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The Role of Peer Support System in Promoting Social Inclusion for Students with Visual Impairment at Tertiary Level of Education

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Abstract

This qualitative phenomenon research examines how the peer support systems play a strategic role in enhancing social inclusion of the students with visual impairments (VI) in the tertiary institutions in Pakistan. Based on thematic analysis of the interviews with three VI students and three sighted peer support, the findings show five major themes: academic access (through real-time support with diagrams, notes, and lectures); emotional belonging (through check-ins and group inclusion); development of peer attitudes towards them (respectful support); institutional gaps that lead to informal reliance on peers; the limitations of assistive technology, which highlights the complementary human role of peers. Although policies have addressed inclusive education, VIs have continued to experience barriers, such as inaccessibility of materials and isolation which can be overcome effectively by peers through increasing engagement, confidence and resilience. Results support the transformative effects of peer support in resource-limiting situations and balance the inactive disability services and foster holistic engagement to align the provision of support through formal peer mentoring programs with disability awareness training and combined technology policies. The research suggests institutionalized peer mentoring schemes and disability awareness education and combined technology policy to normalize the support and minimize drop-out rates and foster fair university cultures.

Keywords: Peer support, Visual impairment, Social inclusion, Tertiary education, Inclusive practices

Introduction

There are peculiar issues on the challenges that visual impaired students face, particularly in matters of integration and access to the academic material during the transition to a tertiary education. (Odhiambo, 2024; Abu-Alghayth & Alshahrani, 2025; Lid et al., 2025). Peer support systems have come out as a critical process among other strategies of improving social inclusion. Peer support is the aspect of support that is given by the rest of the peers who are usually the sighted students and assist visually impaired students in attending both the academic and the social settings. According to the research, this kind of support is not only solving their accessibility to curriculum materials and learning opportunities but also effectively enhances confidence and well-being and resilience in overcoming institutional barriers (Odhiambo, 2024; Abu-Alghayth & Alshahrani, 2025; Lid et al., 2025).

The importance of peer support systems in enhancing social inclusion of students with visual impairment at

tertiary dimension of education has grown to be an important area of research in line with this global trend in embracing inclusive education. Along with higher education institutes aiming at establishing an equal learning environment, the social integration of visually impaired students sets a critical yet important challenge. Peer support used to mean assistance and encouragement by and among other students has been found to be an important mean of not only academic achievements, but to help the visually impaired students feel a sense of belonging and personal well-being (Odhiambo, 2024; Manitsa & Doikou, 2022).

Research has repeatedly pointed out that good relationships among peers are ideal indicatory factors of social and emotional growth among the students who have visual impairment (Jaleel & Kanwal, 2022). Indicatively, Jaleel & Kanwal, (2022) conclude that peer relations are a direct factor of positive development, thereby enabling students with visual impairment to adapt more positively to requirements of higher education.

Moreover, access to reciprocating, caring, and communicative peers has proved to create friendships and a feeling of belongingness which are some of the cornerstones of the social inclusion at tertiary level (Manitsa & Doikou, 2022). Not only does the creation of a peer network support the academic progress of visually impaired students but also allows them to develop a long-lasting social network, thus being more conducive to fostering a more inclusive, just educational experience (Odhiambo, 2024; Abu-Alghayth & Alshahrani, 2025; Lid et al., 2025).

Historically, studies of the topic of student with disabilities inclusion in higher education have changed their outlook of research focus, shifting their lenses of study on physical accessibility and accommodating academic needs to social participation and community integration. Initial research was focused on the necessity of available curriculum materials and specialized resources; however, newer research is giving importance to social relationships and peer interactions in defining the educational experiences of students with visual impairment (Odhiambo, 2024; Manitsa & Doikou, 2022). This transition of purely medical or charity-based model to social and rights-based shift has highlighted the importance of peer support in breaking the inclusion barrier (Ashraf & Ishaq, 2020).

Researchers have illustrated that the peer support systems play a crucial role in improving the social and academic lives of students with visual impairment across international borders. Different countries have reported the increase of self confidence level, better access to course material and the development of meaningful friendships between visually impaired and sighted students within the framework of peer-led initiative and cooperative learning strategies (Manitsa & Doikou, 2022; Niraula, 2024; Jatunam et al., 2021). To give one example, the studies in Malaysia, Australia, and Finland show that empathetic peer contacts together with practical assistance are important elements of effective support systems, which result in better self-esteem and an increase in the campus life involvement (Manitsa & Doikou, 2022; Sri Takshara & Bhuvaneswari, 2025; Kumar et al., 2025). But, difficulties like no sufficient training among the peers and the absence of institutional guidelines are still present all over the world.

