

The Urgency of Sign Language Training in Higher Education: A Reflective Analysis of Strengthening Inclusive Education Services at Universitas Sebelas Maret

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Abstract: *This article aims to reflect on the implementation of a sign language training program at Universitas Sebelas Maret as an effort to strengthen inclusive education services for deaf students. The program has been running for two years and involved various elements of the academic community, including lecturers, administrative staff, security personnel, and students, with a total of 160 participants. This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach. The reflection results show that the sign language training not only improves the basic communication competence of academic community members but also fosters the development of a more inclusive and responsive campus culture toward the needs of students with disabilities. Sign language is considered essential to support accessibility and inclusivity for deaf students in higher education, assist in academic success, and provide reasonable accommodation in academic services and learning processes at Universitas Sebelas Maret.*

Keywords: *Sign Language, Inclusive Education, Deaf Students, Higher Education, Disability Services*

Abstrak: Artikel ini bertujuan untuk merefleksikan pelaksanaan program pelatihan bahasa isyarat di lingkungan Universitas Sebelas Maret sebagai upaya penguatan layanan pendidikan inklusif bagi mahasiswa tuli. Program ini telah berjalan selama dua tahun dan melibatkan berbagai elemen sivitas akademika, yaitu dosen, tenaga kependidikan, satuan pengamanan, dan mahasiswa, dengan total peserta sebanyak 160 orang. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif. Hasil refleksi menunjukkan bahwa pelatihan bahasa isyarat tidak hanya meningkatkan kompetensi komunikasi dasar sivitas akademika, tetapi juga mendorong terbentuknya budaya kampus yang lebih inklusif dan responsif terhadap kebutuhan mahasiswa disabilitas. Bahasa isyarat dinilai sangat penting untuk menunjang aksesibilitas dan inklusivitas mahasiswa tuli di perguruan tinggi, membantu keberhasilan akademik, serta menyediakan akomodasi yang layak dalam layanan akademik dan proses pembelajaran di lingkungan Universitas Sebelas Maret.

Kata kunci: Bahasa Isyarat, Pendidikan Inklusif, Mahasiswa Tuli, Perguruan Tinggi, Layanan Disabilitas

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the essential aspects that must be obtained to enhance every individual's abilities and potential is education. Education serves as a medium for developing skills and internal potential, which is a crucial component of human growth. Along with ongoing developments, education continually undergoes changes and improvements that function as a platform to further develop and strengthen competencies, as well as to foster high-quality learners (Tsoraya et al., 2023).

Education is an essential aspect of life that cannot be separated from human existence. Every citizen has the right to obtain education regardless of ethnicity, race, or religion (Witasoka, 2016). Education is a fundamental, universal, and phenomenal activity (Karsidi, 2015). It is considered fundamental because it functions as one of the main and vital instruments for optimizing learners' potential and transforming it into high-quality human resources for a nation. Every child has the right to access and receive proper

educational facilities, as well as to learn to live together and socialize (Munifah & Ardiyansyah, 2021). This includes citizens with special needs. The rights of individuals with disabilities are equal to those of other citizens, including the right to education (Indriyany, 2015). One of the solutions to reduce disparities and discriminatory treatment in obtaining educational opportunities, especially for children with disabilities or special needs, is the implementation of inclusive education (Yasa & Julianto, 2017). Inclusive classrooms consist of increasingly heterogeneous learners, with diverse learning needs and increasingly varied educational goals (Kurniawati, 2018). According to Yusuf, Choiri, and Supratiwi (2017), inclusive education is essentially an evolution namely a paradigm shift in the educational approach for children with special needs.

Inclusive education seeks to address the issue of equal access to education for persons with disabilities, including at the higher education level. It has become an important policy at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels, aiming to facilitate learners with disabilities so they can socialize and learn alongside their peers. The importance of inclusive education lies in its role in providing opportunities for all individuals regardless of their diverse backgrounds to gain equal access to quality education, including higher education. The implementation of inclusive education requires support from various stakeholders, both within and outside the school environment. The success of inclusive education will ensure that all children, without exception, have the opportunity to receive proper and equitable education (Anafiah & Andini, 2018).

