



## **Citizenship Without Inclusion: Examining the Experiences of University Students with Disabilities in Pakistan's Higher Education System**

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### **Abstract**

In this qualitative study, the authors employ the critical realist approach to elucidate the lived experiences of higher education students with disabilities within the Pakistani system of higher education. As it is in the Pakistani constitution, the rights of citizenship and access to everything, at least formally, are guaranteed; students with disabilities face the paradox of formal citizenship that comes together with significantly low substantive inclusion because of systematic exclusion. The conflict between the policy rhetoric on which the constituent provisions of the constitution are based, on the one hand, and the practices of daily exclusion of students with various disabilities, on the other, is quite brightly reflected in the results of 20 in-depth interviews with a sample of students in three large Pakistani universities who have different disabilities. The paper also scrutinizes the role that institutional structures, cultural norms, and resource limitations play in marginalizing these students, thus pushing them to the edge of university life. The results indicate that the students receive a form of citizenship without any inclusion, although they are citizens in terms of status and have a right to education (because of this legal provision). Poor infrastructure, discriminatory faculty and peer attitudes, a lack of support services, and the failure to engage in mainstream campus activities constitute the significant dimensions of this exclusion. The study employs critical realist epistemology to inform a thematic analysis that identifies structural mechanisms maintaining exclusion, while also highlighting the concept of student agency and the methods of resistance. The findings challenge hegemonic trends in inclusion within the context of Pakistani higher education and promote radical solutions that extend beyond compliance to achieve actual accessibility and a sense of belonging.

**Keywords:** disability studies, higher education, Pakistan, citizenship, inclusion, critical realism, qualitative research, accessibility, exclusion, student experiences

### **1. Introduction**

The Pakistani Constitution allows equal citizenship rights and provides every citizen (persons with disabilities included) with the unrestricted opportunity to



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access education (Aftab, 2024; Gul, 2020; Shah et al., 2025). However, there is a wide gap between these statutorily provided and the realities of university students with disabilities. Pakistan has a about 9.64 per cent population with disabilities (The News, 2024), so with disabled people having such low rates of participating in education at a higher level, it is a significant barrier to inclusive citizenship in the country.

The theoretical conceptualizations of citizenship encompass civil, political, and social rights, including the right to education (Aman-Hunzai et al., 2025; Hanif, 2025; Kester et al., 2025). However, in the case of disabled students in Pakistani Universities, formal citizenship does not necessarily imply substantive inclusion or participation in activities related to higher education (Bokhari et al., 2025). This creates what can be called citizenship without inclusion—a paradox, because people have a legal right to enjoy it, yet structural difficulties bar the whole exercise.

This qualitative study presents the lived experiences of thirty university students with various forms of disability in Pakistan's three major universities, examining how these practices either render or exclude minority university students due to institutional structures, cultural attitudes, and resource shortages. Though Pakistan ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2011 and consecutively implemented a range of policy initiatives, a significant barrier to students with disabilities continues to exist when it comes to access to quality higher education (Bokhari et al., 2025; Elahi et al., 2025; Hussain et al., 2020).

Three main questions serve as the focus of the research: How do university students with disabilities construct citizenship and their experience of inclusion within the higher education sector in Pakistan? How are structures contributing to 2nd-class citizenship? What are the forms of resistance to which students with disabilities resort? Addressing these questions in a critical realist manner, the study contributes to the disability studies literature in the Global South context, providing a less problematic empirical basis for transformative policy change.

## 2. Literature Review

Critical realism can be a powerful tool for analyzing disability in higher education, as it acknowledges that reality encompasses more than just one dimension (e.g., empirical experience, visible events, causal structures) (Bhaskar, 2008; Shipway, 2010). Therefore, at the same time, students with disabilities can share examples of exclusion; these empirical phenomena can be viewed as the result of more fundamental mechanisms of exclusion in educational institutions and society at large.

The theory of citizenship, especially the tripartite way of thinking about civil, political, and social rights (Marshall, 1950), has been disablist in its implication of normative citizenship based on able-bodied contribution. This argument, put forward by Morris (2005), that the standard models of citizenship ignore the systematic exclusion of the disabled with actual rights, is particularly relevant in the context of Pakistan, where a continued tradition of exclusion accompanies constitutional rights.



