

## University Through The Eyes of Disabled University Students: Experiences and Narratives: The Case of Muğla and Bilecik

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### Article History

Submitted: 08.09.2023

Accepted: 01.10.2023

Published Online: 16.10. 2023

### Keywords

Disability,  
Higher education,  
Inclusive education

### Abstract

**Purpose:** Before the Enlightenment period, era, despite cultural differences, disadvantaged individuals in societies generally faced exclusion, discrimination, or ill-treatment. The Enlightenment period opened up discussions about the importance of valuing human beings, leading to the gradual acquisition of various rights by disadvantaged groups, especially disabled individuals, in later periods. However, despite many rights gained, disabled individuals can still experience discrimination and exclusion in various areas of society due to the existence of a "ableism" mindset. The field of education is no exception. Education, particularly, is crucial for disabled individuals' socialization, employment opportunities, and preventing them from falling into deprivation and poverty. Based on this importance, this study focuses on the challenges encountered by disabled individuals actively pursuing education at Muğla Sıtkı Koçman University and Bilecik Şeyh Edebali University.

**Design & Methodology:** The research was conducted using qualitative research techniques, specifically in-depth interviews. The data obtained from the interviews were analyzed thematically and interpreted based on field notes.

**Findings:** It was revealed that the perception of disability has transformed among administrative staff at universities, but the institutions have not yet fully adapted to this transformation. The study found that the accessibility-related regulations implemented by the institutions were insufficient, and there were still students experiencing accessibility issues in the field of education.

**Implications & Suggestions:** It is necessary to make institutional improvements related to disabled university students and to increase the awareness levels of peer students regarding disability and accessibility.



DOI: 10.29129/inujgse.1357450



## Deneyimler ve Anlatılarla Engelli Üniversite Öğrencilerinin Gözünden Üniversite: Muğla-Bilecik Örneği

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### Makale Geçmişi

Geliş: 08.09.2023  
Kabul: 01.10.2023  
Online Yayın: 16.10.2023

### Anahtar Sözcükler

Engellilik  
Yükseköğretim  
Kapsayıcı eğitim

### Öz

**Amaç:** Aydınlanma öncesi dönemlerde kültürel farklılıklar olmakla birlikte genel olarak toplumlarda dezavantajlı bireyler dışlanmaya, ayrımcılığa veya kötü muameleye maruz kalabilmekteydi. Aydınlanma süreciyle birlikte insana verilmesi gereken önem tartışılmaya açılmış, dezavantajlı gruplar özellikle engelli bireyler ilerleyen dönemlerde yavaş yavaş çeşitli haklar elde etmeye başlamışlardır. Ancak birçok hak kazanımına rağmen engelli bireyler, toplum düzleminde "sağlamcılık" anlayışının varlığı nedeniyle, çeşitli alanlarda ayrımcılığa, dışlanmaya maruz kalabilmektedirler. Eğitim alanı da bunlardan biridir. Nitekim eğitim özellikle engelli bireylerin sosyalleşmesi, iş bulma imkânı elde etmesi, yoksunluğa ve yoksulluğa düşmemesi için önemlidir. Bu önemden hareketle bu çalışmada, Muğla Sıtkı Koçman Üniversitesi ve Bilecik Şeyh Edebali Üniversitesinde aktif eğitim gören engelli bireylerin eğitim yaşamlarında karşılaştıkları sorunlara odaklanılmıştır.

**Yöntem:** Araştırma, niteliksel araştırma tekniklerinden olan derinlemesine görüşmelerle yürütülmüştür. Görüşmelerden elde edilen veriler tematik analiz ve saha notları özelinde yorumlanmıştır.

**Bulgular:** Üniversitede engelli algısının idari personeller bazında dönüştüğü kurumlarinsa henüz bu dönüşüme ayak uyduramadığı ortaya çıkmıştır. Kurumların erişilebilirlikle ilgili yaptıkları düzenlemelerin yeterli olmadığı, hala eğitim alanında erişim sıkıntısı yaşayan öğrencilerin olduğu bulgulanmıştır.

**Sonuçlar ve Öneriler:** Engelli üniversite öğrencileriyle ilgili kurum bazında iyileştirilmelerin yapılması ve engelli öğrencilerin akranlarının engellilik ve erişilebilirlikle ilgili farkındalık düzeylerinin artırılmaya çalışılması gerekmektedir.



DOI:10.29129/inujse.1357450

## INTRODUCTION

### *Inequality In Education And Its Historical And Cultural Connection To Disability*

Inequality, a normative concept, signifies the denial of the possibility for the development of individual human capabilities, particularly the violation of human dignity. Furthermore, it refers to the absence or insufficiency of equality. Inequality takes various forms, encompassing factors such as humiliation, subjugation, discrimination, exclusion from knowledge or social life, poverty, powerlessness, stress, mistrust, anxiety, lack of self-confidence, and exclusion from opportunities and life chances (Therborn, 2013). Therefore, inequality is a multidimensional and multifaceted phenomenon. A significant dimension of inequality is inequality within the field of education. While access to education at all levels is crucial, higher education, in particular, provides individuals with job opportunities and avenues for self-realization, and even influences friendships and partner selection. Discussing educational inequality based on higher education institutions, Bourdieu and Passeron emphasize that "different social strata are unequally represented within higher education institutions, and furthermore, students from different class backgrounds have unequal participation rates" (Bourdieu & Passeron 2014). According to them, the education system also functions as a form of selection (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2014).

Therborn (2015) also argues that although there are some elite schools in each country that alter the life expectations of socially disadvantaged children, most educational systems tend to reinforce divisions instead of eliminating them. Inequality is not solely an economic issue; it is also a socio-cultural structure that diminishes human functioning abilities, health, self-respect, self-esteem, and resources for engaging and participating in this world for most individuals (Therborn, 2013). Besides poverty or economic inequality, disadvantaged groups that remain invisible or insufficiently represented within the education system are disabled (specially-abled) individuals. As Burcu (2015, s. 11) points out, even though "disabled individuals may be part of the diversity of social existence," they can still face oppression or be overlooked within the societal system (Burcu, 2015). Thus, it can be stated that the underrepresentation of disabled individuals within the education system, both quantitatively and qualitatively, is a significant sociological issue.

