

An Analysis of Infrastructural Support for Students with Disabilities in Selected Universities of Islamabad, Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This research examines how infrastructural facilities are made available to students with disabilities and the efficiency of this process in a sample of public and private universities in the city of Islamabad, Pakistan. Within a sociological context, the study is based on the concepts of accessibility, inclusivity, and social equity in the learning institution. In the present study, a qualitative case study design was utilised to study eight universities that were selected purposefully based on spreadsheet scores

indicating their size and specialisation, as well as existing claims of inclusivity and accessibility policies. The study employed a structured observational checklist in the evaluation of the physical infrastructure, a semi-structured key informant interview (KII) with top-level Academia /managers of the institutions, and a focus group discussion (FGD) with students with disabilities to collect in-depth, firsthand data. Thematic analysis demonstrated a significant mismatch between infrastructural provision and accessibility, with many cases showing that accessibility was merely symbolic rather than real. The major themes that emerged from the data were inadequate physical accessibility, inconsistent institutional responses, and poor policy enforcement. The gaps are indicative of the flawed approach to inclusive education, which demonstrates the necessity of a rights-based and student-centred approach to infrastructural planning in higher education institutions. This research contributes to the existing discourse on educational justice by recommending and supporting a holistic and participatory approach to the inclusion of students with disabilities within the tertiary educational system in Pakistan.

Keywords: Inclusive infrastructure, students with disabilities, higher education, social equity, Islamabad.

Background and Purpose of the Study

Helping Hand for Relief & Development (HHRD) Pakistan, with its Research and Development (R&D) and Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability, and Learning (MEAL) departments, has been working on pressing humanitarian and development issues in the nation through assessments and research. The studies have become powerful instruments of evidence-based project planning, strategizing organizational dynamics, and demonstrating the relevance and impact of current and future interventions. With this trend, this study was launched to critically investigate the infrastructural support for students with disabilities in public and private universities in Islamabad. Having acknowledged the educational process as one of the fundamental human rights, as well as the primary means of promoting social equality, the research and development department of HHRD found it necessary to evaluate the level at which the universities of the capital might be able to provide an inclusive learning environment to the students with physical, sensory, or cognitive disabilities. This study aims to create a detailed review of current knowledge on gaps, hurdles, and good practices related to disability-inclusive foundations in some public and privately owned universities. Through the consideration of a sociological approach, the study will also aim at determining the level of consistency between infrastructural arrangements and the provisions of the ideals of accessibility, inclusiveness, and dignity of all students. Its experiences shall assist HHRD and partners to build knowledge-based advocacy and inform future disability-based intervention, in addition to playing a role in the discussion on the entire inclusive education policy and planning in Pakistan. Finally, the current study not only exemplifies the value of HHRD in promoting evidence-based programming and inclusive growth but also hopes to contribute to first-rate institutional change that will guarantee fair access to higher educational institutions for disabled learners.

Introduction

According to the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS) Census 2023, 3.41% of the total population in Pakistan (7,448,574 individuals) are persons with disabilities. Among them, 553,905 are within the 15–24 age group and 755,182 are within the 25–40 age group, representing a significant portion of the college- and university-going population. In addition, 23,170,373 individuals experience functional limitations. In Islamabad, 3.58% of the population (73,022 individuals) are reported as persons with disabilities, and 185,380 individuals have functional limitations.

Helping Hand for Relief and Development (HHRD) has played a pivotal role in disability rehabilitation and habilitation since the 2005 earthquake. Since its inception, HHRD has facilitated approximately 4,000 children with disabilities (CWDs) and 511,070 persons with disabilities (PWDs) across the country.

HHRD has also conducted a series of awareness sessions nationwide, constructed accessible washrooms for PWDs at the household level, and built ramps in public and private institutions to promote inclusivity and accessibility. With its expertise and long-standing commitment, HHRD offers its services and experience for collaboration with both public and private institutions to further advance disability inclusion and rehabilitation efforts in Pakistan.

HEC formally issued a nationwide policy in 2021, establishing minimum standards that all public and private universities must follow. Key mandates include the Formation of Accessibility Committees and the appointment of Disability Coordinators. Anticipatory accommodations, universities must proactively make provisions, not wait for student requests.

