

Sociological Research and Innovation (SRI)

Volume 2 Issue 2, Fall 2024


ISSN(P): 3007-3251, ISSN(E): 3007-326X

Homepage: <https://journals.umt.edu.pk/index.php/SRI>



Article QR



- Title:** **Barriers to Inclusion: Challenges Faced by Physically Impaired Students in Higher Education Institutions of Bahawalpur, Pakistan**
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- DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.32350/sri.22.03>
- History:** Received: October 24, 2024, Revised: November 10, 2024, Accepted: November 30, 2024, Published: December 26, 2024
- Citation:** Aamir, R. H., Mohsin, R. M., & Khan, S. (2024). Barriers to inclusion: Challenges faced by physically impaired students in higher education institutions of Bahawalpur, Pakistan. *Sociological Research and Innovation*, 2(2), 43-60. <https://doi.org/10.32350/sri.22.03>
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- Conflict of Interest:** Author(s) declared no conflict of interest



A publication of
Department of Sociology, School of Social Sciences and Humanities
University of Management and Technology Lahore, Pakistan

Barriers to Inclusion: Challenges Faced by Physically Impaired Students in Higher Education Institutions of Bahawalpur, Pakistan

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Abstract

This research is directed at supporting and ensuring equal access to higher education services for physically impaired individuals and mitigating the gap between the acquisition of higher education and disability. For this purpose, it examines the difficulties encountered by physically disabled students in Bahawalpur's higher education institutes (HEIs), concentrating on the institutional obstacles that restrict their social and academic integration. The cluster sampling method was utilized in this study. A total of 100 respondents from the Islamia University of Bahawalpur studying at the B.S. level were chosen. For a better understanding of the subject matter, six themes were developed including the experiences of isolation and loneliness and the experiences of discrimination and discriminatory behavior. The absence of suitable study materials, poor physical accessibility, and a lack of knowledge among stakeholders about the rights of students with impairments were identified as the main problems. Accessible restrooms and ramps are basic facilities that many universities lack, while educational materials in Braille and audiobook formats are frequently out of stock. The findings emphasize how social marginalization has an emotional and psychological effect on students, making them feel more stressed and alone. Steps to improve the situation include mandatory training for teachers and staff to raise awareness about disability rights, strengthening the physical infrastructure for accessibility, and ensuring the availability of accessible academic materials.

Keywords: disability rights, Higher Education Institutes (HEIs), physical disability, physical impairments, stakeholders, students

Introduction

A physically impaired or disabled person suffers from a long-term physical constraint or issue that prevents them from performing optimally. Due to such constraints, the stamina, agility, and mobility of the physically

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impaired are affected conspicuously and they are prevented from living their life in a manner that can be deemed regular or unimpeded. It is also possible that a physically impaired person becomes temporarily or permanently limited physically due to various reasons. These can range from genetics, certain predicaments, or trauma.

A physically impaired person's capacity to perform simple routine tasks is affected grievously. The dispensing of these simple everyday tasks might exacerbate and become more difficult to manage as the impairment progresses. These include carrying things or even attempting to dress oneself.

Physically impaired children or younger individuals can encounter heightened adversity in interacting with their tangible/corporeal environment, utilizing amenities and equipment, engaging in educational and examination-based tasks, or even dispensing with practical work or tasks. However, how physical impairment affects a person may vary from one person to another.

The current study focuses on finding the physical, social, and institutional barriers that have implications for the academic career as well as the overall health and well-being of physically impaired students. It deals with issues such as inaccessible infrastructure, lack of transportation facilities, and insufficient assistive resources in educational institutions. Social challenges including stigma, discrimination, and scarcity of peer or faculty support are also analyzed. The research focuses on institutional weaknesses, ill-designed policies, and a lack of accommodations to satisfy students with physical impairments.

Causes of Physical Impairment

There are numerous causes of physical impairment in individuals. These are elucidated as follows.

Congenital Disability/Impairment is a term that alludes to disabilities that are hereditary in nature. These disabilities manifest at birth. They are potentially incurred upon the fetus while in the womb. They can also be caused by trauma during gestation and due to problems with the cells of the muscles.

Acquired Injury is another reason that can manifest in the form of physical impairment. Such injuries are caused by egregious accidents, brain

injuries, diseases, and infections, among others. Stroke has also been associated with acquired injuries causing physical impairment.