Looking at the quantitative data of disabled youth in higher education in Turkey, according to the Higher Education Institution's report in 2020, there are a total of 51,647 disabled students in higher education institutions, including 27,782 in associate degree programs, 23,581 in undergraduate programs, 236 in master's programs, and 48 in doctoral programs. Additionally, it is reported that 89% of these disabled students are enrolled in distance education programs (YÖK, 2020). The fact that 89% of students opt for distance education programs signifies their underrepresentation in traditional education and on-campus settings. However, examining the educational opportunity for disabled youth solely from a quantitative perspective is insufficient. As pointed out by Burcu, "the discussion extends to how education is provided for individuals with disabilities, its goals, whether it balances demands, and whether it offers equal opportunities for everyone" (Burcu, 2015, s. 107).

In this context, it is essential to understand the experiences of young individuals who have gained access to educational fields within the higher education institutions they attend. Therefore, the aim of this study is to shed light on the spatial, social, and educational challenges faced by disabled students in the universities/educational fields where they actively pursue education. In this context, the problems experienced by disabled students in the study are detailed with sub-questions. The details encompass:

- Experiences and Challenges Regarding Spatial Access Within the University: Investigating whether there are any issues related to spatial access within the university, the nature of these issues, and if present, the direction in which they manifest.
- Access to Educational Materials and the Understanding of Courses: Examining whether students face challenges in accessing educational materials and comprehending course content, and if so, identifying the specific areas of difficulty.
- Interactions and Communication with Peers, Academics, and University Staff: Analyzing whether students encounter any difficulties in interacting and communicating with peers, academics, or other university staff members, and if problems exist, identifying the nature of these challenges.

- Participation and Access to Socio-Cultural Activities: Investigating whether students experience obstacles in participating in socio-cultural activities and accessing such opportunities, and if barriers exist, determining the nature of these issues.

### *Definitions and Limitations*

Given the dynamic and diverse nature of disability, there exist various definitions attempting to capture its essence. According to Article 3 of Law No. 5378 on Disabled Persons (Official Gazette, 07.07.2005, Issue No. 25868), a disabled individual is described as someone who, due to varying levels of loss in physical, mental, emotional, or sensory abilities, cannot fully and effectively participate in society at an equal level with other individuals and is affected by restrictive attitudes and environmental conditions. This definition, among others, reflects the multifaceted nature of disability.

As stated in Burcu's book, disability can be understood as a state of disadvantage or restriction constructed by the societal order that ignores or gives little consideration to disabled individuals, thus excluding them from social activities involving the majority. The disadvantages created by the social environment one lives in can present challenges in establishing social connections or participating in societal processes (Burcu, 2015).

When viewed from a historical perspective, people have often exhibited negative attitudes towards individuals who are different from themselves or those who deviate from the norms of a community. As a result, disability has historically been an avoided condition. One of the most prominent examples of this can be observed in warrior societies; for Spartans, Greeks, and Romans, disability was considered a weakness, while during the Middle Ages, it became associated with evil (Mackelprang & Salsgiver, 2009). Individuals who were born with disabilities or acquired them later have faced mistreatment in various forms, ranging from exclusion from the community to outright torture. This situation took a crueler turn during World War II and evolved into mass extermination. The dissatisfaction caused by this societal annihilation, as well as the struggles of soldiers returning from world wars with disabilities, led to the emergence of a different perspective.

The concept of disability began to be addressed by the social sciences in the 1950s, evolving to be seen as individual and medical issues in the 1960s. In the 1970s, theories, approaches, and frameworks concerning disability were introduced as knowledge increased. Approaching disability from a human rights perspective in the 1980s, it began to be recognized as a condition that could be encountered in all aspects of social life and experienced by everyone. In this period of significant advancements, the notion that disabled individuals should have equal participation in societal life and that fundamental rights should be provided to everyone gained global consensus (ÖZİDA, 2009; Albert & Hurst, 2005, Shakespeare & Watson, 2002; Gleeson, 1999). Based on this historical background, studies related to disability can be categorized into three main models: the medical model, the social model (Burcu, 2007; Okur & Erdugan, 2010), and the traditional model that predates both. The debate between the medical and social models revolves around whether disability is a physical or social phenomenon. In the traditional model, there is a perception that disability arises as a consequence of moral or religious sins committed by the individual (Arıkan, 2002; Ghosh, 2012). The medical model views disability as an illness and considers disabled individuals as 'socially dysfunctional.' They are perceived as limited individuals due to their dependence. Within this model, society cannot be held responsible for the condition of inadequacy since disabled individuals are considered to be in need of correction (Genç & Çat, 2013). In response to the medical model, the social model considers disabled individuals as a minority (Bagenstos, 2009) within society, emphasizing the need for positive discrimination to integrate them effectively. The social model, based on a rights-oriented approach, insists that disabled individuals should also benefit from national income and welfare like everyone else, advocating for gains in areas such as accessibility, participation, and independent living. As a result, the social model calls for the legal support of all rights related to disability. Due to the multidimensional nature of disability, the theoretical background of this study is shaped by the social model. Education stands out as one of the most crucial aspects highlighted by the social model.

While education has a positive impact on the cognitive, social, and emotional development of all individuals, it is essential to assess the disadvantage observed in the societal context within the framework of educational institutions. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognizes that access to education is one of the most fundamental rights that everyone should have. Consequently, in Turkey, inclusive education practices, including disabled students, have led to the establishment of certain laws and regulations. In fact, to "promote and ensure

the benefit of disabled individuals from fundamental rights and freedoms, to strengthen respect for their inherent dignity, to provide their full and effective participation in social life on an equal basis with others, and to take preventive measures against disabilities by making the necessary regulations," (Higher Education Law, 2005), the Higher Education Council (YÖK) enacted the Law on Disabled Persons in 2005.

