Inclusive career counseling challenges for students with disabilities in higher education

Nur Atiqah Abdullah, Samsiah Jayos

Department of Counseling, Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, Kota Samarahan,
Malaysia

Article Info	ABSTRACT
	The number of students with disabilities (SWDs) in Malaysian higher education is increasing, yet inclusive career counseling remains underexplored. This study investigates the challenges faced by counselors in supporting SWDs' career development and highlights practical strategies for improvement. Guided by the planned happenstance theory (PHT), qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with five counselors across different institutions in Sarawak. Thematic analysis revealed four key challenges: communication barriers, limited resources, lack of specialized training, and client dependency. Counselors recommended targeted training, stronger industry collaborations, and improved supervision practices. The study contributes to inclusive education discourse by providing context-specific insights and aligning with sustainable development goal 8 (SDG8), emphasizing the importance of equitable access to career support services for SWDs in higher education.

Corresponding Author:

Nur Atiqah Abdullah
Department of Counseling, Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development
Universiti Malaysia Sarawak
94300, Kota Samarahan, Sarawak, Malaysia
Email: nuratiqahabdullah00@gmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

The sustainable development goals (SDGs), introduced by the United Nations in 2015, serve as a global blueprint for promoting sustainable and inclusive development. Among these, goal 8 emphasizes equal employment opportunities, the elimination of discrimination, and the protection of workers' rights to ensure that people with disabilities (PWDs) have equal access to productive employment [1]. This growing international focus on inclusion is particularly relevant for students with disabilities (SWDs), a subgroup within the broader PWDs community. However, according to the European Disability Forum, only 51.3% of working-age SWDs in the European Union (EU) are employed [2]. While this percentage may seem high, the report highlights that structural discrimination and biases are significant barriers faced by PWDs, alongside limited access to inclusive and quality education. This issue extends beyond developed countries to developing nations. In Malaysia, over 600,000 PWDs were registered with the Social Welfare Department in 2023, including almost 50,000 in Sarawak [3], with half of them being of working age (19 to 60 years old) overall in Malaysia [4]. Yet, less than 10% of these working-age PWDs are employed, a concerning statistic despite efforts by government agencies and non-governmental organizations to address the issue [5]. In higher education, counseling plays a vital role in supporting students' social development [6]. Effective counseling services in higher education support students' growth and positively impact their development. The counselor also serves as a teacher, playing a key role in guiding and supporting students' academic and

personal development. However, there is a significant need to emphasize the direct role counselors play in facilitating career development for SWDs, especially given the unique challenges faced by this group.

Career counseling guides job planning addresses emotional and psychological barriers and supports workplace adaptation in higher education [7]. Given that PWD students are a minority group in counseling settings [8], it is concerning that there are very few registered counselors specializing in vocational rehabilitation, despite over 12,000 registered counselors in Malaysia as of December 2024 [9]. Furthermore, there is limited research on career counseling for PWDs, especially regarding the role of counselors among PWD students in higher education [10]. The experiences of counselors providing services to PWD students in higher education remain underexplored, which is concerning as we aim for a more inclusive community by 2030 through education. Research indicates that PWD students are often unaware of the availability of career counseling services in their institution, which limits their access to career support [5]. There is still a lack of awareness about career counseling services in higher education [10]. Therefore, this study examines the operational challenges faced by counselors in providing career counseling to SWDs and their recommendations to overcome these challenges.

This study contributes to the limited body of research on inclusive career counseling for students with diverse abilities by adopting a design and development approach. The main goal of this approach is to explore and highlight the role of counselors as key facilitators of career development in tertiary education. While this study does not create a full model, it focuses on counselors' perspectives to inform future research and the development of a comprehensive career counseling framework for them. By identifying challenges and offering practical solutions, this research provides valuable insights that align with global inclusive goals and aim to improve the effectiveness of career counseling, ultimately supporting the integration of PWDs into the workforce through educational institutions.

This study is grounded in the planned happenstance theory (PHT), which emphasizes the role of unplanned events in shaping career development. For PWD students, unexpected barriers and limited opportunities often shape their career pathways. PHT provides a useful framework for encouraging counselors to guide students in developing adaptability, curiosity, and resilience when navigating uncertainties in career planning. This theoretical lens is particularly relevant in understanding how counselors support them in identifying opportunities and finding meaningful career directions. Inclusive career counseling in this study refers to counseling practices that consider the individual needs, challenges, and potential of SWDs to ensure equitable access to career development services. Meanwhile, client dependency describes situations where students rely heavily on counselors for decision-making and emotional reassurance due to experiences of exclusion. Thus, the research questions of the study are:

i) What are the challenges faced by counselors in providing career counseling services to SWDs in higher education institutions in Sarawak, Malaysia?
ii) What recommendations do counsellors propose to enhance the effectiveness of inclusive career counseling for SWDs?

2. METHOD

This section discusses the data collection process and analysis. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with selected participants. The study employed thematic analysis to identify key patterns and themes.