Perinatal Causes are associated with the complications that originate during the perinatal period. The latter correlates to the period that precedes and follows childbirth. Perinatal causes are biological in essence and occur due to premature delivery, intense injury, deficiency of oxygen, or any infection that may afflict the newborn in the birth canal (Leaf Complex Care, [n.d.](#))

According to the International Classification of Functional Disability (ICF), physical disability is a condition that evinces an extraordinary limitation or defect. It is an incapability of some organs or bodily processes that impedes a person from performing regular physical tasks, thereby affecting their proper functioning in numerous facets of life (Chang et al., [2021](#)). A person with any form of disability at one time or another in their life faces marginalization, obstructions in interacting socially, and constraints on optimal performance in several or all ventures of daily life. This articulates that disabled/impaired persons suffer from a lack of emancipation or independence (Reynell, [1970](#)). Physical disability or impairment hampers the opportunity level of the concerned individual and leads to consternation and stress among such individuals. It also brings about a degree of bias between the impaired and the fully-abled.

Problems Faced by the Physically Impaired at Higher Education Institutes (HEIs)

Although some countries are more facilitating and expedient regarding the plight of physically impaired students, there are still some ubiquitous issues in this regard. This implies that there are many problems of a similar magnitude and form which physically challenged individuals experience all across the globe. These barriers and their intensity may vary across different countries but their presence is always felt and experienced. They need to be eliminated, mitigated, or reduced to a tolerable extent for the betterment of the physically impaired.

The problems that most physically impaired people experience are elucidated as follows:

Problems in Physical Accessibility

This is one of the foremost problems faced by the physically impaired people. It is most prevalent in educational institutions, such as colleges, schools, and universities. The buildings under the auspices of these educational institutes are bereft of specialized infrastructure and facilities to allow physically challenged individuals to properly access them. For instance, most of the buildings lack lifts or elevators for accessing their multiple stories, there aren't color-coded tiles for guiding blind students, there are no wheelchair ramps, the washrooms lack specialized commodes, there are heavy doors that can't be opened by physically handicapped people, some hallways are too narrow and dimly lit, and so on.

The situation is especially bleak in some countries where the requirements for physically impaired students are fulfilled only on paper, despite being required to be fulfilled by law. These accessibility requirements are crucial but most HEIs skimp on them.

Several developed countries boast an inclusive system of education and accessibility. However, the same doesn't hold for various underdeveloped countries across the world. They suffer due to the absence of physical accessibility options. In some cases, even if they are facilitated in certain aspects, the physically impaired find themselves inconvenienced in others, including accessible transportation and so forth. The onus usually falls upon the parents regarding transporting their children from home to school and to home again.

Lack of Awareness

One of the most dominant causes that spawn barriers and impediments for students suffering from physical disabilities is a severe lack of awareness. What is fascinating is that this lack of awareness impacts and influences the physically challenged students in numerous ways and from different channels. Most of the time, parents are nebulous concerning the different laws that accord equal rights to education to children with disabilities. The parents don't have any awareness about special schools and institutes that can accommodate their children and cater to their special needs, effectively. However, the difficulties aren't assuaged even under circumstances where the parents are erudite and aware.

The administration at the various HEIs is also not aware of their responsibilities and the rights held by physically disabled students. This lack

of awareness produces obstacles for physically challenged students in developing countries. Numerous countries have ratified and pledged to uphold the international laws and standards about physically handicapped individuals but don't initiate concrete steps to ensure their practical implementation. Lack of awareness is the main culprit in this regard.

Lack of Individualization

This is the most neglected and trivialized aspect or barrier regarding physically handicapped students and their advancement. A blanket or holistic approach is employed in most countries regarding physically impaired individuals. This holistic approach is based on preconceived notions concerning disabled people. The pros and strengths of disabled individuals as respective and separate entities aren't appreciated. A disabled student might be strong and capable in one field but the institutions won't be able to recognize them or employ them properly and effectively. In doing so, the institution would deny the student the opportunity to develop and enhance their inherent skill or talent (Bhuvanewari et al., [2016](#)).