Within the scope of this law, Article 15 explicitly supports the participation of disabled individuals in education and training. According to this article, "The education of disabled persons cannot be prevented for any reason. Disabled individuals are ensured to benefit from lifelong education opportunities on the basis of equality, in integrated environments in their living environment, without discrimination. In the general education system, inclusive planning is included to ensure that disabled individuals receive education at all levels. Necessary measures are taken to include individuals with delayed access to formal education programs for various reasons. In order to ensure effective participation in education for disabled university students, Disabled Consultation and Coordination Centers are established within higher education institutions under the coordination of the Higher Education Council, to work on issues such as providing appropriate tools, materials, suitable educational, research, and accommodation environments for disabled individuals, and solving problems encountered in the education process." This inclusive and inequality-preventing decision is outlined in the Law on Disabled Persons No. 5378 (2005).

Similarly, in 2010, the "Regulation on Consultation and Coordination for Disabled Students in Higher Education Institutions" was published in the Official Gazette with the aim of "preparing the necessary academic environment to facilitate the educational life of disabled students receiving higher education and taking necessary measures and regulations to ensure their full participation in the education process. This regulation aims to set forth the working principles and procedures of the Disabled Students Commission of the Higher Education Council, the Disabled Students Consultation and Coordination Unit, the Disabled Students Consultation and Coordination Unit of OSYM (Student Selection and Placement Center), and the disabled student units to be established within higher education institutions.

Numerous studies have been conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of these legally significant regulations, which contain many achievements. Looking at the studies conducted in the Turkish literature, while various disability-related research covers different topics, there are indirect studies that touch upon the education of disabled individuals. For instance, in a study that examines the dreams, fears, preferences, thoughts about the future, and life expectations of disabled individuals, their right to education is also mentioned (Öztabak, 2017). In another study conducted with disabled individuals in the Doğanhisar district of Konya province, issues that can be addressed within the social, cultural, economic, educational, and health frameworks are discussed along with measures to address these problems (Genç, 2016). Some studies conducted within the framework of gender also highlight the issue of education for disabled individuals. In one study investigating the gender roles in families with disabled children, a perspective on social policies related to education is presented (Duru & Duyan, 2017). In another study examining the practices of social exclusion of more vulnerable groups such as disabled women, exclusion practices in the field of education are also questioned (Duman & Doğanay, 2017). In another research, while the problems faced by disabled women in society are discussed in a theoretical context, education-related issues are also addressed (Orhan & Özkan, 2020). As a result of the literature review, there are studies that focus on the problems of disabled individuals in the field of education, as well as studies that directly focus on disability and education. For example, Gürek (2016) examined the education activities and services provided by local governments to disabled individuals and their adequacy. Additionally, there are studies that discuss the right to education and access to education for disabled individuals in light of national and/or international agreements and treaties (Şişman, 2014; Demirtaş, 2019; Çetin, 2020). Higher education institutions represent the final stage in the field of education. As previously mentioned, university education is important to provide the necessary qualifications for finding opportunities in qualified job fields. For disabled individuals, university education is crucial not only for job opportunities but also to gain a perspective that allows them to view life differently and avoid falling into poverty. Moreover, studies have been conducted that reveal the attitudes and awareness levels of non-disabled students towards disabled students (Cengizhan et al., 2019; Sağlam & Altındağ, 2017), as well as studies directly focused on the problems of disabled students (Piştav Akmeşe, 2018; Tekin, 2019; Burcu, 2002; Çikılı & Karaca, 2017; Sevinç & Çay, 2017; Mengi, 2019). Generally, these studies indicate that students face problems related to physical spaces, accommodation, academics, and interactions with non-disabled students. Despite the

introduction of various laws and regulations by YÖK (Higher Education Council) concerning disabled students, the fact that disabled students still face various problems necessitates further research on this topic.

### METHOD, TECHNIQUE, AND FIELD NOTES

The aim of this study is to uncover the spatial, social, and educational problems experienced by disabled students in the universities/educational areas where they actively receive education. The sub-questions of this study are as follows:

- Regarding spatial access within the university, whether or not there are experiences related to spatial access, whether or not there are problems, and if so, what are these problems?
- Whether or not they encounter difficulties in accessing educational materials and understanding the lessons, and if they do, in what aspects do they experience these difficulties?
- Whether or not they experience interaction and communication problems with their peers, academics, or other university staff members, and if they do, what is the nature of these problems?
- Whether or not they encounter difficulties in participating in socio-cultural activities and accessing them, and if there are problems, what specific issues do they face?

Working with individuals with disabilities is both a highly important and sensitive endeavor. The problems experienced by disabled individuals and societal inequalities remain a significant and relevant topic today. In order to comprehend and address the issues faced by disabled individuals in society, appropriate research methods and techniques that align with the sensitivity of the subject must be employed. Therefore, in line with the validity of the research, qualitative research methods and specifically the phenomenological methodology were utilized, incorporating the in-depth interview technique (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018). Pre-prepared semi-structured interview forms were used along with an e-interview form designed to address circumstances like the earthquake disaster that occurred on February 6th in Turkey and the subsequent transition to remote education, financial constraints, and lack of leave, which hindered in-person interviews and data collection. Through the chosen in-depth interview technique, aimed at accessing individuals' perceptions, consciousness, and experiences, the research contributed to comprehending the significance and intricate dimensions of the topic.

