

Inclusive Learning Environment for Students with Disabilities at the University of Dhaka: Challenges and the Way Forward

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Abstract

This study examines the experiences of students with disabilities in relation to accessibility, institutional provisions, participation, support systems, and inclusion. It employs the Social Model of Disability, the Capability Approach, and the Theory of Social Inclusion to analyze barriers, opportunities, participation, recognition, and the lived experiences of students within the university environment. It uses a qualitative method to guide the whole discussion. A total of 18 in-depth interviews were conducted to collect data from students with disabilities, non-disabled students and key informants. The questions were semi-structured, and ethical consideration was a top priority. The data underwent thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes related to accessibility, institutional support, participation, and inclusion. The findings suggest a significant gap between claims and functions. Poorly working infrastructure and insufficient support are the causes that create gaps. Though, non-disabled students perceive the environment as inclusive from the surface, the students with disabilities think otherwise. The study identifies “accessibility theatre,” and it suggests that the facility is symbolically existent and functionally lacking. Moreover, most of the policies lack inclusiveness and proper implementation which needs to be addressed seriously. Additionally, the study suggests dignity as the key factor and it should be preserved by any means to form an inclusive learning environment. Alongside, both the physical and digital infrastructure in University of Dhaka need to be redesigned in an inclusive format. Lastly, the emotional burden and vulnerability of women were addressed as key issues which needed to be prioritized to form a better learning environment. It concludes with emphasizing policy implementation and greater inclusion of voices of the students with disabilities.

Keywords: Students with disabilities, accessibility, social inclusion, institutional support, university of Dhaka

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1. Introduction

Higher education has an immense role in the personal, professional, and social growth of a person. However, for students with disabilities it mostly depends on the access to the educational Facilities in the University. The global research suggests that the formal accommodations like the exam adjustments and assistive technology are important, but the real inclusion is the overall physical, digital and social environment which facilitates for a meaningful participation (Romhild & Holleder, 2023; Edwards et al., 2022). The availability of formal accommodations alone may be insufficient to ensure meaningful participation if physical, digital, social, or institutional barriers persist within

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the learning environment.

Institutional barriers often limit the accessibility for disabled students in many Universities. Studies from Nigeria (Ijadunola et al., 2019) and Ghana (Tudzi et al., 2020) show that students face problems due to insufficient ramps in the campus, inaccessible toilets, weak support systems and heavy reliance on informal assistance. Research also shows gaps in the policy and practice of the University of Dhaka where deficiencies remain in the infrastructural gaps, residential facilities and support systems (Rahaman et al., 2024; Nishat & Das, 2023; Haider, 2022). From a bird's eye view, all of these studies discuss that policies can be seen on paper, but there can be difficulties to navigate through these structures by the disabled students. Therefore, when evaluating policies, facilities, or institutional arrangements, it is essential to assess their practical functioning and how students with disabilities experience them in their daily university lives.

Most of the research on disabled students in higher education focuses on the administrative and school facilities rather than how the students themselves perceive the facilities and challenges. Few studies address the subjective dimension on how the students perceive the facilities whether adequate or inadequate, which impacts the educational and social inclusion. The studies reviewed in this research primarily emphasize institutional arrangements, infrastructure, and the implementation of support, rather than providing a comprehensive investigation into how students themselves perceive and interpret these arrangements. According to Alam and Kabir (2023), this gap is particularly seen in the context of Dhaka University where the disabled students have to compensate for the institutional shortcomings with the personal strategies, peer support and assistive devices. Therefore, understanding the lived experience of these students is essential to frame truly inclusive policies in order to address the problems of these students in higher education. In particular, examining students' experiences can help identify the gap between the formal availability of facilities and policies and their actual usability, as well as how students respond when institutional support is insufficient.

These concerns are analyzed through three complementary perspectives. The Social Model of Disability identifies environmental, institutional, and attitudinal barriers. The Capability Approach assesses whether available facilities and resources can be transformed into meaningful opportunities for students with disabilities. The Theory of Social Inclusion examines how these experiences affect participation, recognition, and a sense of belonging.

Therefore, the aim of the study is to explore how students with disabilities at the University of Dhaka perceive the educational facilities and policies to be adequate for themselves and how much these facilities have changed over time. The study is guided by the theoretical framework which includes the Social Model of Disability, the Capability Approach, and the Theory of Social Inclusion which examines the institutional structures with lived experience of the students. Therefore, the research prioritizes the students' narratives and explores shortcomings in higher educational accessibility to design inclusive structure and policies.