The special needs of students with disabilities are perceived as apprehensive by the administration and faculty alike. They don't execute sincere or unequivocal endeavors to afford them the chance to enhance their abilities. The faculty is also not trained in the means and methodologies necessary to address the individual demands and needs of physically disabled students. They mostly focus on the brilliant and "normal" students, while neglecting special students.

Difficult Process for Accommodation

The requirements for the accommodation of physically disabled students are usually not fulfilled. The whole process in various regions is predicated on the intimate morals and codes of the institutes' administration. For instance, the needs of a diminutive student differ greatly from those of a wheelchair-bound student. A ramp wouldn't suffice for a dwarf or diminutive student. Such a student might also require specialized sitting arrangements as a means of accommodation. The process for accommodating these special students is rarely met expeditiously.

This sparse interest and lack of expediting culminates in students being left to their own devices. The whole process is intricate and convoluted even in those countries where there are laws that accord options to disabled students. The litigation and legal proceedings attached to such processes are

so tiresome and monotonous that it becomes almost impossible for students to achieve the desired outcome. They have to either acclimate or terminate their academic pursuits within the concerned institute.

Adverse Attitude and Stereotyping

Almost all countries exhibit some stereotyping and adverse implications about disability. Educational institutions are also a part of the society and are also influenced by these adverse stances towards disabled students. Many instances show school staff and fellow students acting as bullies against physically disabled students. Some faculty members dissuade and discourage physically disabled students from pursuing their studies or academic aspirations to some extent. This is counterbalanced by the evidence that in most cases, teachers have been the strongest advocates for physically disabled students. It depends on the nature of the concerned teacher. However, the behavior of the people towards physically disabled students is usually negative and this is exuded and represented within HEIs. There are some countries where the social stigma is so potent that it dissuades physically disabled persons from pursuing formal education in HEIs. In some egregious cases, the parents of non-disabled persons repudiate the admission of disabled students along with their children.

Unavailability or Shortage of Proper Study Materials

This impediment is encountered mostly by those students who have a lower vision capacity or are blind. Study materials in formats that are understandable and accessible for them, such as Braille and audiobooks, are either unavailable or come at loftier and extravagant costs that can't be afforded. Most of the institutions around the world don't impart any additional effort to collate study materials for visually impaired students (Bhuvanewari et al., [2016](#)). The latter depend on comprehending these lectures through listening, memorizing, or learning from a helpful classmate. This heavily infers that despite this advanced and technologically superior era, not much has changed for blind students when it comes to their education (Lalit, [2021](#)).

Research Questions

Some perceptions need to be corroborated regarding the impediments faced by physically disabled students in HEIs on an administrative, teaching-based, an extracurricular basis. Do these issues make them vulnerable? Does the prevalence and constant exposure to the probable

marginalization they face entail stress and anxiety? And do these issues exacerbate the odds of these students becoming disconcerted with higher education?

The main research question is whether physically disabled students find any incongruity or adversity in their quest to acquire higher education. It entails understanding the administrative, teaching-based, and extracurricular barriers that may arise as a result of their disability. Whether social marginalization occurs and how such marginalization is perceived against their academic and social lives at HEIs? Questions were asked to find out if these students feel supported by their institutions, how effective such support is, and whether they are emotionally distressed, for example, stressed or anxious, as a result of the difficulties they face. The research questions examined the interaction and treatment of faculty, staff, peers, and fellow students of a physically impaired student to determine if the overall interactions tend to promote or reduce barriers. The first set of questions was related to the prevalence and perception of social marginalization among physically impaired students and how they perceived their social experiences in these institutions.

Rationale of the Study

Bahawalpur is one of the largest cities in the Punjab province of Pakistan in terms of population and also one of the most important. It is a center of education and commerce and is profoundly acknowledged as one of the historical cities within the country. Many universities have been established throughout the city to provide higher education to the people. A fraction of the student population in these institutions is made up of persons with physical disabilities. These students bear the risk of social exclusion from numerous aspects. Therefore, it was considered important to examine the causes that led to exclusion. The difficulties experienced by such students should be treated, and where possible, solved with efficiency and optimality. This necessity arises from the fact that the right to higher education must be available to citizens of every age, color, caste, creed, gender, or disability. All people are equally deserving of this right. The findings are unique in the sense that this research highlights an array of problems faced by physically disabled students in the HEIs of Bahawalpur. The results are also expected to hold implications for other urban settings and populace across Pakistan.