Requirements for reasonable accommodations across campus (classrooms, digital platforms under WCAG AA, exams, etc.). Clear admission relaxations, including age relaxation up to 10 years, along with waived tuition, hostel, and utility fees for PWD students. A reporting mechanism and obligation for HEC to oversee implementation. In April 2021, during a virtual meeting with university vice-chancellors, the President emphasized creating disability-friendly infrastructure. HEC followed up by: Circulating updated policies aligned with the ICT Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2020. Stating that the policy became binding and that reporting mechanisms would track implementation. In August 2021, HEC reiterated: The provision of tuition fee waivers and age relaxation for PWDs. That all institutional charges, including hostel and utilities, should be waived. That some universities, like QAU, had begun implementation, but it urged prompt action across the board. HIGHER EDUCATION COMMISSION Policy for Students with Disabilities at Higher Education Institutions in Pakistan (2021).

A disability is any condition of the body or mind (impairment) that makes it more difficult for the person with the condition to do certain activities (activity limitation) and interact with the world around them (participation restrictions). Disability is a natural part of human existence and is an integral part of human experience. An estimated 1.3 billion people – or 16% of the global population – experience a significant disability today. This number is increasing due to a rise in non-communicable diseases (WHO). Disabled people are people with physical or mental incapacities. Common physical disabilities include blindness, deafness, and paralysis, while common mental disabilities include autism and the effects of Down syndrome.

Disabilities generally vary in severity. One person with Down syndrome, for instance, may have limited access to activities, while another person, only relatively mildly affected, may be able to hold down a job and be much more self-reliant (Delomier, 2011). Until the second half of the 20th century, it was unfortunate that disabled people had some abilities, needs, and interests like the rest of the population. Nevertheless, discrimination persisted in certain key areas. Some employers were reluctant to take on or promote disabled people; some landlords refused to give them land on rent; and courts sometimes deprived them of fundamental rights, including custody of their children. In recent decades, this situation has undergone some positive changes through adjustments in legislation and public attitudes. People with disabilities have also lobbied for their rights as full citizens and productive members of society (Livermore, 2009). In Pakistan, the issue of disability has remained neglected and ignored in all aspects, including administrative, financial, and legal. Persons with disabilities are the most marginalized because they are unseen, unheard, and uncared in the country. There are no serious attempts by the government to conduct a comprehensive survey to assess the problems faced by people with disabilities (Sheikh, 2012). The primary issues are the absence of suitable study materials, poor physical accessibility, and a lack of knowledge among stakeholders regarding the rights of students with impairments. Accessible restrooms and ramps are basic facilities that many universities lack, while educational materials in braille and audiobook formats are often unavailable. This social marginalization has an emotional and psychological impact on students, making them feel more stressed and isolated (Mohsin, Amir, & Khan, 2024).

Problem Statement

This study aims to investigate the diverse range of challenges faced by students with limitations in accessing inclusive education and how students with physical disabilities survive in university settings. Despite advancements in disability rights and inclusive education policies, disabled students continue to face numerous barriers that hinder their full participation and engagement in educational settings. These challenges encompass physical, cognitive, sensory, and social aspects, which often lead to academic underachievement, limited social integration, and reduced opportunities for personal and professional growth.

Research Questions

What facilities (i.e., ramps, wheelchairs, lifts, braille, audiobooks, etc.) do different universities of Islamabad provide for disabled students?

What are the infrastructural challenges faced by students with functional limitations in accessing their education within the university settings?

Research Objectives

To know the facilities provided by different universities in Islamabad for disabled students.

To find out the infrastructural challenges (lack of accessible classrooms, washrooms, etc.) faced by students with functional limitations in accessing their education within the university settings.

Literature Review

As noted by Ahmad and Yousaf (2022), most universities in developing nations, such as Pakistan, are not infrastructurally prepared to accommodate students with physical, visual, or hearing impairments. This leads to mobility restriction, asymmetrical access to learning areas, and psychological distress owing to social isolation. Khan and Saeed (2020) asserted that disability-inclusive infrastructure goes beyond ramps and elevators. It entails a broader range of support, including tactile flooring, accessible toilets, low-height service counters, computer labs, and classrooms adapted for wheelchair users. Alas, all these are lacking in Pakistani universities, which persist in using obsolete architectural models that fail to meet global standards of accessibility. Reynolds (2019) emphasized that in most nations of the Global South, campuses often neglect the principles of universal design. Disabled students are usually left to rely on other students or family members to reach the buildings used for teaching because they lack adequate mobility infrastructure. This dependency not only erodes their autonomy but also impacts their academic performance and self-confidence. Siddiqui and Rafiq (2021) countered that although policies like Pakistan's Special Citizens Act grant people with disabilities their rights, there is a huge gap between policy and practice. Most public universities have not conducted accessibility audits or allocated dedicated funds for inclusive infrastructure. Consequently, even simple features, such as tactile signs, audiovisual aids in classrooms, or wheelchair-friendly sections in libraries, remain nonexistent.

