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Expectations and Realities: Exploring Visually Impaired Students' Academic and Social Experiences in Universities

Muhammad Muzammil Mustafa (corresponding author)
Student Department of Sociology, PMAS Arid Agriculture University, Rawalpindi
muzammilmustafa7662@gmail.com
Faiza Parveen
Visiting Lecturer, Department of Sociology, PMAS Arid Agriculture University, Rawalpindi.
faizamumraiz26@gmail.com
Shoaib Ahmed
Student Department of Sociology, PMAS Arid Agriculture University, Rawalpindi
shoaibsahi786@icloud.com

ABSTRACT
In this qualitative research, the expectations of the visually impaired students coming into universities in Federal and Punjab, Pakistan, and the level of satisfaction of these expectations, have been examined. Based on the Social Model of Disability, this research utilized 10 visually impaired students who were pursuing general education to analyze the limitations related to the infrastructure, pedagogy, exams, and integration of persons with visual impairment. The results show that though the expectations related to social integration had been partially fulfilled, deficiencies exist in the structure of exams, teaching practices concentrating on visuals, and infrastructure.

Keywords: *Visually impaired student, University experiences, Higher education accessibility. Student expectation vs realities. Educational experiences of disabled student*

Introduction

Higher education is an important critical point for visually impaired students, as it holds the prospect of development and social integration for the learners (Hewett et al., 2017). When visually impaired learners join higher education institutions, they have had an accumulation of certain expectations based on the commitments of the institutions and social dialogue on integration (Money et al., 2017). Such expectations include matters of accessibility, equipment and teaching methods as well as equity in examination procedures (Parveen et al., 2024).

In Pakistan, although there are frameworks like "2021 Framework for the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities," a "gap between expectations and reality" still exists (Hussain et al., 2022). Visually impaired students are struggling with diverse issues, from infrastructure to faculty members (Shaheen et al., 2017). As a result of unmet expectations, frustration and disengagement are experienced by those who attend (Money et al., 2017). The problem being addressed by this research is important as it "investigate[s] 'expectation-reality gap' for universities in Pakistan" (Alghurabi, 2024).

Literature Review

Barriers in Higher Education: Globally, visually impaired individuals demonstrate better employment outcomes with higher education, yet attainment rates remain lower than the general population (Good eyes, 2025). In Pakistan, students face acute challenges including the non-availability of writers for examinations, absence of software-like JAWS, and social stigma

(Shaheen et al., 2017). Research indicates that accessibility hurdles such as inaccessible buildings and unavailable assistive devices remain prevalent (Hussain et al., 2022).

Pedagogical and Examination Barriers: Faculty members often lack training in inclusive pedagogical strategies (Hussain et al., 2022). Materials are frequently shared as scanned PDFs, which screen readers cannot interpret (Tribune, 2025). Furthermore, examination systems rely heavily on writer (scribe) systems, which are often inconsistent and fail to provide equitable assessment conditions (Parveen et al., 2024).

Theoretical Framework: This study is grounded in the **Social Model of Disability**, which reframes disability from an individual medical problem to a socially constructed barrier (PWD Australia, 2025). It emphasizes that people are disabled by inaccessible environments and exclusionary practices rather than by their impairments (AFDO, 2019).

Research Gap:

While existing literature has documented barriers faced by visually impaired students in higher education, significant gaps remain. First, most research has focused on identifying barriers rather than examining the gap between students' expectations and their actual experiences. Second, limited research has been conducted in the Pakistani context, particularly in the twin cities of Rawalpindi and Islamabad. Third, few studies have employed comprehensive thematic analysis to understand the nuanced dimensions of expectation fulfillment across multiple domains (university environment, peer interactions, faculty support, teaching methods, examination systems, and inclusive learning). Fourth, research has not adequately explored how visually impaired students beyond the first semester those with sustained exposure to university systems—perceive the fulfillment of their initial expectations.

Fulfilling the Research Gap

This study addresses these gaps by conducting an in-depth qualitative investigation of visually impaired students' expectations and their fulfillment across six key domains: university environment, peer groups and fellow students, professors and faculty support, teaching methods and pedagogical approaches, examination and evaluation systems, and social and inclusive learning opportunities. By focusing on students beyond the first semester who are enrolled in regular (mainstream) education programs in Rawalpindi and Islamabad, this research captures sustained experiences rather than initial impressions. The employment of thematic analysis with detailed coding procedures provides rich, nuanced insights into both the nature of expectations and the specific barriers preventing their fulfillment. Finally, by grounding the analysis in the Social Model of Disability, this study shifts focus from individual deficits to institutional responsibilities, providing actionable recommendations for systemic change.