The scope of this study encompasses the provinces of Muğla and Bilecik. After the earthquake that occurred in February 2023, Muğla Sıtkı Koçman University (MSKÜ) and Bilecik Şeyh Edebali University (BŞEÜ) transitioned to online remote education and subsequently to a hybrid mode, which led to them being selected as the sample universities for this study. The selection of students from these two universities as the sample was determined considering the constraints posed by conditions such as the transition to remote education, financial constraints, and leave restrictions. The students actively engaged in education at these two universities were reached out to, and thus the research sample was formed. However, this approach also introduces a limitation as the researchers' access was confined to the universities where they were situated. The information about disabled students in both universities was obtained from the Disabled Student Units. According to the acquired information, there are 138 disabled students at MSKÜ and 38 disabled students at BŞEÜ. Due to the smaller numbers of disabled students in comparison to the total student population, the challenges associated with accessing students during the online and hybrid education systems, and the fact that part of the fieldwork coincided with the summer semester, communication was attempted through the Coordinators of the Disabled Student Units. In this context, the purposive sampling technique was used to select willing participants for in-depth interviews. Ten students who could be reached and were willing to participate were selected for in-depth interviews. Although the total number of disabled students in both universities is 176, being able to reach only 10 students constitutes another limitation of the research. Despite efforts to disseminate information about the research through the Coordinators of the Disabled Student Units, WhatsApp groups, and email groups of disabled students, the majority of students did not volunteer to participate. Since voluntary participation is a fundamental principle, the number of participants remained limited to 10 individuals. Thus, the number of individuals to be interviewed was determined during the field phase. The obtained data were analyzed using the thematic analysis method, and the findings were interpreted with input from the literature. This study addresses various aspects of university life, including daily life practices, spatial and educational accessibility to university and education, socio-cultural participation and accessibility, and relationships with university staff, academics, and peers, under different headings. Questions that

focused on individual experiences centered around the ways in which disability is experienced within higher education.

**Table 1.**

*Demographic Characteristics*

Interviewer	Age	Gender	Hometown	Class	Disability Status
G1	24	Male	Muğla	First Year of Master's Program	Physical Disability (62%)
G2	29	Male	Denizli	Master's Thesis Stage	Physical Disability (Cerebral Palsy) (52%)
G3	22	Female	Muğla	Second Year of Bachelor's Program	Physical Disability (Cerebral Palsy) (95%)
G4	21	Female	Manisa	First Year of Bachelor's Program	Physical Disability (60%)
G5	19	Female	Bursa	Second Year of Bachelor's Program	Visual Impairment (50%)

G6	20	Female	Ankara	Fourth Year of Bachelor's Program	Orthopedic Disability (56%)
G7	23	Female	İstanbul	Fourth Year of Bachelor's Program	Hearing Impairment (68%)
G8	21	Male	İstanbul	Second Year of Bachelor's Program	Physical Disability (80%)
G9	19	Male	Kars	First Year of Bachelor's Program	Physical Disability (91%)
G10	23	Female	Bilecik/Merkez	Fourth Year of Bachelor's Program	Physical Disability (56%)

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**The demographic characteristics of students reached through MSKÜ and BŞEÜ Inclusive Campus data, who voluntarily participated in the study.**

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As can be seen from the demographic characteristics table, the ages of the participant students range between 19 and 29. The participants consist of 4 male and 6 female students. Among the participants, 8 are undergraduate students and 2 are graduate students. Their disability conditions range between 50% to 95%. In an effort to assess different experiential narratives and ensure equal distribution, attempts were made to reach students with various disability groups. However, due to the low number of voluntary participants and the majority of willing participants being physically disabled, the distribution of disability statuses in the sample group, as evident from the table, has not been well-balanced. This also presents another limitation of this study.

## FINDINGS

### *Daily Life, Accommodation, and Transportation*

Students were initially asked about the university they were attending and the factors influencing their choice of studying in Muğla or Bilecik. With the exception of two students, it was found that the primary factor determining the choices of students, due to their disability status, is proximity and accessibility. One student, G4, stated, "I had written down the programs I wanted, and this place came up," while another, G7, said, "I chose this place because my mother wanted me to." On the other hand, the other 8 students commonly expressed factors such as "being close to the city/area where I live," "being close to my family," "having health issues," and "living in the same city." Some students' statements are as follows:

"The fact that the university campus is very close to residential areas influenced my choice of Muğla Sıtkı Koçman University." (G1, 24 years old)

"My desire to live with my family due to my disability, the university being close to where I live, and the recommendation of a disabled acquaintance studying at the university." (G3, 22 years old)

"Being close to the city where I live, being peaceful, and being a small province." (G6, 20 years old)

"Being close to my family, having health problems." (G10, 23 years old)

Karataş (1997; 2002) emphasizes the necessity of considering individuals' disability situations in urban spaces and highlights the importance of adapting accessibility and physical arrangements in cities inclusively for social participation. The fact that physical, environmental, and spatial arrangements in urban areas, such as buildings, roads, transportation, parks, and gardens, are not designed to encompass all segments of society is a barrier to the integration of disabled individuals into the community (Karataş, 1997; Karataş, 2002). The failure to plan urban

areas according to an inclusive approach hinders access to educational spaces, which are one of the areas essential for the integration of disabled individuals into society. Ultimately, individuals who face difficulties in accessing university education may be at risk of falling behind in their education. Indeed, Tekin (2019), who conducted research on disabled students at universities, has revealed that students experience difficulties in accessing education due to the location of the university. Therefore, the students within the scope of our sample may also have chosen a university that they already know or one that is relatively close to them due to concerns about access difficulties. Thus, it is understood that the participation of students in society occurs within a limited environment. Moreover, the data obtained from the students regarding their daily lives and housing also support the reasons for their choices. Some of the students interviewed mentioned the following:

“My neighborhood is close to the campus...” (G1, 24 years old)

“I used to live in the city center during my undergraduate years because it was close to my workplace at the time. During that time, getting to school was difficult because campus shuttles departed from the stadium stop. However, in the following years, I had my own car, so the difficulty of reaching the educational area disappeared. But if you don't have a personal vehicle within your means, you may encounter difficulties due to the limited public transportation in this city... If I weren't a working student, I would have faced housing issues. The debate about whether these places are considered homes is already ongoing, and for a physically disabled individual, this situation makes things even more challenging.” (G2, 29 years old)