2.1. Data collection
2.1.1. Research design

This study adopts a constructivist philosophical paradigm, which focuses on understanding the experiences and perspectives of individuals [11]. It explores the experiences of counselors providing career counseling services to SWDs in tertiary education in Sarawak, Malaysia. The study employs a qualitative research approach and uses semi-structured interview questions to gather data.

2.1.2. Participants

A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants based on specific criteria relevant to their experiences in career counseling for students requiring adaptive support. The inclusion criteria for participants were: i) they must be registered counselors with the Malaysian Board of Counselors, ii) they must have experience in providing career counseling services to SWDs, and iii) they must have at least 3 years of experience in the education counseling field. To ensure diverse perspectives, exclusion criteria require a balanced representation of race and education sectors. These criteria were crucial for maintaining the focus of the study and minimizing any risk of bias or unfavorable outcomes [12]. One of the challenges in this study was finding counselors with direct experience in career counseling for SWDs in higher education.

This limited our participant selection to those with relevant experience. However, this study reached data saturation, as the participants provided enough insights to address the research questions thoroughly.

2.1.3. Research procedure

To recruit participants, the researcher directly contacted them via email and arranged appointments for the interviews. The interviews were conducted one-on-one online, providing flexibility for both the researcher and the participants. Standardized open-ended interview questions were used to ensure consistency across all interviews. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were required to complete the necessary forms, including documentation of their professional qualifications, such as their practice certificate and licensed counseling credentials. This process ensured that ethical standards were maintained throughout the study. Additionally, the researcher applied trustworthiness strategies [13]. One of the key strategies used was triangulation, which involved collecting evidence from multiple data sources. Specifically, the study also relied on interviews with SWDs to explore their experiences in counseling sessions. These were used to support and cross-check the themes derived from counselors' narratives. SWDs' insights were not part of the core data but were instrumental in confirming the relevance and accuracy of the emerging themes. To further enhance the validity of the findings, triangulation was achieved by comparing interview data with documents like field notes, participants' certificates, and other relevant documents to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the participants' perspectives.

2.1.4. Research limitation

The study recognized the potential influence of the researcher's personal biases or preconceived notions on the data collection and analysis process. To address this, the researcher openly acknowledged these biases and engaged in regular reflection throughout the study. In addition to this self-reflection, steps were taken to minimize bias through methods such as member checking, where participants reviewed and verified their interview transcripts to ensure accuracy and provide additional insights. This process helped confirm that the data accurately represented participants' experiences and allowed for adjustments when necessary.

2.2. Data analysis

For data analysis, this study utilized an inductive approach, where conclusions were drawn directly from the data. Thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns and themes that emerged from the data. The analysis process consisted of several steps as suggested by Naeem *et al.* [14]. First, the researcher organized and prepared the data by transcribing the interview recordings, scanning documents, and typing field notes for analysis. In the second step, the researcher examined the data by reading multiple transcripts and annotating field notes to understand the significance of the interview questions and to identify key themes. Next, the data was coded. This involved a systematic process of labeling significant segments of text with descriptive codes that captured their meaning. The researcher used open coding to identify initial codes that emerged from participants' responses without being influenced by pre-existing theories. After that, the codes were refined and grouped into broader categories that reflected common ideas or issues. For example, responses related to communication difficulties were coded under themes such as "verbal barriers" or "non-verbal barriers". This coding process helped reduce large volumes of qualitative data into manageable and meaningful units for further interpretation. The fourth step involved interrelating the themes, where the researcher examined how the themes were interconnected and grouped related themes. Finally, the researcher interpreted the meaning of these themes, understanding their relevance to the research questions and drawing conclusions that could inform improvements in career counseling practices for SWDs. The overall aim of the data analysis was to gain a comprehensive understanding of counselors' experiences and to provide recommendations for improving career counseling services for PWD students.

3.   RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, we present the results along with a comprehensive discussion. The findings are organized according to themes emerging from the data analysis, supported with directed quotes from participants. We relate each theme to existing literature, highlighting how this study advances understanding of career counseling services for learners with impairments in higher education. While the term SWDs was initially used broadly, this section specifies the various types of disabilities that counselors encounter.

3.1. Demographic of participants

Table 1 presents the demographic profiles of participants, whose ages range from 29 to 49 years and represent two racial backgrounds, Malay and Chinese. They work in diverse institutional settings, including

public universities, vocational centers, and private colleges, with years of counseling experience ranging from 5 to 23 years. This diversity in race, institutional context, and professional experience offers a varied perspective on inclusive career counseling for SWDs.

Racial background influenced rapport-building strategies. Malay counselors in this study, working with predominantly Malay SWDs, reported that shared cultural values and language familiarity helped establish trust more quickly. Chinese counselors were equally committed but had to navigate initial cultural or language differences, particularly from a rural Malay-speaking background, before building a rapport with the PWD client.

Table 1. Demographic of participants

No	Pseudonyms	Age	Race	Institutions	Years in counseling
1	C1	49	Malay	Public university	23
2	C2	36	Chinese	Vocational center	10
3	C3	38	Malay	Public university	11
4	C4	35	Malay	Vocational center	9
5	C5	29	Chinese	Private college	5

Experience level also shaped counseling styles. C1, with 23 years of experience, tends to address issues directly and resolve them quickly, reflecting a results-oriented approach. In contrast, C5, with 5 years of experience, prefers to spend more time exploring clients' needs. C1 often refers clients to other professionals when progress stalls, while C5 seeks supervision to improve practice. These contrasts highlight how both experience and institutional dynamics influence counseling approaches with PWD clients.