Significance of the Study

The current study addresses a research gap that is specific to the context of Bahawalpur and provides insightful information on localized challenges faced by physically impaired students in HEIs across the city. It explores different types of barriers, such as physical, structural, social, and attitudinal, which add to the depth of understanding within the Pakistani educational context. The study advocates for greater educational equity by pointing out the need for inclusive practices that ensure equal opportunities for physically impaired individuals. It aims to raise awareness among students, faculty, and administrators about the importance of creating a supportive environment that recognizes and values the contributions of students with disabilities, thereby promoting empathy and fostering an inclusive culture in higher education.

Ethical Integrity

The investigators made considerable efforts to guarantee that the current research adhered to ethical standards. They highlighted the importance of respecting the dignity of the participants and endeavored to engage with them in a manner that demonstrated reverence and patience. The participants were properly briefed on the principles of non-maleficence and confidentiality relevant to the research in which they were involved. Consent was systematically obtained from all participants before the commencement of data collection. The study also resonated on a humanistic and empathetic level, as the findings are intended to serve the interests of the participants and their broader community.

Objectives

- To evaluate the challenges of social marginalization encountered by physically disabled students at the HEIs of Bahawalpur, Pakistan.
- To determine whether these students face obstacles in accessing the facilities available at these HEIs.
- To clarify whether the participants experienced feelings of stress or anxiety as a result of any marginalization they may have endured.

Theoretical Framework

Numerous theories substantiate the phenomenon of social marginalization as a societal concern. This research is grounded in the following theoretical perspectives.

Social Marginalization

Social Exclusion Theory. This theoretical framework elucidates the systematic exclusion of individuals or groups from accessing various rights, opportunities, and resources generally available to other societal members. Notable scholars including Amartya Sen and Hilary Silver endorse the Social Exclusion Theory (Kiliç, [2023](#); Šušterič, [2024](#)). This theory is particularly applicable to the current study as it validates the occurrence of social marginalization affecting physically disabled students. It was established that the respondents are at a heightened risk of social marginalization and exclusion, thus rendering this theory relevant.

Stigma Theory. The Stigma Theory was developed by Erving Goffman. It is based on the concept of stigma. This theory is important to show how physical disability could lead to stigma and ultimately result in rejection and exclusion by society (Goffman, [2009](#)). The same applies to physical handicaps in our society with stigma being part and parcel of it. There are many prejudices connected to physical impairment in our society. The indifference people with physical impairments receive and the tendency to be ridiculed stem from the social stigma associated with such disabilities. Thus, this theory brings out the issue of leadership in the current study in a direct way.

Disability Studies

Social Model of Disability. The Social Modelling of Disability is the differentiation of disability from social deprivation and physical loss. This is based on the principle that disability is a construct of society and does not stem from the physical limitations of the individual. This perspective is supported also by other scholars (Sajjad, [2023](#)). This model proved to be quite helpful for the analysis of the situation of physically disabled students in this research and provided an understanding of what could be behind the exclusion of such students due to their physical disabilities.

Educational Disparities

Cultural Capital Theory. Pierre Bourdieu's Cultural Capital Theory helps to get a better understanding of how students with different



socioeconomic statuses, including those with disabilities if any, are differently positioned regarding educational resources (Bourdieu, [2011](#)). Interestingly, the research in question identified reasons informing that the participants have limited access to education, hence making this theory relevant.

Intersectionality. This paper shows its usefulness in how different kinds of discrimination or oppression based on gender, race, disability, or any other grounds determines physically disabled students' experiences, as outlined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (Crenshaw, [2021](#)). As a fixed property, disability does make people susceptible to social exclusion, a fact corroborated by Crenshaw's theory, hence qualifies this factor under discussion as a useful addition to the theoretical arguments at hand.

