SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW ARCHIVES

Exploring the Adjustment Journey of Persons with Disabilities in South Punjab: Challenges, Opportunities, and Coping Mechanisms

Muqadas Shafique[1], Dr. Asma Bashir[2]

[1] M.Phil. Scholar, Department of Applied Psychology, The Women University, Multan.
Email: muqadas637622@gmail.com , https://orcid.org/0009-0003-3613-5425
[2] Assistant Professor, Department of Applied Psychology, The Women University, Multan.
Email: asma.bashir@wum.edu.pk

Corresponding Author: Dr. Asma Bashir   Email: asma.bashir@wum.edu.pk

Abstract
Background: Persons with disabilities face multiple barriers in higher education worldwide. This study examines people with disabilities in South Punjab higher education institutions of Pakistan to understand their reality through challenges and opportunities as well as their developed coping mechanisms.
Method: The research utilized a qualitative exploratory design to conduct semi-structured interviews with 30 students who had different disabilities. We analyzed data using thematic analysis to discover major barriers along with their corresponding solutions.
Results: The study uncovers important barriers to study that include inaccessible infrastructure, as well as social stigma, together with insufficient institutional support. Students faced their challenges by using a combination of peer assistance, along with advocacy for themselves, and spiritual practices. The study revealed a critical issue regarding the insufficient training of teachers in disability inclusion, as it creates more difficulties for students.
Conclusion: Based on the collected research findings, recommendations are presented to strengthen university policies as well as inclusive support systems in South Punjab universities. This exploratory analysis produces essential knowledge about limited studies in this field of research. This particular area focuses on cultural limitations alongside institutional factors, which provides education and health professionals with essential implications about developing a favorable environment for persons with disabilities.

Keywords: Person with Disabilities, Disability, Higher Education, Challenges, Inclusive Education, Coping Mechanisms, South Punjab

Introduction

The term "disability" is inclusive, and each country defines it differently. As a result, there is no standard consensus definition (Hussain et al., 2020). Suppose a person has medical conditions, traumas , or congenital disabilities that make them unable (Ahmed et al., 2011). It includes the blind and deaf and also people with mental and physical disabilities. A physical disability refers to restrictions or impairment of the body's system's ability to execute normal functions and activities due to physical constraints. Someone with such an injury might have difficulty walking, standing, using their arms

and legs, or performing basic functions. Depending on the individual and such restrictions or limitations of body parts, the individual may not have the endurance necessary to get through daily responsibilities.

A Preview of the Challenges Faced by Persons with Disabilities
Many Persons with Disabilities (PWDS) are faced with many difficulties that influence areas such as learning and being socially active.

Structural Barriers
Structural barriers to multiple life aspects, especially in education, employment, and community integration, are the most common challenges faced by PWDs. These obstacles may be physical, such as buildings or buses that people with disabilities cannot access, or systemic, such as policies and practices that discriminate against them. Students with disabilities, for example, often struggle with adapting to flexible learning spaces and modalities, such as physical education, that requires instructor-led physical activity (Quibral et al., 2024), just like disabled people face challenges around algorithmic control as well as performance evaluation, which excludes them from a workplace (Sannon & Cosley, 2022).

Stigma and Discrimination in Society
Social stigma and discrimination against Persons with disabilities are a common sight in front of PWDs in the community. Such negative attitudes can contribute to feelings of shame, low self-esteem, and social marginalization. The families of children with disabilities in China, for example, often face social stigma and "loss of face" as a result of cultural attitudes towards disability (Chen & Yu, 2024). Likewise, young disabled people moving into adulthood confront ableist ideals constructed to present them as dependent and childlike agents that continue to render them peripheral (Ingimarsdóttir et al., 2024).

Leading to Psychological and Emotional Challenges
A Person with Disabilities encounters Psychological and Emotional Challenges Associated with penetrating disabilities. The trauma of being disabled, including conditions such as spinal cord injuries due to road traffic accidents, can either lead to or be compounded by such struggles, characterized by angst, remorse, anxiety, and despair (Hashemiparast et al., 2021). Also, post-traumatic stress, as well as social disapproval, can be involved in the process of adaptation to life again after a disability, for instance, in the case of veterans with disabilities (Hatun & Şirin, 2022).