Thomas (2017) emphasized the need for inclusive design at higher learning institutions. He elaborated that the building must be able to accommodate various types of disabilities, not only physical but also sensory, cognitive, and mental. Amenities such as sound-reducing classrooms, accessible campus transportation, and rest areas are crucial for students with neurological or mental health conditions. However, these aspects are seldom part of mainstream campus planning in nations such as Pakistan. The World Bank (2021) indicates that investment in accessible infrastructure yields long-term returns not just for students with disabilities, but for everyone. For example, ramps and lifts benefit not just wheelchair users but also employees with broken limbs or parents with pushchairs.

Methods and Procedure

This paper used a qualitative case study to examine the accessibility and efficiency of infrastructural provision to students with disabilities in some of the universities in Islamabad. The study was set in the sociological framework and aimed at such principles as accessibility, inclusivity, and social equity. The research was carried out in eight universities in Islamabad, including both public and private universities, to ensure diverse representation. The universities included in the study were chosen through the purposive sampling method; this method was employed to select universities that accommodated students with disabilities or had publicly claimed to have an inclusive structure. Other factors chosen as criteria among the institutions were size and type (general or specialized), and accessibility policies. The tools used in the collection of primary data included: a Structured Observational Checklist, which was used to evaluate physical infrastructure. These consisted of Semi-

structured Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), which were used to interview key stakeholders (disability support focal person in the University, the managers or infrastructure officers, and faculty involved in inclusive education at the University) to get their perspectives on disability support, facilities, and the inclusive education context at the University. FGDs with students with disabilities were held as a means of obtaining firsthand information about the experience of people with impaired abilities in connection with the level of accessibility, barriers, and quality of facilities. Thematic analysis was used in the study of data collected using checklists, interviews, and FGDs. The responses to the questions were entered manually and grouped into frequently occurring themes, which included physical accessibility, responsiveness of the institutions, and policy implementation. They were discussed from a sociological perspective of systemic enablers and barriers to inclusive infrastructure.

Results and Discussions

Table 1.1 illustrates the facilities provided by the University of Islamabad. The results and discussions of the availability and quality of infrastructural support for students with disabilities in some of the public and privately owned universities in Islamabad. The information would be collected using structured observations and institutional reviews with five major themes, including physical accessibility, emergency preparedness, academic inclusivity, transportation, and sanitation facilities.

Ramps, Lifts, and Wheelchairs (Physical Accessibility)

One of the major themes that came out was partial accessibility. Most universities had ramps on the ground floors, whereas only a limited number of universities (e.g., IQRA, AIR, and BAHRIA) had access to upper stories using lifts. It is noteworthy that PRESTON university did not have even simple things like ramps or double-decker elevators that could work. This variance is a sign of inconsistent dedication to accessibility, whereby most of the infrastructure is built to accommodate students with no mobility challenges and little accommodation to mobility-challenged students. New Awareness: Accessibility is also tokenized, that is, it is not inclusive on any level beyond compliance with the entrance.

Signage and Safety (Emergency Preparedness)

It was chaotic regarding the availability of emergency signboards. Although six of the eight universities had put up signs, their visibility, accessibility, and locations were not standardised. IIUI and PRESTON had no form of signage, which presents a great danger to the students, particularly those with visual or cognitive disorders, in the event of an emergency. New Reflection: The system of emergency infrastructure is commonly neglected or given lower priority than other parts of the accessibility plan, which suggests that inclusive security measures are ignored on an institutional level.

Academic Inclusivity (Aids, Trained Faculty, Tools)

Academic supports (e.g., braille, audio books, sign language interpretation) were to be provided and were found critically deficient in most institutions. The only University that differentiated itself was IQRA University because it provided hearing aids and faculty who were trained to meet special needs. Others, such as IIUI, permitted the

recording of the lectures, but it was on a student-led basis rather than institutional support. New Insight: They are a loophole in the conceptualization of physical access to academic inclusion. Students can enter the classroom, but they are not educationally empowered to learn in the same way as their peers.

Transport Support

Transport was a grey area; five universities provided some form of transport, but only 2 (IQRA and RIPHAH) had comprehensive arrangements with seat assignment. Others offered general transportation, neglecting the needs of students with disabilities as far as mobility and sitting arrangements are concerned. This limits the involvement of people who are located far away, in addition to cities such as Islamabad, where transportation is not always accessible. New Finding: Although some infrastructure is present, it has not been done with inclusion in view; this points to a failure to focus on a universal design approach.

