Career Selection Challenges Faced by Disabled Students in Higher Education Institutions: A Systematic Review

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Abstract:

This review paper analyses the evolving landscape of career options for Disabled students in inclusive higher education institutions (HEIs), emphasising both present challenges and anticipated future issues. The study underscores the imperative for fair access and support systems tailored to various learners, including persons with disabilities (PWDs), reflecting the inclusive vision of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. Through systematic analysis of academic literatures to pinpoint persistent issues, such as a lack of legal understanding, insufficient professional support, and erratic enforcement of inclusive policies. Despite increased attempts to enhance awareness, numerous gifted students continue to encounter systemic challenges during their transition from education to employment. The document anticipates emerging challenges, including disparities in digital accessibility, evolving skill requirements, and the necessity for individualised career assessment frameworks. It concludes with evidence-based recommendations for higher education institutions to adopt innovative, inclusive strategies that empower impaired students to navigate their careers with confidence and dignity.

Keywords: Exceptional Students, Inclusive Higher Education, Career Pathways, NEP 2020, Persons with Disabilities (PWDs), and Future Challenges.

Introduction:

The NCERT (2006) had an impact on work education that must be given from the very beginning of the secondary level onwards for students with special educational needs (SEN), focusing on understanding of the work environment and preparing them for future careers through career counselling and pre-vocational skills training. In NEP (2020), it's recommended that children with disabilities should be capable of fully participating in the regular learning process from the Foundational stage to higher education. Therefore, in the era of urgency for an inclusive society, every

individual must be facilitated in education without any turbulence. Causes behind that education and employment are two fundamental pillars of economic and social development, intricately linked in shaping the trajectory of individuals and societies (Giotis et al., 2025). The foundations of the inclusive education movement were laid by the celebration of the United Nations International Year of Disabled Persons in 1981, which focused on bringing about full participation in society of all people with disabilities (Garry, 2014). One of the main goals of education is to 'produce responsible, self-sufficient citizens who have the confidence, initiative, skills and wisdom to pursue knowledge and further their own personal growth (Gull et al.,2025). But there are so many findings exposed that many people with disabilities do not receive adequate career development at school, or even upon entering higher education (Sefora & Ngubane, 2021). Grasping how disability discourse applies to each person is vital for assessing its influence on their career progression (Denisova et al.,2021). The UK government tasked higher education institutions with producing work-ready graduates through curriculum reforms emphasising employability via internships and placements (Clarke, 2018; Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021). Collins et al. (2019) addressed the faculty's perception towards disabled, training needs and low representation of disabled students as key challenges of employability.

2. Review of Related Literature

In the context of navigating career pathways and facing challenges in placement after finishing higher education by disabled students is the focus of this study, the purpose is here to discuss and analyses the challenges facing by students with disabilities in their career selection and facing problems in job placement and main themes that guide the different research works conducted in this area to deeply understand of the challenges faced by disabled student in their career selection and in job placement. Therefore, the investigator collected and reviewed the content to know the overview of the Current Status, Accessibility and Engagement of Students with Disabilities in Higher Education, which is presented below as:

Employability is a key focus in the policies and practices of many contemporary UK universities, where placements and work-based learning (WBL) have become integral components of the curriculum across various fields (Thompson & Brewster, 2022). More critically, if higher educational achievement among disabled students does not translate into improved labor market outcomes, their talents will continue to be underutilized and acquiring experience and knowledge is a positive experience, but demanding expectations are a major negative experience (Stewart & Schwartz, 2018). Moreover, students with disabilities share similar work placement experiences with their non-disabled

peers; however, these experiences may have a more significant effect on the abilities of students with disabilities to manage challenges and succeed (Georgiou et al.,2011).