2. Research Questions

- a. How do students with disabilities experience and perceive the educational facilities at the University of Dhaka?
- b. What are the challenges to develop an inclusive learning environment for students with disabilities at the University of Dhaka?
- c. What are the ways to remove obstacles and establish an inclusive environment at the University of Dhaka?

3. Literature Review

3.1 Academic Support and Inclusive Learning Environment

Academic excellence cannot be ensured by formal routine studies rather social environment and institutional cooperation is needed. Disabled students can outshine their own potential if proper nurturing can be ensured. A study by Romhild and Hollederer (2023) suggests the same thought. The authors came up with the findings that traditional supports were useful such as exam accommodations, but results showed upward curves when the institution addressed wellbeing, health in social and academic integrity. The inclusion must go beyond administrative files.

A lot of studies put a seal on the fact that the conventional system has limitations, and the approach should be changed. Edwards et al. (2022) reported that non-visible disabilities remained un-assessed. Faculties' failure to respond effectively can reduce the support efficiencies. Adopting Universal Design (UD) can reduce what-to-do anxieties. Individual accommodations and a learning environment being inclusive is another solution. Collectively, these studies indicate that academic inclusion relies not only on the provision of individual accommodations but also on the presence of a supportive and inclusive learning environment.

3.2 Institutional and Structural Barriers to Accessibility

Contexts can be different, but the barriers are not in terms of inclusion. Akoto et al. (2022) suggested some challenges in different places such as awareness, logistics, and institutional services. Thus, policy implementations can be hampered in a structured process.

A number of studies circulating in University of Dhaka contexts, find themselves in the loop of difference between policy and practice. According to Rahaman et al. (2024), some inclusive measures were hopeful to see at first but after that the author came to the conclusion that there are issues in matters of accessibility and Universal Design (UD) practices where the Residential students suffer more. On the other hand, Nishat and Das (2023) put emphasis on halls and came up with a list of problems which include washrooms that are not easy to access, and intimidating behavior toward them which eventually leads to less engagement and gloomy daily life. In addition to this, Haider (2022) found while looking at digital technologies such as the weak support and the not-so-friendly behavior in the campus environment. All these studies depict the challenges to inclusion which may arise from the physical infrastructure, regular practices within the

institution, residential benefits, and digital environments. They also highlight a significant gap between the existence of inclusive measures that remains formally within the policies and their proper implementation.

The gap between the formal access of the structural measures and their genuine workability has been studied across various contexts in the national arena. Accessibility is another fish in the sea. Studies from Ghana (Tudzi et al., 2020) and Nigeria (Ijadunola et al., 2019) found out a difference in paper and practice. Accessibility measures, as was expected, should have been functional but somehow it has been symbolic and a talk of pride. Weak enforcement is one of the barriers. In Bangladesh, Rahman and Akther (2021) also reported these barriers and the authors added more like lack of ramps and poor signage. Accessibility should be conceptualized not only by the availability of facilities or policies, but also by their functionality, safety, consistency, and usability for students with disabilities.

3.3 Formal Institutional Support and Its Utilization

The problem is more embedded in a deeper and darker context. Asdaq et al. (2025) suggested the same finding in different contexts. Utilization could not be accomplished due to self-perception and fatigue about the system.

3.4 Informal Support, Personal Adaptation, and Institutional Responsibility

As a social being, interpersonal factors can be a significant game changer. Nishat and Das (2023) found positive peer behaviour and attitudes at the University of Dhaka which is a form of inclusion. On the other hand, Couzens et al. (2015) noted the fact that hidden disabilities are fought informally. The network in this case is small but supportive.

Support systems do not work effectively if they are not comprehensive, and there is a lack of coordination. Edwards et al. (2022) emphasized the needs of coordinated and integrated personal, academic, and communication support with clear and simple procedures for students with disabilities. Tu et al. (2025) supported the previous finding and added a supportive campus environment, understanding with faculty and counselling to the list. Furthermore, all the studies suggest that the solo availability of the support facilities does not ensure the effective utilization. The actual effectiveness of the support system is persuasive with regards to the prior experiences of the students, responsiveness of the institution, the clarity and transparency of using procedures, and the coordination found in different kinds of facilities.