The situation in the local Pakistani environment is also characterized by achievements and constant barriers. Although it is encouraging that the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) was ratified, and that the principles of inclusive education are being introduced, the rate of practical application of these efforts is low (Ashraf & Ishaq, 2020; Mehmood & Parveen, 2025). The analyses undertaken in Karachi and Lahore demonstrate that children with visual impairment tend to depend on informal peer support to a greater extent because of the limited numbers of adapted learning materials and institutional resources (Ashraf & Ishaq, 2020; Mehmood & Parveen, 2025; Khowaja, 2021). The most common way through which these students do access course materials, group work and social life in campus is through peer assistance. Systematic obstacles continue to affect full inclusion (negative attitude in the society, poor infrastructure, and awareness of faculty and students) even though some universities have started resource centers and training programs (Mehmood & Parveen, 2025; Khowaja, 2021).

Notwithstanding these advantages, the success of peer support systems is conditional upon the development of auspicious institutional culture which promotes interaction, understanding, and mutual respect among all

the students. Consequently, the nature and effectiveness of the peer support are essential in formulating specific interventions and policies that would encourage the social inclusion of students with visual impairment in the post-secondary education environment (Odhiambo, 2024; Manitsa & Doikou, 2022).

The study is important because it helps fill an essential shrink in the literature: whereas the academic and infrastructural requirements of students with visual impairment have been researched, the more delicate element of peer support as a factor to create social inclusion has not been examined, at least not in the conditions of developing nations, such as Pakistan (Ashraf & Ishaq, 2020; Mehmood & Parveen, 2025). This research will help to shed light on the experiences and attitudes of visually impaired learners and will enable policy and practice to advance the more welcoming and accommodative education systems.

The overall issue that will be tackled by this research will be the low levels of social inclusion among students with visual impairment in universities, in spite of the policies of the country to pursue an inclusive education program.

Research Objectives

Objectives of the research are to:

1. Analyze the situation in the higher educational institutions regarding providing peer support to visually impaired students.
2. Evaluate peer support effectiveness in encouraging the visually impaired students to participate in social life
3. Examine the obstacles and facilitating factors of the successful peer support.

Literature Review

Peer support systems are central in enabling tertiary-level students who are visually impaired (VI) to be socially included by eliminating scholarly, emotional, and social barriers. Educational settings for inclusive purposes are assisted by organized peer support systems, which integrate academic help (e.g., note-taking, exam study) with social interaction (e.g., hobby-based discussions). Such dual-target interventions in high schools enhanced communication skills and acceptance for the inclusion of students with disabilities, a model for transfer to tertiary settings (Manitsa & Doikou, 2022; Sri Takshara & Bhuvaneswari, 2025; Kumar et al., 2025). Nonetheless, there remains unhappiness with available support systems from students with VI, who consistently campaign for extended disability awareness training for staff and students to promote social integration (Manitsa & Doikou, 2022; Sri Takshara & Bhuvaneswari, 2025; Kumar et al., 2025).

Research evidence shows supportive peer interaction, emotional actions, and instrumental support to be the pillar of effective support schemes. Peer relationships in the research conducted in Punjab, Pakistan, proved to be a strict predictor of healthy development of VI students, especially in the frame of such inclusivity as collaboration with sighted peers that increased the level of confidence and problem-solving (Jaleel & Kanwal, 2022). This finding concurs with Kenya and Sri Lanka, in which coursework accessibility and socialization bestowed academic trust and belonging within institutions, championed by their peers (Odhiambo, 2024).

The subsequent studies also rated the peer support systems highly as far as encouraging academic achievement and social integration of visually impaired (VI) undergraduate students are concerned. For instance, a qualitative case study in Tanzania in 2023 reported that personalized peer support, undertaken by teachers and schools, improved significantly academic achievement and career path possibilities among secondary-level VI students. The study highlighted that structured peer support not only facilitated easy access to learning materials but also raised the confidence and level of motivation of VI students and suggested that such models can be implemented effectively in institutions of higher education (Lunsford et al., 2023).