“It's far from the center, but it's easy to reach the university within walking distance.” (G6, 20 years old)

Students have given different responses to the question about access to housing spaces and the use of these spaces based on their disability conditions. For example, G6, who has an orthopedic impairment, responded, “I don't have a big problem with housing places; it's just that since I was born without my left hand, carrying a tray with one hand in the dormitory dining hall can be challenging at times” (G6, 20 years old), indicating that they face fewer challenges. G5, who has a visual impairment, shared his experiences of accessing places, saying, “I can walk to my sister and brother's houses. However, when I cross the main road, I lose confidence due to the constant fear of a traffic accident” (G5, 19 years old), while also expressing the fears he experiences. However, G3, who has a physical disability, stated that he faces significant difficulties in entering places and housing areas:

“Entering homes is very difficult. I can't enter every place. Stairs, narrow entrance doors, cluttered entrance areas, and lack of maneuverability prevent me from going wherever I want. I can only go to places and shops that provide easy access and entrance for me. This excludes me from social life, friend gatherings, and even my very close surroundings... For example, when you want to go to a live music venue in the Kötekli area in Muğla, you can't enter due to infrastructure-related issues. As a student, you can't experience normal student life experiences. The venue owner probably thought that disabled students wouldn't come here to study, so they didn't feel the need to create an accessible space, considering it a financial loss. Therefore, I cannot attend friend groups or gatherings”(G3, 22 years old).

Thus, it can be seen that students' disability conditions can reveal different difficulties related to housing and space use. These findings, along with previous findings regarding transportation, support the idea that urban planning is not inclusive. Additionally, the statements from G3 reveal that there is a lack of awareness in society regarding spatial arrangements. Burcu (2002) also emphasizes the importance of society's perspective for the social inclusion of disabled individuals and to prevent social isolation. In this context, the importance of societal awareness of environmental, physical, and spatial arrangements becomes apparent.

On the other hand, some participants have also discussed whether sufficient support is provided by the government, municipality, and other relevant institutions for disabled students. While there have been several important initiatives related to disability by official institutions in recent years, some students have mentioned both the support provided and its inadequacy:

“Regarding the support for disabled individuals... In recent times, with the influence of the EU harmonization process, some progress has been made apart from symbolic commemorations on important days, but we still can't get anywhere most of the time. In terms of the city we are in, I believe that more useful work has been done compared to other cities, but it is clear that more can be done” (G2, 29 years old).

“Although the support provided to disabled individuals and their families by the state has increased in recent years, it is still insufficient... The lack of disabled-friendly vehicles with ramps in transportation, or the use of manual ramps like in Yenice public transportation, drivers seeing it as a burden, and the lack of legal regulations with sanctions for our transportation rights hinder us. Not being seen as individuals, being alienated from education, inadequate and unenforceable legal regulations on transportation and access, lack of support, leaving it to the discretion of individuals, lack of supervision, covering up negative incidents, and the failure to inform disabled individuals and their families about their legal rights can be mentioned as the deficiencies observed” (G3, 22 years old).

“I see many friends who economically don't have much income but can manage without taking the bus and choose to walk, don't need to take medication, or if they're not feeling well, they can wait a bit. But I can't manage like this. I also wish I could walk, but I get tired, and when I insist, I have pains in my leg and back. For me to be pain-free, I need suitable shoes and clothing, and ideally, the place I sit or lie down should be orthopedic. Therefore, there are situations that exceed my family's support. The people I talk to say that the situation is better than before, but it could be even better” (G4, 21 years old).

Before disabled students even arrive at universities, it is crucial for the transportation and housing needs in the city where the university is located to be accessible. Therefore, under this theme, the daily life and participation in the social life of students in the cities they choose for their university education have been discussed, and it has been found that students have different experiences based on their disability conditions. However, students have also expressed the inadequacy of measures taken for accessibility. While this indicates that students have access to their education, it can also be understood that they experience educational inequality. They face access limitations compared to non-disabled students, and based on their own statements, they cannot envision university life in different cities other than the cities where they or their families reside. Furthermore, the experiences of disabled students within the university, which constitute the main focus of the research, have been discussed under other themes.

### ***Accessibility of Spatial, Educational, and Socio-Cultural Areas at Universities***

While conducting research with students from different cities studying at MSKÜ, it should be noted that access to the university and accessibility within the campus vary from one university to another. All participants who attend BŞEÜ have stated that access to the university is easy. In contrast, students attending MSKÜ have mentioned various transportation difficulties. For instance, two disabled students studying at MSKÜ have expressed their transportation challenges as follows:

"I use my private car to reach the university because public transportation is very crowded, and many vehicles don't have ramps. Even if there are ramps, the drivers don't know how to use them, and they don't want to open them. I guess they reluctantly do this job because setting up a mobile ramp seems like torture to them" (G3, 22 years old).

"There's a bus that passes in front of the dormitory and takes us to school, but these buses are always full. Of course, the distance is short, and people help, but it still may not be sufficient, especially in very hot or cold weather" (G4, 21 years old).

In their study conducted to identify the problems of autistic students and their families in higher education, Çıkılı and Karaca (2017) found that participant families used their own vehicles or public transportation during the process of reaching higher education institutions, but sometimes they encountered problems with public transportation. In this sense, the life experience narratives of disabled students at MSKÜ in this research support the findings of other studies conducted with disabled students at different universities (Çıkılı & Karaca, 2017; Tekin, 2019) as well. This suggests that unless an inclusive and egalitarian societal system is adopted, disabled individuals will continue to face similar difficulties in their life experiences, regardless of the city or university.

