



## CHALLENGES FACED BY STUDENTS WITH PHYSICAL DISABILITIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS OF KHYBER PAKHTUNKHWA

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### **Abstract**

*Students with physical disabilities encounter numerous challenges during their academic endeavors, especially in higher education institutions (HEIs), which hinder their academic and social integration. This study aimed to identify the extrinsic and intrinsic challenges faced by these students with physical disabilities in HEIs across Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Pakistan. The population of the study was M.Phil and Ph.D graduates and Ph.D enrolled in public sector universities. The snowball sampling technique was used to draw samples for the study, due to the limited population of students with physical disabilities in KP's HEIs. The sample size consists of 34 students with physical disabilities. The study employed quantitative design, utilizing a self-developed three-point Likert-scale questionnaire as the research tool for data collection. The questionnaire encompassed various dimensions, including physical accessibility, institutional support, academic accommodations, social inclusion, and psychological challenges. The survey method was used to collect data from students with physical disabilities. The main findings of the research were that students with disabilities face infrastructural, social, financial, psychological and health related challenges due to their disabilities in higher education. Policymakers must enforce accessibility standards, provide assistive technologies, train staff, offer financial and implementation of HEC policy and Pakistan disability act 2020 in true spirit. This study recommended that universities and policymakers understand and reduce these barriers.*

**Key Words:** *Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, students with physical disabilities, higher education institutions, challenges.*

### **Introduction**

Students with physical disabilities face systemic challenges in higher education institutions (HEIs), and there are systemic hurdles that make it hard for students with physical disabilities to learn and make friends. These challenges can be broken down into the following areas: physical accessibility, institutional support, social participation, and psychological well-being. Despite attempts to pass laws like Pakistan's Disabled Persons Act (2020), the law is still not always followed, especially in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). This literature review situates the challenges that students with disabilities face in KP's higher education institutions within their proper historical and geographical context. There are a total of 27 public sector universities in KP, and data were collected from nine of these universities. The following section will address the problems pertaining to physical accessibility, institutional assistance, social involvement, and psychological well-being. Following the discussion, a comparison of these scenarios on both international and national levels will be conducted.



15% of people worldwide live with a disability, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2021), but many universities do not have basic accessibility elements. Ramps, elevators, and accessible restrooms are commonplace in advanced countries (such as the United States and the United Kingdom), but poor ones fall behind (UNESCO, 2020). Only five per cent of Pakistani universities are completely wheelchair accessible (HEC, 2021). Khan et al. (2022) surveyed ten public institutions in KP, finding that 78% of them lacked ramps in important buildings (labs and libraries), and 65% of multi-storey structures lacked elevators. For students with visual impairments, 90% lacked tactile pathways. KP's HEIs infrequently conduct accessibility audits, which is contrary to Pakistan's National Policy for Persons with Disabilities (Mustafa, 2012).

Just 34% of the 50 universities in 20 countries examined by Iezzoni et al. (2021) had offices dedicated explicitly to disability support. In contrast, note-takers, extended exam times, and assistive technology services are sometimes lacking in developing countries compared to developed countries (Blasey, 2020). Only 12% of Pakistani HEIs have disability resource centres, according to the HEC's 2021 report. According to research by Usman et al. (2020), KP faculty lacked training in inclusive teaching practices, resulting in inadequate academic accommodations.

Another problem is negligence; according to Shabbir et al. (2023), students with disabilities reported receiving delayed feedback because they were unaware of their disabilities, according to Malisiova et al. (2025) 40% of students with disabilities experience bullying and social exclusion (55%), and 62% of peers are reluctant to work together in groups. Students with disabilities were made fun of or excluded. The issue is made worse by cultural shame; many families discourage students with disabilities from going to college out of fear of stigma (Green, 2003).