The psychosocial effect of peer support is also important. A longitudinal study carried out by the Finnish showed that those teenagers with VI survived with strong peer relationships, had higher self-esteem and emotional regulation in adulthood (Manitsa & Doikou, 2022). Similarly, Indian research at Avinashilingam

Institute showed that 82.5 percent of VI students exhibited better social relations owing to voluntary peer support in integrated classes, which gave object value to institutional programs to establish cooperative environments (Gariba & Awini, 2023). Though such benefits exist, scaling support systems in varied tertiary institutions remains a challenge, especially where there is limited resource (Odhiambo, 2024: Gariba & Awini, 2023).

Systems of support in institutions of higher education vary in how well they can provide full-fledged support to visually impaired students. In Thailand, 227 undergraduate students with VI, university staff, and administrators classified support services as high, medium, and low support systems according to the potential for providing assistance. Although different from one another, each category was found to provide a high social and economic level of support and medium physical support. Students called for the following five areas to be given foundational support: social, financial, physical, general support, and testing accommodations. Establishing Disability Support Service Centers and integrating support services in education quality assurance policy was regarded as moving in the right direction in institutionalizing the support for disabled students. This research highlights that peer support, being a social support, is an integral component of the support structure that enables VI students to take part fully in academic and university life (Jatunam et al., 2021).

In Nepal, a qualitative study to identify the experience of visually impaired tertiary students disclosed that peer support is an effective strategy in achieving overcoming barriers to access, as well as facing social exclusion. The students affirmed that peer help facilitated access to information, sharing of information, and acquiring appropriate social skills necessary for academic progress and personal growth. Nonetheless, institutional support gaps were also highlighted in the study, implying that peer support cannot independently overcome the issues associated with students with VI without additional institutional resources and policies (Niraula, 2024).

Moreover, studies reveal that peer support plays an important role in the psychosocial development of VI students. In a study done in Lahore, Pakistan, it was revealed that there is a very strong connection between visual impairment and social interaction, and VI students feel isolated from social life. Peer support was revealed to shatter this isolation by enhancing social interaction and a sense of belonging among higher education institutions. The study recommended increased awareness and staff/student orientation to encourage more inclusive social settings that benefit the needs of the visually impaired pupils (Ashraf et al., 2024).

Peer support in the context of VI students also got new dimensions with the appearance of the COVID-19 pandemic and the switch to e-learning. Based on a study conducted in one of the Punjab schools in Pakistan, visually impaired students as well adapted with ease to online learning by the use of assistive tools and peer support (virtual). Such problems as poor provision by institutions of the software required as well as poor preparation of teachers to offer online training were reported. Despite all these issues, peer support remained an important component in supporting students in the virtual learning environment, attesting to its versatility and importance across different learning contexts (Iqbal et al., 2022).

Additionally, the results of a study conducted in 2023 to integrate pupils with VI into a teachers' training college in Kenya showed that lecturers utilized various approaches in the integration of curriculum, including the preparation of handouts in Braille, large print, and producing tactile maps and diagrams. The institution also utilized several assistive devices and ICT facilities. However, the study has found that although academic accommodations were robust, social inclusion required a favorable climate greatly, and the peer relation was the key in establishing the sense of belonging and reducing the isolation (Kimaro, 2023).

A participatory research conducted by students with VI disability in New Zealand (2022), disability advocates, and accessibility advisors suggested that, although students with VI could receive related academic assistance (e.g., note-takings, exam preparations) with time, the systemic barriers (e.g., the misguided view of disability and peer naivete) still showed up as the major barrier to true inclusion. The research proposed the tertiary

education institutions implement non-academic supports such as social participation and transition programs in place and provided specific disability awareness training to staff and students to bridge the policy-practice gap (Otu-Danquah, 2022).

This role of peer support is also reflected in the research results of African and Asian university cases, where a peer mentoring scheme has found an ever increasing role in the inclusive education initiatives of the Disability Support Services (DSS). The services undertake the role of peer support supplements to assistive technology and official accommodations because they are real-time, one-on-one in nature, and an open campus culture is created. Note-taking, orientation, and social integration are also very important since they assist VI students to perform in high and vastly impersonal universities, but most importantly, they rely on peer mentors to deliver their services. Presence of peer support has been associated with increased academic confidence, lower incidences of dropouts and enhanced mental status (Odhiambo, 2024).

The effectiveness of mentor programs, particularly the STEM-related ones, has been indicated as well. One of the latest studies involved the description of how mentor-training curricula have been developed to better equip the mentors to work with youth who have VI, including the use of more accessible materials and covering modules related to visual impairment content. The research found that mentee expressed gratitude and heard both variants of tips either expedient or psychosocial, which increased assertiveness and career objectives in STEM (Odhiambo, 2024).