Winn and Hay (2009) examined various challenges and issues faced by individuals with disabilities as they transition from the school setting to post-school life, highlighted the complexities involved in this critical period and underscored the need for targeted support to facilitate successful adaptation to new environments. Educators, disability specialists, employer organisations, and policymakers must rethink strategies to strengthen this crucial transition, ensuring that young adults with disabilities gain work-relevant skills and build the confidence needed to navigate society effectively (Winn & Hay, 2009). Further, vocational guidance has major shortcomings, and many young people with disabilities aged between 17-20, who are in the process of selecting a vocational education pathway, demonstrate a lack of maturity and responsibility in making career decisions and understanding their professional prospects (Denisova et al.,2021). A report of the United Nations Human Rights Council (2019) recommended that empowerment of children with disabilities by ensuring their rights are upheld and fostering their active participation and full inclusion in society, within the framework of international collaboration and efforts to meet the Sustainable Development Goals. Career development programs frequently overlook the specific requirements of students with disabilities. Nevertheless, these students can effectively navigate the school-to-work transition when supported by a robust self-identity, resilience, familial and peer encouragement, and an enabling growth environment. Consequently, all parties involved must contribute to fostering sustainable career paths for students with disabilities (Sefora & Ngubane, 2021). Inclusive university programs highlight improvements in autonomy, self-confidence, social inclusion, and employment for students with intellectual disabilities. Moreover, positive personal, vocational, and socio-emotional outcomes are influenced by factors such as accessibility, expectations, support systems, attitudes, acceptance, teaching methods, and program structure (Ann et al., 2025). In this line, Gracia et al. (2025) also highlighted the need for institutional reforms, targeted professional development for educators, and increased awareness among students. Based on participants' experiences, the music educators, staff and leaders must adopt inclusive and supportive practices to help music students with disabilities succeed in higher education (Abed et al., 2025; Thompson et al. 2025). The accessibility and resources for undergraduate students with disabilities (SWDs)in Saudi Arabian higher education do not significantly vary by age, gender, university type, disability type, or region, and inclusivity and equal rights must be enhanced through stakeholder collaboration, creating supportive environments, and conducting accessibility audits. Further, the practicum provides meaningful experience that helps to discover life values and enhances sensitivity towards vulnerable groups (Reig-Aleixandre et al.,

2024). Hermosa-Ramírez & Arias-Badia (2024) focused on access services in cultural settings, often overlooking higher education, where people with sensory disabilities remain underrepresented. The key issues revealed were a widespread lack of accessibility awareness among society and university staff, hidden efforts by disabled students and lecturers to meet their needs, and challenging working conditions for accessibility staff. Taneja-Johansson & Pesonen (2025) highlighted the need to improve resource distribution, working and learning conditions, and to apply user- and professional-focused methods to promote social justice and accessibility in higher education. Education is widely recognised as key to better life outcomes, yet disabled students remain underrepresented in higher studies with barriers as transition challenges and the inadequacy of current support systems. Factors like parental support, financial stability, and personal confidence were important facilitators. Lukianova (2022) addressed the contradiction in Russia, where disability services exist to support career planning for students with disability. It is emphasised that, during critical moments of career decision-making, the material environment plays an important role in shaping students' perceptions of their potential than the disability itself. This underscores the need for universities to improve physical accessibility to better support the career development of SWD.

The review underscores diverse perceptions regarding challenges, barriers and a recommended range of assistance that can help disabled students in the selection of a suitable career. Therefore, the current review sought to address the following research questions:

RQ1. What findings, suggestions, or recommendations emerge from the existing literature on the challenges faced by disabled students in selecting and executing a career/job during higher education?

RQ2. What factors enable the success of students with disabilities?

RQ3. What employment Support Services must be provided to students with disabilities upon completing higher education?

3. Methodology

The study used a systematic literature review methodology to draw meaningful conclusions. The SLR method permits the investigator to synthesise useful information on a particular topic (Pieper & Rombey, 2022; Manterola et al.,2013). Furthermore, the study relied on the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) statement to guide the research, selection, and analysis (Moher et al., 2015).

3.1 Literature Search Strategy

For the selection of recently published research articles, the Scopus and Google Scholar databases were searched in October 2025, using a time frame from 2010 to 2025. The articles were searched by

using keywords specifically related to 'students with disabilities in higher education' while searching in the article title, keywords and abstract. The Booleans used for searching are- ("students with disabilities" OR "disabled students") AND ("higher education" OR "University") AND ("navigating career pathways" OR "job challenges") AND ("work engagement" OR "job opportunities") AND ("inclusive education" OR "inclusion").

3.2 Literature Selection Criteria

The study was systematized following study inclusion as well as exclusion criteria.