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The literature reveals that learners with disabilities face complex barriers, including physical accessibility, attitudinal, and support services barriers (Gull et al., 2025; Liu et al., 2025; Veerabathiran & Thomas, 2025). Although the existence of legislative frameworks, including the Americans with Disabilities Act, has helped achieve changes in accessibility in developed countries, policy-practice gaps still exist (Lombardi et al., 2015).

The Global South faces distinct challenges, including resource scarcity, varying cultural perspectives on disability, and inadequate policy implementation capabilities (Grech, 2011). Indian and South African research indicates that disabled students have to cope with similarly structured disadvantages, albeit in an environment characterized by worse resource deprivations and alternate cultural meanings of disability (Singal, 2010).

In the Pakistani scenario, the law has continued to protect on a much larger scale after the ratification of UNCRPD and the enactment of the Disabled Persons (Employment and Rehabilitation) Ordinance 1981. Accessibility guidelines have been issued by the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan, which are not perfectly followed by all institutions (Hussain et al., 2020).

There has been relatively little research in Pakistan; however, studies have found that infrastructure barriers and attitudinal constraints are evident in the universities of Lahore (Parveen et al., 2024). Additionally, inadequate resources and cultural stigma are identified as the primary barriers (Ashiq et al., 2024). The deeper aspects of experiential realities related to student citizenship and inclusion, however, are not discussed in these quantitative studies.

Using a critical-realist perspective, the current study has found three ontological grounds, including empirical (experience), actual (events), and real (structures), in order to understand the mechanisms (Fryer, 2022; Wiltshire & Ronkainen, 2021), including but not limited to ableism, systems of resource allocation, and cultures of the institution, that leads to the production of dynamically similar events of exclusion in which students are subjected. This systematic model yields the formulation of the idea of citizenship without inclusion, which describes the scenario where formal citizenship rights are present to a person within a designed system that excludes them completely. The exclusion cannot, therefore, be treated as a unique tragedy but as a product of systems that are capable of being identified and changed.

### **3. Methodology**

A critical realist approach to qualitative investigation was employed to examine the lived experiences of students with disabilities in Pakistani universities. To ensure the inclusion of the differences in geographic location and university type, interviews were conducted with twenty people from three universities: two public universities, and one privately owned university in Lahore. The sample was selected using the purposive method, with the criterion defined as participants who were currently enrolled and self-identified as individuals with a disability. The sample included representatives from different impairments: visual ( $n = 6$ ), physical ( $n = 8$ ), auditory ( $n = 4$ ), and learning disabilities ( $n = 2$ ). They were all aged between 19 and 26 years and were at both undergraduate and graduate levels of study.



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Participants were interviewed using a semi-structured interview guide that took 50 to 79 minutes to complete, and the interview was conducted in the language of their preference, either Urdu or English. The interview guide inquired about citizenship, inclusion, barriers, and implemented strategies to overcome these barriers.

The thematic analysis procedure (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was employed, involving a six-phase process known as thematic analysis. This process includes several phases, each applying concepts and principles from the critical realist approach to coding, which identifies both surface-level and underlying causal mechanisms.

The study adhered to ethical aspect considering the informed consent procedures and the confidentiality measures particularly carefully. The consent of all participants was obtained in writing, and participants were guaranteed anonymity through the use of pseudonyms.

### **5. Findings and Analysis**

#### **5.1 Participant Demographics**

A sample of 20 participants (12 male, eight female) from diverse disability classifications and academic backgrounds was selected. These people attended undergraduate and graduate courses in engineering, social sciences, business administration, and literature. Participants had diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, and most were the children of middle-income families who could afford the expenses of higher education.

#### **5.2 Structural Barriers to Inclusion**

##### **5.2.1 Physical Accessibility Challenges**

In all three universities discussed in this research, physical infrastructure has become another hindrance. The students who lack mobility have explained various barriers that limit their participation on campus. Explaining the situation, Amir, a second-year engineering student who uses a wheelchair, says, *“The ramps are steep, and there are no elevators in several buildings. I require assistance from friends to climb stairs to attend classes.”* It is a feeling of burden as opposed to being a student—one whose rights are upheld.

There is also an equivalent problem of visual accessibility. Fatima, a graduate school student with visual impairment, notes that there are no discernible routes, no crossings, and no audio clues. Additionally, the library lacks accessible computers and screen readers. *“I do study literature; however, I cannot get to the bigger part of the books without being given access.”*

These barriers are not just inconvenient; they are structural in that they systematically exclude disabled students as being active members of the university, and they invalidate their formal rights to an education.