Table 2 illustrates how institutional settings influence the approaches and priorities in delivering inclusive career counseling to SWDs [15]. In vocational centers, counselors work extensively with vulnerable groups and adopt proactive, inclusive strategies to address employment challenges faced by SWDs. Public university counselors focus on academic integration and career planning, preparing students for future employment through structured support systems. In private colleges, limited resources lead counselors to provide highly personalized guidance, carefully addressing each SWD's unique needs.

Although participants work in different institutions, they share a strong commitment to helping SWDs realize their potential after graduation. As educational landscapes evolve, counselors play a crucial role in empowering students with diverse abilities by fostering personal development, problem-solving skills, and career readiness. At the tertiary level, it is essential to guide SWDs in understanding the purpose and scope of higher education while providing the necessary support to enhance their academic engagement and future opportunities [16].

Table 2. Institutional context comparison

Institution type	Focus area	Key observations
Public university	Academic and career development	Focused on structured support and academic integration
Vocational center	Skill-based training	Proactive and inclusive toward vulnerable populations
Private college	Individualized student attention	More cautious with limited resources and partnerships

3.2. Challenges in career counseling services for SWDs

Table 3 presents the challenges faced by the participants in providing career counseling for SWDs. These challenges are categorized under four main themes: communication barriers, limited resources, lack of training, and client dependency.

Table 3. Participants' challenges in career counseling services for SWDs

Themes	Subtheme	Category	Counselor
Communication barriers	Language barriers	Verbal communication	C1, C3, C4, C5
		Non-verbal communication	C2, C3, C5
Limited resources	Insufficient resources for effective career counseling	Accessibility of career counseling	C1-C5
		Shortage of industry partners	C1-C5
Lack of training	Limited professional development opportunities	Lack of specialized training programs	C2, C4, C5
Client dependency	Adjustment	Bias and stigma	C1, C3, C4, C5

3.2.1. Communication barriers

This theme consists of two sub-themes: verbal and non-verbal communication. Verbal communication barriers were reflected in language limitations that hindered mutual understanding between counselors and PWD students. Participants C1, C3, C4, and C5 struggled with verbal communication due to language limitations. C1 highlighted the sensitivity of SWDs, stating, *"my client is very sensitive, and we have to use proper words when conducting counseling sessions with them."* Similarly, C3 noted, *"even our tone might make them sensitive, and we can see how they react to it."*

C5 elaborated that some SWDs are sensitive to terms like "disabilities" or "impairments" and prefer alternative terms such as "my specialty". Furthermore, C3 faced difficulties communicating with students with learning disabilities, as they struggled to understand complex terms, requiring to simplify the language or use simple metaphors. This finding is consistent with previous research, emphasizing the importance of using appropriate language [17], simplifying terms [18], and adopting effective communication strategies to enhance understanding with PWDs in counseling sessions [19]. Non-verbal communication challenges were also prominent, as reported by C2, C3, and C5. C2 found interpreting non-verbal cues easier with clients who had physical disabilities but needed to use art therapy to facilitate expression for clients with mental health challenges. C3 mentioned that she often mirrored her clients' emotions:

"I cry if the client cries, to show them that they are cared for. But I also try to guide the session back to problem-solving by asking them to visualize possible next steps."

Mirroring PWDs' emotions such as crying with them is another strategy to build rapport and show empathy [20]. Meanwhile, C5 described the difficulty of reading non-verbal cues in clients with learning disabilities or autism, prompting her to use tools like career cards and life map activities to help them express themselves. Although they are pursuing higher education, it is crucial to recognize that their unique impairments can influence how they express themselves in counseling sessions. These findings suggest that counselors in higher education must develop adaptive communication strategies for diverse student needs.

3.2.2. Limited resources

This theme includes two sub-themes: insufficient resources for effective counseling and a shortage of industry partners. All participants mentioned that access to career counseling services was limited. C1 shared that:

"It was hard to find professionals with expertise in vocational rehabilitation, so I began collaborating with lecturers from related faculties to conduct joint workshops tailored for SWDs."

C2, C3, and C5 highlighted that SWDs are a minority group, making career counseling less accessible for them. PWD students often receive less attention in career counseling services, with many being unaware of their availability [5]. C4 further explained that:

"Institutional priorities tend to focus more on mental health counseling, making career guidance less accessible for SWDs. Although counseling services are available, lecturers must take an active role in recommending and facilitating career-related support for these students to a counselor."

Another major concern raised by all participants was the shortage of industrial partners. C1, C2, and C4 emphasized that effective career counseling must include pathways for work placements, yet limited collaboration with industries makes it difficult to provide these opportunities. C3 and C4 further explained that without strong industry partnerships, SWDs struggle to access workplace exposure, internships, or entrepreneurship support. C4 specifically shares that:

"We have industrial partners, but they are not yet ready to recruit learners with impairments because their companies lack the necessary infrastructure."

