specific limitations to the analysis conducted in this research. First, the research data was gathered through an online survey system that contained basic survey questions. Although the survey was designed to be accessible, it may have limited the depth of participants' responses, as they may have found written surveys less comfortable, which could affect the richness of the data collected. Future research into student lived experiences should use in-depth interviews or group discussions as alternative data collection methods to attain a deeper understanding of student experiences.

Second, the recruitment strategy via open social media platforms introduced a risk of including ineligible or non-targeted participants. Although no such case was confirmed, this potential limitation suggests the need for more controlled recruitment channels, such as verified student groups or institutional referrals, in future research.

Third, this study focused solely on students with disabilities who reported having engaged in self-advocacy. The study contributes important insight regarding student advocacy experiences but fails to include information from students who face obstacles in self-advocacy or those who abstain from it. Research should examine the experiences of underrepresented students to gain a full understanding of the interaction of disability and agency in higher education.

7. Suggestion

The conclusions from this research produce meaningful recommendations for future teaching and conceptual applications within Indonesian higher education institutions. Although Indonesia established enlightened legislation regarding Persons with Disabilities together with supporting rules the institutional drive to implement these laws proves constrained and irregular. Systemic challenges in student rights support become evident because less than half of the respondents demonstrated self-advocacy behaviors.

Many Indonesian higher education institutions maintain either non-operational Disability Service Units (DSUs) or their DSUs function at different levels of capacity. Students must carry the responsibility of support initiation even though they face the unfamiliar and hierarchical student environment which lacks disability awareness. Institutions need to take proactive measures to construct both inclusive policies and practice standards. Higher education institutions need to

develop better DSUs while implementing inclusive teaching standards and providing mandatory disability rights education for all staff members.

Furthermore, students with disabilities in Indonesia often enter higher education with little exposure to disability rights or self-advocacy practices, due in part to the limited inclusion in primary and secondary school. As such, university orientation, together with empowerment programs, must be integrated to help students gain both confidence and skills needed for self-advocacy practice. The programs should include rights education, communication training, and workshops for establishing personal goals.

The findings demonstrate the necessity of cultural changes that must happen within higher education institutions. Student advocacy is often regarded as confrontational in Indonesia because cultural norms encompass high power distance together with low student academic participation. Organizations promoting self-advocacy need to work on developing spaces that accept diverse input while trusting students with disabilities. Staff members who represent both faculty and administrative teams should understand that students with disabilities demand participation rather than passive assistance.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study affirms the relevance of the Social Model of Disability and Causal Agency Theory in explaining self-advocacy experience in a Global South context. It emphasizes that self-advocacy is both a matter of personal determination and shaped by socio-cultural norms. As such, future models of inclusive education must account for interplay between personal agency, institutional responsiveness, and sociocultural context in enabling students with disabilities to take control of their academic journeys.

Declarations

Author Contributions. All authors have read and approved the published version of the article.

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