Lastly, the research conducted in Bangladesh by Alam and Kabir (2023) discussed a finding which is very interesting and that is the physically challenged students managed to cope up with the environment in their own strategies like support getting from devices and help from the peers. These techniques are very obvious in advancing the process of inclusion and continuation. Which clearly shows a gap in institutional responsibility. The findings also indicate that the informal assistance and the individual adaptive mechanisms can help the students to manage their daily barriers and maintain participation. However, major reliance on these types of assistance can be a symptom of lacking in the formal institutional regulations and can also raise concerns of students'

opportunities for independent participation.

3.5 Participation, Recognition, and the Subjective Experience of Inclusion

The existing body of literature depicts that the overall inclusion embodies additional aspects than the mere presence of the physical facilities or formal systems. Negative attitudes, ineffective institutional responses, reliance on informal support, and challenges associated with non-visible disabilities can significantly affect students' participation in university life and their experiences of recognition, belonging, and inclusion. Several studies focused on implementation of policies, infrastructure, institutional provisions, etc., but no study has focused on how students with disabilities reflect the very policies and systems made for them. No study has put emphasis on their lived experience.

Although existing studies have addressed key issues such as accessibility, infrastructure, institutional support, policy implementation, peer relationships, and personal coping strategies, these dimensions are frequently analyzed in isolation. This study will integrate the lived experience with some theories like Social Model of Disability, the Capability Approach, and Theory of Social Inclusion. This study will also explore the gap of subjective dimension of inclusion as the students often compromise by taking informal support and personal adaptive strategies rather than formal channels. This study aims to integrate these dimensions by investigating how students with disabilities perceive and experience institutional barriers, available resources, support systems, and everyday social experiences.

4. Theoretical Framework

This qualitative study is guided by three connected theories: The Social Model of Disability, the Capability Approach, and the Theory of Social Inclusion. These theories work together and provide a framework to examine the way students with disabilities experience identity barriers, educational and support facilities and recommend solutions. Also, these theories have guided the research to form research questions, code, interpret thematically and discuss the findings.

4.1 Social Model of Disability

The Social Model of Disability (Oliver, 1990) suggests that societal barriers like negative attitudes, physical obstacles and systematic issues create disability rather than individual impairments. The model was used to examine exactly how these barriers create an unfavorable learning environment. This framework has guided the analysis throughout the study. As a result, analytical focus was placed on institutional structures which restricted participation, not on disabled people only.

4.2 Capability Approach

The Capability Approach (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011), focuses on the capabilities of the people rather than resources. This study helps create a framework to examine if the facilities can truly help or support students or its resources being outdated, limit freedom. This approach is suitable to examine if the resources or facilities are present in

the university that can turn into a meaningful opportunity. Accordingly, the analysis looked for the differences between on-paper availability and actual usability. The perspective was especially relevant to find out functional accessibility, mobility, participation, informal support system and conversion of potentiality to opportunity.

4.3 Theory of Social Inclusion

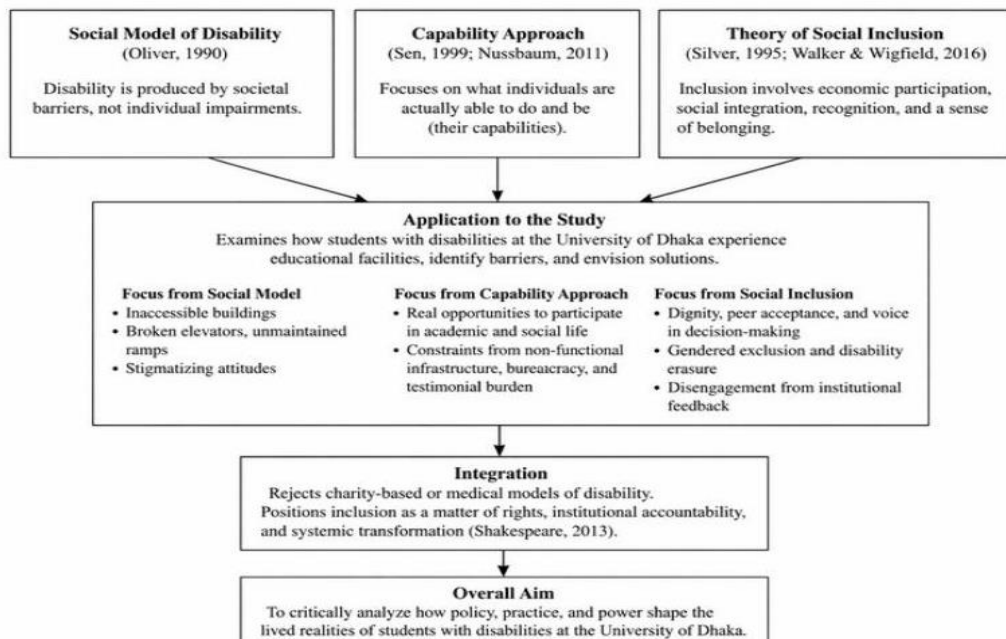
The Theory of Social Inclusion (Silver, 1995) shows inclusion as a whole concept of social integration, economic participation, sense of belonging and recognition. This perspective has guided the interpretation to examine if the students feel respected and recognized, if they are participating and building a sense of belongingness or if they are facing issues like exclusion and lack of engagement.