These findings align with existing research indicating that PWD students often face challenges such as insufficient funding, inadequate infrastructure, and a lack of necessary tools and equipment for effective vocational rehabilitation [21]. However, this study indicates that the challenge extends beyond resource limitations to include a lack of institutional prioritization and targeted career interventions for PWD students.

3.2.3. Lack of training

This theme includes one sub-theme: limited professional development opportunities. C2, C4, and C5 expressed concerns about the absence of specialized training programs designed to meet the unique needs of students with diverse abilities, making it difficult for them to deliver effective career counseling. C2 and C5 shared that finding workshops focused on career counseling for SWDs was challenging. Additionally, C5 noted that developing suitable approaches for students with learning disabilities was especially difficult. While workshops on handling disabilities exist, participants pointed out that they often focus on general strategies. C5 specifically stated:

"Occasionally, we attend workshops, but they mainly focus on sign language and don't follow a continuous series. It would be helpful to have workshops with a structured series, such as beginner, intermediate, and advanced levels."

There is a noticeable gap in workshops specifically tailored to career counseling services for PWD students. This aligns with existing research indicating that many counseling and psychology programs lack extensive training in disability-related areas, resulting in varying levels of preparation among counselors working with students requiring adaptive support [22]. The participants from different institutions shared the same experience of lacking training. C1 mentioned that disability training is usually managed by the disability section, while in vocational centers, occupational therapists receive specific training. Unlike those in private colleges, the institution received first-hand training, though it was not suitable for the cases she was handling. Given the importance of inclusive education, higher education institutions should consider integrating specialized career counseling training for PWD students into their programs to better support both counselors and students.

3.2.4. Client dependency

This theme includes one sub-theme: adjustment. This dependency is compounded by challenges such as bias and stigma, as noted by C1, C3, C4, and C5. Many learners with impairments sought counseling due to bullying, exclusion, or feeling undervalued at work. C1 shared that *"my client felt their colleagues avoided giving them meaningful tasks, often viewing them as incapable."* Similarly, C3 mentioned a client who was excluded from company events, which made them feel isolated and alienated. C4 and C5 highlighted issues with discrimination during the hiring process. C5 shared a troubling case where a client with a learning disability was unfairly dismissed during a trial period due to insufficient time to adapt. C5 shared that:

"My client told me that their hiring manager initially agreed to hire him. However, after about two weeks on the job, my client was let go due to not being able to pick up the work quickly enough. My client was fired on the spot, which feels extremely unfair. This has made him rely heavily on my words of affirmation. So now I combine encouragement with role-play sessions to rehearse workplace communications and self-advocacy."

Participants noted that PWD students often depend heavily on counselors to manage workplace challenges. C1, C2, C4, and C5 reported that clients with learning disabilities struggled to develop independence, frequently seeking reassurance or immediate support from counselors. C3 described a situation where her client remained silent for an entire week at work because they felt unsupported and isolated. This case highlights the need for targeted intervention strategies to address dependency while fostering independence. Although existing research has not extensively addressed the dependency of PWD students on counselors in career counseling, it is well-documented that bias, stigma, and discrimination contribute to increased support needs [23]. These challenges often lead to heightened reliance on counselors and emphasize the necessity for higher education, especially for educators to adopt intervention strategies to promote student autonomy and independence.

The findings of this study show that communication barriers, limited resources, lack of training, and client dependency remain significant challenges in delivering career counseling services for SWDs in higher education. Addressing these issues is closely aligned with the targets of SDG 8, particularly in promoting inclusive and equitable access to decent work. For example, the shortage of trained counselors and industry partners directly limits SWDs' opportunities for workplace readiness and employment, which runs counter to SDG 8's call for productive and decent work for all. Furthermore, these findings also suggest clear directions for Malaysian higher education policy. Disability-specific content should be embedded into counselor training curricula, ensuring that professionals are equipped with strategies for adaptive communication, career planning, and workplace integration for PWD students. At the institutional level, policies could prioritize structured career pathways for PWD students, supported by targeted funding and industry

engagement schemes to expand placement opportunities. The results also indicate the value of an interdisciplinary model. Collaboration between counselors, special educators, therapists, and industry representatives can address both the skill development and emotional support needs of SWDs. Such a model would not only enhance service delivery but also contribute to national and global commitments towards inclusive, sustainable economic growth under SDG 8.

3.3. Recommendations in career counseling services for SWDs

Table 4 presents the recommendations from the participants for improving career counseling services for SWDs. These recommendations fall under three main themes: specialized training, industry partnerships, and enhancing counseling services. Each theme is further divided into specific sub-themes to reflect the range of suggestions provided by the participants. The table outlines how these themes are categorized and which counselors contributed to each recommendation.