Sanitation Facilities (Accessible Washrooms)

Accessibility of a washroom was also found to be relatively better. Support handles were installed in washrooms in most of the universities (e.g., NUML, AIR, BAHRIA, RIPHAH, FUIC). In places such as PRESTON, however, those facilities were lacking, and in others, such as IIUI, the facilities were incomplete or even shabby. New Learning: Washroom access is more important than academic or transport assistance. It is perceived as essential infrastructure, like water, power, and electricity, but the same problems with fees and accessibility issues exist.

Sociological Interpretation and Cross-Cutting Themes

Sociological Interpretation and Cross-Cutting Themes Symbolic Inclusion and Substantive Inclusion:

The facilities offered in most universities are only symbolic representations of inclusion, but do not guarantee that students with disabilities can participate and be independent.

- Institution Inconsistency: no systematic coverage of inclusive education policy since decisions are ad-hoc and school-specific, manifesting poor implementation of policies.
- Absence of Stakeholder Participation: There was not much evidence of disability infrastructure being planned with the consultation of the students or involving the community in most universities, which underpinned the top-down decision-making.

Table 1.1 Facilities Provided by the University of Islamabad

University	Classroom Accessibility (Ramps, Lift)	Emergency Sign Boards	Academic Aid	Transport Facility	Accessible Washroom
IIUI	Ramps are available on the ground floor.	Not available.	Not available. Teachers allow for	Provided by the university, but no	Available, but no handles for physically

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	No lift/ ramps for the upper floors. Wheelchairs are also available at the entrance.		lecture recording for blind students on their behalf.	specific seats for students with disabilities .	disabled students.
NUML	Ramps are meant for the ground floor. Lift available for upper floors. Wheelchairs are also available.	Signboards are available.	Not available specifically.	Not available.	Available with proper handles as well.
IQRA (H-9)	Ramps are available, along with a lift, for access to all floors. Wheelchairs are also available at the entrance.	Signboards are available. The polyclinic is also available for such students to address any emergencies .	A hearing aid is available. The teachers are also trained in how to deal with students with disabilities in classroom settings.	Transport vendors are present, along with designated seats for all these students.	Accessible washrooms without handles.
PRESTON	No ramps available. The lift was also not in a functional position. No wheelchairs are available.	No signboards available.	No academic aid available.	The university provides no transport facility.	No accessible washrooms.
AIR (E-9)	Ramps are available on the ground floor. While a lift is available for access to upper floors,	Signboards are available.	There is no academic aid for students with disabilities.	Transport facility provided by the university.	Accessible washrooms with proper handles.

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	wheelchairs are also available for students who require them.				
BAHRIA (E-9)	Ramps are available on the ground floor. While a lift is available for access to upper floors, wheelchairs are also available for students who require them.	Signboards are available.	There is no academic aid for students with disabilities.	Transport facility provided by the university.	Accessible washrooms with proper handles.
RIPHAH (I-14)	Ramps are available for the ground floor. No ramps or lifts for upper floors. No wheelchair available.	Signboards are available.	No proper academic aid is available.	The university offers a transportation facility with designated seating arrangements for all students.	Accessible washrooms with proper handles.
FUIC	Ramps are meant for the ground floor. Lift available for upper floors.	Signboards are available.	Not available specifically.	Not available.	Available with proper handles as well.

Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to explore the conditions under which infrastructural support is given to students with disabilities in selected public and private universities of Islamabad. Using qualitative approaches in the form of structured observations and institutional analysis, the study sampled five main areas of accessibility, which are classroom structure, emergency preparedness, academic assistance, transport, and sanitation amenities. The results show that there is a highly disintegrated and disharmonized way of inclusion. Although some universities displayed impressive results in particular facets, most of the placements tended to provide relatively little or token accessibility, as opposed to what would be expected to enable full student

participation in tertiary education by those students with handicaps. Physical accessibility may be incomplete, and superficial ramps and wheelchairs have been introduced in most of the universities, particularly at the entrances or on the ground floors. Nevertheless, most institutions, such as IQRA and BAHRIA, once again, possessed complete vertical mobility by way of lifts and accessibility to other floors. This trend points to a reluctance to dig deeper into the issue of accessibility and reduces it to an infrastructural ceremony instead of a holistic right. The problem of Emergency preparedness is not well covered. Signboards are an emergency infrastructure that exists in most universities, although not in all. The fact that such essentials of safety are not present even in universities such as IIUI and PRESTON raises questions about accountability within the institution. Student with disabilities emergency preparedness is not only a matter of safety, but it is a legal and ethical requirement that reflects the ability of an institution to make sure that it supports all its students equally. The support systems in academics are nonexistent. The most significant and most threatening gap was identified around academic inclusivity. Other than IQRA University, where hearing aids were provided and staff were trained in their use, none of the institutions offered braille texts, audiobooks, or well-structured educational accommodations.