The impact of psychological struggles on mental health in a meta-analysis of 30 papers, Lindsay et al. (2018) discovered that students with disabilities have three times the rate of depression, continuous stress brought on by societal exclusion and accessibility issues. According to a study conducted, dropout rates were correlated with campus inaccessibility; 45% of students expressed concern as a result of mobility issues (Ayub, 2022). Another issue is sexual harassment; 20% of female disabled students reported experiencing abuse but were afraid to disclose it (Parveen, 2020; Badmus, 2021). Pakistan's policy implementation gaps even though Pakistan's 2020 Disabled Persons Act requires: accessible infrastructure, education quotas for people with disabilities, Assistance funding for assistive technology lack of funds is the leading cause of poor compliance no means of enforcement administrators' lack of awareness (Razzaq, 2022) (HEC, 2021) (Khanum et al., 2025).

Research indicates that students with physical disabilities at KP's higher education institutions have a range of challenges, encompassing social, psychological, institutional, and physical factors. The difference between Pakistan's policies and practices increases discrimination, despite international research providing solutions like universal design and disability offices. To provide equitable education, immediate modifications are necessary, encompassing faculty training, accessibility assessments, and anti-stigma initiatives. We have assessed the problems and existing state of Pakistani higher education institutions and compared them with the conditions of international universities. Environmental modifications can lessen the severity of these difficulties. This does not imply, however, that learning about these difficulties only once is adequate.

Additionally, while demands change with time, it does not mean that a reevaluation is not necessary. Students' learning habits have changed in the modern era. The regulations of the Higher Education Commission (HEC) policy currently offer various amenities, including wheelchairs; However, the nature of the challenges has also evolved. Now, the question is: What kinds of difficulties, and to what degree, do students with physical disabilities currently face? Consequently, these studies should be conducted periodically, as they facilitate the evaluation of needs, enhancement of policy provisions, and assurance of effective implementation. This method is eventually advantageous for our educational system. Although these issues have been thoroughly examined, there has been minimal attention directed towards M.Phil. and Ph.D. levels in higher education. This study fills that gap. In Pakistan, especially in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, there is a lack of study regarding the challenges encountered by university students with physical disabilities. Consequently, this work addresses that research gap.

### **Objective of the Study**

The objectives of the study were:

1. To identify the extrinsic challenges faced by students with physical disabilities at the higher education level in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.
2. To identify the intrinsic challenges faced by students with physical disabilities at the higher education level in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the accessibility and infrastructural challenges faced by students with physical disabilities at the higher education level?
2. What are the accessible transportation challenges faced by students with physical disabilities at the higher education level?
3. What sports services are available for the students with physical disabilities at the higher education level?
4. What are the accommodation challenges faced by students with physical disabilities at the higher education level?
5. What are the social challenges faced by students with physical disabilities at the higher education level?
6. What are the financial challenges faced by students with physical disabilities at the higher education level?
7. What are the research supervisory supports challenges faced by students with physical disabilities at the higher education level?
8. What are the health challenges faced by the students with physical disabilities at the higher education level?
9. What are the medical challenges faced by students with physical disabilities at the higher education level?
10. What are the psychological challenges faced by students with physical disabilities at the higher education level?
11. What are the harassment challenges faced by students with physical disabilities at the higher education level?

## METHODOLOGY

### RESEARCH DESIGN

This study employed a descriptive design with a quantitative methodology, utilising a survey instrument for data collection.

### POPULATION AND SAMPLING

The study population consisted of all physically disabled M.Phil. and Ph.D. students enrolled in or having recently graduated (within the five years) from public universities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The snowball sampling technique was employed, with 34 students used as the sample for the study.