The inclusion criteria include: (a) articles of peer-reviewed journals, (b) articles published between 2010 to 2025, (c) articles having a sample of students with disabilities in higher education, and (d) challenges in selecting career and job opportunities faced by the disabled students in higher education. The exclusion criteria followed: (a) the document which is not in English language, (b) duplicate documents, (c) if the article did not explicitly address challenges and navigation about career selection and job placements, or they only reported barriers and or facilitators, influenced these outcomes, (d) focused on participation in higher secondary education rather than higher education or university education and (e) focused on infrastructural facilities rather than career assessment and future placements.

3.3 Study Selection Process

The initial search from Google Scholar and Scopus Database revealed 100 studies. 40 were excluded from these studies due to duplication. Both empirical and theoretical studies were included. Further, 46 studies were eliminated that did not meet the inclusion criteria of the current study. The Final review includes 14 studies (n=14) that directly met the inclusion criteria of the study. The selection process utilized the PRISMA statement, which is presented below-
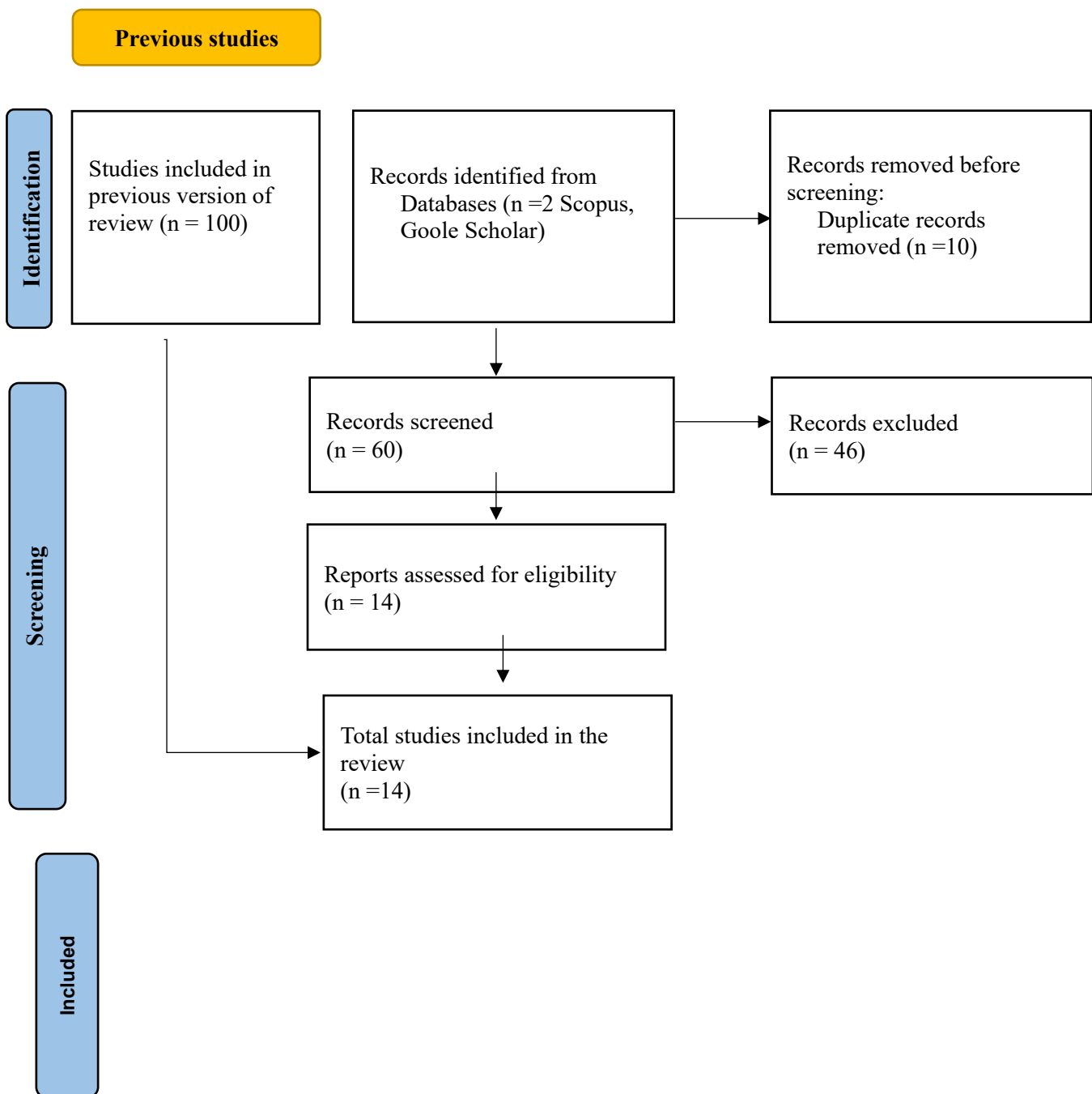
Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram for study selection (adapted from Page et al. 2021),
https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.n71

