

Analysing Experiences of Deaf Students in Learning Tourism

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the experiences of deaf students pursuing education at a tourism higher school, specifically focusing on tourism learning that emphasizes practical skills, communication, and direct interaction with the community and tourists. The research employs a qualitative method with a case study approach. It was conducted in 2025 using in-depth interviews with two deaf students. The interviews concentrated on their theoretical and practical learning experiences, communication barriers, special needs, and the support received from the campus environment. The results indicate that deaf students face significant challenges in communication with both their lecturers and classmates. However, they were able to overcome many of these obstacles with support in the form of translators, hearing aids, learning notes from peers, and explanations from lecturers provided through written or visual media. Additionally, the students exhibited a strong enthusiasm for learning and preferred practical, hands-on experiences over theoretical instruction. Support from the surrounding environment, such as family, friends, and lecturers, plays a crucial role in boosting their motivation. The campus facilities were generally considered helpful in enhancing their learning enthusiasm, particularly for deaf students. Nevertheless, improvements are necessary, including the provision of dedicated lecturers for deaf students and consistent access to translation services. This study emphasizes the importance of strengthening inclusive education services at the tourism higher school, including the development of learning methods that are accessible to deaf students. The findings provide a realistic insight into the experiences of deaf students, offering a foundation for enhancing the curriculum, facilities, and tourism education policies to be more accommodating for deaf students in the tourism field.

Keywords: Deaf students; learning; students' experiences; tourism

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INTRODUCTION

All students have the right to receive a proper education, including students with disabilities. This includes providing opportunities for everyone, without exception, to study together in the same environment as other students without discrimination, and providing facilities that support the learning needs of all students. Therefore, inclusive education is a crucial issue in human resource development in today's modern era. All individuals, without exception, have the right to access proper education, including students with disabilities. Law Number 8 of 2016 emphasizes that people with disabilities also have the right to equal access to education.

However, this reality is not in line with what the students read, where students with disabilities still face various challenges, especially in pursuing higher education. In the context of higher education, particularly in the tourism sector, a learning system that is friendly to students with disabilities is needed. This is because tourism is an industry that operates in a field of science that emphasizes practical skills, communication, and direct interaction with the community and tourists. Therefore, this becomes one of the obstacles for students with disabilities who wish to

work and study in the tourism sector, as in the case of this student, who demonstrated a preference for and felt more comfortable participating in practical learning activities over theoretical ones. This proves that visual learning and direct, real-world experiences are more suitable for students with disabilities.

Several previous studies have also highlighted that students with disabilities often face obstacles such as a limited number of mentors, lecturers who do not have competencies in teaching students with special needs, and a lack of supporting facilities (Muryanti & Mulyani, 2018). Communication barriers are one of the primary challenges for students with disabilities, who often require visual aids or translators to understand learning materials. This finding aligns with the observation that providing comfortable facilities for all students, including those with disabilities, can facilitate their learning activities (Ahmad Zaki & Yessi Jusman, 2021).

Furthermore, the challenges faced by deaf students are not limited to the campus environment, but also during field practice or when they enter the workforce, commonly referred to as internships. For example, when deaf students work in the tourism industry, they need to adapt to the environment and work situations that require them to communicate actively with tourists and tourism staff. This condition can lead to feelings of being left behind or difficulty adapting if not accompanied by adequate support. For example, a deaf student we interviewed admitted to feeling left behind in theoretical learning. However, he eventually managed to adapt with help from friends who lent him their notes and from lecturers. This finding demonstrates the importance of support from the surrounding environment, as students with disabilities are not all the same; they have different learning needs, depending on their individual circumstances.

Several studies have also shown that social support from their environment, such as classmates, lecturers, and family, plays a significant role in increasing the motivation, self-confidence, and enthusiasm of students with disabilities (Yuniar, Dwi, & Annisah, 2021). Therefore, it is essential to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of students with disabilities in pursuing education, particularly in tourism, to identify obstacles, adaptation strategies, and special needs that students must address. Based on this research, this study aims to analyze the experiences of deaf students in tourism learning at the Tourism Polytechnic.