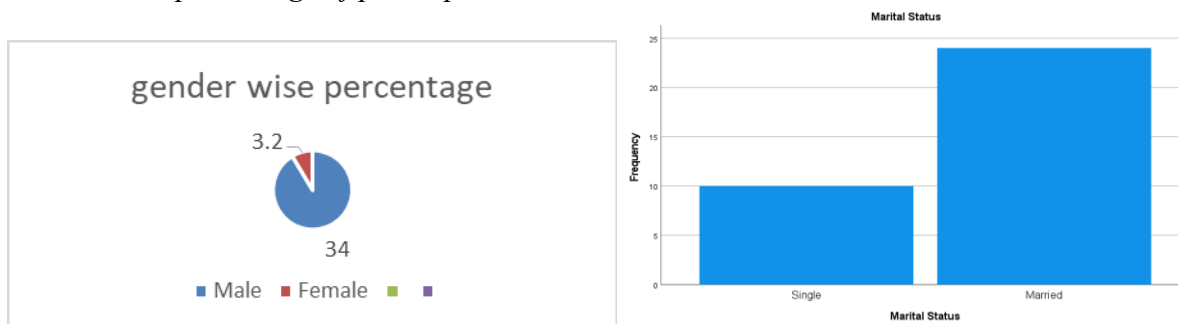
**Table 1**

*Sampling Framework of Study*

Sr #	University Name	No. of Students Frequency
1	University of Peshawar	7
2	University of Mardan	2
3	University of Malakand	9
4	University of Engineering and Technology	1
5	Northern University	2
6	Islamia College Peshawar	1
7	Hazara University	3
8	Gomal university	4
9	Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan	5
	<b>Total</b>	<b>34</b>

**Figure 1**

*Gender-wise percentage of participants*



The above figure shows that the majority of respondents were male and married.

### TOOL OF RESEARCH

To gather quantitative data on various aspects of the problems, the study employed a self-developed questionnaire using a 3-point Likert scale (ranging from "Disagree" to "Agree"). Having 53 items in 3 parts, one is demographic and disability information, the second is about extrinsic challenges, seven constructs, and the 3rd part is about intrinsic challenges, containing three



constructs. The questionnaire was divided into three main parts to ensure comprehensive data collection. The first section gathered demographic information, including age, gender, type of physical disability, degree program, and institute details. The second section focused on extrinsic challenges, accessibility (e.g., ramps, elevators, washrooms), transportation barriers, university support (e.g., disability offices, faculty cooperation), and social inclusion (e.g., peer attitudes, bullying). The third section explored intrinsic challenges, including health-related limitations (e.g., chronic pain, fatigue), psychological stressors (e.g., anxiety, low self-esteem), and experiences of harassment. Six experts in related fields, including special educationists, university academics, and senior teachers, validated the instruments. The questionnaire was translated into the Urdu language, and the translation was validated by a bilingual expert in English and Urdu. The overall scale Cronbach reliability of the 53 item was .893.

### DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The researcher collected contact information of students through official means with appropriate consent processes, and after receiving departmental approval, circulated a Likert-scale questionnaire. The researcher herself was a woman with disability, and the participants also faced the same issue. Participants typically contacted electronic versions, such as email or WhatsApp, and then followed up with calls, texts, and WhatsApp messages over a period of five weeks. The researcher had to contact university students and then ask them for additional contacts of students using the snowball sampling technique to obtain student data, as most universities lacked adequate disability-related information about students with disabilities. The student was contacted via WhatsApp, phone number, or email, and after their response, the questionnaire was emailed to them, or a Google Form link was shared. The absence of systematic disability documentation in higher education was confirmed by the reports of numerous institutions that had no enrolled students with physical disabilities. After obtaining 34 responses, an analysis was conducted.

### RESULTS

The results were analysed to provide light on the underlying problems and demonstrate extrinsic and internal challenges.

#### A. Extrinsic Challenges

Extrinsic challenges indicate external hurdles or difficulties originating from outside an individual, or system, rather than from internal sources. These problems frequently beyond individual control and are shaped by environmental, accessibility, transportational, accommodational, social, medical, and research supervisory support challenges encountered by students with physical disabilities in higher education.