Lack of Support Systems
Another significant issue is the lack or insufficiency of support systems. This involves such things as lack of access to adequate health care, minimal social services, and support from schools. As an illustration, many students with disabilities in higher education encounter obstacles that prevent them from accessing campus premises, which can negatively impact their academic experience (Martins & Moriña, 2022).

Accessibility & Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities
Giving fair opportunities to persons with disabilities and helping them access things everyone else enjoys is crucial for their empowerment. If society supports people and removes obstacles to their development, individuals can achieve more.

Educational & Professional Training
People with disabilities can greatly benefit from education and vocational training, acquiring skills that can help them lead more independent lives. Inclusive education is a crucial instrument of social inclusion because it aims to make quality education available to all students regardless of their level

of competence (Trezzini et al., 2022). Moreover, adaptive sports significantly improve the psychological state of disabled people, promoting emotional endurance, integration into society, and self-assertion (Bulut et al., 2024).

Employment-and-Economic Empowerment
The employment of PWDs is an essential activity that empowers them economically and socially. On the one hand, the gig economy leads to tense working conditions, but on the other hand, it can be a source of income for those who have been rejected from shared workspaces (Sannon & Cosley, 2022). In addition, programs involving employability assessment and job training can promote PWDs' skills and confidence to seek jobs, contributing towards sustainable development goals (Balala et al., 2024).

Integration into the Community and Social Activities
The well-being of Persons with disabilities relies upon community integration and social participation. Telescoping recreational, cultural, and educational activities to achieve a sense of connection and self-injury can lead to personal development (Parsakia et al., 2024). Moreover, technological advancements and holistic policies can promote and ease the integration of Persons with disabilities into the community (Singh et al., 2023).

Self-development and Strength
For People with disabilities, this process of adjustment comes with a full roll of growing pains. Employing coping strategies (e.g., problem-solving, social support searching, spirituality (Kim et al., 2020). The adaptation process experienced by individuals with disabilities can cultivate a more profound sense of purpose and meaning, for example, in the case of veterans (Hatun & Şirin, 2022).

Coping Strategies for Persons with Disabilities
Dealing with challenges is important for persons with disabilities and coping strategies make this possible. They cover everything from inner strength to assistance from the outside world.

Internal Coping Strategies
Able to adjust, a Person with disabilities requires at least internal coping strategies to address their issues—such strategies as problem-solving, self-determination, and resiliency. In short, online learners with disabilities use a variety of proactive mechanisms like self-efficacy and problem-solving to address academic as well as emotional challenges (Reyes et al., 2024). Likewise, persons with physical disabilities employ an emotional-focused coping approach, such as spirituality, to combat psychological distress (Desalegn et al., 2023).

Social Support Systems
The Person with Disabilities adaptation process is augmented by social support systems. Through social networks such as family, friends, and community, individuals with disabilities can access emotional, practical, and financial support to help overcome their difficulties. Unfortunately, veterans with disabilities predominantly depend on family and fellow veterans' support for their transition back after the war (Hatun & Şirin, 2022). Intellectual adults constantly interacting with pro-social environments exhibit emotional and behavioral skills (Hall & Theron, 2016).

Collective and Professional Support
People with disabilities also need support from the community and professionals. Communities hold opportunities for participation in community activities for individuals with disabilities with proper support from professionals and peer networks, which can help improve the quality of life (Parsakia et al., 2024). Moreover, clinicians and therapists can help promote resilience by identifying and focusing on strengths like acceptance, autonomy, and social skills (Scheffers et al., 2024).

Advocacy and Policy Change

Much change needs to be done through advocacy and policies so that Person with disabilities have an inclusive environment to get along in their adjustment process. Various global and international initiatives, like the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, have been taken to ensure the complete and adequate participation of PWDs in the social order of society (Trezzini et al., 2022). In addition, inclusive policies and community-based initiatives are also required to address the barriers due to these barriers and enhance the access needs of all PWDs to set the stage for equitable health emergency responses (Singh et al., 2023).