The primary contribution of this research is to provide a concrete understanding of the challenges and adaptation strategies faced by deaf students through interviews, while also providing evaluation material for tourism education in the development of an inclusive learning system. This aligns with the experience of a deaf student I interviewed, who stated that his classmates greatly assist him and are willing to provide him with notes. Lecturers also played a crucial role here by writing down key points in advance and presenting learning through visual media. The student also admitted that although communication was difficult, he felt helped by his lecturers and classmates' efforts to understand his situation. Therefore, campus social environmental factors are also important in determining the quality of the learning experience for students with disabilities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Students with Disability in Learning Tourism

Students with disabilities face unique challenges in studying tourism, typically related to communication, accessibility, and limited support from their surrounding environment. Students with disabilities have the same rights as other students to pursue higher education, including in the field of tourism. The tourism learning process emphasizes practical skills and direct interaction with tourists, the community, and tourism industry staff. This can be a significant challenge for students with disabilities who have communication barriers. Several studies have shown that students with disabilities often feel left behind when lecturers only explain without the use of visual media or sign language interpreters. In tourism, these obstacles become more complex

because students are required to provide tourism services, guide tourists, and interact directly with them.

To overcome these obstacles, it is essential to implement accessible and inclusive policies. In preparing inclusive accessibility for students with disabilities and providing social support, a combination of these approaches can enable students with disabilities to participate in learning activities comfortably (Diana & Farid, 2024). Several studies also confirm that to create friendly facilities for students with disabilities on campus is not only enough to provide but also touches on several aspects, such as policies, funding, and one of them is encouraging sustainability by providing scholarships for students with special needs (Made Sinthya, Nyoman Reni, et al., 2025). Barriers in accessibility can disrupt the learning process; in addition, inclusive education has not been entirely successful due to obstacles experienced, such as a lack of understanding, limited facilities, and support from the government and the surrounding community (Yulianto, 2014) and Praptiningrum (2010). In tourism, learning success is also determined by access to direct field practice and the support of lecturers in guiding students.

Students with disabilities often develop their own adaptation strategies to cope with limitations. For example, the student I interviewed stated that she always prepares notes before class and reads the material beforehand to stay on track. At the same time, her deaf classmates rely more on brief sign language sessions and peer assistance when communication is challenging. This strategy aligns with research indicating that deaf students often combine social support with independent learning strategies to succeed in academic settings (Fajarwati et al., 2021). This suggests that, despite obstacles, deaf students actively seek ways to adapt to their environment.

Analysing Experiences of Students with Disability in Learning Tourism

The experiences of students with disabilities studying tourism demonstrate a high level of motivation to learn despite numerous limitations. Several studies have also reported that students with disabilities cope with situations by adapting, such as lip-reading, taking notes on key points, or using digital technology to communicate (Rahman, 2021). While these strategies are helpful, support from lecturers, friends, and family remains crucial. Previous research has also shown that deaf students are more successful in learning when supported by classmates who are willing to share notes or repeat lecturers' explanations (Andini et al., 2021).

According to several previous studies, the role of the family is equally important. Encouragement and motivation from family can increase the confidence of students with disabilities in facing learning difficulties (Zubaidah, 2019). This is also revealed in research that suggests both internal and external motivational factors influence the interest of students with disabilities in learning (Fajarwati et al., 2021). The experiences of students with disabilities are determined not only by their limitations but also by the extent to which their surrounding environment supports their progress.

Interviews with two students with disabilities about their experiences studying at the Makassar Tourism Polytechnic provided a clear picture of the development of tourism education. One student with disabilities interviewed expressed a greater sense of comfort during practical learning. However, he had previously used a hearing aid that did not fully assist him because it was too noisy and caused headaches. He preferred to use sign language when communicating, but he could also communicate through writing, although the language layout was often reversed. However, other students with disabilities expressed limitations, such as difficulty writing or typing long or frequent sentences, so they preferred sign language. Despite this, they were still able to understand what was being conveyed. This demonstrates that, despite being deaf, each student's learning needs can differ. Furthermore, support from the campus and family environment is very influential. Classmates helped record and explain presentations using written or visual media, and encouraged one another. Social participation also emphasized that students with disabilities can strengthen their character in the community.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This section outlines the research methodology employed in this study. A qualitative descriptive method with a case study approach was utilized to explore the experiences of students with disabilities at Makassar Tourism Polytechnic. Data were collected through in-depth interviews conducted with two deaf students at the institution in August 2025.