Another important issue for disabled students in universities is the ability to have easy access to every unit or area within the university after reaching the university. As mentioned in the literature section, Law No. 5378 regarding Persons with Disabilities emphasizes the necessity for public institutions to take accessibility measures, particularly in Article 7, which states the requirement for structures to be designed in compliance with accessibility standards. Within the scope of the research, it can be understood from the different views expressed by disabled

students that the most important factor determining the accessibility of spaces in the universities (library, dining hall, sports hall, restrooms, etc.) is the students' disability status. While some students (6 students) stated that they did not have any difficulties or issues with access, others (4 students) shared their access problems related to the spaces they use.

I believe that the library, dining hall, and sports hall are accessible. However, in some places, disabled restrooms are located in the same area as restrooms used by non-disabled individuals. I think this is not correct, and disabled restrooms should be placed in a different area from the restrooms used by non-disabled individuals" (G1, 24 years old).

"Entering the library with a motorized wheelchair is difficult because of the narrow spaces between the shelves. The shelves are too high, so I cannot reach books independently. The staff members assist me. Due to my physical disability, I cannot get food by myself because I am not tall enough, and I use a motorized wheelchair. However, the staff is very considerate and helps me. The entrance door is not always open, so I have to wait if there is no one to assist me" (G3, 22 years old).

"I don't have difficulty if the places I need to go to on foot are not hilly or have stairs. The pathways in the dining hall are a bit challenging for me, but the library is easier. There are ramps and suitable handles for support near the stairs. However, I get tired of long distances and climbing stairs. The elevator is not always available. Since the building has three floors, I cannot reach all the professors who teach the classes, especially those in the philosophy and psychology departments" (G4, 21 years old).

"I don't have any accessibility issues due to the absence of my left hand. Having a ramp to access the dining hall at the Vocational School is convenient for other disabled friends" (G5, 19 years old).

From these statements, it can be understood that whether students experience problems or not varies depending on their disability status. Despite certain legal regulations, there are still areas within the university that are inaccessible. This situation can potentially make disabled students dependent on others and create barriers to their independent movement or free mobility within the university. Burcu (2002) conducted a study with disabled students at Hacettepe University and noted that students faced many spatial accessibility issues. Burcu mentioned that students encountered difficulties due to the physical conditions of the university's library and cafeteria, as well as problems with access to classrooms, laboratories, and faculty members' offices. Additionally, the condition of roads and stairs, the narrowness of toilets, and uncomfortable chairs were factors that posed challenges for students in spatial terms. A student also highlighted the deficiencies and necessary improvements related to the accessibility of spaces in their narrative:

"Door thresholds and ramp inclines could be less steep. The space between shelves in the library could be wider. We have shortcomings for individuals with visual and hearing impairments. Necessary adjustments need to be made. Equal access should be provided to disabled individuals" (G3, 22 years old).

Piştav Akmeşe (2018) conducted a study with students and staff members in higher education institutions to explore their expectations and opinions regarding the current situation of transportation and space within the campus. She stated that participants expressed their views on the need for physical arrangements to be designed with the principle of inclusivity for everyone in mind.

Furthermore, within the context of questions regarding the accessibility of education for students, it can be observed that the needs, problems, or solutions related to classes vary according to students' disability status. For example, four of the physically disabled students with mobility limitations did not encounter any problems, while two students (G3, G4) mentioned that preventive measures had been taken for potential problems, and educational adaptations such as extended time, appropriate classroom arrangements, and writing support had been provided, so they had not experienced any issues. Another two students (G2) and (G6) mentioned that they faced difficulties in traditional and long-form exams. However, (G2) emphasized that they were aware of their rights, communicated this to their professors, and as a result, the situation improved:

"I have most of my classes on the ground floor in a classroom suitable for me. I can reach my classes in other buildings by elevator or by going around the courtyard. I receive writing support in exams because I have a physical

disability and cannot use my hands completely. My professors are understanding in this regard. I also use extended time in exams" (G3, 22 years old).

"If my hands get very tired, then I ask for help. Due to the earthquake, classes and exams are online, so I can get extended time. For now, there is no problem, but I don't know what might happen in face-to-face education" (G4, 21 years old).

"I can easily access classes, I don't face any difficulties" (G8, 21 years old).

"I had difficulties in traditional exams or long assignments, and I had to explain the situation to the professors of the course. It was necessary to apply individually and within the regulations. A result was achieved" (G2, 29 years old).

"Writing with only one hand can be time-consuming in classic or assignment-style exams" (G6, 20 years old).

However, a visually impaired student expressed difficulties related to a specific course and stated that they couldn't access sufficient information about that course due to not being able to see the presentations. They also mentioned that when they were a first-year student, despite writing a petition about the issue, some professors seemed to have forgotten about it. This situation led to feelings of being left out in front of everyone and questioning whether they were forgotten because they were singled out or because of their petition, which caused frustration:

"In one of our courses, I couldn't see the presentation well, so I couldn't access sufficient information about that course. When I was a first-year student, despite writing a petition about the issue, unfortunately, some of my professors seemed to have forgotten about it. I was entering those exams with a different psychology, not knowing whether this was enough for being singled out in front of everyone or whether I was forgotten despite writing a petition" (G5, 19 years old).

The student with a hearing impairment also mentioned a problem related to exams, stating that they couldn't solve the questions without a teacher present: "I couldn't solve the questions without a teacher present during exams" (G7).

It should be noted that some students mentioned receiving support from peers in various ways. For instance, one student with a visual impairment mentioned receiving help from their friends in transcribing notes from their friends' notebooks and thought about the intention behind their friends' assistance. Even though their friends didn't see it as a problem, they couldn't help but wonder if they were given the notes because they needed them or just because they asked for them: "In this regard, my friends would tell me when they were writing, and they kindly provided their notes to me. They were so understanding. However, in my mind, I couldn't help but think, 'What if they had notes to take care of, and they gave them to me just because I asked?'" (G5, 19 years old).

