

**Disability and Education and Social Networks.  
A scoping review protocol**

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**ADMINISTRATIVE INFORMATION****Support** - Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program.**Review Stage at time of this submission** - Piloting of the study selection process.**Conflicts of interest** - None declared.**INPLASY registration number:** INPLASY202480112**Amendments** - This protocol was registered with the International Platform of Registered Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis Protocols (INPLASY) on 23 August 2024 and was last updated on 23 August 2024.**INTRODUCTION**

**Review question / Objective** What is known about the roles, scope, and functions of social networks for students with physical disabilities participating in higher education?

**Rationale** Social networks play a central role in shaping the trajectories of individuals. (Jespersen et al., 2019). However, comprehensively understanding their influence and the underlying mechanisms is a complex and multifaceted task that involves various fields (Vacchiano et al., 2024). Conducting a scoping review is an appropriate method to synthesize knowledge provide a comprehensive overview of the existing literature and address broad review questions. For individuals with physical disabilities, the social networks and the connections they establish are of utmost importance as they navigate their environment (Peters et al., 2020). These networks contribute significantly to their integration, well-being, success (Cimino et al., 2022).

Globally, students with disabilities encounter various challenges within the context of higher education (Egan et al., 2022; Fernández-Batanero et al., 2022). The lack of forming and maintaining social networks poses significant environmental obstacles among these factors. Environmental factors include the support and relationships individuals have, as well as the attitudes exhibited by those surrounding them, which can influence the experiences of an individual in both negative and positive ways (e.g. attitudes, support, and relationship) (WHO, 2007).

In the African context, and particularly in Ethiopia, students with disabilities face numerous challenges related to the lack of accessible physical and social environments, as well as limited opportunities for integration and participation in university life, both inside and outside the classroom (Tefera, et al, 2014; Tefera, 2022). These challenges further extend to difficulties in forming good relationships within their social environment (Abera et al., 2020b; Bele & Kvalsund, 2016). They often face difficulties creating good relationships with faculty and peers

(Abera et al., 2020b; Bele & Kvalsund, 2016). Abera et al. (2020) found that students with disabilities in Ethiopia have a lower sense of belonging in higher education, poorer relationships with faculty and peers, and participate in fewer extracurricular activities. Similarly, a study by Bele and Kvalsund (2016) in Norway showed that students with disabilities have limited social networks and face social isolation when transitioning from secondary school to other life transitions (for example, transition from high school to university). Recent studies have also shown that students with disabilities have faced psychosocial and well-being challenges due to environmental challenges (Herruzo et al., 2022; Tamrat, 2018). Although these studies have addressed some of the environmental challenges that students with disabilities face and recommend interventions, there is still evidence of a gap in understanding the social networks of these students and how these networks shape their university experience.

**Condition being studied** This paper focuses on describing the scope of existing social network use by students with physical disabilities in higher education worldwide. The concept of interest is the social networks of students with physical disabilities and how they are used within the context of higher education. Social networks include various relationships of students that students develop with their classmates, friends, professors, and other members of the university community which can have both positive and negative contributions. This scoping review will not include the broader application of social networks by people with disabilities outside of higher education contexts.

## METHODS

**Search strategy** The search strategy will aim to locate published and unpublished studies. A three-step search strategy will be used in this review. First, an initial limited search of ERIC (EBSCOhost) (established in 1966) and Web of Science (social sciences Citation index: since 1956) has been conducted. The search focused on the titles and abstracts of relevant articles, as well as the index terms used to describe the articles. I will seek librarian assistance to develop search terms (keywords and index terms) for all the databases based on the participant [students with disabilities], the concept [social networks], and the context [university/post-secondary school] (PCC) framework for a scoping review (Peters et al., 2020).

The keywords from relevant articles will be used to build the search for stage two, which will identify

relevant concepts related to social networks and disability. The search strategy, including all identified keywords and index terms, will be adapted for search on MEDLINE, EMBASE, CINAHL, PsycINFO, and Scopus. The sources to be searched for relevant unpublished materials will be such as ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global (Publication coverage since 1861), Abstracts, and Google Scholar. An initial search strategy was created in collaboration with the Health Science librarian and Education librarians, based on the research topics and research questions. A full search strategy for the Web of Science is detailed in Appendix C. Full search strategies for the remaining databases will be included in the final paper. In the third stage, the reference list of all selected studies focusing on social networks and disability elements will be screened for additional studies.

**Participant or population** The scoping review will only consider studies that include students with physical disabilities, regardless of the level of physical disability in universities and colleagues' settings. Participants with congenital or acquired impairments that affect mobility or result in loss of functioning in the legs, spine, arms, or hands will be included. However, studies that focus on cognitive and /or mental illness (e.g. intellectual disabilities, depression, motor impairment, and mental illness) will not be included.