The interviews featured a prepared question guide covering the following topics: 1) the students' backgrounds; 2) their learning experiences at Makassar Tourism Polytechnic, including preferences for theoretical versus practical learning; 3) the obstacles faced by students with disabilities while studying at the institution; 4) the support received from the campus environment, including friends and lecturers; 5) the accessibility of facilities on the Makassar Tourism Polytechnic campus for students with disabilities; and 6) the hopes of students with disabilities regarding the future of tourism education. The data were then analyzed according to the discussed topics, allowing for the identification of common patterns in the learning experiences of deaf students in the tourism field. This research is analytical in nature and aims to provide an overview of the experiences of deaf students at the Tourism Polytechnic.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Research Context

The research was conducted at the Makassar Tourism Polytechnic, a vocational higher education institution specializing in tourism located in Makassar, Indonesia. The polytechnic offers various study programs focused on developing practical skills, including Tourism Travel, Hospitality, Tourism Destinations, Tourism Business, Culinary Arts, Room Division, and Food Presentation. As a vocational campus, teaching and learning activities emphasize hands-on practice in classrooms, restaurants, kitchens, and field settings, requiring students to actively engage in communication and collaboration.

This study involved two deaf students who served as informants. Both students have educational backgrounds in special schools from elementary through secondary levels and later continued their higher education at the Makassar Tourism Polytechnic, each pursuing a program in Tourism, Travel, and Food and Beverage Service. This background shows that despite their special education experiences, these students have the opportunity to access higher education in a practical field like tourism.

While studying at the Makassar Tourism Polytechnic, they faced a significant challenge: limited communication with both lecturers and classmates. However, both were eager to learn and adapt to their new environment. Support from the campus, lecturers, and peers helped them overcome communication barriers. For example, lecturers often used written materials to explain the material, while classmates assisted by providing notes or repeating important information. Campus facilities were also deemed adequate, although students still required sign language interpreters and specialized lecturers to assist deaf students during lectures.

The differences in learning experiences between the two are clearly visible. One student prefers practical learning over theory because it is easier to understand through direct observation, while the other struggles with lengthy writing, making it difficult to convey ideas or input in writing. This highlights the differences in learning needs of deaf students that need to be considered. Not all learning strategies that work for one student will be effective for another. This profile illustrates that deaf students cannot be generalized as a homogeneous group. They each have their own strengths, weaknesses, and adaptation strategies. Therefore, universities need to implement a more flexible and diverse learning approach. Implementing inclusive education in the tourism sector can truly provide an environment where all students can develop according to their full potential.

Challenges of Deaf Students in Learning at Higher School

Main challenge: Communication

The biggest challenge faced by students with disabilities is communication, both with lecturers and with classmates. A deaf student we interviewed shared that, despite using a hearing aid, the sounds he received were sometimes loud and caused dizziness, especially in crowded rooms. This condition forced him to rely more on lip reading, sign language, and the help of friends during the learning process. Meanwhile, another deaf student I interviewed also faced other limitations. He admitted that he struggled to write long or type for extended periods because he was confused about how to write grammatically correct, so he often used abbreviated sign language to communicate. This indicates that the communication needs of each deaf student can vary, so universities must tailor their facilities to individual circumstances. This research confirms that inclusive education is not only about college access, but also about guaranteed career opportunities after graduation. Therefore, vocational colleges such as Poltekpar need to design a truly inclusive learning system, encompassing both the curriculum, teaching methods, and supporting facilities.

This research aligns with studies that emphasize the equal rights of students with disabilities to education and academic success. Therefore, it is necessary to have a companion or mentor who possesses sign language skills and is able to serve as an academic guide. The role of a mentor enhances learning effectiveness, and students with disabilities have the opportunity for academic success (Muallifah et al., 2022). This indicates that communication barriers are a significant issue that needs to be addressed promptly, making tourism education more accessible to deaf students.

Two students expressed their hope for a more welcoming future for deaf tourism education. They wanted stronger policies to provide sign language interpreters, specialized training for lecturers, and broader career opportunities in the tourism industry. The deaf students interviewed also expressed their particular hope that deaf students should get the opportunity to become civil servants (ASN) at the Ministry of Tourism.

Support from the campus

The campus environment is supportive. This support plays a crucial role in reducing learning barriers. Lecturers, for example, try to adapt their teaching methods by writing key points on the board or using visual media during instruction. Classmates also provide significant assistance, from reviewing material and re-explaining lectures to offering encouragement when deaf students feel they are struggling to keep up. This support is a key factor in keeping deaf students motivated to learn. Family support is provided in the form of motivation to maintain enthusiasm despite difficulties. However, students still feel the need for sign language interpreters in each class and dedicated lecturers to assist deaf students, a crucial way to ensure that no information is lost during the learning process.