**Table 2**

*Accessibility Challenges Faced by Student with Physical Disabilities*

Sr #	Statements reflecting challenges of:	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
1	Accessible entrance of campus.	5	3	26
2	Accessible the classroom	6	4	24
3	Accessible library	9	11	14
4	Accessible cafeteria	8	3	23
5	Accessible admin office	13	4	17



6	Accessible bank	9	1	24
7	Accessible hostel	13	8	13
8	Smooth pathways of the campus	7	2	25
9	Provision of ramps	19	3	12
10	Provision of elevators	22	3	9
11	Provision of accessible toilets	21	1	12
12	Provision of accessible restroom	25	1	8
13	Provision of mobility devices in classroom.	28	4	2
14	Provision of accessible lodging	23	5	6

Table 2 shows that students with physical disabilities face maximum accessibility issues. Ten out of 14 items indicated that respondents were facing severe issues because they disagreed with the statements. It is concluded that eighty per cent of the students faced infrastructural challenges in one-third of the universities in KP.

**Table 3**

*Support Services Challenges Faced by Student with Physical Disabilities*

Sr #	Statements reflecting challenges of:	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
(1)	Easy admission procedure	7	4	23
(2)	Provision for disability office	14	8	12
(3)	Faculty cooperates in studies	11	5	18
(4)	Supervisor supports in research	4	3	27
(5)	HEC policy support inclusion	9	8	17

The table indicates the support services challenges faced by students with physical disabilities. 68% of students found the admission procedure easy. Only 35% indicate that universities have a disability office for handling disability issues of students with physical disabilities. 79% agreed with the supervision of the supervisor in research matters. Fifty per cent of the HEC policy has been implemented. It showed that the majority of students face difficulties in supporting services challenges during their studies

**Table 4**

*Accessible Transportation Challenges Faced by Student with Physical Disabilities*

Sr #	Statements reflecting challenges of:	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
(1)	Accessible public transport	18	4	12
(2)	Provision of accessible transport facilities.	14	2	18
(3)	Faced high transportation costs	9	4	21

The data in the table above indicate that students with physical disabilities had major transportation issues because of their inaccessibility and high expense. More than 50% of respondents disagreed with facing serious problems regarding their travel. 63% are facing high fares for travelling due to their disability. It showed that majority of students faced difficulty in transport facilities.

**Table 5**

*Social Challenges Faced by Student with Physical Disabilities*

Sr #	Statements reflecting challenges of:	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
(1)	Inclusion in sports activities.	18	6	10
(2)	Peers' positive attitudes	6	9	19
(3)	Peers' awareness of disability.	5	6	23
(4)	Peers help with studies.	8	5	21
(5)	Teachers positive attitude	6	8	19
(6)	Teachers understand the health-related problem	9	11	14

The table indicated the social challenges of students with physical disabilities. 18 respondents, more than 50%, disagreed with the statement that their peers included them in various sports and social activities. In contrast, the other five items indicated that socially, peers and teachers include students with physical disabilities in social activities. It shows that overall social and institutional challenges are comparatively less.

**Table 6**

*Accommodation Challenges Faced by Student with Physical Disabilities*

Sr. No	Statements reflecting challenges of:	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
(1)	Provision of disability accommodation	20	5	9
(2)	Provision of extra time for assignment	23	6	11
(3)	Provision of note taker during lectures.	24	5	11
(4)	Provision of extra time in exams	24	7	9

Table 6 indicates the provision of special accommodation to the students with physical disabilities. More than 70% of the problems are related to examinations and the need for extra time to complete assigned work. More than 60% disagreed with the other disability-related accommodation. It is concluded that higher institutions were not providing any special accommodation to students with physical disabilities.

**Table 7**

*Research Supervisory Support Challenges Faced by Student with Physical Disabilities*

Sr #	Statements reflecting challenges of:	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
(1)	Timely feedback of supervisor	15	3	15



(2)	Discuss various topics with supervisor.	3	6	24
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The table indicates the supervisory support challenges faced by students with physical disabilities. 50% of responses highlighted that supervisors are providing support to these students. This indicates that academic guidance is generally strong, a favorable trend in supervisory support, and an essential element of academic achievement for these students with physical disabilities.

**Table 8**

*Medical Challenges Faced by Student with Physical Disabilities*

Sr #	Statements reflecting challenges of:	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
(1)	High medical expenses	7	7	20
(2)	High-cost assistive devices	11	6	17
(3)	Provision of financial support	22	5	7

The table shows the medical challenges of students with physical disabilities. 59% agreed with the high medical expenses, and nearly 50% faced the expense of assistive devices. One-fourth of the students were not facing financial support issues regarding assistive devices, while all the remaining students faced these issues. It indicates that all three items indicated that financial challenges are higher for these students.