In addition to social and emotional assistance, peer assistance is likely to entail academic assistance as well. Sighted peer helps students with VI by reading the whiteboards and clarifying visual content in a presentation and sharing notes throughout lectures. Such interactions improve not only the access to studies but also introduce cooperation in learning and understanding among students. In effective collaboration with peers, lecturers are encouraged to create congenial classroom settings through availing of learning materials applicably to the VI and relaxing communication among the VI and other students

The publications outlining the implementation of peer support system into the process of ensuring social inclusion of students with visual impairment (VI) at tertiary level of education are consistent in the significance of the collaboration they apply, positive attitudes, and direct help offered by the sighted peers. They are essential towards supporting the students with VI as they cope with academic pressure and social situations in order to increase a positive sense of belonging and emotional wellness. The intensive analysis of the student peer support of students with VI reveals that the student peer work does not only provide the students with access to the course content, but is also known to help them feel more confident and motivated and thus continue their studies in higher education regardless of the challenges presented by a disability (Manitsa & Doikou, 2022).

It has also been shown that peer support is a significant everyone facilitator of inclusion in higher learning. Support of sighted peers-reading materials to lects, explaining visual information and providing emotional support-would all help significantly to enhance the educational process according to students with weak eyesight. To illustrate, a study within the tertiary institutions has shown that there is enhanced social and academic integration achieved by the VI students who are peer aided and therefore the development is generally positive. The support offered in this case goes beyond academic assistance thus building relationships and social networks that minimize isolation and increase retention in the institution (Ashraf & Ishaq, 2020).

In psychopathology, peer support also has psychosocial dividends through development of self-esteem, emotions control and social competence. According to longitudinal studies, the adolescents with VI that support good relationships with their peers in adolescence will be healthier when they are adults regarding both their emotional and social well-being. Through the establishment of a common sense and sense of meaning and experience, peer support negates in its head the visual impairment handicaps of social isolation and dependency.

Together with it, such peer support learning strategies as studying groups and mutual notes writing have been

shown to improve the grades and self-esteem of VI students. They also play a role in removing attitudinal barriers due to the fact that through it there is improved interaction and understanding between the visually impaired and other sighted peers (Odhiambo, 2024).

The use of peer support has also been mentioned in the literature by adding the assistive technologies to improve inclusion. Peer assistance is enabled by use of technology such as screen readers, audio recorders and Braille displays which enable students with VI access to curriculum materials independently of the students assisting them. However, peer support cannot be omitted in case of immediate tasks of interaction or social ones. The combination of technology and peer support results in a comprehensive support program that covers academically related needs and the social ones (Manitsa & Doikou, 2022; Aftab et al., 2025).

A second overlap of peer support and institutional policies is assessment accommodations. VI students usually take longer to write exams, print in accessible format, and assistance of readers or scribes. Students also get their peers to act as informal readers or study session facilitators in preparation of assessments. According to the published literature, this combination of the accommodations and peer support reduces the stress related to academic achievement in VI students and improves their confidence in their capabilities (Odhiambo, 2024).

Regardless of the various obvious benefits, the full-scale use of peer support systems loses some. The existence of diversity in institutions of resources, levels of awareness of staff and students, as well as the culture of response to disability can limit accessibility and effectiveness of peer support schemes. Although the majority of students with VI are dissatisfied with the present provision arrangements the cause of major regret is the absence of awareness of the concept of disability amongst several of the prospective supporters that influences interaction with peers.

To addresses these gaps, it is proposed in the literature to have formal peer mentoring programs, trainings on disability awareness and universal extracurricular activity to enable them to socialize naturally. There is also the suggested model of learning through incorporation of peer support along with the technology access that can be availed in the endeavor to alleviate problems of academic work.

Cumulatively, the overall statistical evidence in the presentation of over a dozens of studies in different countries foreshadows towards the direction that the peer support initiatives are significant in promoting the social learning of visually impaired students at the post-secondary school levels. Besides providing mental assistance, they provide emotional resilience, social connection and personal empowerment on an individual level, therefore, making the post-secondary system inclusive and just. A majority of literature in different nations and institutions concur that peer support systems are very instrumental in social inclusion and academic achievement of tertiary students who are visually impaired.

The systems fill the accessibility gap, alleviate social isolation, and enables students to fit in their learning fraternities with no weariness. Peer support programs have to be linked with institutional policy, disability awareness training, and assistive technology in order to be included in inclusive education comprehensive approach.