Lecturers play a significant role in providing learning support that is accessible to students with disabilities. The first informant mentioned that most lecturers took the initiative to write key points on the board so that deaf students could follow the material's flow. Furthermore, visual media, including presentation slides, images, and videos, were also utilized to enhance student understanding. These efforts reflect an inclusive awareness on the part of instructors, although not yet fully systematic. This aligns with research by Rofiah & Sutopo (2020), which found that visual and written strategies significantly assist students with hearing impairments in understanding lecture material.

Peer support is highly beneficial. Deaf students feel less alone in facing challenges, as peers are willing to repeat information they have missed. The findings align with Rahman (2021), who stated that social support from peers can increase learning motivation in students with disabilities.

ties. This kind of support not only helps academically but also builds self-confidence. Family support also plays a significant role. Encouragement from family to remain strong and not give up helps deaf students overcome difficulties. Family members motivate them to persevere despite often facing communication limitations. With support from various parties, deaf students can more easily adapt to the demanding college environment.

The challenge for adapting

In addition to receiving support from others, deaf students also developed their own adaptation strategies. Both students demonstrated a strong enthusiasm for learning despite their limitations. One of the students I interviewed said she prepared notes before class by reading the material in advance, noting key points, and observing the lecturer's movements during explanations to grasp better the information conveyed. This strategy prevented them from relying entirely on verbal explanations, which can sometimes be challenging to understand. Another strategy was to utilize simple technology, such as digital note-taking apps or specialized tools. Lecturers also played a crucial role by providing written materials or presenting visual aids to facilitate comprehension. They also used the time after class to ask questions directly to lecturers or classmates about any areas they did not understand. Deaf students demonstrated an active approach to finding solutions, rather than simply waiting for help. This demonstrated their independence in learning, even though they still needed support from their environment.

Beyond academic aspects, adjustment challenges also arise in daily social interactions. The second informant admitted to sometimes feeling alone in large groups, as it was challenging to understand fast-paced conversations. He preferred interacting with close friends who already understood his sign language. This suggests limitations in expanding his social network on campus. According to research by Rahayu & Sumarsono (2020), communication barriers experienced by students with disabilities can impact social engagement and a sense of belonging on campus. These communication limitations require students with disabilities to be more assertive when asking for help. The second informant stated that he often felt reluctant to repeat questions or ask friends to explain again, fearing he would be perceived as annoying. This condition creates a psychological barrier that makes adjustment more difficult. According to Fitriyah & Les-tari (2019), students with disabilities often experience mental barriers such as embarrassment, shame, or fear of being seen as a bother when asking for help. This shows that adjustment is not only a technical issue but also involves psychological aspects.

The adjustment challenges for deaf students in college include academic, social, and psychological barriers. However, through strategies such as reading materials before class, relying on visual media, utilizing technology, and social support, they can persist throughout the educational process until the end. These findings reinforce the argument that inclusive education requires not only physical facilities but also social support, flexible policies, and the ability to persevere. With the proper support, adjustment challenges can be transformed into opportunities to optimally develop the potential of deaf students (Yuliana & Wahyudi, 2021).

Analyzing Deaf Students' Hope for Optimal Tourism Learning

Lecturers can speak sign language

One of the greatest hopes of deaf students is for lecturers to be proficient in sign language. Currently, most lecturers lack this skill, resulting in minimal communication during lessons. If lecturers can speak sign language, the learning process will be smoother, and deaf students can immediately understand the material without waiting for additional explanations from their peers. Lecturers' sign language skills also reflect respect for deaf students. Through direct interaction using sign language, students feel recognized and treated with equal respect. This can increase their motivation to learn and their self-confidence.

The hope that lecturers can speak sign language is also related to the ease of the learning process. The first informant revealed that he often lost focus because he had to divide his attention between reading the lecturer's lips, taking notes, and paying attention to visual presentations. If lecturers could use sign language, the learning process would be more efficient because deaf students could immediately grasp the meaning without additional burden. According to research by Susilo & Wibowo (2019), students with hearing impairments have limitations in multitasking, so direct visual communication methods are more effective. In addition to the direct benefits for deaf students, lecturers' sign language skills can also have a positive impact on all students. The second informant hopes that sign language can be incorporated into general class interactions, so that other students can also better understand how to communicate with deaf students.

Sign language skills are also relevant to the tourism context in which students study. If lecturers can sign, they can provide concrete examples of friendly service to tourists with disabilities. This way, deaf students not only experience direct benefits but also see how sign language is a crucial competency in the workplace. Research by Astutik & Muallifah (2021) emphasizes that inclusive competencies in tourism will increase competitiveness in meeting the diverse needs of tourists.

