Breaking Down Barriers: A Case Study on the Effectiveness on D.E.T.A.I.L in Advancing Disability Equality among Student Leaders

(Meruntuhkan Halangan-halangan: Kajian Kes tentang Keberkesanan D.E.T.A.I.L dalam Memajukan Kesaksamaan Kurang Upaya di kalangan Pemimpin Mahasiswa)

ALI KARIMI MOHD NASRI & MUHAMMAD IRFAN ROSDIN

ABSTRACT

D.E.T.A.I.L an acronym stands for Disability Equality Training and Inclusive Leadership program launched by IIUM Disability Service Unit with the collaboration from IIUM Student Union. The goal of this program is to enhance understanding and to develop skills and knowledge on leadership qualities that embrace inclusion. Persons with Disabilities (PWD) are often marginalized due to a lack of awareness and empathy in society. Therefore, to overcome this issue, it requires societal awareness and fostering empathy to promote inclusion and equal treatment for people with disabilities. The primary objective of this study is to determine the effectiveness of D.E.T.A.I.L. in fostering awareness and empathy among student leaders and how they could contribute back to society in general. This study uses a qualitative case study design, with interviews as the primary method of data collection and social models of disability will be used as a guideline in this study. This study makes a significant contribution especially toward the disability community through shaping student leaders' attitude and practices on inclusive strategies for the creation of a more inclusive education environment aligning with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) in promoting equal and lifelong learning to all. Thus, it starts from the leader to create and foster understanding and give the opportunity to the disability community to participate in society without judgment.

Keywords: D.E.T.A.I.L., person with disabilities, inclusivity, empathy, student leaders

ABSTRAK

D.E.T.A.I.L adalah singkatan kepada program Latihan Kesaksamaan Orang Kurang Upaya dan Kepimpinan Inklusif yang dilancarkan oleh Unit Perkhidmatan Orang Kurang Upaya UIAM dengan kerjasama Kesatuan Pelajar UIAM. Matlamat program ini adalah untuk meningkatkan pemahaman dan untuk membangunkan kemahiran dan pengetahuan tentang kualiti kepimpinan yang merangkumi keterangkuman. Orang Kurang Upaya (OKU) sering terpinggir kerana kurangnya kesedaran dan empati dalam masyarakat. Oleh itu, untuk mengatasi isu ini, ia memerlukan kesedaran masyarakat dan memupuk empati untuk menggalakkan keterangkuman dan layanan yang sama untuk OKU. Objektif utama kajian ini adalah untuk mengukur keberkesanan D.E.T.A.I.L dalam memupuk kesedaran dan empati dalam kalangan pemimpin pelajar dan bagaimana mereka boleh menyumbang kembali kepada masyarakat secara amnya. Kajian ini menggunakan reka bentuk kajian kes kualitatif, menggunakan temu bual sebagai alat utama untuk mengumpul data dan model sosial ketidakupayaan akan digunakan sebagai garis panduan dalam kajian ini. Kajian ini memberi sumbangan yang besar terutamanya kepada komuniti orang kurang upaya melalui pembentukan sikap dan amalan pemimpin pelajar mengenai strategi keterangkuman bagi mewujudkan persekitaran pendidikan yang lebih inklusif sejajar dengan Matlamat Pembangunan Mampan 4 (SDG4) dalam menggalakkan pembelajaran yang saksama dan sepanjang hayat kepada semua. Justeru, ia bermula daripada pemimpin untuk mewujudkan dan memupuk persefahaman serta memberi peluang kepada masyarakat kurang upaya untuk turut serta dalam masyarakat tanpa pertimbangan.