4. Results

RQ1. What findings, suggestions, or recommendations emerge from the existing literature on the challenges faced by disabled students in selecting and executing a career/job during higher education?

To find out the answer to the above question, the researcher has attempted to discuss the results, conclusions and recommendations of the studies reviewed and summarised in a table form given below-

Table 1. *Data Extraction Table*

S. No	Author (s) & Year	Study conducted on	Findings/Conclusions	Recommendations points
1	Ann et al. (2025)	The outcomes of an Inclusive University programme on Personal, Social and Vocational domains of Intellectually Disabled students	-Inclusive programmes improve autonomy, confidence, employment outcomes, and social skills -Campus accessibility, staff and peer expectations, teaching approaches, and overall programme design affect the positive and negative outcomes.	-Individual supports policies, teaching practices, student services and campus culture all need to align with specialised programmes.
2	Abed et al. (2025)	Special Resources Accessibility in Higher Education Through Self-Reporting	-Reported accessibility and support are not fully adequate. -Physical access, assistive technologies, and academic accommodations need to be addressed	-strengthening inclusivity and equality -collaborations among key stakeholders -supportive campus environments, and conducting regular accessibility audits
3	Bjørnerås et al. (2023)	Aiming for inclusion: processes taking place in co-creation involving students with	-Participatory Action Research (PAR) with disabled students promotes meaningful participation and ensures peer connection and mutual support, and helps translate	-participatory, co-creation approaches in disability and inclusion work -moving away from a narrow medical-service model toward rights-based, social-justice-oriented practice.

		disabilities in higher education	students' experiences into concrete inclusion	
4	AlTaleb et al. (2024)	Facilitators and barriers faced by disabled female students in higher education	-multiple interacting facilitators and barriers in higher education, -Inaccessible buildings and transport, inflexible teaching and assessment, limited assistive technology, negative or paternalistic attitudes from staff and peers, and gendered risks such as heightened vulnerability to harassment and discrimination.	-Systematic consultation (e.g., advisory panels, participatory research). -Establishment of disability support units and integration of universal design for learning into teaching practice to reduce case-by-case struggles
5	Tai et al. (2024)	Students' experience towards inclusive assessment?	-Out of 13 empirical studies, only one study directly measured the effect on student learning outcomes such as grades or progression.	-Stronger theorization and operationalisation of "Inclusive Assessment,"
6	Taneja Johansson (2021)	Facilitators and barriers along pathways to higher education in Sweden: a disability lens	-Both systemic barriers and personal/social facilitators on their pathways into higher education -Underrepresentation of Disabled students in higher education -Difficult school–university transitions and insufficient support	-Structural change in universities to support diverse disabled students. -Transition support, a stable, well-resourced disability unit, and collaboration with families and external services
7	Lukianova et al. (2022)	Environmental barriers as a factor affecting how students	-structural contradiction: universities formally create disability or career services, but these services are poorly	-Integration of career guidance with accessibility policy: career service planning together with

		with disabilities construct their career design.	connected to the actual accessibility routes. -Limited physical access to classrooms, dorms, transport, and informal spaces has become a central barrier in study choices and future employment.	universal design, campus accessibility audits, and inclusive teaching strategies, rather than as a separate, purely advisory unit.
8	Fidarova et al. (2020)	The role of an inclusive informational and educational environment of a university for shaping professional competence among disabled students	-Barrier of the Physical environment of institutions -High-quality, competitive professional training for disabled students also depends on comprehensive social and pedagogical conditions that support full inclusion and personal development, not just physical access	-Integrated support systems that involve counsellors, tutors, and teaching staff, and encourage the inclusion of students with disabilities in course design, professional training, and extracurricular activities
9	Morgan (2023)	Experiences of disabled students regarding participation in higher education and placement.	-weak implementation, limited accessibility, and inadequate support for disabled people in universities and workplaces. -Recurring challenges of accessible infrastructure and materials, unclear or difficult procedures to request accommodations, dependence on personal networks, and limited transition support from university to employment.	-Shift from a medical/charity or paternalistic model to a human-rights model of disability. -Clear regulations for universities and employers, independent monitoring bodies, and complaint mechanisms