Significance of the Study

This research investigates the social and academic experiences of persons with disabilities (PWD) studying under the disability quota in higher education institutions (HEIs) of South Punjab. Despite substantial policies aimed at overcoming barriers between disabled students and traditional institutions, Persons with disabilities still encounter obstacles from disabled-accessible infrastructure and social prejudice, as well as insufficient institutional backing, which prevents overall academic and social growth. Most research in academia focuses on broad smartphone-related challenges for persons with disabilities, despite their growing smartphone adoption, because South Punjab, Pakistan, lacks localized academic studies regarding these barriers. The research evaluates current barriers and adaptive mechanisms deployed by persons with disabilities (PWD). The study's outcomes will serve institutions by enabling them to develop supportive policies for this student population in this part of Pakistan.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the research are as follows:
1. To Identify the challenges faced by Persons with disabilities enrolled in higher education institutions (HEIs) in South Punjab.
2. To explore the coping strategies of Persons with disabilities enrolled in higher education institutions (HEIs) in South Punjab.
3. To evaluate the impact of institutional support, including services and support networks, on the adjustment process of differently-abled students enrolled in higher education institutions (HEIs) in South Punjab.

Research Questions

1. What challenges do the students admitted to the disability quota face when adjusting to university life in South Punjab?
2. What opportunities make their lives at the University less challenging?
3. What are the coping mechanisms employed by the students admitted by disability quota to overcome challenges?

Methodology
Study Design

A qualitative exploratory design was used to explore the adjustment experiences of persons with disabilities (PWD) studying under disability quota in South Punjab, Pakistan. The intention was to improve understanding of the academic, social, and psychological challenges with which these students struggle. This approach allowed for in-depth narratives on the students' accommodation processes, including reflections on the value of institutional support.

Sample

Thirty students with disabilities from South Punjab were part of the study. They were chosen because they are enrolled in higher education institutions (HEIs) and have actual knowledge of how to cope

with the changes and situations they face. Data was collected from various higher education institutions across South Punjab, to ensure a wide perspective on the experiences of persons with disabilities in different institutional environments.

Table 1. Demographic Information of Study Participants (N=30)

No.	Gender	Age	Level of Education	Semester	Educational Institute
1	Female	21	Undergraduate	6th	WUM
2	Female	22	Undergraduate	8th	WUM
3	Female	24	Postgraduate	4th	WUM
4	Female	20	Undergraduate	2nd	WUM
5	Female	20	Undergraduate	6th	WUM
6	Male	18	Undergraduate	2nd	BZU
7	Female	21	Undergraduate	7th	WUM
8	Female	18	Undergraduate	2nd	Emerson University
9	Female	24	Postgraduate	4th	WUM
10	Female	21	Undergraduate	6th	BZU
11	Female	22	Undergraduate	6th	WUM
12	Female	22	Undergraduate	6th	BZU
13	Female	20	Undergraduate	2nd	WUM
14	Male	23	Undergraduate	7th	BZU
15	Male	23	Undergraduate	8th	BZU
16	Female	25	Postgraduate	4th	WUM
17	Female	22	Postgraduate	4th	BZU
18	Male	20	Undergraduate	6th	BZU
19	Male	24	Postgraduate	4th	WUM
20	Female	23	Undergraduate	6th	Emerson University
21	Female	22	Postgraduate	4th	BZU
22	Male	21	Undergraduate	5th	Emerson University
23	Female	21	Undergraduate	6th	BZU
24	Female	23	Postgraduate	4th	BZU
25	Male	25	Postgraduate	4th	BZU
26	Male	22	Undergraduate	6th	Emerson University
27	Female	22	Undergraduate	6th	Emerson University
28	Male	24	Postgraduate	4th	BZU
29	Male	23	Postgraduate	4th	Emerson University
30	Female	20	Undergraduate	3rd	BZU

Sampling Technique

This study used a purposive sampling technique. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique where participants are selected based on specific characteristics and traits that meet the requirements of the study. The knowledge gained from the participants was selected carefully to address best the exploratory nature of the study on the challenges that persons with disabilities (PWD) experience in higher education institutions (HEIs) in South Punjab. Thirty participants were chosen for this research to maintain a gender balance with students who are deprived and have different types of impairments. The sample size was considered appropriate for a qualitative study due to the depth of information and personally gained knowledge that was to be received as opposed to its quantitative representation. The students included different categories of disabilities (physical, sensory, congenital, neurological) as participants in the undergraduate or post-graduate program for the

disability quota. The inclusion and exclusion criteria for the selection of participants were as follows:

Inclusion Criteria
✓ Students who are currently taking undergraduate or postgraduate studies in universities in South Punjab.
✓ Students who have been admitted under the disability quota.