Kata kunci: DETAIL, orang kurang upaya, keterangkuman, empati, pemimpin pelajar

INTRODUCTION

Creating inclusive schools for students with disabilities is a major leadership responsibility for principals throughout the world. At the same time, continued efforts are needed to confront specific barriers to inclusive education, such as attitudes toward people with disabilities, myths about the negative impact of students with disabilities on other students, lack of a clear definition of inclusion, inadequate preparation for inclusion, and insufficient resources (Hayes & Bulat, 2017; Loreman, Forlin, Chambers, Sharma, & Deppeler, 2014). The objectives of this article are explicitly to evaluate the significance of D.E.T.A.I.L. in breaking down barriers faced by Persons with Disabilities (PWDs), to demonstrate efficiency among student leaders, and to explore how increased disability awareness among student leaders can contribute to inclusive leadership and long-term social impact beyond university settings. The purpose of this article is to show the significance of D.E.T.A.I.L. in breaking down barriers for Person with Disabilities (PWDs) and proving its efficiency among Student Leaders. Disability Equality Training (DET) courses have been developed by disabled people to address the need for information about the reality of disability. The awareness of the reality of disability is limited because we live in a society geared towards people whose bodies and minds are fully functioning. This may seem strange when one considers that disability or illness can happen to anyone at any moment in their lives - it is an inevitable part of human experience. Nevertheless, society is organized in such a way as to treat disability as an exceptional circumstance that requires special and, in the main, separate provision which is often inadequate and serves only to maintain the divisions and lack of understanding between non-disabled and disabled people.

In Malaysia, the latest statistics show that only about 15% of Persons with Disabilities are enrolled in higher education (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2022), indicating the need for greater disability awareness and inclusive policies in universities to bridge this gap. This article builds on the Social Model of Disability as the guiding theoretical framework, which shifts focus from the individual's impairment to the societal barriers that disable them (Oliver, 1990).

D.E.T.A.I.L. is a combined version of DET and Inclusive Leadership modules designed by Professor Ruzita Mohd Amin, Head of IIUM Disability Services Unit (DSU) and Dato' Major (R) Yusri Bin Anwar, Advisor of DSU that was launched first with the collaboration of IIUM Student Union. This course adds a few extra elements such as Inclusive Leadership modules and experiential learnings for non-disabled participants. It encourages the student leaders to analyze the barriers faced by disabled people by experiencing it themselves and propose enhancement projects especially in terms of accessibility and inclusivity. This first designated program was conducted on International Day of Person with Disabilities, which is on 3rd December 2023. Then, this module was introduced and brought to the Higher Education Ministry level, which DSU conducted among the National Student Consultative Council (MPPK) with the hope that this awareness can spread widely in other universities by tackling all presidents of universities' student representative councils.

The ultimate goal of DET is to change societal attitudes to become just, equal and inclusive, where full participation and equality for disabled people are assured and to elevate the scale of awareness among student leaders that are potentially becoming future leaders in all levels and bringing changes to the society. This aligns with Bass's Transformational Leadership Theory (Bass, 1985), which highlights how inclusive leadership can foster social change by inspiring and empowering followers to transcend individual interests for the collective good.

Through D.E.T.A.I.L., we can evaluate changes in student leaders' awareness, empathy, and behavioural attitudes before and after their participation. Simulation experiential learnings are implemented during D.E.T.A.I.L., e.g., placing non-disabled people in wheelchairs or blindfolding them to experience moving around, which only illustrate the experience of functional difficulties. To experience inequality or discrimination resulting from an exclusive society, resource persons are brought to mingle and facilitate the participants to exchange insights so both disabled and non-disabled can understand each other. The use of experiential learning in D.E.T.A.I.L. draws on Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984), which validates learning through concrete experience followed by reflection, fostering deeper understanding and empathy.

Thus, this article discovers the efficiency of D.E.T.A.I.L. in breaking down the barriers and advancing the disability issues on a bigger scale.