This study also revealed that only one student received peer support when it came to education. The student mentioned that they asked their friends to inform them about the content when the materials were presented in a larger font size before their official accommodation paperwork was processed: "Of course. In this regard, I asked my friends to inform me. They kindly did so. However, sometimes, I couldn't help but think, 'What if they had notes to take care of, and they gave them to me just because I asked for them?'" (G5, 19 years old).

In addition to the experiences shared by students, the literature also suggests that peer support is often sought after by disabled students in higher education (Çıkılı & Karaca, 2017). Some studies have reported that students with disabilities receive peer support, which helps them overcome problems, especially in classes and exams (Sevinç & Çay, 2017; Tekin, 2019). However, concerns have been expressed in other studies about the lack of peer support, especially in higher education institutions (Piştav Akmeşe, 2018).

Furthermore, many participants in this study mentioned that they couldn't participate in social-cultural activities organized by the university or faculty due to reasons such as not being informed about these activities or not having enough time due to their study commitments.

"To be honest, I can't say anything about the ones I haven't attended yet. I usually either don't know about them or don't have time because I'm busy studying" (G1, 24 years old).

"I couldn't participate in activities because of the facilities where activities are organized" (G10, 23 years old).

One student expressed their desire for more social-cultural activities to be organized to include disabled individuals in social life: "Activities should be organized for disabled individuals in universities to integrate them into social life" (G3, 22 years old).

Similarly, other studies conducted with disabled students in higher education have reported a lack of sufficient free-time activities and the sporadic nature of organized activities. It is emphasized that students are not sufficiently motivated to participate in activities and that universities should prioritize social and cultural activities that enable disabled students to access them, alongside their academic commitments (Çıkılı & Karaca, 2017; Burcu, 2002; Kaldık, 2022; Mengi, 2019).

### ***Awareness or Exclusion in Education***

In everyday life, individuals' prejudices, discriminatory behaviors, and exclusionary attitudes towards those who are different from themselves, such as race, gender, and ethnic identity, are significant issues in the societal context. When it comes to disability, attitudes, and behaviors towards individuals with special needs in educational settings, in particular, can sometimes pose problems that negatively affect individuals' educational experiences. According to Şişman (2014), individuals with disabilities may face discrimination, exclusion, marginalization, and isolation in various aspects of daily life, such as the workplace or the healthcare sector, as well as in the field of education, due to the differences created by their disability. According to the "Measurement of Discrimination Based on Disability Research (2010), 70% of the disabled individuals in the sample group perceive discrimination in the field of education and anticipate that they will face discriminatory practices someday, with 51% stating that they have experienced discrimination in this area" (cited in Aktaran, Şişman, 2014 s. 57, 79).

Through the interviews conducted with the participants, it is evident that the attitudes of individuals at the university towards them vary. In fact, participants have spoken positively about the attitudes of university and faculty staff (academic staff, university students, administrative staff, etc.) towards disabled students.

"As a disabled person, the attitudes, behaviors, and approaches of the academic and administrative staff, as well as other employees at my university, are positive and genuine" (G3, 22 years old).

"I can confidently say this about the subject: All the staff at our university, at least as far as I have observed, have reached a level of awareness when it comes to disabled individuals. I have not been subjected to any hurtful or offensive words, behaviors, etc. so far" (G5, 19 years old).

"The academic staff, my teachers, all of them helped me in the best possible way, but I had a bit of trouble with my friends" (G7, 23 years old).

As can be understood from the statements, some students speak positively about academic and administrative staff. However, Piştav Akmeşe's (2018) findings indicate a different result; disabled individuals are faced with some forms of discrimination that can demotivate students, and thus, there is a need to increase the knowledge and awareness of academic and administrative staff. Among the problems that some disabled students face, the dynamics of their relationships and communication with peers come to the forefront. However, they have expressed different views about their peers. Therefore, it is possible to say that there are different responses regarding discrimination or exclusion issues in the university life of disabled students. For example, G5 and G6 stated that they have not experienced discrimination and prejudice with the following statements:

"To be honest, I think that all individuals who have the right to a university education are sensitive to different situations or individuals they will encounter at the university. Also, I consider the university environment to be the freest environment for me throughout my educational life" (G5, 19 years old).

"I haven't experienced any exclusion so far, and since I am a social work student, I think my classmates are more understanding because they will all work with disabled individuals in the future, so I believe they are more understanding compared to other students" (G6, 20 years old).

On the other hand, a few other students have mentioned their experiences with prejudice and exclusion:

"Since we are peers, we still have reservations and prejudices in the background, even if we have a dialogue. I cannot say that my friends have an awareness about disability. They act cold. Our relationship is not sincere; it is very superficial. I think we are excluded because they generally don't want to make friends with us. I believe it is related to a person's character and empathy" (G3, 22 years old).

"I only experienced it in the early days of the first year, and when everyone gave each other a share of the pie, I didn't experience it again. (G2, 29 years old).

From the statements of the participating students, it can be understood that whether students experience prejudice, discrimination, and exclusion varies depending on the awareness levels of non-disabled students and the department they are enrolled. However, Kaldık (2022) conducted a study with visually and orthopedically disabled individuals, where it was found that individuals were subjected to practices of exclusion by society in their daily lives, based on "pity" and "otherness." Burcu (2015) also noted that society tends to view disabled individuals with a sense of pity. In contrast, the narratives of the students in this study reveal different experiences of exclusion, more explicitly expressed through relationships, including "not being included in friend groups," "acting cold," "lack of sincerity," and "superficiality." These findings are consistent with studies focusing on non-disabled students in higher education, which have shown that non-disabled students often lack sufficient awareness and sensitivity toward disability and their peers with disabilities (Cengizhan et al., 2019; Sağlam & Altındağ, 2017).