Exclusion Criteria
✓ Students not admitted under the disability quota.
✓ Students who are not currently enrolled in academic programs.

Study Setting
Data was collected from different higher education institutions (HEIs) in South Punjab, Pakistan, to ensure diversity in terms of institutional environment.

Data Collection Method
Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with students who enrolled under the disability quota. We conducted one-on-one interviews, inviting participants to share their experiences, challenges, and coping strategies freely. The interviews lasted 60 to 80 minutes and were audio-recorded for accuracy. Interviewees were permitted to make audio recordings prior to the interview.

Data Analysis Procedure
The data were transcribed from the interviews using thematic analysis. The thematic analysis is used to identify, analyze, interpret, and report the patterns (themes) of qualitative data. First, the qualitative data were manually coded to identify emerging themes. The key experiences and perspectives were derived from the interview transcripts, which extracted themes manually. The study's method involved the manual inspection of the data and assistance from specialized software to ensure that the data were examined comprehensively and systematically. Step-wise methods of the analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2006) were implemented:
1. **Familiarization with the Data:** The transcripts were read several times to understand the content and identify key ideas comprehensively.
2. **Manual Coding:** Major data sections were manually coded, and similar codes were grouped into categories.
3. **Theme development:** The coded data was organized into broader themes. These themes were described and expanded to ensure that participants' experiences were accurately represented.
4. **Verification:** The findings were verified, and if needed, additional details were pursued to confirm accurate interpretations.

Ethical Considerations
The research was compliant with ethical principles during the process. All subjects were informed about the study, and informed consent was obtained. Participants were assured of confidentiality and informed that they had the right to withdraw from the study whenever they liked without any repercussions. The study considered the specific needs of Person with disabilities, and adjustments were made to enable their full participation.

Findings & Discussion
In South Punjab, the adjustment experiences of disabled students (SWD) at the tertiary level are not free from physical, emotional, and social challenges. These students face countless barriers, ranging from inaccessible infrastructure to societal stigma and insufficient support services. However, despite these challenges, they display incredible resilience and have many coping strategies. Drawing on rich qualitative interviews, this study delineates **Six dominant themes** that speak to the complex nature of their university experience:

1) Inaccessible Infrastructure
2) Social Exclusion & Stigma
3) Teachers' Lack of Training on Disability Inclusion
4) Lack of Awareness about Rights
5) Lack of Services
6) Transportation Barriers

Such themes go beyond highlighting the barriers that prevent students from participating fully in university life; they also illuminate the strategies employed to overcome the obstacles that prevent students from these experiences.

Inaccessible Infrastructure

I observed that the lack of physical accessibility deeply affected both mobility and dignity, often leading to internalized shame among students. Students with disabilities often mention inaccessible facilities as their most common issue. Students who are mobility impaired face physical barriers throughout the campus due to insufficient ramps and elevators, as well as insufficient accommodations, which block their academic access and limit their freedom. Students with disabilities experience fatigue because, as one participant stated, *"It is frustrating." The addition of a ramp would help me significantly, they said.* Students often feel ashamed when they must depend on others for assistance. A participant noted that physical barriers consistently cause problems with reaching their classes. According to the male participants, avoiding the stairs is always a priority in his everyday planning.

"When suitable ramps are not available, I need help from my friends to navigate outside due to my inability to use stairs. Both the mental and physical aspects of this burden weigh heavily on me, as feeling like I am a burden becomes increasingly difficult to manage."(P14)

"At present, our department does not have a working elevator. I always have the feeling that I'm being punished for mistakes I didn't make."(P12)

"Each day , after I wait outside for help with my wheelchair, I see people casually walk in, and that makes me feel quite helpless."(P3)

There were students who felt more reliant on their peers as time went on, ending up ashamed of themselves. One person involved said,

"It's tough having to ask people to push my chair every day up the slope." They never says no, but the way I feel makes it appear I'm causing trouble. When I asked a classmate for help, that same classmate joked, 'Are we doing this again?' It brought something painful to the surface within me. (P17)

Educational institutions should evaluate how physical obstacles in their facilities create psychological challenges for disabled students while working to enhance their infrastructure. These findings are consistent with that of literature which shows how lack of physical infrastructure not only restricts academic participation but creates an adverse effect on the psychological lives of the disabled children, by infringing upon their autonomy and dignity (Martins & Moriña, 2022).