Higher education is recognized as a space for individual development, social well-being, and social cohesion across diverse physical abilities; therefore, policies in universities are needed to ensure the educational rights of persons with disabilities (Kamanzi et al., 2021). The development of inclusive campuses is a strategic effort to meet these needs. Inclusive education is an educational practice in schools that involves all students in the learning process, where all members are treated equally because they hold the same value as members of society (Moriña, 2017). Inclusion refers to the holistic integration of general students and students with special needs, encompassing the entire curriculum, learning environment, and social interactions within the school (Yusuf, 2015). Inclusive education views children with special needs not merely as individuals with disabilities, but as children with different health conditions who are able to participate in activities in different ways and achieve various forms of accomplishment together with their peers (Isrowiyanti, 2013).

Inclusive education in higher education must become a place where students with disabilities can learn, participate, and be recognized as valuable individuals within the university (Morgado et al., 2016). Universities have the responsibility to create an inclusive environment for all students, including those with disabilities. One of the major challenges in implementing inclusive education at the tertiary level is the limited communication between academic staff and deaf students. Sign language, which serves as the primary mode of communication for deaf individuals, has often not received adequate attention within higher education service systems, thereby creating barriers to accessibility in academic services as well as in the learning process (Kusters et al., 2017).

Although national regulations and higher education institutions have expressed commitments to the principles of inclusion, in reality many universities in Indonesia are still not fully prepared to provide accessible services for deaf students. One aspect that is often overlooked is the availability of effective communication. When administrative staff, lecturers, or even security personnel are unable to understand sign language, deaf students face difficulties in accessing academic, administrative, and social information (Wright & Taylor, 2020). This lack of preparedness results in social isolation, decreased learning motivation, and limited active participation of deaf students in campus life.

Previous studies have shown that sign language training for educators and academic staff can significantly improve the quality of interaction and the overall educational success of deaf students (Power & Hyde, 2002). Through such training, participants gain not only linguistic skills but also greater awareness of disability rights, understanding of diverse learning styles, and enhanced empathy in fostering a supportive environment. Thus, the training is not merely viewed as the development of technical skills, but also as a process of cultivating inclusive values and culture within higher education institutions. Furthermore, from an inclusive education perspective, ensuring communication accessibility is a key component of implementing equitable education. Accessibility is not limited to physical facilities, but also includes access to information and communication (UNESCO, 2020). As a

visual mode of communication, sign language is vital for deaf students in understanding course content, interacting with lecturers, and building social networks with other students. Therefore, universities must ensure that communication accessibility becomes an integral part of the academic service system as a whole, and not rely solely on the limited availability of sign language interpreters.

Universitas Sebelas Maret, as a university committed to inclusion, has initiated a sign language training program for lecturers, administrative staff, security personnel, and students. This program aims to strengthen the basic communication competencies of all campus stakeholders in interacting with deaf students, while also promoting more responsive, humanistic, and inclusive academic services. Over its two years of implementation, the program has trained a total of 160 participants from various units and faculties within Universitas Sebelas Maret, who are expected to become the driving force for transforming campus culture toward greater inclusivity.

The sign language training program initiated at Universitas Sebelas Maret serves as a concrete response to these needs. By involving various campus stakeholders, the program promotes collaboration and synergy in building an inclusive university environment. Participants are not only equipped with basic sign language vocabulary, but also provided with an understanding of Deaf culture (De Meulder & Haualand, 2019). Understanding Deaf culture is essential, as it reinforces the awareness that deafness is not merely a medical condition, but a part of identity and community that deserves recognition and empowerment within the educational setting.

The importance of sign language training in the context of higher education is not only related to communication skills, but also to the fulfillment of the right to equal education for deaf students as mandated by Law No. 8 of 2016 on Persons with Disabilities. Therefore, reflecting on the implementation of this program is essential to illustrate its effectiveness, challenges, and impact on strengthening inclusive education services within the university environment. This article aims to reflect on the implementation of the sign language training program at Universitas Sebelas Maret as a form of good practice in supporting inclusive higher education for deaf students. Such reflection is expected to serve as a foundation for developing policies, strategies, and replicable program models in other higher education institutions across Indonesia to further promote inclusive educational environments.

2. METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach using a reflective method as the basis for analyzing the implementation of the sign language training program at Universitas Sebelas Maret. This approach was chosen to provide an in-depth understanding of the dynamics of the training, participants' perceptions, and its impact on inclusive education services for deaf students. The research does not aim to generalize findings, but rather to explore and describe the good practices carried out in a contextual manner. The subjects of this study include the organizers of the sign language training program and the training participants, consisting of lecturers, administrative staff, security personnel, and students. The participants were selected through purposive sampling, considering their active involvement in the program and their willingness to provide reflections on their experiences. Data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman model, which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. The validity of the data was ensured through triangulation techniques.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1. The Implementation of Sign Language Training within the Higher Education Environment

The sign language training program at Universitas Sebelas Maret has been implemented for two consecutive years since its initial launch, which responded to the needs of Deaf students in accessing academic services. The program was designed as an introductory-level training that covers basic elements such as fingerspelling, numbers, common greetings, and simple conversational expressions related to classroom interactions and administrative services. The training is carried out in a progressive and inclusive manner, involving 60 lecturers and administrative staff, 20 security personnel, and 80 students as participants.

The sign language training at Universitas Sebelas Maret is conducted in an in-person format over 13 training sessions, each lasting 120 minutes. The program is facilitated by professional sign language instructors who are themselves Deaf, ensuring that the learning process is contextually grounded and authentically informed by lived experience. The training employs a range of methods, including interactive lectures, communication simulations, educational games, and hands-on practice using sign language in campus service scenarios. The program is designed not only to transfer knowledge but also to cultivate participants' social awareness of the communication experiences of Deaf students within the higher education environment.

This training program is also aligned with national policy directions, particularly the mandate outlined in the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology Regulation No. 48 of 2023 on Reasonable Accommodation for Students with Disabilities in Early Childhood Education, Primary Education, Secondary Education, and Higher Education. The regulation underscores that higher education institutions are required to provide reasonable accommodation for students with disabilities, including in the domain of communication. In this context, sign language training serves as a concrete form of policy implementation. Beyond merely responding to individual needs, the program demonstrates the university's commitment to becoming a pioneer in developing a higher education system that is equitable, inclusive, and participatory, as envisioned within the framework of Education for All.

The program demonstrated a high level of enthusiasm among participants, as evidenced by strong attendance rates and active engagement throughout the training sessions. Participants also showed improved understanding of disability issues and the importance of accessible communication. This aligns with Hallahan et al. (2019), who emphasize that the success of inclusive education is determined not only by policy, but also by the readiness of human resources to build a supportive environment. Participants further expressed that the program has opened wider and more inclusive channels of communication. Moreover, they noted that through sign language training, the academic community contributes to creating an inclusive environment that listens to all voices, including those conveyed through sign language.

In addition to expanding communication access for deaf students, the sign language training also contributes to raising the social awareness of the academic community regarding diversity and disability issues. The program serves as a cross-perspective learning platform that bridges academic understanding with the lived experiences of persons with disabilities, thereby fostering empathy and inclusive attitudes in everyday campus interactions. As noted by Punch and Hyde (2011), the successful integration of deaf students in higher education greatly depends on the awareness of the surrounding environment and the provision of social and emotional support beyond academic accommodations.

Furthermore, the outcomes of this training demonstrate long-term impacts on the development of inclusive campus policies. As more lecturers and administrative staff acquire basic sign language competencies, the university gains an essential foundation for designing more accessible and systematic academic services. This aligns with findings by Marschark et al. (2015), who emphasize that the availability of human resources trained in communicating with deaf students is a key indicator of successful inclusive higher education. Thus, this training program can serve as a model of best practice that may be replicated by other universities in Indonesia.

3.2. Improving Communication Competence and Inclusive Awareness

One of the significant outcomes of this program is the improvement of basic sign language communication skills among the academic community. Lecturers and administrative staff who have participated in the training are now better prepared to respond to real-life situations when interacting with deaf students, particularly in academic services and instructional processes. In addition, trained students also serve as peer support who assist deaf students in understanding course materials, conveying questions, and participating in student activities. This finding reinforces the study by Effrandudeta et al. (2024), which emphasizes that by providing accessible communication, enhancing the learning environment, and fostering an inclusive and supportive community, universities can ensure that all students have the opportunity to thrive academically.