10	Denisova et al. (2021)	Career Guidance of Disabled People in Sustainable Education Content: Research Experience and Development Prospects.	-Lack of adequate career guidance or a strong sense of responsibility and agency over their future careers. -Lack of "serious vocational guidance deficiencies": -Low initiative and limited vocational self-determination;	-Specially designed, sustainability-oriented vocational guidance -Vocational guidance interventions (workshops, individual counselling, mentoring, work-experience placements)
11	Georgiou et al. (2011)	Disabled students' experiences of work placement.	-Work placements are an important way to provide real-world experience of job demands and increase employability. -Placements successfully build skills, confidence and understanding of workplace expectations	-Work placements organisation -Universities should guarantee equitable access to high-quality work placements for disabled students -Collaboration between disability support services, academic departments, and placement.
12	Lindstrom et al. (2013)	Barriers and strategies of career selection among disabled adults.	-Reported multiple systemic barriers in their early careers, but targeted, multi-level strategies can support real career development and advancement. -Underrepresented in high-wage, high-skill jobs and experience limited career advancement, -Common barriers include a lack of early work experience and a narrow or "lowered"	-broaden career exploration: expose young adults with disabilities to a wide range of occupations, including high-skill, high-wage fields, through mentoring, job-shadowing, informational interviews, and career education -Scaffold early work experiences: internships, supported work experiences, cooperative education, jobs

				with appropriate accommodations and realistic expectations about work.
13	Stewart & Schwartz (2018)	Equal Education, Unequal Jobs: College and University Students with Disabilities	-The study finds that students with and without permanent disabilities have *similar dropout/stop-out rates* from postsecondary education.	-Targeted career services, internship and co-op schemes, and employer engagement programs -Link education and labour-market records using objective disability measures.
14	Thompson & Brewster (2022)	Inclusive placement learning for diverse higher education students: anxiety, uncertainty and opportunity	-Common challenges around placements, including anxiety about disclosure (disability, illness, caring roles), uncertainty about requirements and assessment, and concern about whether placements will accommodate their needs.	-Inclusive placement design and support grounded in social justice and responsive to a wide range of student circumstances. - Inclusive placement learning as a universal requirement, not a specialist add-on placement policy. -structured, proactive guidance

From Table 1, it can be concluded that higher education and early career systems are slowly becoming more open to disabled students, but real inclusion and equitable employment still depend on structural change, co-created practices and sustained, individualised support. Studies also recommend strengthening transitions to work to ensure equitable access to high-quality placements, internships, and opportunities, coordinating career services with disability support and accessibility planning and working with employers to remove discrimination, providing on-the-job support and open pathways into high-skill, high-wage roles. Table 2 summarises the key challenges faced by disabled students during higher education (emerged from the reviewed literature in Table 1).

Table 2. *Brief Summary of Key Challenges of Career/Job During Higher Education*

Challenges	Supporting Source (s)

Accessibility challenges	Abed et al. (2025); Ann et al. (2025)
Underrepresented in high-wage jobs and Advancement in career	Lindstrom et al. (2013)
Lack of training opportunities	Lindstrom et al. (2013)
Lack of Assessment concerns	Thompson & Brewster (2022)
Dropouts from the post-secondary level	Stewart & Schwartz (2018) Lindstrom et al. (2013)
Lack of adequate career guidance for their future careers	Denisova et al. (2021)

RQ2-What factors enable the success of students with disabilities?