##### **5.2.2 Academic and Curricular Barriers**

A systematic review of institutional practices has indicated a slow academic accommodation. The students also cited a lack of flexibility in evaluation mechanisms, a shortage of alternative forms to deliver course content, and strong opposition from the faculty to modifications in instructional design.



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Hassan, a hearing-impaired student, provides another review of such shortcomings: *“Professors do not want to provide lecture notes or use the microphone device. They told me it is my fault, not theirs. How will I be able to study when I'm unable to listen to lectures? My right to schooling is wasted.”*

The inadequacy of assistive technology intensifies these constraints. The most able and studious resources, such as screen readers, hearing aids, and adaptive keyboards, are often unavailable to universities, and students must rely on their own resources or the assistance of their families.

### 5.2.3 Institutional Policy Gaps

Despite national guidelines, one of the three universities that are under analysis had available overall disability policies or support offices to assist people with disabilities. This structural deficit fostered an administrative piecemeal-based system of accommodation requesting, and it was based solely on institutional support, which at that time was at the mercy and out of the control of individual faculty members.

The dilemma, illustrated by the example of Sara, a student with a learning disability in a business major, was that there was no official procedure for seeking assistance. *“Every professor makes their own choice. Some are sympathetic, some tell me to work harder. I encounter a feeling where I sense as though I am pleading with my rights as opposed to demanding them.”*

## 5.3 Cultural and Attitudinal Barriers

### 5.3.1 Faculty Attitudes and Behaviors

Faculty attitudes represented a high-profile block, in which one group showed a low degree of awareness of disabilities and had low expectations towards students with disabilities. The practices of discrimination were often subtle but all-surrounding.

Ali, a blind participant, was a case in point: *“My professor addressed the whole class and explained to the rest of the class that blind people are not typically suited for engineering since they cannot see diagrams. He told it out, as though I were not present at all. It was demeaning and reflected how much he knows of adaptive technology.”*

Paternalistic faculty attitudes, with which disabled students were regarded as rocks of pity by some faculty, were also not in the best interest. This position destroyed the sense of student autonomy and propagated deficit perspectives of disability.

### 5.3.2 Peer Interactions and Social Exclusion

The peer relationship presents a group of complex issues, which involves experiences that can include pleasurable friendship groups to blatant exclusion and bullying. A significant percentage of the people interviewed felt alienated from the campus's mainstream social environment.

One of the students who is physically disabled, Zainab, provided us with the following example, concerning her actions and social interactions within a classroom: *“My classmates are very cold. They do not ask me to join study groups*





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*or on social occasions. They think I am incapable of making contributions, or I will slow them down. I do not know why I cannot have the same degree goals and am made to feel different.”*

Social exclusion also affects the level of involvement in extracurricular activities, sports, and cultural events, preventing students from having a comprehensive university experience and limiting their opportunities to network with peers who may lead them to successful careers in the future.

### **5.4 Resource and Economic Constraints**

#### **5.4.1 Financial Barriers**

The provision of disability-related accommodation is seriously taxing financially on students and their families. The cost of assistive technology, personal care assistance, and travel often far outweighs the ability to provide the same. A typical example can be seen in the story of Ahmad, whose mother sold a family asset so that he could buy a computer with screen-reading software. The institution logically offers such accommodation, but, at present, they are considered beyond the range of normal university delivery.

What aggravates this unfairness is the fact that there are fewer scholarships available to students with disabilities. Most financial-aid systems do not make provisions specifically to cover disability-related expenses. Consequently, due to the said dual marginalization, the students with disabilities have to fight both educational disadvantages as well as financial struggles.

#### **5.4.2 Support Service Limitations**

Students with disabilities did not receive any special support services and, as a result, had to deal with their problems with minimal assistance. Career, academic tutoring, and mental support were often missing or inaccessible in the educational settings studied.

### **5.5 Student Agency and Resistance Strategies**

Despite the existence of systematic barriers, the actors demonstrated a strong degree of agency and developed various vehicles of resistance to assert their educational rights.

#### **5.5.1 Individual Coping Mechanisms**

Student groups devised innovative strategies for overcoming structural disadvantages within their institutions. The important competency became self-advocacy, with a significant portion of participants learning to express their needs in forceful terms.