### *Opinions on Practices and Studies on Accessibility*

Regarding the adequacy of the university's efforts for disabled students, for example, in terms of counseling services, none of the participants mentioned any negative experiences. However, some participant students expressed their requests for more accessibility-related work, stating that counseling is not sufficient:

"Of course, it's not enough. There should be a comprehensive panel with the participation of all disabled students, the disability unit, and top administrators" (G2, 29 years old).

"Life is already not easy; I don't want to struggle in university. Our problems can be solved with simple solutions. There could be a more active disability unit that greets us and introduces itself when we first arrive" (G4, 21 years old).

"I think there are individuals who are not aware of the disability unit at our university. I believe this unit should promote itself to them" (G5, 19 years old).

As previously mentioned, Article 12 of the "Regulation on Disabled Students Consultation and Coordination in Higher Education Institutions" outlines the measures that university disability units should take regarding students' access to education, facilities, and socio-cultural activities. As evident from the expressions of the participant students, there are existing issues such as the "insufficiency," "inactivity," and "unawareness" of disability units among students. However, Tekin (2019) found in their study with disabled students at two universities that the students emphasized the importance of the disability unit, defining it as a unit where disabled students can acquire information, express their problems, and seek support for problem resolution. These differences among research findings suggest that the efforts and commitment of universities and their units in addressing disability-related issues vary.

In this regard, it is crucial to conduct more inclusive practices in all universities, aiming to level the accessibility standards across all institutions. Collaborations between universities can be a significant asset in achieving this goal, as it may enhance the practicality of the regulations. Finally, when the participants' general opinions and recommendations about the university, accessibility, and inclusivity were sought, one student (G8) expressed that nothing had been done, while the majority of students mentioned that universities had initiatives related to disability but considered them insufficient.

"Elevators may be wider and well-maintained, classroom doors may be wider, and seating arrangements for wheelchair users may be improved. However, the efforts related to disabled individuals are not sufficient. Necessary legal regulations should be made for solving the issues" (G3, 22 years old).

"Our university has many great initiatives for disabled individuals. However, I believe that these are not sufficient. I hope that more work will be done in this regard" (G1, 24 years old).

“When I started university, I shared a letter on the introduction form stating the areas where the university was not suitable for me, but I have not received any response or action on that yet. It was a new opportunity for me to say that the university is lagging behind in such matters” (G5, 19 years old).

“I cannot express my thoughts because I have not seen any initiatives for disabled individuals” (G8, 21 years old).

As seen, despite various efforts related to accessibility in the two universities mentioned earlier, it is evident from the students' statements that these efforts are not at a sufficient level. Therefore, it does not seem possible to claim that full equality of opportunity is provided in the higher education institutions where the participants continue their education. It can be understood that the implementation of these efforts, beyond guidelines and laws, into empirical reality and the necessity of taking more consistent, inclusive measures (for all types of disabilities) are important. Many studies have also recommended that the measures taken by institutions regarding accessibility are insufficient, and there is a need to increase necessary regulations and efforts (Taşgın & Şatır, 2016; Kaldık, 2022; Burcu, 2002; Mengi, 2019; Piştav Akmeşe, 2018; Sevinç & Çay, 2017). Based on this, it is evident that more feasible and supportive improvements should be made to enable disabled students to participate in university education throughout their academic journey.

### RESULT, CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Disability, a sociological phenomenon, has been interpreted differently in various cultures throughout human history. It has been both feared and revered in some cultures in the early stages of humanity. However, with scientific advancements and developments in human rights, the perception of disability has evolved from being a stigmatized or sacred trait into an aspect that needs to be understood and contextualized. The belief that every individual is valuable and that society can enhance an individual's worth through self-realization has led to local and global agreements, regulations, and legislation recognizing disability as a condition that can affect anyone at any point in life.

Various institutions and organizations have begun to actively work together to promote the idea that disabled individuals should be integrated into society and have access to social, economic, and physical spaces to lead independent lives. In contemporary society, it is acknowledged that disabled individuals, like everyone else, should have the opportunity to benefit from national income and welfare. Therefore, legal support for all types of rights related to disability is being advocated by numerous institutions.

Although significant progress has been made in legal and political terms, it is essential to understand the cultural and social aspects of these developments. This study focuses on the experiences of disabled individuals within educational institutions, aiming to gain insights into their experiences related to everyday life, housing, transportation, spatial, educational, and socio-cultural accessibility, as well as awareness and exclusion within the educational context. The study centers on the spatial, social, and educational experiences of disabled students concerning accessibility, the competency of universities in inclusive education, and themes of exclusion.

The study reveals that disabled individuals often prefer "proximate and accessible" universities and campuses due to their disability. Consequently, ensuring accessibility to all universities and campuses for disabled students, just like for other students, should be the primary goal. Within campuses, shared facilities such as dormitories, classrooms, libraries, and cafeterias need to be designed to accommodate various types of disabilities, including hearing, visual, orthopedic, speech, and language impairments.

The study also highlights that students generally speak positively about counseling services and the behavior of academic and administrative staff toward them. However, they do not express the same positivity when discussing their peers. Peer support is crucial in their educational lives, and the lack of it is a common issue for disabled students. This situation demonstrates that the attitudes and behaviors of young individuals towards their disabled peers vary, which emphasizes the importance of cultivating correct attitudes and awareness regarding disability from an early age in the education system.

Furthermore, disabled students mentioned that there were improvements and initiatives related to disability and disabled students at their universities. Nevertheless, they emphasized that these efforts were inadequate.

Issues related to housing, spatial usage, accessibility, and integration should be addressed. The difficulties faced by disabled students can be mitigated through internal, external, and inter-university collaboration.

In conclusion, the study indicates that although there have been legal and political advancements, the cultural and social aspects of these changes are significant. Ensuring accessibility, inclusivity, and integration for disabled individuals require more comprehensive efforts in the education system and society as a whole. The study underscores the need for universities and institutions to focus on creating a more inclusive environment and raising awareness about disability among both students and staff.

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