Methodology

It is important to understand the goals and types of data used for this study. Qualitative research method that employed open-ended interviews was used to collect raw primary data from physically disabled students studying in HEIs in Bahawalpur, Pakistan. Out of 700 disabled persons studying in different HEIs, such as the Islamia University of Bahawalpur, the Government Sadiq College Women University Bahawalpur, and Cholistan University of Veterinary and Animal Sciences - CUVAS Bahawalpur, 30 were selected purposively. Simple random sampling technique was used to collect data because the characteristics of the population were unambiguous and uniform. Thus, it did not require any further differentiation. It was important for the current research to be based on the information gleaned from the participants and to evaluate the issues and problems faced by social exclusion and marginalization within those higher education environments. These responses were documented comprehensively in a manner inclusive of a rigorous thematic analysis. They were recorded at first and then each interview was typed on different sets of notes. Then, each note was again gone through carefully to find out the important segments of the text. These segments were then coded and compared with other responses to develop the over-arching and congruent themes.

Analysis and Results

All of the participants' responses were recorded and categorized for easy analysis. The common themes and findings emerging from this analytical process are presented below.

Theme 1. Experiences of Isolation and Loneliness

In the case of physically disabled students, the responses revealed only one over-arching theme related to the experience of deep despair and loneliness. On this issue, all participants were asked several questions and complained of feeling uncomfortable or unwanted at their respective HEIs. They said that they often experienced social exclusion and perceived themselves to be different from everyone else. They were socially isolated and often neglected by their able-bodied peers. Their common instance was that they did not fit into the mainstream or normal student community, and this resulted in enhanced feelings of isolation. The results also aligned with the primary research question emphasizing the marginalization of these students.

This feelings of loneliness and isolation were further reinforced by the absence of an appropriate and efficient social support system. While physically impaired students emphasized that they felt socially isolated and had few occasions to interact or mingle with other students, such attempts were often discouraged. Feelings such as these were more or less present and noted across all the participants.

Theme 2. Experiences of Discrimination and Prejudiced Behavior

This theme concerns the interaction of disabled students with prejudices and discrimination from their fellow students, professors, and other people in HEIs. A significant number of the respondents with physical disabilities reported that they had experienced discrimination and were dismissed outright because of their physical disorders and disabilities. Some of the respondents indicated that many students in universities were insensitive when it came to people with disability and were equally frank in expressing this. All the patients and caregivers identified at least one instance of abusive language, insulting language, or degrading treatment at their respective HEIs. Prejudice or stereotyping of disabled people was an observable practice in these HEIs. It was also pointed out, however, that there was no replication of such behavior from the faculty or administrative personnel. These were most courteous and sensitive to disabled students, never used abusive language, or voiced out negative impressions about disabled students.



Theme 3. Access to Resources

The participants offered more textual coverage of this theme. Quite a number of participants expressed a dearth of appropriate and sufficient teaching/learning resources with which to teach in the class or to refer students to the library or other similar facilities. Visually impaired students reported that they did not find it possible to access the required books in Braille from the libraries of their respective institutions. As per their view, it hampered their general access to a lot of information and knowledge to a large extent. The majority of students also reported that there was always a lack of sufficient writing or reading material in the class from what the students required.

Theme 4. Access to University Facilities

This formed another important dimension of the experience of social integration in universities. There were physical barriers that made facilities in these HEIs unattainable for physically challenged students, hence causing the feeling of isolation. Such facilities included physical allowances of structures, such as buildings, cafeterias, and auditoriums, among others. The physically impaired students are a prominent part of the concerned demographic, hence they should be allowed easy and full access to the facilities. However, while a cross-section of the respondents said that there were adequate provisions for their welfare, others had negative things to say regarding the same. Some institutions had no or unsuitable ramps and transport (wheelchairs) for physically disabled students. A few students from the boys' hostel of Islamia University of Bahawalpur enumerated a variety of supportive structures as follows: wheelchairs, ramps at crucial areas, and special transport. Other institutions, on the other hand, have not ventured into such conclusive and positive steps guaranteeing that their physically disabled students receive swift and efficient student assistance.

Theme 5. Stress and Anxiety

This theme relates to the degree, to which students with physical impairments reported feeling anxious and stressed at school. Notably, the results were rather pessimistic and alarming since a considerable number of respondents mentioned that they often felt such emotions. They claimed that the growing level of prejudices that promoted shunning and rejection experienced by them caused to develop anxiety and stress as a natural consequence of the exclusionary process. This finding is in line with other

studies which posited that the experience of social exclusion is the main cause of increased anxiety and stress among the affected people. These emotions were more extreme when disabled students did not have access to social groups. They did also experience stigmas in appealing for help from other people and might as well lack proper nutritious food.