**Intervention** Not applicable.

**Comparator** Not applicable.

**Study designs to be included** The proposed scoping review will be conducted following the JBI methodology for scoping reviews. A comprehensive search will be conducted, including both to include published and unpublished studies. The search will be conducted in various databases including MEDLINE, EMBASE, CINAHL, PsycINFO, Web of Science, Scopus, and Education. Additionally, unpublished sources such as theses, dissertations, and conference abstracts will be included. Reference lists of articles will also be searched for additional sources. Studies published in English will be included. All qualitative, quantitative.

**Eligibility criteria** The search in the databases will be based on the participant [students with physical disabilities], concept [social networks], and context [university/post-secondary school] (PCC) framework (Peters et al., 2020).

**Participants:** The scoping review will only consider studies that include students with physical

disabilities, regardless of the level of physical disability in universities and colleagues' settings. Participants with congenital or acquired impairments that affect mobility or result in loss of functioning in the legs, spine, arms, or hands will be included. However, studies that focus on cognitive and /or mental illness (e.g. intellectual disabilities, depression, motor impairment, and mental illness) will not be included.

**Concept:** The concept of interest is the social networks of students with physical disabilities and how they are used within the context of higher education. Social networks include various relationships of students that students develop with their classmates, friends, professors, and other members of the university community which can have both positive and negative contributions. This scoping review will not include the broader application of social networks by people with disabilities outside of higher education contexts.

**Context:** This scoping review considers studies in higher education settings. Studies will be included regardless of country of origin, higher education setting, or socio-cultural setting of participants. social networks in the context of high school, after graduation, or other transitions will not be part of the review.

**Information sources** The search strategy will aim to locate published and unpublished studies. A three-step search strategy will be used in this review. First, an initial limited search of ERIC (EBSCOhost) (established in 1966) and Web of Science (social sciences Citation index: since 1956) has been conducted. The search focused on the titles and abstracts of relevant articles, as well as the index terms used to describe the articles. I will seek librarian assistance to develop search terms (keywords and index terms) for all the databases based on the participant [students with disabilities], the concept [social networks], and the context [university/post-secondary school] (PCC) framework for a scoping review (Peters et al., 2020).

The keywords from relevant articles will be used to build the search for stage two, which will identify relevant concepts related to social networks and disability. The search strategy, including all identified keywords and index terms, will be adapted for search on MEDLINE, EMBASE, CINAHL, PsycINFO, and Scopus. The sources to be searched for relevant unpublished materials will be such as ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global (Publication coverage since 1861), Abstracts, and Google Scholar. An initial search strategy was created in collaboration with the Health Science librarian and Education librarians, based on the research topics and research

questions. A full search strategy for the Web of Science is detailed in Appendix C. Full search strategies for the remaining databases will be included in the final paper. In the third stage, the reference list of all selected studies focusing on social networks and disability elements will be screened for additional studies.

**Main outcome(s)** This scoping review aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the existing knowledge on social networks and disabilities in higher education and describe the scope of social network use by students with physical disabilities worldwide.

**Quality assessment / Risk of bias analysis** Data extraction: Data will be extracted from the papers included in the scoping review using a data extraction tool developed. The data extraction process will involve defining participant characteristics, articulating the scope and breadth of the phenomenon or concept, and providing details of the study context (Peters et al, 2020). The data extraction will include specific details about the situation of students with disabilities, concepts, context, study methods, and key findings that are relevant to answering the questions about the roles, scope, and functions of social networks for students with physical disabilities participating in higher education. The theoretical framework will be used to identify the main concepts of social networks. For example, the main concepts of social network structures and social network characteristics. Any disagreements between the reviewers will be resolved through discussion or with a third reviewer.

**Strategy of data synthesis** Data will be presented using tables, and key contents relevant to answering the research question will be described. The theoretical framework will be used to organize and analyze the contents covered by the studies. A table will be created to present the data, and a narrative summary will accompany the tabulated results to describe how the results relate to the objectives of the reviews.

**Subgroup analysis** Not applicable.

**Sensitivity analysis** Not applicable.

**Language restriction** Studies published in English will be included in this study. However, the search will not restrict to English.

**Country(ies) involved** Canada (Queen's University).

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**Other relevant information** The Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program, which covers all costs as part of a PhD fellow research project for the corresponding author, supports this work. However, the organization will not shape the design of the review protocol.

**Keywords** Social networks, education, ego-social networks; physical disabilities; mobility challenges; post-secondary education/higher education.

**Contributions of each author**

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MA conceptualized, prepared, and presented the draft protocol under the supervision of AH. AH contributed to the study's conceptualization and development of the protocol. BN, AH, and RW reviewed and approved it. TG and MA contributed to the database search and screening. RWA refined the search function, databases, and protocol.