FOSTERING EMPATHY AMONG STUDENT LEADERS THROUGH EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AND SEJAHTERA ACADEMIC FRAMEWORK

The disabled communities face discrimination in

surrounding society all over the world ignoring their rights and needs due to the lack of empathy and weak law. International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) launched IIUM Disability Inclusion Policy according to the Persons with Disabilities Act 2008 and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). More importantly, IIUM is one of the leading universities in the Muslim world that also promotes the concept of "Rahmatan Lil 'Alamin," which is against the discrimination towards any human being on the earth and upholds the meaning of mercy to all mankind, which includes disabled communities. This commitment is reflected through the implementation of the IIUM Disability Inclusion Policy, which was drafted and approved on 3rd June 2015. In addition, the MOHE launched the *Guidelines on the Implementation of Disability Inclusion Policy in Institutions of Higher Learning*, aiming to uphold and protect the rights of students and staff with disabilities. Both the policy and the guidelines were co-developed with the Disability Services Unit of IIUM, positioning the university as a pioneer in driving disability discourse within Malaysian higher education institutions.

The discrimination happened due to some factors, among them is lack of knowledge. It can be seen in any level of society from citizens to the nation leaders. Most people's perception on disabled people is influenced by the Medical Model. This model is strongly rooted in capitalism and meritocracy, which are the dominant sense of values in current world society (Kuno, 2009). Providing inclusive leadership is challenging work as leaders need to have clarity about what is meant by inclusion. Definitions vary and inclusion is described as a value, philosophy, attitude, and as a set of practices, among others (Billingsley, 2012; DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2013; McLeskey, Waldron, Spooner, & Algozzine, 2014)

Empathy is defined as the ability to share someone else's feelings or experiences by imagining what it would be like to be in that person's situation (Cambridge). To achieve that, one of the most important elements in D.E.T.A.I.L. is experiential learning, which is implemented to let the student leaders experience for themselves how the barriers limit the disabled community's movement whereas there are lots of inaccessible facilities, unsafe infrastructures and many more. The participants are needed to assist resource persons who are disabled in groups and also use wheelchairs, blindfolds, white canes, and more according to the type of impairments to experience the challenges faced by disabled people. Different disabilities require different supports and needs. Therefore, in experiential learning, they need to use different rehabilitation according to the type of disability.

One of the strategic initiatives designated in the IIUM Sejahtera Academic Framework (SAF) is International Cultural and Experiential Learning, which resulted from the concept of mercy to all mankind and the garden of knowledge and virtue. SAF outlines some generic frameworks in humanizing education including the five Maqasid Shariah: Faith, Life, Intellect, Wealth and Lineage. It also highlights the concept of Bi'ah applied in IIUM, which among them are pedagogy, social facilities and support systems. These bi'ah elements can be highlighted in advancing the issue of disability on campus. For example, a support system provided toward the disabled students resulted from the empathy fostered among the students.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

i. Exploring the level of understanding among student leaders on disability before and after participating in D.E.T.A.I.L. during the 2023 academic year, focusing on programmes conducted between December 2023 and March 2024, through in-depth interviews.

ii. Examining perceived changes in societal behavior and attitudes among student leaders toward disabled communities and their reflections on the impact of D.E.T.A.I.L., using qualitative narratives from participants and resource persons.

iii. Investigating the perceived effectiveness of D.E.T.A.I.L. modules in breaking down attitudinal and other barriers faced by disabled groups, particularly at the campus level, based on participant experiences and resource person insights.

iv. Addressing the research gap in understanding how disability awareness programs influence student leaders in Malaysian higher education by providing holistic qualitative evidence supported by a literature review.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

i. What is the level of understanding among student leaders on disability issues?

ii. Does D.E.T.A.I.L. contribute to the changes of societal behavior among student leaders toward disabled communities?

iii. How effective is D.E.T.A.I.L. in breaking down attitudinal barriers at the campus level?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative case study design, with interviews as the primary method of data collection and social models of disability will be used as a guideline in this study. A total of 8 respondents were involved in the interview session, which consisted of 5 participants among student leaders and 3 resource persons among disabled students. This qualitative paper also uses the method of literature review to support the case study findings in explaining disability issues holistically. The study focuses on programmes conducted between December 2023 and March 2024. There are a few questions that have been asked toward respondents among participants during the interview sessions, which are:

TABLE 1. Interview Questions for Participants

No.	Questions
1	How do you understand disability before and after joining the program?
2	Why do you think D.E.T.A.I.L. is so important to the community?
3	How does D.E.T.A.I.L. affect your decision making?
4	How do you contribute to advancing disability issues after joining the program?