Social Exclusion and Stigma

It became clear to me that stigma was not just an external label, but an emotional prison for many of these students. Social acceptability functions as an essential challenge for students with disabilities during their adjustment period. The students experienced feelings of loneliness alongside poor attitudes from societal members. A small number of students refused to interact with them, and others engaged in cruel comments. Students shared experiences such as:

"Some of my classmates treat me as if I don't exist. They don't involve me in group projects or discussions, and it's not that they exclude me; they treat me like I'm not there. This helps me feel like I don't belong, that I'm not a part of the university experience. When I attempt to speak up or contribute, it seems that my presence doesn't matter." (P23)

"Students fail to see me, although I stand right in front of them. They avoid inviting me to participate in both group assignments and team conversations." (P12)

"No one from my class invited me to join a group discussion throughout the entire semester. I was required to remind them to include me and even that didn't help their attitude. I was also told by another, "It's like they only talk to me when they need to." I usually sit alone in the cafeteria each day." (P16)

"I had a hard time taking notes and someone beside me commented, "Why's he wasting his time?" I would hear that voice in my head for weeks afterwards." (P19)

"A teacher once said, 'You are doing fine despite having that problem.' Being called this made me happy at first, but then I started to feel insulted too. (P27)

Students who experience social and intellectual contact denial develop lowered feelings about belonging to and integrating within their university community. The culture of South Punjab considered disability to represent a burden, as students and their family members often discouraged them from attending college, assuming it was not necessary. One student said,

"My relatives tell my parents, 'Why are you spending money on her education? She won't get a job anyway.' I want to prove them wrong, so it hurts." (P17)

This stigma is ingrained and consequently limits the social opportunities that persons with disabilities have access to, further complicating university life. Additionally, they are socially isolated due to a lack of understanding and acceptance from peers and the larger society. Students often feel like second-class citizens who are forever reminded of their differences. One student explained,

"I've never felt fully accepted. Even within my group, there is this unspoken difference, and it always reminds me that I am different from everyone else." (P18)

This is compatible with the previous studies showing that the stigma of the society worsens marginalization and significantly impairs socio-integration of disabled students (Chen & Yu, 2024). The cultural stigma attached to disability in this part of the world can make the environment quite hostile for person with disabilities (PWD), resulting in a feeling of being less than their peers and as a second-class citizen, which can severely impact their self-esteem and ability to participate fully in the university experience.

Not Enough Teacher Training on How to Include People with Disabilities
I found that the absence of faculty sensitization programs placed the burden of adjustment entirely on students. The most significant issue raised by disabled students was teacher training concerning how to support students who experience disability. Most students reported that many instructors either did not know or did not understand the specific needs of disabled students, making it much more difficult for them to engage in their courses fully. Students shared experiences such as:

"Many times I felt that the teachers didn't understand what kind of support I needed. They just taught in their regular way, and I had to adjust myself. No one ever asked me if I was comfortable." (P23)

"Some teachers believe we are just making excuses. They do not see we need real support, not sympathy." (P4)

"Teachers don't know how to handle screen readers or accommodate us in exams. We have to explain everything from scratch every time." (P11)

Students recounted situations where professors declined to adapt their teaching style for disabilities, for example, refusing to provide lecture notes. A partially blind male student said:

"I explained to my professor that I have problems taking notes because I am blinded but he just waved me away. He said "that's not my problem, ask your Classmates. It was humiliating. It made me feel my struggles didn't matter and I didn't deserve the help I needed to be successful." (P7)

Faculty were not adequately trained to construct inclusive classes, exacerbating the issue. Students struggled to advocate for themselves due to a lack of assistance and instruction from educators who did not prioritize their needs. These findings highlight a critical gap that educational institutions have

to fill because various literature have predicted the key role that faculty play in developing inclusive academic settings (Trezzini et al., 2022).