Table 4. Participants' recommendations in career counseling services for SWDs

Themes	Subtheme	Category	Counselor
Specialized training	Training and development	Sign language workshop	C1, C2, C3, C4
		Cultural competence	C1-C5
		Art therapy	C1-C5
Industry partners	Collaborations for employment opportunities	Career fairs	C1, C4, C5
		Career workshop	C2, C3, C5
		Internship programs	C2, C3, C4
Enhancing counseling services	Innovative approach	Promote counseling services	C1, C2, C4, C5
		Supervision	C1-C5

3.3.1. Specialized training

The first identified theme is specialized training, with the subtheme of training and development. Participants emphasized the need for specialized training to enhance counseling services for PWD students. C1, C2, C3, and C4 highlighted the importance of a sign language workshop to better support individuals with hearing and speech impairments. C4 specifically shared:

> "During our support for parasports, our counselors struggled to communicate effectively with individuals who have hearing and speech disabilities. As a result, they resorted to using general signs like thumbs up and 'okay' gestures to motivate them. It was frustrating because we couldn't use appropriate sign language to encourage them."

Integrating sign language proficiency into counseling services enhances inclusivity and effectiveness for SWDs, especially for those with hearing and speech disabilities [24]. This integration fosters a deeper understanding of clients' unique needs and promotes a more responsive counseling environment. Additionally, all participants agreed that cultural competence is essential for counselors when conducting sessions. C1 mentioned:

> "I'm very straightforward with my language, but when working with Iban or Chinese clients with disabilities, I have to be mindful of my language as they can be quite sensitive."

Similarly, C2 shared:

> "PWD from financially stable backgrounds tend to cooperate better in counseling sessions, especially when their caregivers are supportive."

C3 added that some caregivers can be overly protective and reluctant to allow their children with disabilities to work, which poses challenges in counseling. When participants share their challenges in providing counseling services across different racial and family backgrounds, these differences influence the counselor's ability to adapt and modify counseling approaches to be culturally sensitive. A key aspect of this competence is understanding how cultural factors influence beliefs, values, and behaviors, and adapting counseling approaches accordingly [25]. Furthermore, all participants recommended art therapy as an effective approach for PWD students. This is supported by previous research, which highlights that art therapy enables SWDs to express their emotions and experiences non-verbally. This approach is beneficial for supporting holistic interventions, as it integrates emotions through creative and meaningful activities [26]. C3 noted, "when I used stone therapy, I could easily identify when a client had been bullied." Similarly,

C5 shared, "*in counseling sessions with my client, I use standard career tools for clients with physical disabilities but apply specialized play therapy for those with learning disabilities.*"

In alignment with current Malaysia education policies that advocate for inclusive practices in higher education and career development, these recommendations underscore the importance of specialized training for counselors to support SWDs [27]. This approach would not only enhance counselor effectiveness but also contribute to a more inclusive and supportive learning environment for all students. Despite the implementation of special education integrated programs (SEIP) in Malaysia since 1996 [28], the focus has primarily been on special teachers' commitment. This research suggests that counselors should also be actively involved in such programs to enhance their career counseling services. School leaders also should take the initiative to involve counselors in these programs, preparing them for inclusive counseling sessions through collaboration with special education teachers and other disability specialists. Similarly, in higher education, counselors must develop skill sets by collaborating with lecturers and administrators specialized in supporting PWD students to enhance career counseling services.

3.3.2. Industry partnerships

The second theme is industry partnerships, with the subtheme focusing on collaborations for employment opportunities. Participants emphasized the importance of initiatives like career fairs and workshops tailored for PWD students. C1, C4, and C5 recommended organizing career fairs. C1 highlighted:

> "*Every year, we host career fairs, and this year we successfully included inclusive opportunities for PWD students by inviting industries interested in recruiting them.*"

Similarly, C4 and C5 suggested that future career fairs should concentrate more specifically on work opportunities for students with diverse abilities. This is supported by previous research, as successful career counseling services are those that collaborate with the industry [19]. Additionally, C2, C3, and C5 recommended conducting career workshops for SWDs. C2 mentioned that career talks featuring industry representatives would be impactful, as they could outline the criteria they look for when recruiting PWD students. C3 and C5 agreed, adding that interview workshops should be implemented, particularly for students with mild learning disabilities. All participants supported inviting industry representatives to share insights during these workshops.

However, Lindsay *et al.* [29] highlights the need for higher education institutions to facilitate mentorship programs between SWDs and employed individuals with disabilities. Such programs help them navigate workplace challenges more effectively. The findings highlight the limitations of relying solely on traditional career fairs and workshops for employment support. While participants emphasized annual career fairs and industry partnerships as key strategies, integrating mentorship programs could offer more personalized and sustainable career guidance for PWD students. Furthermore, C2, C3, and C4 recommended implementing internship programs for SWDs. This has been supported by previous studies, which suggest that implementing internship programs for SWDs is widely recognized as an effective strategy to enhance their employment prospects and skill development. However, it is essential to include family preparation to ensure a holistic approach [30]. C2 shared his experience, noting that trainees at his vocational center typically acquire skills through practical training. However, he suggested introducing internship programs like those in academic streams to provide more comprehensive exposure. C3 and C4 echoed this sentiment, agreeing that internship opportunities in higher education would significantly enhance the employability of PWD students by giving them hands-on experience in real-world settings.