### **Intrinsic challenges**

Intrinsic challenges are obstacles or difficulties that arise from within an individual, group, or system. Intrinsic challenges pertain to human, psychological, or organisational traits, in contrast to extrinsic obstacles, which arise from external circumstances. These relate to health, medical, psychological, and harassment issues.

**Table 9**

*Health Challenges Faced by Student with Physical Disabilities*

Sr #	Statements reflecting challenges of:	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
(1)	Experience chronic pain.	12	7	15
(2)	Pains limit participation in extracurricular	10	9	15
(3)	Progressive Disability	19	7	8

The table shows the health challenges of students with physical disabilities. 44% of participants faced chronic pain, and this pain limits 44% participants from actively participating in extracurricular activities which also affect the academic performance of these students. These results demonstrate how health-related obstacles exacerbate academic difficulties in educational institutions. Those who faced progressive disability defiantly faced more challenges, but these are less than the students who don't have progressive disability.

**Table 10**

*Harassment Challenges Faced by Student with Physical Disabilities*

Sr #	Statements reflecting challenges of:	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
(1)	Experienced sexual harassment	22	6	6
(2)	subjected to inappropriate physical contact	18	6	10
(3)	Adequate measures to prevent sexual harassment.	13	8	12
(4)	Awareness for reporting sexual harassment	9	9	16
(5)	Disability made vulnerable to sexual harassment.	17	6	11

The table reveals the harassment challenges faced by student with physical disabilities that 65% students deny the sexual harassment. While very few 18% admit it that they knew about the existence of harassment cells and the mechanism of reporting that harassment in the university. Similarly, 53% of respondents know how to tackle inappropriate physical contact. Universities often arrange workshop seminars regarding this issue. These findings highlight the need for universities to enhance awareness and education on sexual harassment, potentially through more effective workshops and seminars.

**Table 11**

*Medical Challenges Faced by Student with Physical Disabilities*

Sr #	Statements reflecting challenges of:	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
(1)	Disabilities increased fatigue	7	6	21
(2)	Fatigue due to long study hours.	10	3	21
(3)	Medical appointments disrupt schedule	6	11	18

Table 11 indicates the medical challenges faced by students with physical disabilities. 31 % of students were not disturbed by their medical appointments, but the remaining all have disturbances and 62 % face fatigue due to their disability relate this number with previous one 44% students was with chronic pain these both factors must be limiting their academic performance. Result reveals that the maximum universities do not provide access to these students due to their disabilities.

**Table 12**

*Psychological Challenges Faced by Student with Physical Disabilities*

Sr #	Statements reflecting challenges of:	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
(1)	Isolation due to negative attitudes.	12	7	15
(2)	low self-esteem due disability.	14	3	7
(3)	face physical abuse	14	2	16
(4)	bullying being disabled	18	4	12



The table shows the psychological challenges of student with physical disabilities that 44% agreed on social inclusion due to negative attitudes. 58% reported low self-esteem because these universities do not provide them with any psychological support. Results indicate that psychological challenges are a significant hurdle in the higher education of these students. Mental health is very important.

## **DISCUSSION**

Students with physical disabilities in higher education still encounter systemic obstacles despite the numerous studies. Research conducted over the past two decades consistently identifies challenges including inaccessible infrastructure (e.g., absence of ramps, lifts, and modified classrooms), insufficient academic accommodations (e.g., lack of extended time for examinations or alternative assessment formats), and social exclusion (e.g., stigma, bullying, and inadequate peer support). These issues persist despite the implementation of Pakistan's HEC 2021 Policy for Students with Disabilities, which mandates accessibility committees, fee waivers, and support services, yet suffers from inconsistent execution. The repetition of research on these matters is not redundant but essential for diagnosing the reasons behind policy implementation.