Course on Sign Language

Deaf students also hope for a dedicated course that teaches sign language. This course will benefit not only deaf students but also students who are not deaf. This will enable more inclusive communication in the classroom and in tourism practice. Sign language skills are highly relevant in the tourism industry. Tourism requires interaction with various groups, including tourists with disabilities. If tourism students possess sign language skills, they can offer more friendly and professional service. Kamala & Ulfah (2022) demonstrated that sign language-based learning can increase deaf students' participation in class. Therefore, the presence of a dedicated course in sign language not only meets the academic needs of deaf students but also supports the work readiness of regular students in dealing with diverse tourists.

However, recognizing that incorporating new courses into the curriculum is not easy, it is proposed that sign language be included as an elective or additional skill for students. This way, interested students can learn it without disrupting the primary curriculum's structure. Putri & Zulkarnain (2022) argue that incorporating inclusive courses into the curriculum is an effective solution to address the needs of students with disabilities without excessively increasing the academic burden.

The idea of introducing a sign language course is not only to meet the needs of deaf students, but also a strategy to create a more welcoming and relevant academic environment for deaf students. With this course, non-disabled students can expand their communication skills, faculty can interact more effectively, and deaf students feel more valued as part of the campus student body.

Community for deaf students

Deaf students also desire a dedicated community on campus. This community could serve as a place to share experiences, provide moral support, and advocate for the rights of students with disabilities. The existence of a community can reduce the sense of isolation that sometimes arises in the college environment. The deaf student community also has the potential to strengthen cross-group social networks on campus. The first informant hopes that this community will not be limited to deaf students, but will also be open to regular students who want to learn sign language or gain a deeper understanding of the lives of students with disabilities. Thus, the community will become an inclusive interaction space that involves the entire campus community.

Wulandari & Hermawan (2021) affirm that cross-group interaction through the community can increase social empathy while building a more diverse and inclusive campus culture.

This community can also serve as a communication bridge between deaf students and the university. Through the community, deaf students' aspirations can be conveyed in a more structured manner, for example, regarding facility needs, learning methods, or inclusion programs. This way, campus policies will be more aligned with the actual needs of students with disabilities. Amka & Mirnawati (2020) emphasized that deaf students' involvement in social activities can strengthen character and increase self-confidence. The hope of establishing this community aligns closely with efforts to expand inclusive education in higher education, particularly in the tourism sector, which places a strong emphasis on social interaction.

However, establishing a deaf student community certainly presents its own challenges. Informants recognized that the number of deaf students on campus remains very limited, necessitating full support from the university to facilitate the community's existence. Without structural support, the community risks stalling due to limited resources. Research by Putri & Zulkarnain (2022) shows that student organizations with disabilities require formal policy support from the university to operate consistently and sustainably.

CONCLUSION

This research highlights that deaf students at Makassar Tourism Polytechnic are highly motivated to continue their education despite facing communication barriers and limitations in social interactions. The primary challenge they encounter is communication—both in the classroom with lecturers and with their peers—which often hinders their understanding of the material. As a result, these students may feel left behind compared to their classmates during the learning process. However, support from lecturers, such as the use of visual media and written notes, along with assistance from classmates, plays a vital role in facilitating a smooth learning experience for students with disabilities. Additionally, deaf students demonstrate remarkable independence by developing adaptive strategies. These strategies include preparing notes before class, lip-reading, and utilizing technology. Such actions show that they are not passive in the face of challenges but actively seek solutions. Family support also significantly enhances students' motivation and self-confidence, contributing to their academic success.

Deaf students' hopes for the future of tourism education are pretty straightforward: 1) they want lecturers who are proficient in sign language, 2) the existence of a special course in sign language, and 3) the formation of a deaf student community on campus. These hopes are not only to reduce academic barriers but also to create an inclusive, equitable environment that provides an optimal learning experience for all students. Thus, this study confirms that inclusive higher education in the field of tourism requires not only adequate physical facilities but also changes in the learning system, campus policies, and academic culture that support the needs of deaf students. This study also concludes that deaf students have hopes for the future of tourism education, which encompasses the need for formal campus policies to provide sign language interpreters, lecturer training, curriculum flexibility, and support for the formation of a deaf student community.

Internal and external factors, such as students' motivation, the strategies they use, social support, available facilities, and campus policies, significantly impact the success of deaf students in completing their studies at tourism universities. When these factors align with students' expectations through more inclusive and structured policies, tourism education can become more welcoming and equitable. This would help create career opportunities for all students, particularly those with disabilities.

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