Table 3. *Factors of Success*

Factors of Success	Supporting Source (s)
Inclusive placement learning is a universal requirement, not a specialist add-on. Placement policies.	Thompson & Brewster (2022)
Institutional guarantee; equitable access to high-quality work placements	Georgiou et al. (2011)
Demanding Expectation must match	Denisova et al. (2021); Georgiou et al. (2011)
Promote Inclusive Education Through Collaborative support and student involvement	Abed et al. (2025); Tai et al. (2024); Thompson & Brewster (2022)
Integrate career guidance with accessibility policy	Lukianova et al. (2022)

Table 3 ensures successful employment outcomes for students with disabilities after higher education; several key factors must be addressed. Inclusive placement learning should be established as a universal requirement rather than a specialist add-on, supported by clear placement policies (Thompson & Brewster,2022). Institutions must guarantee equitable access to high-quality work placements, creating opportunities that reflect demanding expectations aligned with student capabilities (Georgiou et al., 2011; Denisova et al., 2021). Collaborative support systems involving counsellors, tutors, and teaching staff, along with active student involvement, are essential to promote inclusive education and effective career preparation (Abed et al., 2025; Tai et al., 2024; Thompson & Brewster, 2022). Moreover, integrating career guidance with accessibility policies further strengthens

the support framework, ensuring that students with disabilities receive comprehensive assistance tailored to their employment transitions (Lukianova et al., 2022).

RQ3-What employment Support Services must be provided to students with disabilities upon completing higher education?

Table 4. *Employment Support Services*

Employment Support Services	Supporting Source (s)
Providing targeted career services, Internship and co-op schemes and ensuring graduates with disabilities secure jobs	Stewart & Schwartz (2018); Lindstrom et al. (2013)
To link education with the labour market	Stewart & Schwartz (2018)
Employer engagement programmes	Stewart & Schwartz (2018); Georgiou et al. (2011)
Establishment of disability support units to ensure the rapid provision of accommodations	AlTaleb, et al. (2024)
Individualised support policies, teaching practices, student services and alignment of campus culture with specialised programmes.	Ann et al. (2025)
Collaboration between disability support services and academic departments	Georgiou et al. (2011)
Regular Counselling and Monitoring	Morgan (2023); Denisova et al. (2021); Fidarova et al. (2020)
Structural change in universities and Strengthen Transition Supports	Abed et al. (2025); AlTaleb et al. (2024); Taneja-Johansson (2021)

Table 4 revealed that the higher studies must be comprehensive and targeted to enhance successful job outcomes. Providing specialised career services, including internship and co-op schemes, helps link education directly with the labour market and increases the chances of securing employment (Stewart & Schwartz, 2018; Lindstrom et al., 2013). Employer engagement programs are crucial to foster inclusive hiring practices (Stewart & Schwartz, 2018; Georgiou et al., 2011). The establishment of dedicated disability support units ensures the rapid provision of accommodation, while individualized support policies, aligned teaching practices, and campus culture strengthen specialized programs for students with disabilities (AlTaleb et al., 2024; Ann et al., 2025). Closer collaboration between disability support services and academic departments enhances coordinated assistance

(Georgiou et al., 2011). Regular counselling and ongoing monitoring provide vital emotional and academic support during the transition process (Morgan, 2023; Denisova et al., 2021; Fidarova et al., 2020). Finally, universities must implement structural changes and reinforce transition supports to create an accessible and supportive environment for students moving from education to employment (Abed et al., 2025; AlTaleb et al., 2024; Taneja-Johansson, 2021).

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The study shows the core things of challenges and navigates pathways for disabled students in higher education for their further job placement; it also discusses many points that will navigate the ways to a job for the disabled. And focused on physical and organisational environments strongly shape what disabled students and graduates see as possible for their education and careers. Some evidence shows that many disabled young people reach vocational and higher education with serious gaps in career guidance, limited understanding of labour market demands and a passive or dependent stance toward career decision-making (Denisova,2021). Work placements and early employment experiences are powerful routes to independence and employability, but they can also create extra pressure when expectations are high and support is weak. Young adults with disabilities are often underrepresented in high-skill, high-wage jobs and face unstable early employment, even when their graduation rates are comparable to those of non-disabled peers (Thompson and Brewster, 2023 & Stewart and Schwartz,2018).

6. Implications for future study

This study is limited to the studies retrieved from two databases, Google Scholar and Scopus, restricting its broader generalisation of findings. While the current study primarily used Systematic Literature Review and PRISMA for study selection, future reviews could employ other recent and advanced techniques for study selection and review article writing. Moreover, future studies should include another database like Web of Science, Research Gate, Academia, etc., to better examine the challenges faced by disabled students in higher studies and navigate the career pathways related to job opportunities or career selection.

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