The children who had visual or hearing disabilities had to make do with the mainstream classroom without the support that the institution could offer. Such failure to design academic access to these students is not only a waste to the educational process of the said students, but it is also a breach of their entitlement to equitable education. There will be transportation services, but they will not always be inclusive. While 5 universities provided transportation services, only two universities offered special accommodations, such as reserved seats for disabled students. In the rest of the universities, there was none, or it was not designed to suit a mobility-impaired student. Such neglect can be seen as a larger attribute of creating services that serve the majority population and overlook the needs of diverse learners. Washroom accessibility begins to improve. Compared to other areas, there were easily accessible washrooms too, and most universities had appropriate facilities. However, then, as is also the case with the above, discrepancies abound whereby some schools, such as PRESTON, have no available facilities whatsoever. Although this improvement is favourable, it is not adequate on its own, and it should be supported with other academic and physical aids. Inconsistency and failure on the part of institutions to enforce policy in all regions that were visited, we spotted a pattern in which standardization and accountability were lacking. The universities presented varying degrees of preparedness, indicating that the application of inclusive principles is institution-specific but not system-based.

The presented results indicate that current policies at the national and international level (UNCRPD or HEC policies) are understood and implemented in higher education institutions. Empty gestures with no real significance. Along with these conclusions, there is a most significant one as well, which might be the most striking one, and it is that inclusion commonly proves to be more symbolic than functional. Physical requirements, such as physical infrastructures such as ramps and signboards, are in place; however, the underlying structural requirements, such as academic accommodations, social inclusion, and independent travel, are largely missing. This

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leaves the situation where students with disability are in the system but marginalized in practice. The results of these analyses reveal that institutions of higher learning in Pakistan must develop outside-the-box solutions to tokenism and place infrastructural planning on a rights foundation, based on student input. The issue of accessibility must be considered not as a bonus feature but as part of the overall concern of educational justice. The best way that universities should work is by employing inclusive design principles, carrying out accessibility audits, training faculty and personnel, and including students living with disabilities in decision-making processes. It is upon these that higher education can be an inclusive place to enable every learner to excel.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Higher Education Commission (HEC) needs to implement and inculcate the country-wide standards of disability-inclusive infrastructure in all universities, both government-owned and privately managed.

Compliance of institutions must also be followed up on due to third-party accessibility audits annually. All constructions should have ramps, a wide passage, elevators with Braille and voice information, and access routes suitable for wheelchair use. Additionally, they should not be confined to the first floor only but spread out to all the stories.

Put standard emergency signboards all over campuses and especially by the entrance, exit, stairwells, and elevators.

Organise emergency drills that include persons with disabilities regularly to check genuine inclusivity and safety.

Institutions that do not have this infrastructure now (e.g., IIUI, PRESTON) are to be offered additional support with the resolution terms.

Provide institutions with assistive learning measures such as braille printers, screen readers, audio books, and hearing aid-type systems.

Hire or develop faculty in universal pedagogy that also covers sign language, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and differentiation of different disabilities.

Establish academic support services like extra time on exams, other assessments, and note-taking services as part of policy. Universities are supposed to offer special transport services with ramps that accommodate wheelchairs, designated seats, and staff trained to assist individuals with disabilities.

Transport lines ought to be plotted and checked to see how easy it is to connect students across the city, especially for those farthest away.

There should be regular maintenance checks to maintain the dignity and cleanliness of all who use it, as in the case of universities, where there are incomplete facilities or marginalised facilities.

Consult with students with disabilities in planning infrastructures and reviewing the university's policy.

Introduce Disability Inclusion Committees on the university level with the participation of students, representatives of disability rights expert community, and administration.

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Undergo compulsory disability rights, inclusive communication, and respectful engagement training sessions with the administrative, teaching, and support personnel.

Create awareness to shift the compliance to the rights-based and empathetic inclusion. Appreciate that presence is not participation: universities should look beyond the prominent features, such as ramps and signs, and consider the broader concern, both academic and social, of the inclusion of students with disabilities in the university.

Prepare the Annual Disability Inclusion Reports of each university to be publicly released to reflect the infrastructural improvements, the satisfaction rate, the grievances/issues addressed, and the results of the staff training conducted.

Conflicts of interest

The authors report no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

This study utilizes primary data collected from the public and private Universities of Islamabad, Pakistan.

Ethical statement

This research work was not previously published or submitted in any form.

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