Lack of Awareness about Rights

One of the most frequently reported challenge in the adjustment journey of Persons with disabilities was a significant lack of Awareness regarding the special provisions available to them. Many participants revealed that they did not know about the disability quota, fee concessions and other student benefits when they enrolled. They did not learn about programs and resources created to help them with their studies. Many participants did not realize that some services, like fee reductions, reserved seating, or extra time in exams, are available to them. Students did not receive the necessary help because administrative departments did not communicate well. Students shared experiences such as:

"I didn't know that we were eligible for special reserved seats and fee concessions for us. It wasn't explained to me until I took the next step to university." (P3)

"A visually impaired person said, "I asked for the concession because nobody from the admission office told me about it. I could see they didn't know what I was asking." (P10)

"The university's ways of communicating were inadequate. The university does not have a set way to explain things to students with disabilities. There's no useful information given to us, not even by our teachers. In what way can they direct our actions?" (P8)

Students pointed out the difference between what policies say and how they are applied. There are facilities listed, but that's all. Still, in reality, nobody helps us to understand this. Lack of awareness initiatives isolates students with disabilities and makes it common for them to have to argue for their rights at every opportunity. Because the information is not widely shared, many students continue to deal with issues they could easily avoid in university. This agrees with the views of (Waterfield & West, 2005) that hiding information from students encourages them to use less of the support offered.

Inadequate Support Services

Although many universities claim to provide services to students with disabilities, little awareness exists, as was immediately apparent in the interviews. Participants reported that:

"I did not know about the counseling services until my third year. I felt like I was drowning in stress, but nobody told me about the help I could get." (P9)

"I often feel isolated in group tasks because my input is limited by lack of support. I missed deadlines because no one provided soft copies of the material I could read." (P3)

"I begged for extra time during exams and no one offered it to me, so I never got the chance. In tough situations, I felt cut off from the rest of the community." (P2)

Limited access, coupled with their invisibility, is a substantial gap in supporting disabled students. These gaps hinder students from getting the guidance they need when they are struggling with their emotional and mental health, making it all the more difficult to walk through the various challenges of university life. Such results were also revealed by (Hashemiparast et al., 2021), demonstrating the large extent to which the lack of institutional support is detrimental to the mental well-being of disabled people.

Transportation Barriers

Another major challenge was the lack of affordable transportation. A number of students mentioned a lack of dedicated university transport or provision for disabled students, which made it impossible for them to commute to and from campus. Participants reported that:

"If my friends cannot help me, I am stuck. However, I cannot travel alone, as those routes are inaccessible. It was emotionally exhausting not knowing if you would make it to class." (P27)

"I cannot pay for rickshaws daily and my body can't fit in buses. I have to think twice if I should even go to an important class." (P11)

"I have to someone with me when I travel alone. On days when they can't take me, I'm unable to

return to the classroom. I feel like I can't come to university and it makes me lose confidence. It also affects my attendance." (P5)

"Every morning, I leave home with anxiety in my heart. The buses are not made for someone like me, and people stare when I struggle to climb in. I feel like a burden. The long distance and broken roads make my joints ache, but I still try to reach on time. Sometimes I just cry quietly when I get home." (P19)

Most often, such transportation obstacles lead to both emotional and physical drudgery that isolates disabled students from participating in university life. The problems that disabilities cause for students make it very difficult for them to learn, socialize, and maintain emotional wellness.

Gender-Specific Challenges

Although many of the challenges faced by disabled students are common to all students, some gendered barriers were also reported. The female students perceived stronger pressures from their family and society to overcome their disability and also achieve unrealistic expectations. As female respondents explained,

"My family expects the same out of me as my siblings. They do not realize how difficult it is for me. There is this constant pressure to be normal."(P23)

"Just because I walk on crutches, certain men think it's okay to say anything to me. A guy shouted that I was 'rubbish' in front of all the others. I didn't speak... I started crying a little bit later in the washroom." (P21)

"A girl said that she acts strong and confident, though she is always scared deep down. Worried that failing just once will make others point out that she told them it was impossible. I have to deal with that fear all the time." (P10)

We also found that male participants frequently emphasized societal impositions regarding being independent, which served to further burden them in trying to conform to expectations despite their disability.

Table 2: "Barriers Experienced by Students with Disabilities"

Category	Challenges Experienced by Students with Disabilities
Physical Barriers	No ramps, no elevators, no accessible bathrooms; hard to get around campus.
Social Stigma	Prejudices in society, being banned from group activities, and emotional loneliness.
Teacher Awareness	Lack of teacher training in disability inclusion, refusal to provide lecture notes or adjust teaching styles.
Support Systems	No support services from schools, for example, counseling, psychological support.
Transportation Barriers	Unavailability of campus transport, dependence on colleague transport, and affective and physical stress.