3.3.3. Enhancing counseling services

The final theme focuses on enhancing counseling services for PWD students through innovative approaches. Participants stressed the need to promote these services and improve their accessibility and effectiveness. C1, C2, C4, and C5 emphasized the importance of raising awareness about counseling. In addition, C1 suggested:

> "*We should conduct outreach programs to educate caregivers so early intervention can be provided for their children before they enter higher education or the workplace.*"

C2 and C5 similarly highlighted the need for targeted community programs in schools to raise awareness and provide early career counseling for SWDs. Community programs for early interventions for PWD students aim to equip them with the essential tools needed to navigate their education, career development, and social integration successfully [31]. Furthermore, all participants agreed on the need for supervision. C1 shared:

"Even with 23 years of experience in counseling, I see supervision as essential when working with specific clients like SWDs."

C2 and C4 supported this, mentioning their collaboration with occupational and behavioral therapists to better understand PWD cases. C3 and C5 emphasized the importance of continuous supervision for new counselors, especially when conducting career counseling with SWDs. C5 specifically mentions that supervision helps counselors develop the necessary skills and sensitivity to support PWD students in their career journeys effectively. Research supports these perspectives, highlighting the important role of supervision in enhancing counseling effectiveness and counselor retention [32]. In this study, the participants described supervision as an informal process, focusing on seeking advice from counselors with expertise in SWDs or career counseling. These findings highlight the need for counselors to actively engage in supervision to enhance their practice and well-being.

4. CONCLUSION

This study explores the challenges of providing career counseling for PWD students in higher education and offers actionable solutions. Counselors play a crucial role, not only in supporting mental health but also in preparing SWDs for the workforce and fostering collaboration with employers after graduation. By adopting the PHT as a framework, this research demonstrates how unplanned events and barriers influence SWDs' career trajectories and highlights the need for adaptable counseling practices. This study fills a gap by focusing on how counselors can effectively support SWDs in navigating career-related challenges in higher education. It highlights significant barriers, including limited accessibility to career counseling services and the underutilization of industry partnerships. Collaboration among counselors, universities, and employers is essential to equip PWD students with the necessary skills and opportunities for success after graduation. Additionally, universities should provide specific training to help counselors address the unique needs of PWD students, particularly in overcoming communication barriers during counseling sessions. This can be achieved by strengthening partnerships between universities' disability support services and career services to provide comprehensive support for them. Furthermore, education policymakers should advocate for greater industry involvement in inclusive career fairs and internship programs for PWD students. A mentorship program should also be implemented to help PWD students thrive and maintain long-term success in the workplace. It is important to note that student counselors are often assigned administrative duties, which detract from their focus on their primary role of implementing comprehensive university counseling programs for students. Therefore, the findings of this study align with SDG8, which promotes inclusive and sustainable economic growth and productive employment for all. By strengthening inclusive career counseling, higher education institutions can directly contribute to this global goal, particularly by improving employability outcomes for SWDs.

While this research offers valuable insights, its limited sample representation highlights the need for more extensive studies. Future research should expand on these findings by including larger, more diverse samples, such as parents, peer support groups, academic advisors, and faculty members, to support career readiness among SWDs in higher education. Additionally, exploring the role of parents and peer support systems in reinforcing career readiness and providing emotional support during job searches could offer valuable perspectives. Finally, examining the involvement of academic advisors and faculty members in preparing SWDs for the workforce could provide a more holistic understanding of how higher education contributes to their career development.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

This journal uses the Contributor Roles Taxonomy (CRediT) to recognize individual author contributions, reduce authorship disputes, and facilitate collaboration.

Name of Author	C	M	So	Va	Fo	I	R	D	O	E	Vi	Su	P	Fu
Nur Atiqah Abdullah	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Samsiah Jayos		✓		✓			✓	✓		✓		✓		

C	:	**C**onceptualization	I	:	**I**nvestigation	Vi	:	**Vi**sualization
M	:	**M**ethodology	R	:	**R**esources	Su	:	**Su**pervision
So	:	**So**ftware	D	:	**D**ata Curation	P	:	**P**roject administration
Va	:	**Va**lidation	O	:	Writing - **O**riginal Draft	Fu	:	**Fu**nding acquisition
Fo	:	**Fo**rmal analysis	E	:	Writing - Review & **E**diting			

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors state there is no conflict of interest.

INFORMED CONSENT

Informed consent was obtained from all participants, pseudonyms were used to protect identities, and all data was stored securely. Participants had the right to withdraw at any time.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

At the time of writing, formal ethical approval was still pending from the Universiti Malaysia Sarawak Ethics Committee. For triangulation, SWD participants were also briefed and given separate consents to share limited experiential feedback relevant to the counselors' interviews.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author, [NAA]. The data, which contain information that could compromise the privacy of research participants, are not publicly available due to certain restrictions.