Therefore, the resource persons also have been asked different questions during the interview session. The questions are below:

TABLE 2. Interview Questions for Resource Persons

No.	Questions
1	How do you see any difference in attitude of the non-disabled participants before and after the program?
2	What are the most usual issues among participants that you identified?
3	Why do you think D.E.T.A.I.L. is crucial for non-disabled student leaders?

RESEARCH FINDINGS & DISCUSSIONS

All respondents among the program's participants consisted of student leaders at the university at the level of student unions and student representative councils. Meanwhile, the respondents among resource persons consisted of disabled groups with different backgrounds of study, which were in bachelor's degree, master's degree and PhD candidates. 60% of respondents among student leaders were male and the remaining were female, while 66.6% of respondents among resource persons were male and the remaining was female. All resource persons are IIUM students since the D.E.T.A.I.L. programs were conducted in IIUM by the Disability Services Unit.

D.E.T.A.I.L. was conducted twice, both in IIUM. The first program was aimed at student leaders from IIUM, which consisted of volunteers from the Ibnu Ummi Maktum Club (I-MaC), office members from the IIUM Student Union and various backgrounds of students. While the second time, it was aimed at presidencies in MPPK from different universities and it was conducted at the national level. 60% of respondents among participants were joining the first program and the remaining 40% were joining the second program while all respondents among resource persons were joining both programs.

LEVEL OF UNDERSTANDING AMONG STUDENT LEADERS ON DISABILITY

The finding of this study proves the pattern of understanding of the participants among student leaders is getting better after joining the program. Most of the participants have no idea about disability and no basic knowledge toward issues faced by disabled community. This study finds that the lowest level of understanding about disability is among student leaders that never mingle with disabled due to some factors, among them none of the physically disabled students in their university. The participants of the D.E.T.A.I.L. are from various backgrounds, some of them experienced as they have families and friends with disabilities, and some of them have no experience at all. This pattern shows the level of understanding on disability issues happening everywhere.

Majority of the participants have a better understanding of disability after joining D.E.T.A.I.L. as they got the opportunity to experience it themselves how difficult challenges faced by disabled groups. This program truly elevates the views and understandings among student leaders who joined. Among all the participants, some of them used to be part of a circle of disabled individuals surrounded by friends with disabilities. They may know about the disability, but feedback cannot deny how this program assists them to understand better about types of disability, the way to assist those who are in need and more. From the interview session conducted, it can be said that 60% participants initially have no idea at all on disability issues on campus and all of them got a better understanding after they finished the course.

Although limited in size, the sample was purposely selected for its relevance to the research context. Each respondent directly participated in the D.E.T.A.I.L. programme, which offers rich, experience-based insights essential for an in-depth qualitative understanding.

SOCIETAL BEHAVIOR OF STUDENT LEADERS TOWARD DISABLED COMMUNITIES

The social model of disability is different with over-medicalized or individualistic accounts of disability that preceded it, and it requires some key dichotomies. The medical model tended to focus on disability as an individual deficit to be cured but the social model defines disability as a historical and cultural phenomenon which distinguishes between disabled people as an oppressed group and non-disabled people that are the causes of that oppression (Shakespeare, 1997). According to interviews conducted among resource persons, one of the identified issues during the program is the social interaction between non-disabled and disabled groups. The most common issue is the interaction gap due to some factors which are feeling too awkward to start a conversation, lack of courage and afraid of asking sensitive questions. For some people, especially non-disabled, they might think the disabled are different in many ways including the way they speak. This happens due to generalizing all categories of disabilities as the same.