Theoretical framework

The paper is rooted in the Social Model of Disability. An important aspect considered in the model is the fact that disability is not inherent to the individual but is created by the society through various barriers and biased attitudes (PWD Australia, 2025). The Social Model focuses on the fact that the 'problem' is shifted from the individual to the society. People with impairments find themselves disenabled by the society and its biased attitude, and not their own impairments (AFDO, 2019).[26][25]

When applied to visually impaired students studying in higher education institutions, an analysis of how higher education institutions and their rehabilitation strategies may act as barrier to visually impaired students can be carried out using a critical lens offered by the Social Model of disability. This is pertinent since this model throws light on a positive programmed that such students can adopt rather than

highlighting their shortcomings (Scope, 2007).[23] There are several types of barriers that are of particular interest to this study as identified by the Social Model, including: Physical barriers: Inaccessible buildings, absence of tactile navigation systems, absence of Braille signs, and campus infrastructure that hinders mobility and independence (Hussain et al., 2022).[6]
Attitudinal barriers: Negative stereotypes, low expectations, stigmatization, and discriminatory attitudes of faculty members, peers, and institutional administrators (Sniatecki et al., 2015).[12]
Communication barriers: Inaccessible learning materials, visual-based approaches, lack of accessible digital content, and a lack of provision of materials in alternative formats (Ahmed et al., 2020).[10]

Institutional Barriers

Poor policy, inadequate facilities, lack of assistive technology, inadequate support services, and failure to implement Universal Design (Tribune, 2025).[5] The Social Model plays a role in this study as it conceptualizes gaps in expectations and realities as a failure in the provision of accessible learning spaces by institutions, as opposed to personal failure and unreasonable expectations by students. The expectations that visually impaired students have, such as accessible campus infrastructure, accessible learning processes, fair examination conditions, and adequate interactions with their peers, are in no way unreasonable, as they are based on the fundamentals of equity and inclusiveness. Failure to meet these expectations calls for removal of barriers by society, as indicated by the Social Model.
This theoretical perspective influences the methodology of this research work, data gathering, and analysis. Through the focus on the way, this research work provides insight into making changes at the institutional level for truly inclusive higher education.

Methodology

Research Design: The study adopts a qualitative research design using in-depth interviews with thematic analysis supported by the approach of Merriam and Tisdell (2015). This kind of qualitative data collection suits the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm-that is, it supports the view that reality is socially constructed (Braun & Clarke, 2021).
Sample: This study used purposive sampling wherein a total of 10 visually impaired students enrolled in regular education programs at public and semi-government universities in Federal and Punjab regions were selected, namely Rawalpindi, Islamabad, Lahore, and Multan. Participants had to be enrolled beyond the first semester to ensure adequate exposure to university systems.
Data analyses were conducted using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis approach, facilitated by NVivo 12 Pro software (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Dhakal, 2022).

Results and Analysis

Analysis of the 10 interviews revealed varying degrees of expectation fulfillment and significant structural barriers.
The Expectation-Reality Spectrum: Participants' expectations ranged from anxiety to optimism.

- *Anxiety:* Students like **Mirza Saran** and **Eraj** entered with fear regarding mobility and study management. Saran noted, "Expectations were quite negative… I was thinking how I would study."
- *Fulfillment:* **Talha** reported that 70% of his expectations were met, largely due to supportive peers and permission to use digital exams.

- *Disillusionment:* **Muzammil** reported only 20% fulfillment, citing a lack of teacher dedication. **Nehal** described the experience as a "roller coaster," while **Mahad** felt only 30-40% of expectations were met due to facility gaps.

The Examination Crisis (Writer vs. Technology): The reliance on scribes (writers) emerged as a primary barrier, contradicting expectations of fairness.

- **Areeba** criticized policies requiring writers to be "juniors," stating it is "injustice" to compete at a university level with a less qualified scribe.
- **Hamza** shared a critical incident where his writer left mid-exam, resulting in a loss of marks.
- **Success with Technology:** Conversely, **Eraj** and **Talha**, who successfully advocated for computer-based exams, described a sense of independence and fairness, aligning with the Social Model's advocacy for removing barriers.

Visual-Centric Pedagogy: Classroom realities often failed to be inclusive.

- **The "Silent" Board:** Participants like **Areeba** and **Muzammil** noted that teachers write on boards without verbalizing content, making lectures inaccessible.
- **Material Access: Marukh** and **Mahad** highlighted that slide-based lectures are difficult to follow when materials are not shared beforehand in accessible formats.

Infrastructure and Mobility: Areeba described her university as a "maze" with poor accessibility ("zero out of zero"). **Maria** and **Muzammil** pointed out hazards like open manholes, lack of ramps, and dangerous vehicular traffic within campus, forcing reliance on sighted assistance.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study confirms that while social inclusion is often supported by peers, institutional barriers in examinations and pedagogy create a significant gap between expectations and reality. To align with the **Social Model of Disability** (Scope, 2007), universities must move from reactive accommodations to systemic inclusion.

Recommendations:

1. **Digital Examination Reform:** Abolish the "junior writer" policy and standardize computer-based exams using screen readers (NVDA/JAWS) to ensure autonomy.
2. **Inclusive Pedagogy:** Mandate faculty training to ensure all board work is verbalized and accessible reading materials (Word/accessible PDF) are provided prior to lectures along with necessary tools like maps and globes must be provided to IR students to promote accessibility.
3. **Infrastructure:** Install tactile paving and Braille signage to facilitate independent navigation.
4. **Equity-Based Policy:** Implement assessment policies that prioritize equity (e.g., alternative assessment modes like viva or audio recording) over rigid equality.

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