Maria, a deaf student, demonstrated an example of this approach's usage: *“I have learned to contact professors each semester in advance and explain my needs in clear terms. At times, I also bring a personal interpreter. I am not going to sit down and shut up when there are a lot of abuses going on against my rights. This is not their charity, but it is my right to get an education.”*

Most of them had been involved in personal adaptation strategies, such as developing informal networks of support, sharing resources, and adopting



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alternative exam behaviors. Such efforts were necessary to stay alive; at the same time, they also highlighted how institutions were failing, which forced students to make up for the incompetence within the systems.

### 5.5.2 Collective Action and Advocacy

A significant number of students from the mentioned institution engaged in the common cause of speaking up, formed disability awareness support groups, and initiated mass movements demanding change within the institution. Efforts of this nature were strategic moves aimed at reshaping deeply rooted structural processes, rather than simply making them more accommodating. Omar, the head of the disability awareness week initiative, said: *"We understood that when kept silent, nothing happens. We began to voice our concerns, hold rallies, and speak with administrators. They believe we are troublemakers, but we are only taking our destiny into our own hands at this university."*

### 5.6 Contradictions and Paradoxes

The current study reveals a significant gap between formal rights and real-life experiences. The Constitution of Pakistan states that the people have access to the right of equal educational opportunity, whereas empirical evidence alludes to institutional discrimination of specific groups of people. Based on the data analyzed through the interview, participants differentiated between formal arrangements to accessibility and life as is seen through the experiences of students with disabilities. This was a description of tension as described by Ayesha, a student with mobility disability: "on paper, I ought to be entitled to be here," she mentioned. The university claims it to be all-inclusive. But I cannot go through my day without challenges that other students do not face every day."

The latter disjunction represents an instance of what is generally characterized as citizenship without inclusion: having formal rights held yet lacking structural means to enact such rights in substance.

## 6. Discussion

The current research offers valuable insights into the experiences of disability in the Pakistani higher education sector and can inform further work on the scholarship of citizenship and inclusion. The analysis further confirms that, despite apparent legal rights, systematic exclusion persists, providing empirical input into the framework of citizenship without inclusion as an appropriate conceptual lens to understand the phenomenon.

The findings indicate that it is the accumulation of structural forces that leads to exclusion, rather than individual shortcomings or unforeseen idiosyncrasies of institutions. The physical barriers, the attitude of bias, the deficiency of resources, and policy gaps work in synergy to undermine the constitutional guarantees and weaken Pakistan's international commitments.

The findings on student agency and resistant practices reveal the agency of disabled learners who struggle to challenge their marginalization; however, advocacy should not be placed solely on the shoulders of the learner. Institutional involvement in structural changes involves making commitments to the overhauling of exclusionary policies and rooted practices.



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Problems that the Pakistani context shares with other Global South contexts include limited resources and deeply ingrained cultural attitudes; similar processes of exclusion also occur on a cross-national level. Responding to these impediments, therefore, requires action on both contextual realities and universal human rights necessities.

Policy recommendations include developing all-inclusive institutional policies on disability, conducting accessibility audits as a requirement, providing faculty training on a systemic basis, and establishing disability support offices. Still, the transition to genuinely transformative inclusion demands a shift beyond the compliance-based initiatives towards the development of an inclusive strategy that challenges and requires a change of the ableist paradigm vested in the conventional educational framework.

The study has methodological constraints, suggesting that the results cannot be generalized to the level of the observed three universities, as well as the perspectives of 20 participants. Subsequent studies should expand the sample size of participants and universities studied, incorporate management perspectives, and investigate how gender and other social factors, such as class and region, interact and influence these outcomes.

### 7. Conclusion

To conclude, the evidence reflects the ubiquity of the phenomenon of citizenship without inclusion among university students with disabilities in Pakistan, even though constitutionally guaranteed equal access and its declaration via the many policies. The gap between rights on paper and reality reveals a great paradox of inclusive citizenship and social justice. A critical realist reading of such results would identify structural possibilities for change, as systematic exclusion could be brought about by specific mechanisms that could be viable targets for change through student invasions reclaiming their rights, demonstrating this possibility. The real inclusion consequently demands a paradigm shift in higher-education practice to change the structures so that they can accommodate every citizen, not just by providing accommodation to the barriers, but by reshaping the environment as inclusion assumes a form. Inclusive higher education is both ethically and economically essential for national improvement, should Pakistan want to fulfill its promise of equal citizenship and human dignity for all.

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