According to the responses given, some of the student leaders with no experience mingling with disabled communities thought that disability only reflects those who have physical impairment, and those who have learning and mental disabilities, they mischaracterize them with offensive labels as they do not understand the real concept of disability and its types. Therefore, all misconceptions arise before they join the program, and those perceptions are changed after they finish the course which also affect their social attitude with more respect toward the minority. Thus, D.E.T.A.I.L resulted in them being more thoughtful and mindful to offer assistance to those in need.

THE EFFICIENCY OF D.E.T.A.I.L. IN BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS AND FOSTERING EMPATHY

According to the interview session conducted, it shows that all respondents admit that the modules successfully elevate their awareness and understanding toward disability. The most problematic issue highlighted in this study is the attitudinal barrier which is the biggest threat to disabled community. The best solution to overcome this problem is fostering empathy among everyone, especially student leaders who have power and influence over people. D.E.T.A.I.L. is a paradigm shift process that changes people's perception on disability as a person-centric or medical model to the environmental-centric or known as social model.

Both participants and resource persons agree that D.E.T.A.I.L is a good program in enhancing awareness and fostering empathy among the audiences who join the program. According to one of the resource persons, this program is a communication platform between disabled and non-disabled in understanding and addressing the issues together. Feedback of the most participants saying it changed their views and perception which lead to a paradigm shift in their societal behavior and eliminate the attitudinal barriers at least. This program also acts as a pedagogy in highlighting crucial

problems faced by disabled and encouraging student leaders to take action and contribute back to society on any levels that they are capable of. Thus, it can be concluded that D.E.T.A.I.L. is proven in breaking down barriers and fostering empathy among student leaders and it should be implemented in all levels whether universities, schools, ministries and businesses.

CRITICAL REFLECTION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

While this research provides valuable insights into the effectiveness of D.E.T.A.I.L., it is not without its limitations. As student leaders who were also involved in the program's design and implementation, there is an inherent subjectivity that could influence the interpretation of findings. Our proximity to the issue, though a strength in understanding its depth, also calls for critical reflection to ensure academic integrity.

Additionally, the study is limited by its qualitative scope and small sample size, which consisted of only eight respondents. While their experiences are deeply insightful, they may not represent the full spectrum of student leaders in IIUM or beyond. Future research should consider broader participation involving other institutions and a diverse demographic to enhance generalizability.

The absence of longitudinal follow-up data also restricts our ability to determine the long-term effectiveness of the D.E.T.A.I.L. programme. It is recommended that future research incorporate post-programme assessments after a few months to observe whether the empathy and awareness gained continue to influence student behaviour and policy engagement.

Furthermore, although the study touches on social models of disability, a deeper integration of interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks such as Critical Disability Theory or Human Rights-Based Approaches could strengthen its academic grounding. Engaging scholars from legal, psychological, or sociological fields may offer a more holistic analysis.

To address these limitations, future research could employ mixed methods approaches, combining qualitative interviews with quantitative surveys to measure changes in awareness and behavior. Collaborations with independent evaluators or external researchers may also enhance the objectivity of findings.

Despite these limitations, this study stands as a student-led initiative aimed at elevating disability equality discourse in Malaysian higher education. Rather than a final claim, it is offered as a living document that invites further engagement, collaboration, and critical expansion.

CONCLUSION

This study shows the significance of D.E.T.A.I.L. in breaking down barriers of Person with Disabilities (PWDs) and proving its efficiency among Student Leaders at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). The finding indicates that the D.E.T.A.I.L. really improves student leaders' understanding on disability issues, which 60% of the participants initially had little to no prior knowledge of. The program can reduce attitudinal barriers, fostering empathy and promoting positive interactions between non-disabled and disabled groups. Participants were reported to be more comfortable to strike a conversation and offer assistance to the PWDs

Additionally, student leaders who completed D.E.T.A.I.L. demonstrated greater consideration for accessibility and inclusivity in their decision-making, which suggest potential benefits of policymaking in the future. The application of experiential learning, which include simulations and direct interactions with disabled individuals, was effective in building empathy and challenging misconceptions.