Conceptual Framework

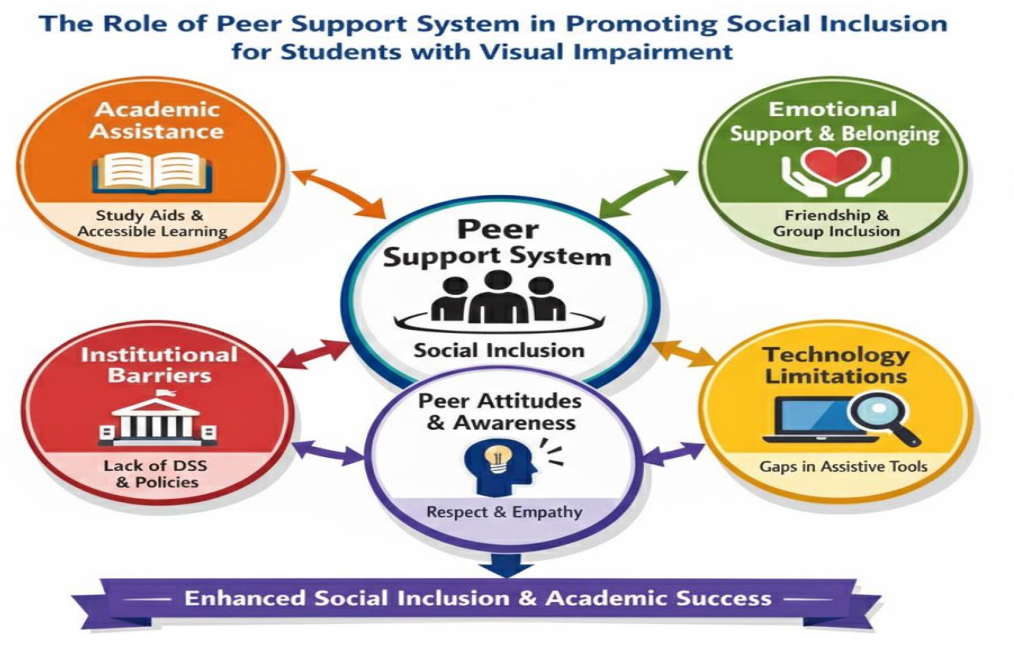


Figure 1: The Peer Support System in Social Inclusion of Students with Visual Impairment.
This conceptual framework presents how peer support facilitates social inclusion of visually impaired students in tertiary education. It focuses on the "Peer Support System" by associating it with five major factors: Academic Assistance, Emotional Support and Belonging, Peer Attitudes and Awareness, Institutional Barriers, and Technology Limitations. These factors demonstrate that peer interactions help advance academic access, emotional well-being, respectful attitudes, institutional gaps, and assistive technologies, which leads to a more inclusive learning process.

Methodology

The study will be based on an interpretivist paradigm so as to generate the lived experiences of VI students and their peers. This correlates with qualitative studies examining the social inclusion processes in higher learning institutions. The design to be used will be phenomenological in an attempt to explore lived experiences of peer support systems to a large extent. This is a good approach to describing the essence of social inclusion processes since it is based on individual experiences of the participants. Target population includes visually impaired students in universities with normal visual acuity Participants in formal/informal support networks

Purposive sample: 3 VI students with the following criteria: registered with university disability services. At least 6 months 3 sighted peers: Are in some kind of structured support relationship (note-takers, guides, study partners) Have at least 1 semester of support giving experience. The sample of these participants will be identified based on criterion sampling that allows identifying individuals who could demonstrate: Strong experience-based knowledge of peer support phenomenon Faculties to provide detailed descriptions

Table 1: Demographic information of respondents

Respondent	Gender	Age	Academic Level	Role	Type/Level of Visual Impairment	Duration at Institution
Respondent 1	Female	20-24 years	Undergraduate	VI Student	Low Vision	1-2 years
Respondent 2	Male	20-24 years	Undergraduate	VI Student	Partial Sight	3-4 years
Respondent 3	Female	25-29 years	Postgraduate	VI Student	Total Blindness	1-2 years
Respondent 4	Male	20-24 years	Undergraduate	Sighted Peer Supporter	Fully Sighted	Less than 1 year
Respondent 5	Female	20-24 years	Undergraduate	Sighted Peer Supporter	Fully Sighted	1-2 years
Respondent 6	Male	25-29 years	Postgraduate	Sighted Peer Supporter	Fully Sighted	Less than 1 year

Tool Development

Semi structured interview guide consisting of: 12 open-ended questions including three areas: Academic collaboration experiences Social integration challenges/opportunities Emotional support mechanisms. A number of rigorous strategies have been used to assure the validity of the research findings. Member checking was done through the provision of the transcripts to the participants to ensure that they confirmed whether their statements and interpretations were accurate.