REFERENCES

[1] The Global Goals, "Goal 8: decent work and economic growth," Accessed Dec. 12, 2024. [Online]. Available: https://www.globalgoals.org/goals/8-decent-work-and-economic-growth/

[2] A. Felix, "Majority of persons with disabilities locked out of quality employment," Accessed Dec. 13, 2024. [Online]. Available: https://www.edf-feph.org/majority-of-persons-with-disabilities-locked-out-of-quality-employment/

[3] Community Service Position, "Statistic report 2023 - registration of persons with disabilities (active) by state," Putrajaya: Community Service Position (in Malay), 2023. [Online]. Available: https://heyzine.com/flip-book/b64df55644.html#page/133

[4] Community Service Position, "Statistic report 2023 - registration of persons with disabilities (active) by age group," Putrajaya: Community Service Position (in Malay), 2023. [Online]. Available: https://heyzine.com/flip-book/b64df55644.html#page/138

[5] N. A. Abdullah and S. Jayos, "A narrative study: career counselling service among persons with disabilities at vocational centre in Sarawak," *Journal of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development*, vol. 10, no. 1, p. 171, 2024, doi: 10.33736/jcshd.6557.2024.

[6] G. A. Adu, "The role of counselling services and its importance in educational institutions," *Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research*, vol. 9, no. 6, pp. 541–557, 2022.

[7] N. Drosos and A. Korfiatis, "Career adaptability and resilience of mental health service users: the role of career counseling," *Behavioral Sciences*, vol. 13, no. 11, p. 886, Oct. 2023, doi: 10.3390/bs13110886.

[8] G. Sharma, M. Yukhymenko-Lescroart, and K. Bernal-Arevalo, "Counseling students' experiences and interpretations of purpose development," *Heliyon*, vol. 9, no. 3, p. e13760, Mar. 2023, doi: 10.1016/j.heliyon.2023.e13760.

[9] Lembaga Kaunselor Malaysia, "Registered counselor directory," Putrajaya: Kementerian Pembangunan Wanita, Keluarga dan Masyarakat (in Malay), 2025. [Online]. Available: https://www.lembagakaunselor.gov.my/cr/direktori/index.php

[10] J. Kim, M. Baumunk, S. Park, and T. Tansey, "Pathway to trauma-informed rehabilitation counseling: vocational rehabilitation counselors' training experiences and use of trauma-relevant knowledge in daily practice," *Rehabilitation Counselors and Educators Journal*, vol. 13, no. 2, pp. 1–14, Oct. 2024, doi: 10.52017/001c.124002.

[11] P. Muthiah, R. S. Naidu, M. Badzis, N. F. M. Nayan, R. A. Rahim, and N. H. A. Aziz, *Qualitative Research: data collection and data analysis techniques*, 2nd ed. Sintok: UUM Press, 2020, doi: 10.32890/9789672363415.

[12] C. M. Patino and J. C. Ferreira, "Inclusion and exclusion criteria in research studies: definitions and why they matter," *Jornal Brasileiro de Pneumologia*, vol. 44, no. 2, p. 84, Apr. 2018, doi: 10.1590/s1806-37562018000000088.

[13] J. Rose and C. W. Johnson, "Contextualizing reliability and validity in qualitative research: toward more rigorous and trustworthy qualitative social science in leisure research," *Journal of Leisure Research*, vol. 51, no. 4, pp. 432–451, Aug. 2020, doi: 10.1080/00222216.2020.1722042.

[14] M. Naeem, W. Ozuem, K. Howell, and S. Ranfagni, "A step-by-step process of thematic analysis to develop a conceptual model in qualitative research," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, vol. 22, pp. 1–18, 2023, doi: 10.1177/16094069231205789.

[15] Y. Liu, Y.-C. J. Chiu, N. Guennouni, and L. M. Conyers, "Career development of college students with disabilities: a scoping review," *Journal of Career Development*, vol. 51, no. 2, pp. 254–298, Apr. 2024, doi: 10.1177/08948453241236114.

[16] A. Arumugam *et al.*, "Importance of guidance and counselling in the school educational system: an overview," *EPRA International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research (IJMR)*, vol. 12, no. 1, pp. 239–250, Aug. 2021, doi: 10.36713/epra8153.

[17] L. Verkerk, A. Backus, L. Faro, J.-M. Dewaele, and E. Das, "Language choice in psychotherapy of multilingual clients," *Language and Psychoanalysis*, vol. 10, no. 2, pp. 1–22, Aug. 2021, doi: 10.7565/landp.v10i2.5542.

[18] L. Sun and G. P. Wallach, "Language disorders are learning disabilities," *Topics in Language Disorders*, vol. 34, no. 1, pp. 25–38, Jan. 2014, doi: 10.1097/TLD.0000000000000005.

[19] E. Watson, P. Raghavendra, S. Lawn, and J. Watson, "Improving communication access in psychoeducational interventions for people with complex communication needs: a scoping review and stakeholder consultation," *Disability and Rehabilitation*, vol. 45, no. 20, pp. 3388–3406, Sep. 2023, doi: 10.1080/09638288.2022.2127932.

[20] T. Motahar, N. Brown, E. S. Wiese, and J. Wiese, "Building 'design empathy' for people with disabilities: an unsolved challenge in HCI education," in *Proceedings of the 5th Annual Symposium on HCI Education*, Apr. 2023, pp. 68–71, doi: 10.1145/3587399.3587409.