Coping Strategies Adopted by People with Disabilities

Despite these many challenges, disabled students have found ways to cope with university life. This may reflect the resilience and determination of students who, despite barriers, continue their education.

Social Connections and Peer Support

Peer support became an invaluable tool for coping. Separate interviews with students showed they leaned heavily on their classmates for emotional and physical support. Male participants stated that:

"I could only get through this because of my friends. "They support me not only in getting to class but also in managing my emotions. They're the ones who make me handle all the stress." (P9)

"My emotional support is a friend I met online who also has a disability. We've never met in person, but we talk daily. He gets my frustrations, my fears, and even the silent struggles I can't explain to anyone else. (P22)

Student-peer relationships created a sense of community while ensuring emotional support — not that the environment was a prison, but in many ways, it was isolating. This goes hand in hand with (Hall & Theron, 2016), who advocate for peer networks as central components to constructing resilience with marginalized students.

Faith and Spiritual Engagement

Spirituality and faith were lifelines for many students. As female respondents explained:

"I pray when I feel like I'm going to burst. It brings me peace even in the midst of chaos. My faith helps me stay grounded." (P5)

"I feel relieved by reading holy books and praying regularly. Practicing these strengthens my belief that tough times from God help and I have to be patient and rely on him to act at the right time. Having this information eases the stress I have about my situation." (P8)

Such necessity of faith represents students' emotional stress regarding spiritual healing for their particular disability journey within the university environment. The same important tendency was found in the research that touches upon spirituality as the tool of coping in the groups of disabled (Kim et al., 2020).

Self-Advocacy and Independence

Students identified the brief learning experience as a source for developing their independence and increasing their assertiveness in their regular daily interactions. The participants stated,

"I needed to develop my ability to defend my needs. During my initial days, I depended on other students for help. The process of asking for my necessary needs made me more confident without experiencing any shame." (P8)

"At first, I kept quiet when my needs weren't acknowledged. So, when I found out that I had to push to get assistance, I began talking to my teachers and said, 'Could you please send me soft copy notes? I won't be able to come to class on the third floor.' That event transformed the situation completely." (P2)

These narratives show that many used these ways of acting to feel stronger and more empowered, rather than relying on them as simple ways to cope. The strategies helped students move from being limited to being strong, active, and with a sense of purpose. This agrees with research in disability that opines that self-advocacy is crucial in Identity formation and achievement in academia (Scheffers et al., 2024).

Extracurricular Engagement

Students build an important external connection through different educational activities outside of formal academic work. Many students noted that being part of events encouraged them to rethink stereotypes. The participants stated,

"Drama club membership brought many important advantages to my life. The program allowed me to speak and bond with people who are not part of my disability community." (P23)

"I became a part of the debating society. I was able to prove my ability when I won my first competition, convincing others who had previously felt sorry for me, she added." (P6)

"I regularly find a still and quiet area of the university, under a tree and sit there. Witnessing how the leaves sway and feeling the air gives me comfort. It allows me to escape from anxiety and think I am not restricted by what is happening." (P22)

These events allowed students both social interaction and training to build their confidence, as well as their interpersonal competencies.

Seeking Professional Help

Many students determined professional therapy as necessary to manage their mental distress. Participants stated that:

"I began going to see a counselor when I recognized I could not do it all myself. It helped me clear my head and feel less overwhelmed." (P28)

"Where I grew up, it was considered acceptable for everyone to tell me not to show emotions or seek support. I discovered in therapy how to deal with what I had avoided for years." (P6)

For many, seeking mental health support became a key tool in this new age of coping, especially for those who found themselves battling anxiety, depression, and stress.

Recommendations to Lessen Barriers for Persons with Disabilities

To ensure equal participation and academic success for Person's with disabilities, it is crucial for universities to adopt targeted interventions that address their unique challenges. The following recommendations are proposed based on the participants lived experiences and aim to promote inclusivity, accessibility, and support within higher education institutions.

Improved Accessibility Infrastructure

Universities must focus on building ramps, using elevators, and providing wheelchair-accessible restrooms. These campus modifications will help guarantee that students with disabilities have equal access to the pathways and buildings.

Suggestion: All new construction or renovations should reflect universal design principles, making buildings accessible to students with disabilities.

Adoption of Assistive Technologies

The addition of assistive technologies (e.g., screen readers, voice-to-text devices, adaptive devices) can greatly enrich the learning experience for students with visual, auditory, or motor disabilities. These devices will be used to access course materials and discussions.