Measures to ensure credibility of results like cross referencing the information gathered with records in the university disability services unit was carried out to ensure triangulation of results was done through this. Also, the concept of thick description was applied, and micro-level field notes were recorded to capture the contextual aspects and subtleties of the research field. This was further enhanced by reliability by way of the maintenance of an audit trail, that was achieved through open and transparent recording of all data collection and analysis processes. The code-recode technique was adopted, where 20 percent of the data was analyzed after every 2 weeks to determine coding consistency.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data collected from six participants (three visually impaired students and three sighted peer supporters) were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis. All interviews were transcribed manually and repeatedly read to achieve familiarization with the content. Initial codes were generated line-by-line to capture meaningful units related to academic assistance, emotional support, peer attitudes, and institutional factors. Codes sharing conceptual similarity were grouped into sub-themes, which were then reviewed to ensure coherence and distinctiveness. Through iterative refinement, five overarching themes were constructed: Accessibility and Academic Assistance, Emotional Support and Belonging, Peer Attitudes and Awareness, Institutional Barriers, and Technology as Incomplete Support. These themes reflect the lived experiences of visually impaired learners and their peer supporters, highlighting how peer interactions shape inclusion within the university context. Credibility was ensured through reflexive memoing, peer checking, and maintaining an audit trail documenting coding decisions throughout the analysis

process.

Thematic Analysis Table

Table 2: Themes, Sub-Themes, Codes, and Supporting Quotes

Respondents	Theme	Sub-Theme	Codes	Quotes
Respondent- 1	Accessibility & Academic Assistance	Classroom Visual Support	Describing diagrams, reading slides, explaining visuals	"Whenever the teacher uses diagrams, my friend quietly explains what's on the screen so I can follow the topic."
Respondent- 2	Accessibility & Academic Assistance	Notes & Materials Access	Screen-reader issues, rewriting notes, inaccessible PDFs	"Most of the uploaded files are scanned, so my classmate rewrites the main points for me."
Respondent- 3	Emotional Support & Belonging	Inclusion in Groups	Feeling valued, reduced anxiety, participation	"When my group includes me without hesitation, I automatically feel more confident to speak."
Respondent- 1	Emotional Support & Belonging	Friendship & Motivation	Checking-in, reassurance, encouragement	"Just knowing someone checks on me makes me feel less anxious about classes."
Respondent- 2	Peer Attitudes & Awareness	Understanding Needs	Asking before helping, avoiding assumptions	"I wish people asked me what help I need instead of assuming I can't do basic tasks."
Respondent- 5	Peer Attitudes & Awareness	Growth in Awareness	Learning to support, empathy building	"At first I didn't know how to support her, but with time I understood what actually helps."
Respondent- 3	Institutional Barriers & Gaps	Lack of Disability	Inactive DSS office, slow	"Our teachers rarely replies, so

		Support	response, no training	I depend mostly on my peers."
Respondent- 6	Institutional Barriers & Gaps	No Formal Peer Training	Confusion about role, self-learning	"I want to help properly, but the university never trained us on how to support visually impaired students."
Respondent- 4	Technology & Assistive Tools	Limits of Tech	Screen-reader limitations, image/graph issues	"My screen reader works for text but becomes useless when teachers show graphs."
Respondent- 2	Technology & Assistive Tools	Peer-Technology Interaction	Human explanation needed, compatibility issues	"Sometimes technology fails, and a quick explanation from a peer saves a lot of time."

Theme 1: Accessibility & Academic Assistance

This theme highlights the central role peers play in helping visually impaired (VI) students access academic content that is otherwise inaccessible. Participants explained that teaching materials, diagrams, and digital resources were often not compatible with screen readers, forcing VI students to depend on sighted peers for interpretation. Peer assistance—such as reading slides aloud, describing visual content, or sharing structured notes—enabled students to follow lessons more effectively. This academic facilitation also reduced stress, increased engagement, and helped VI students keep pace with classroom activities. The support was immediate, practical, and filled institutional gaps, showing how peer collaboration directly enhanced learning accessibility.