Theme 6. Threat of Social Exclusion

Qualitative data were obtained from the respondents through the interview process; they were also allowed to give their opinions at the end of the interview. They were asked if the above practices led to their social elimination and irreversible marginalization. The majority said yes and seemed to be very much convinced that they had been sidelined out of all the activities within their social networks. They expressed some sort of powerlessness and a perceived lack of voice. Although a few of the respondents made more positive assessments, the overall assessment depicted a very gloomy picture.

Discussion

This investigation demonstrated that notwithstanding the claimed measures undertaken by the HEIs to promote inclusivity, enduring difficulties persist regarding the explicit execution of such initiatives. Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that there are still many barriers to providing physically disabled students with proper support and learning opportunities. Students included in this group experience physical barriers that hinder them from effectively participating in the academic arena. This is because physical accessibility concerns complicate social integration and creates isolation, leading to a heightened sense of loneliness. This phenomenon has been corroborated by numerous studies indicating that students with physical disabilities exhibit lower levels of engagement and face particular challenges in comparison to their non-disabled peers, thereby adversely affecting their academic and social outcomes (Green et al., [2023](#); Rath, [2024](#)).

The existing social dimensions in the student context of HEIs do not sufficiently meet the needs of students with physical disabilities. These students need to be integrated and be active members of various groups, organizations, clubs, and societies in order to increase their social and cultural capital. However, quite often, these physically disabled students find such involvement as unfriendly and complain that they are being



excluded. This isolation may significantly raise the chances of their disengagement or dropping out of school (Iqbal, [2023](#); Spalding, [2023](#)).

The current study also revealed that such students faced a myriad of barriers in using the university resources and or facilities in Bahawalpur, Pakistan. Many mentioned their problems with orientation in campus buildings, with transport, and so on. This goes a long way into explaining why the needs of discrete students are always given a raw deal. Their needs and difficulties are often disregarded or downplayed in the formulation of adequate policies and respective strategies in HEIs and this is a major concern. The exacerbation of these issues could eventually render these students irrevocably disheartened, causing them to lose confidence in the offerings of universities, potentially leading to significant academic disengagement (Algolaylat et al., [2023](#); Amoah et al., [2023](#)). Students at the selected institutions also reported experiencing considerable stress and anxiety resulting from the treatment they received within the social environment of their respective universities. This situation is one of the primary factors preventing disabled students from adequately integrating within the higher education landscape of the nation. This can be viewed as a substantial barrier to achieving comprehensive inclusivity across the selected universities (Hitches et al., [2023](#); Shaw, [2024](#)).

Conclusion

To conclude, although much progress has been achieved to improve the conditions of physically disabled students in HEIs, continued problems and barriers remain a hindrance to successfully achieving the intended goals. Much has to be done to facilitate these students in order to make them feel that they belong to the institutions in question through meaningful facilitation and handling of emerging problems. The goal is to engage physically disabled students in optimal social and academic activities which enable them to achieve the overall purpose of social inclusion, not only in education but also in the learning process, specifically in HEIs.

Suggestions

There is an imperative and acute need to improve the situation of physically disabled students in HEIs. This requires certain actions to be implemented on the following lines. HEIs should review their policies on physically impaired students and cover all the gaps or limitations that prevent their integration into the higher education landscape, including all

the academic and co-curricular activities. These institutions should offer ample support for such people including their efficient training and counseling, among other services. Efforts have to be made to develop and sustain positive, affirming, and welcoming climates for these students. Measures and corrective measures should be taken against any of the learners who try to demean or compromise the dignity and worth of other learners.

Besides, the growing understanding of social exclusion should be encouraged as well. This would make it easier to respond to situations that lead to social marginalization, thereby making the university environment more supportive for all students. Furthermore, social workers can take a powerful and privileged position in eradicating the aforementioned social marginalization through earnest counseling, advocacy, and compensation services. Thus, it is necessary to include such specialists to respond to the problems and the multifaceted processes that students with physical disabilities have to face in universities.

Conflict of Interest

The authors of the manuscript have no financial or non-financial conflict of interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

The data associated with this study will be provided by the corresponding author upon request.

Funding Details

No funding has been received for this research.

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