[21] M. Abushaira, M. Hamdan, H. Alqarni, K. Arab, and S. K. Allala, "Obstacles of vocational rehabilitation for individuals with disabilities: perspectives of vocational rehabilitation workers in Tabuk," *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, vol. 30, no. 5, pp. 1237–1244, 2024, doi: 10.53555/kuey.v30i5.3040.

[22] E. E. Öksüz and M. D. Brubaker, "Deconstructing disability training in counseling: a critical examination and call to the profession," *Journal of Counselor Leadership and Advocacy*, vol. 7, no. 2, p. 163, 2020, doi: 10.1080/2326716X.2020.1820407.

[23] P. Longhurst and W. Full, "Disabled people's perceptions and experiences of accessing and receiving counselling and psychotherapy: a scoping review protocol," *BMJ Open*, vol. 13, no. 6, p. e069204, 2023, doi: 10.1136/bmjopen-2022-069204.

[24] A. Nadya, A. A. Syaifudin, and I. Fahriza, "Empowering Deaf Youth Through Vocational Training: Case Study of Participants *Balai Rehabilitasi Sosial Penyandang Disabilitas Sensorik Rungu Wicara Melati* Social Ministry of The Republic Indonesia," *Psikoeduko: Jurnal Psikologi Edukasi dan Konseling*, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 17–30, Dec. 2022, doi: 10.17509/psikoeduko.v2i2.53887.

[25] N. S. M. Ayob, S. A. Hassan, and M. H. M. Nordin, "A local approach toward multicultural counseling in Malaysia," *International Journal of Human Resource Studies*, vol. 11, no. 4S, pp. 287–306, Nov. 2021, doi: 10.5296/ijhrs.v11i4S.19254.

[26] N. Power, T. L. Harrison, S. Hackett, and C. Carr, "Art therapy as a treatment for adults with learning disabilities who are experiencing mental distress: a configurative systematic review with narrative synthesis," *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, vol. 86, p. 102088, Nov. 2023, doi: 10.1016/j.aip.2023.102088.

[27] N. H. M. Ghazali, H. Thoemeran, P. C. Bose, and S. Q. S. A. Anuar, "Enhancing higher education opportunities for special needs students in Malaysia: a case study," *International Journal of Academic Research in Progressive Education and Development*, vol. 13, no. 4, pp. 1683–1697, Nov. 2024, doi: 10.6007/IJARPED/v13-i4/21766.

[28] A. L. M. Azmah, W. M. W. Azlinda, and M. A. Asran, "Inclusive education program in Malaysia: Evolution in policy and challenges," in *Proceedings of the International Conference on Special Education*, 2015, pp. 735–744.

[29] S. Lindsay, L. R. Hartman, and M. Fellin, "A systematic review of mentorship programs to facilitate transition to post-secondary education and employment for youth and young adults with disabilities," *Disability and Rehabilitation*, vol. 38, no. 14, pp. 1329–1349, Jul. 2016, doi: 10.3109/09638288.2015.1092174.

[30] M. S. Zainal, W. A. M. W. Pa, and M. S. Mahmud, "Internship program for students with disabilities: are Malaysian family ready?" *Journal of Contemporary Issues in Business and Government*, vol. 27, no. 1, pp. 2754–2761, 2021.

[31] J. P. Fredericks, S. Visagie, and L. van Niekerk, "A qualitative exploration of community mobility experiences of wheelchair users," *African Journal of Disability*, vol. 13, p. 1253, Jan. 2024, doi: 10.4102/ajod.v13i0.1253.

[32] S. A. Sabella, T. J. Landon, and J. C. Schultz, "Supervision impact on rehabilitation counselor job satisfaction and intent-to-quit," *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin*, vol. 68, no. 4, pp. 275–286, Jul. 2025, doi: 10.1177/00343552241265315.

BIOGRAPHIES OF AUTHORS

Nur Atiqah Abdullah [ID] [SC] is a registered counselor under the Malaysian Board of Counselors (KB09770, PA09394). She holds a bachelor's degree in counseling from the University of Malaya. She serves as a psychology officer under Human Resource Management at Universiti Malaysia Sarawak and actively volunteers with Yayasan Kebajikan Negara (YKN). Her research interests include vocational rehabilitation, career counseling for people with disabilities, and community-based counseling services. She has contributed scholarly work on inclusive career guidance and has presented a poster presentation at the World Counseling Conference 2025. In the current paper, she was involved in conceptual development, literature review, and data interpretation, focusing on practical implications for higher education institutions supporting students with disabilities. She can be contacted at email: nuratiqahabdullah00@gmail.com or anatiqah@unimas.my.

Samsiah Jayos [ID] [SC] is a lecturer in the Department of Counseling, Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development at Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, and a registered counselor under the Malaysian Board of Counselors (KB00690, PA00486). Her areas of specialization include spiritual counseling, Islamic counseling, mentoring skills, motivational models, guidance and counseling for non-Muslims, and family counseling. She holds a doctor of philosophy in guidance and counseling from Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, a master of science in counseling, and a bachelor of science (Hons) in botany from the University of Malaya. She actively contributes to the development of counseling practices that are culturally and spiritually sensitive. She can be contacted at email: jsamsiah@unimas.my.