Quote 1: "Whenever slides are full of diagrams or tiny text, my friend quietly explains what's there. Without her, I would miss most of the lecture." — R1

Quote 2: "Teachers upload scanned PDFs and my screen reader can't read them, so a classmate rewrites the important points for me." — R2

Theme 2: Emotional Support & Sense of Belonging

This theme reflects how peer support fosters emotional well-being and strengthens students' sense of belonging. VI participants shared that having peers who check on them, include them in group discussions, or simply walk with them to class reduces feelings of isolation. Emotional reassurance from peers encouraged greater class participation and reduced anxiety, especially during new or challenging academic situations. Sighted peers also expressed that supporting VI students strengthened empathy and built meaningful friendships. Overall, emotional support became a foundation for inclusion, with social acceptance helping VI students develop confidence and a stronger identity within the university community.

Quote 1: "When my classmates include me in their group without hesitation, I feel like I'm truly part of the class." — R3

Quote 2: "Having one supportive friend changed everything. It gave me confidence to speak up in class again." — R1

Theme 3: Peer Attitudes & Awareness

Participants emphasized that peer attitudes significantly shaped their experience of inclusion. Some peers were respectful and proactive, asking how to help rather than assuming needs. Others were either overly protective or uninformed, which sometimes made VI students uncomfortable. Positive attitudes created openness, while lack of awareness led to misunderstandings or unintentional exclusion. Sighted peers also noted that they initially did not know how to support VI classmates, but over time learned appropriate ways through interaction. This theme highlights that awareness and appropriate attitude are critical to ensuring that peer support feels respectful, empowering, and dignified.

Quote 1: "Some people think I'm helpless and try to do everything for me. I just wish they would ask what help I actually need." — R2

Quote 2: "Before I became a peer supporter, I had no idea how visual our classes were. I learned slowly what kind of help is actually useful." — R5

Theme 4: Institutional Barriers & Gaps

Although peers play a critical role, participants reported that peer support is often necessary because institutional systems are inadequate. Many VI students felt that teachers rarely respond, or lacked proper resources. As a result, students relied heavily on classmates for note-taking, navigation, and even exam preparation. Sighted peers also expressed frustration at the absence of training or guidelines from the institution, leaving them unsure whether their support strategies were effective. This theme reveals that peer support compensates for systemic shortcomings, and without institutional backing, inclusion efforts remain inconsistent and dependent on individual goodwill.

Quote 1: "Our teachers rarely responds. Honestly, if my peers didn't help me, I wouldn't survive most of my courses." — R3

Quote 2: "I support my VI friend in class, but the university should train us. We're doing everything through guesswork." — R6

Theme 5: Technology & Assistive Tools as Incomplete Solutions

Participants explained that while technology such as screen readers, audio notes, and magnifiers assist learning, they cannot fully replace peer support. Many digital materials used by instructors were inaccessible, including images, graphs, scanned books, and unlabeled diagrams. VI students described how peers filled the gap by explaining visuals in real time or helping with software-related issues. Sighted peers also noticed that assistive tools were not always updated or provided by the university. This theme shows that technology plays a complementary role, but human assistance remains essential for bridging inaccessible visual information.

Quote 1: "My screen reader works for text, but when a teacher shows a graph, it becomes useless. A peer has to describe what's happening." — R4

Quote 2: "Technology helps, but not everything is compatible. Sometimes a simple explanation from a classmate saves a lot of time." — R2

Findings

Thematic analysis of interviews with three visually impaired students and three sighted peer supporters revealed five key themes illustrating peer support's role in social inclusion at tertiary institutions. Peers delivered critical academic assistance by describing diagrams, reading slides aloud, and rewriting notes from inaccessible scanned PDFs, enabling visually impaired students to follow lectures, reduce stress, and engage fully despite screen reader incompatibilities. This immediate, practical help compensated for institutional gaps in accessible materials, directly enhancing learning outcomes and classroom participation.

Emotional support through peer check-ins, group inclusions, and friendships fostered a profound sense of belonging, alleviating isolation and anxiety while boosting confidence in academic and social settings.

Visually impaired participants described how reassurance from peers encouraged class participation and built lasting relationships, with sighted supporters gaining empathy in return. Such interactions formed the emotional foundation for inclusion, promoting resilience and community identity.