Suggestion: "Universities should make assistive technologies (AT) available to students with disabilities, whether through direct provision or provision in computer labs and libraries."

Strengthening of Faculty Training for Disability Awareness

A particularly common problem students raised was the faculty members' lack of awareness of teaching and supporting disabled students. Teachers must be educated on how to modify their teaching to meet the needs of students with disabilities and provide them with accessible materials and alternative methods of engaging with them.

Suggestion: "A comprehensive faculty training curriculum on disability inclusion should be introduced to prepare educators to serve the varied needs of students with disabilities.

Campus Transportation Which is both Accessible and Inclusive

More easily available transport, such as custom-equipped university buses with wheelchair-accessible fittings, would lower the barriers that students currently have. Today, far too many students with disabilities depend on the goodwill and assistance of others to get around, perpetuating their isolation and need for assistance.

Suggestion: "Universities should provide special transport facilities for disabled students so that they can easily and independently travel from one campus to hostels and to their classes."

Programs to Address Stigma

There is still significant stigma toward disability, 'witch' can lead to exclusion, isolation, and discrimination. Universities need to conduct awareness campaigns to teach students and staff about disability/inclusion/diversity and its benefits in academia.

Suggestion: "Organize regular awareness programmes to diminish the stigma around disability and help to promote a culture of inclusivity on campus."

Offer Personalized Counseling and Support

In particular, emotional and psychological needs are critical for students with disabilities who experience social seclusion and prejudice. Colleges and universities should create specialized counseling services; their students should have access to professional mental health practitioners who understand disability issues.

Suggestion: "Colleges should introduce counseling centers that offer targeted support to students with disabilities, focusing on mental health, coping strategies, and emotional health."

Peer Support Networks

In the circle of friend support during classroom time, students with and without disabilities swap personal profiles, play mental health trivia games, and discuss what causes stress and their sources of support. Universities should also encourage the development of peer support groups, where disabled students can exchange experiences, mutually support one another, and be agents of change.

Suggestion: "Promote the development of peer support networks that link students with disabilities to one another to build relationships, share resources, and create a sense of community."

Promote Family and Community Affiliations

Families and local communities serve as vital support systems for students with disabilities. Families should be incorporated into the university learning process, with resources and tips on supporting their children academically.

Suggestion: "Hold workshops for families of students with disabilities so they too are empowered and equipped to support their children academically and emotionally."

Review and Improve Policies On Disability

It is time for universities to revisit and improve their policy response to disability, bringing it into line with national and international best practice. A policy will help develop strong accommodations so that students with disabilities can fully experience their educational experience.

Suggestion: "Universities should establish transparent disability policies informing students of their rights as students with disabilities, which should be applied consistently and monitored for their effectiveness."

Through these suggestions, South Punjab universities can develop an inclusive and supportive environment to overcome the obstacles that higher education students with disabilities encounter, which will help them in their academic and social achievements.

Conclusion

The study points towards the substantial challenges of Persons with disabilities (PWD) in the universities of South Punjab, such as inadequate infrastructure, social stigma, as well as lack of support services. Nevertheless, Persons with disabilities are strong and manage to find coping strategies, among others , peer support, religious activity, and self-advocacy. For Persons with disabilities, universities need to address their buildings' physical access, including assistive technology, faculty training on disability, and inclusive classrooms. Awareness campaigns and establishing networks with strong support systems like mental health services are important to demystify and give Persons with disabilities (PWDs) a voice. To conclude, South Punjab universities

need to develop a holistic approach through comprehensive policies and practices to make a place where person's with disabilities have equal opportunity and support to participate in academic and campus life.

Limitations & Future Directions of the Study
Even though this study provides important findings on the lives of Person's with disabilities in South Punjab, certain limitations should be acknowledged. The findings gathered from South Punjab may not always be applicable to other regions, particularly urban areas, due to their distinct social and organizational structures. A cross-sectional study only records one point in the academic journey and this is only partially useful because it does not capture development over time. In addition the study did not consider students who left school/university because of difficulties and what they share could be useful for creating future policies. Despite these factors, the research prepares the ground for future researchers to continue research and brings attention to the urgency of true inclusion, long-term studies and efforts from multiple stakeholders in the field of disability and higher education in Pakistan.

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