3.3. *Fostering a More Inclusive Campus Culture*

According to Honneth, it is essential to build awareness that persons with disabilities are integral members of society. Through such recognition and equality, persons with disabilities are able to exercise their rights to contribute to societal development as well as to improve their quality of life through education, in line with their right to determine the direction of their own lives (McArthur, 2021; Poole et al., 2021; Wilcox et al., 2021). In this context, society must be involved as a key component that provides support for persons with disabilities to optimize their educational opportunities, including at the higher education level. University stakeholders ranging from leadership, faculty members, to administrative staff need to gain literacy and cultural understanding regarding educational services for students with disabilities (Wren Butler, 2021).

The sign language training program implemented at Universitas Sebelas Maret has made a significant contribution to fostering a more inclusive and empathetic campus culture for students with disabilities, particularly deaf students. Conducted regularly and involving multiple elements of the university, this program has cultivated a collective awareness that accessible communication is a fundamental educational right. This inclusive culture not only improves the quality of academic services but also contributes to the formation of a healthy, equitable, and responsive social climate on campus. This aligns with the findings of Thompson (2021), who emphasizes that success depends on institutional commitment, vision, and the availability of resources to support such efforts. Thus, sign language training is not merely a technical strategy but a tangible representation of cultural transformation toward a learning environment that is just, humanistic, inclusive, and accessible for all.

3.4. *Challenges and Recommendations*

Although the program has demonstrated positive outcomes, several challenges emerged during its implementation. Some participants expressed the need for follow-up training in the form of intermediate-level sessions to ensure that the skills acquired do not remain at a basic level. In addition, tight schedules and the diverse backgrounds of participants posed challenges to the continuity of the training. Therefore, it is recommended that the university provide tiered training modules and promote institutional policies that support the sustainability of this program as part of inclusive academic services. This recommendation aligns with the principle of reasonable accommodation as mandated in Law No. 8 of 2016 on Persons with Disabilities, which requires educational institutions to ensure accessible services for students with disabilities.

4. CONCLUSION

The sign language training program at Universitas Sebelas Maret over the past two years has demonstrated a tangible contribution to supporting inclusive education for deaf students. The program has enhanced the basic communication competencies of the academic community and fostered a campus environment that is more inclusive and responsive. Reflections on its implementation indicate that sign language plays a critical role in ensuring accessibility, academic success, and equitable services for students with disabilities in higher education. This initiative affirms that inclusion can be realized through concrete and collaborative actions, especially when supported by strong institutional commitment, program sustainability, and the active participation of all campus elements.

Furthermore, the results of the program reveal that it provides not only short-term benefits in communication skills but also long-term impacts on shifting the academic community's paradigm of disability. The sign language training has created a dialogic space where academic perspectives, humanistic values, and the lived experiences of deaf students intersect, giving the university a strong foundation to build an equitable learning ecosystem. Thus, the program contributes to the cultural transformation of the campus in a direction that values diversity and upholds social justice.

In addition, the involvement of various campus stakeholders in the training highlights that inclusion cannot be the responsibility of a single unit or group, such as sign language interpreters or disability service centers. Rather, inclusion is a collective responsibility that must be internalized by all components of the university. The findings emphasize that basic sign language communication skills among lecturers, administrative staff, and students serve as essential social capital for fostering more

equitable and empowering interactions with deaf students. Nevertheless, the implementation of this program also reveals several challenges that must be addressed to ensure its sustainability. Time constraints, diverse participant backgrounds, and the need for intermediate-level training indicate that the university must design a more tiered, structured, and systematic training model. Providing self-study modules, supportive digital platforms, and strengthening the capacity of instructors are strategic steps to enhance the effectiveness and reach of future training programs.

On the other hand, the success of this program offers an empirical and practical basis for developing inclusive institutional policies. The university may integrate sign language training into continuing professional development programs, administrative requirements, or indicators of academic service quality. This approach reinforces the institution's commitment to implementing Law No. 8 of 2016 and Ministry Regulation No. 48 of 2023, particularly regarding the provision of reasonable accommodations in communication. Finally, the sign language training program at Universitas Sebelas Maret can serve as a best practice model for other higher education institutions in Indonesia. By adopting a collaborative, needs-based, and Deaf-culture-informed approach, similar programs can help expand access to higher education for deaf students nationwide. Ultimately, this effort represents a meaningful contribution to advancing Education for All and ensuring that every student, without exception, is able to learn, develop, and fully participate in academic life.

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