Peer attitudes shaped inclusion experiences, with proactive approaches—asking specific needs rather than assuming helplessness—creating respectful dynamics, though initial unawareness sometimes led to overprotectiveness or exclusion. Over time, interactions cultivated awareness and empathy among sighted peers, underscoring the need for dignified support. Institutional barriers exacerbated reliance on peers, as inactive disability offices and absent training left students dependent on informal help for navigation, notes, and exams.

Technology like screen readers proved insufficient for visuals, graphs, and dynamic content, necessitating peer explanations to bridge compatibility failures and ensure real-time comprehension. While assistive tools aided text access, human intervention remained essential, highlighting peers' complementary role in comprehensive support. These findings affirm peer systems as vital for overcoming academic, emotional, and systemic hurdles in promoting equitable tertiary inclusion.

Discussions

The findings of this research align with emerging evidence emphasizing the vital role of peer support in promoting social inclusion and academic participation among students with visual impairments in higher education (Niraula, 2024; Tuttle & Carter, 2022). Peer support fosters not only academic accessibility by compensating for gaps in institutional accommodations but also emotional well-being by reducing feelings of isolation and anxiety, which are commonly reported challenges in this student population (Manitsa & Doikou, 2022; Kija & Mgumba, 2025). This comprehensive support system effectively addresses the social and educational dimensions of inclusion; which traditional disability services often inadequately cover.

The study highlights how peers bridge technology and resource limitations, especially where assistive devices fail to fully replace human interaction, which supports previous observations stressing the complementary nature of social and technological aids (Sharma et al., 2025; Escudeiro & Campos Gouveia, 2025; Monica et al., 2025; Aftab et al., 2025). Moreover, witnesses to peer support growing from an informal gesture to a structured and recognized component of inclusive educational practices suggest institutional reforms are essential. Nonetheless, gaps in formal training for peer supporters and inconsistent institutional responsiveness corroborate findings from recent research indicating a persistent need for systemic improvements and disability awareness programs (Firat & Bildiren,2025; Carrillo-Sierra et al., 2025).

Emotional and psychosocial benefits derived from peer support underscore its significance beyond accessibility to fostering identity, confidence, and resilience (Niraula, 2024). The provision of empathetic peer interactions corresponds with the call for higher education institutions to integrate holistic approaches that support students' socio-emotional needs alongside academic accommodations (Kija & Mgumba, 2025). Emphasizing developmental aspects such as empathy training and social participation aligns with evidence that meaningful peer relationships contribute positively to mental health and academic persistence (Manitsa & Doikou, 2022; Tuttle & Carter, 2022).

Given these multifaceted benefits, future policy and practice in higher education must prioritize embedding peer support within institutional frameworks, including formal training curricula and coordination with assistive technology services. Such integration can enhance the efficacy of peer support and alleviate the burden of systemic deficiencies (Sharma et al., 2025; Escudeiro & Campos Gouveia; Firat & Bildiren,2025; Carrillo-Sierra et al., 2025). Ultimately, fostering a university culture that actively promotes peer-led inclusion can diminish social isolation and elevate educational outcomes for visually impaired students, as echoed throughout contemporary research (Niraula, 2024).

These findings contribute to an expanding body of knowledge urging a shift from purely resource-based accommodations toward comprehensive, human-centered inclusion strategies that encompass emotional and

social dimensions, ensuring visually impaired students thrive holistically in higher education environments (Kija & Mgumba, 2025; Manitsa & Doikou, 2022). This perspective represents a progressive step toward realizing genuinely equitable education systems.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that peer support systems are indispensable for promoting social inclusion among visually impaired students in tertiary education, effectively bridging academic accessibility gaps through real-time assistance with diagrams and notes, alleviating emotional isolation via empathetic interactions and belonging, fostering respectful peer attitudes, compensating for institutional shortcomings, and complementing limited assistive technologies. These findings highlight peers' transformative role in resource-constrained settings, enabling full engagement, resilience, and persistence. Institutions should institutionalize formal mentoring, awareness training, and technology integration to sustain these benefits and reduce dropouts, while future research explores scalable models longitudinally. Ultimately, embedding peer support advances equitable, holistic higher education where visually impaired students thrive.

Recommendations

Here are two recommendations based on research findings:

1. Higher education institutions should implement formal peer mentoring programs paired with mandatory disability awareness training for sighted students to standardize respectful support and address institutional gaps in social inclusion.
2. Universities must integrate peer assistance with assistive technologies via policy guidelines and joint training sessions, ensuring real-time solutions for visual content barriers and reducing over-reliance on informal help.

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