Although metropolitan institutions perform somewhat better than rural ones, the difficulties faced by disabled students in KP's higher education are similar to those faced nationwide: inadequate transportation, inaccessible facilities, and a lack of support services (Ali & Khan, 2020). At the national level, Pakistan falls short of international norms; the Disability Act (2020) is still not being adequately enforced, in contrast to the legally mandated accessibility requirements in the United States (ADA, 1990) and the United Kingdom (Equality Act, 2010). KP and other Pakistani institutions do not have assistive technology or disability centres, although international universities do (Mutanga, 2017). Although psychological issues like loneliness are prevalent worldwide (Graves et al., 2023), harassment was conspicuously lacking in KP. HEC policy was implemented in 2022, bringing changes to many intrinsic and extrinsic aspects of students with disabilities in all universities. According to HEC policy, some buildings become accessible, and assistive devices, such as wheelchairs, are provided to many students. However, there are many other aspects that these institutions need to address.

Proposed solutions include Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to integrate accessibility into curricula, directed by student engagement that involves disabled students in policy formulation, and legislative enforcement mechanisms such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which imposes penalties for non-compliance. In the absence of these structural reforms, policies will remain only symbolic, and students with disabilities will continue to encounter the same challenges recorded decades before.

## **CONCLUSION**

Responses show that students with disabilities encounter substantial institutional challenges that significantly hinder their academic achievement. Students with physical disabilities encounter significant accessibility obstacles, such as poor infrastructure, ineffective implementation of policies, increased transportation expenses, exclusion from recreational activities, and insufficient academic support. Numerous individuals struggle with chronic pain, costly assistive devices, harassment, and diminished confidence, yet their problems frequently remain unacknowledged



Although students with physical disabilities encounter significant issues with inclusivity and accessibility in higher education, there are some beneficial support mechanisms available. Supportive supervision, timely feedback, and peer assistance enhance academic performance and morale. The existence of operational harassment complaint cells provides a channel for reporting problems, hence increasing students' sense of security. Numerous students resilience by maintaining increased self-esteem and overcoming negative attitudes with determination and optimism.

### **EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS**

These measures are inadequate when compared to the systemic challenges present in infrastructure, policy execution, transit, and accommodations. To promote sustainable inclusion, institutions must enhance disability-friendly activities and strengthen current support systems to ensure equitable opportunities for all students. To guarantee sustainable institutional advancement, the subsequent procedures are recommended: This type of study should be conducted every five years to thoroughly assess the efficacy of current support systems and identify novel challenges. Secondly, faculty committees must be required to organise awareness seminars concentrating on three essential areas: enhancements to accessible infrastructure, anti-harassment measures, and available support services, with specific emphasis on accommodation and medical facilities. Third, universities must ensure the continuous availability of qualified support personnel as disability counsellors. With a focus on realistic, immediately implementable solutions and a framework for long-term institutional change, these proposals have been purposefully developed to optimise impact within current financial restrictions.

Universities in KP must establish support centres to overcome extrinsic challenges, such as assistive technology, accessible transportation, and renovating infrastructure (elevators, ramps) to make their campuses more accessible to students with disabilities. Anti-bullying initiatives, teacher training on inclusivity, and financial assistance for medical and assistive technology are essential. Moreover, psychological support for better mental health is in high demand for overcoming intrinsic challenges of students with physical disabilities. Systematic change will be fostered by thorough implementation of Pakistan's Disability Act (2020) and HEC policy in the true spirit through compliance checks and inclusion measures. These steps will help bridge the gap between international inclusion criteria and KP's current challenges.

Despite the current obstacles, we need to explore different strategies for addressing these issues and increasing success rates in students with physical disability at the higher education level. Two decades ago, we endeavoured to resolve these challenges, and yet they persist. The persistence suggests that previous methods have proven inadequate, necessitating the exploration of new techniques to achieve the success of these students. The issues that existed in the past persist in the present. Consequently, we must focus on how students can achieve academic success and fulfill their degree requirements while having these constant challenges.

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