This study provides us with important insights into the potential of such programs in promoting equality for disabled individuals, especially in higher education institutions, despite the small sample size of only eight respondents. Further research is needed, and it should explore the long-term impacts, its implementation across different institutions, and the development of quantitative measures to add onto these qualitative findings.

In conclusion, D.E.T.A.I.L. should be used as a tool for championing, advancing disability equality and inclusive leadership in student leaders, in line with the concept of "Rahmatan Lil 'Alamin" (mercy to all mankind). Additionally, this research will contribute to inclusive leadership discourse in Malaysian higher education by demonstrating how experiential learning modules can effectively shape student leaders' empathy and influence their approach to disability-related decision-making.

APPRECIATION

REFERENCES

Bass, B. M. (1985). *Leadership and performance beyond expectations*. Free Press.

Billingsley, B., DeMatthews, D., Connally, K., & McLeskey, J. (2018). Leadership for effective inclusive schools: Considerations for preparation and reform. *Australasian Journal of Special and Inclusive Education, 42*(1), 65–81. https://doi.org/10.1017/jsi.2018.6

Borhan, L., Azman, A. W., Ghani, G. M., Abdullah, M. F., Rahman, Z. A., & Yusof, Z. M. (2020). *Sejahtera Academic Framework (SAF)*. International Islamic University Malaysia.

Borhan, L., Azman, A. W., Ghani, G. M., Abdullah, M. F., Rahman, Z. A., & Yusof, Z. M. (2020). *Sejahtera Academic Framework (SAF)*. International Islamic University Malaysia.

Cambridge Dictionary. (n.d.). Empathy. In *Cambridge Dictionary*. Retrieved May 2025, from https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/empathy

Davis, L. J. (Ed.). (2017). *The disability studies reader* (5th ed.). Routledge.

Department of Statistics Malaysia. (2022). *Persons with disabilities 2022*. https://www.dosm.gov.my/portal-main/release-content/person-with-disability-2022-

DeMatthews, D., Billingsley, B., McLeskey, J., & Sharma, U. (2020). Principal leadership for students with disabilities in effective inclusive schools. *Journal of Educational Administration, 58*(5), 539–554. https://doi.org/10.1108/JEA-10-2019-0177

Hayes, D., & Bulat, J. (2017). *Overcoming barriers to inclusion in schools*. Routledge.

IIUM Disability Services Unit. (2018). *IIUM Disability Inclusion Policy*. International Islamic University Malaysia.

Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Prentice-Hall.

Kuno, K. (2009). Disability equality training (DET): Potentials and challenges in practice in developing countries. *Asia Pacific Disability Rehabilitation Journal, 20*(1), 36–47.

Loreman, T., Forlin, C., Chambers, D., Sharma, U., & Deppeler, J. (2014). Inclusive education in Malaysia: Reflections from teachers and students. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 18*(6), 571–584. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2013.862071

McLeskey, J., Waldron, N., Spooner, F., & Algozzine, B. (2014). *Creating inclusive classrooms: Effective and reflective practices*. Pearson.

Oliver, M. (1990). *The politics of disablement*. Macmillan.

Persons with Disabilities Act 2008 (Malaysia). (2008). *Laws of Malaysia*.

Sells, K. G., & Campbell, J. (1991). *Disability equality training: Trainers guide*. Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work.

Ali Karimi Mohd Nasri & Muhammad Irfan Rosdin*
International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM),
Jalan Gombak, 53100, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

*Corresponding author: Irfanrosdin@iiumstudentunion.com.my