4.4 Integration

Traditional perspective on disability is charity based and medical issues. These theories put light on a different perspective of seeing disability. They emphasize rights, accountability, and feelings of ownership. It requires systematic change (Shakespeare, 2014). All the theories have made the interpretation more complementary. The Social Model of Disability identifies barriers, the Capability Approach identifies how these barriers affect opportunities and the Theory of Social Inclusion identifies how these experiences subtly affect participation, belonging, recognition and dignity. Thus this study will go beyond the traditional perspective and put light on the functional sides and systematic change at the University of Dhaka.

Figure 1

Theoretical Framework



5. Materials and Method

5.1 Research Design

This study follows a cross-sectional qualitative approach as a guideline to conduct the systematic research on lived experiences of the students with disabilities along with their perceptions on institutional facilities. A qualitative approach is appropriate for the study needs in-depth and contextual understanding instead of rigorous measurements and generalized outcomes. This study employs an interpretive approach to examine participants' perceptions and experiences related to inclusion, accessibility, and institutional support. The theoretical framework informs the analysis of institutional barriers, meaningful opportunities, and experiences of participation and inclusion.

5.2 Study Area

This in-depth study was conducted at the University of Dhaka. It has one of the largest numbers of students in Bangladesh. The population here is diverse and the context is relevant. As it is a public university, challenges remain such as red-tapism and difference between policy and practice. Therefore, the university provides a relevant context to examine students' experiences of accessibility, inclusive practices and infrastructure. Both residential and academic settings were considered to capture the understanding of the participants' experiences.

5.3 Participants and Sampling

Prior to the research, the team contacted PDF (Physically-Challenged Development Foundation) and sought help for finding disabled students. Then the participants were contacted and after informed consent, they were interviewed thoroughly. The research only focused on the current students enrolled at the University of Dhaka. Random Purposive sampling model was used to determine the students with direct experiences with facility and accessibility issues. The sampling approach ensured relevant data with rich findings aligned with the objectives.

Participants were selected to reflect diversity such as physical disability, visual disability, other hidden disabilities, gender, residential status like hall residents and non-residents and academic level and department. The sample comprised 18 participants: 10 students with disabilities, 5 non-disabled students, and 3 key informants. Data collection proceeded until thematic saturation was achieved, with sufficient depth and recurring patterns identified across participants' accounts.

5.4 Data Collection Methods

The data were collected in a semi structured method with in-depth interviews so that the participants could express their experiences without any hesitation and feeling distant. An interview guide was used to cover key themes that are related to accessibility, institutional facilities, support, participation, and inclusion. Each interview lasted 30-60 minutes and was conducted in Bangla. With participants' consent, detailed notes were taken during the interviews and later they were organized for analysis.

5.5 Data Analysis

The study was interpreted with a thematic analysis process (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The process was systematic:

At first, transcripts were repeatedly read and thus data was familiarized. Secondly, coding was done to identify meaningful units. Thirdly, these units were categorized into themes. The themes were reviewed and refined. Lastly, these themes were interpreted as the research question demanded. This process looked for patterns, differences, and similarities in participants' experience. The data collected from non-disabled students were verified by disabled students and key informants through several interviews.

The Social Model of Disability informed the analysis of environmental, institutional, and attitudinal barriers. The Capability Approach was applied to assess the relationship between available facilities and students' actual opportunities to utilize them. The Theory of Social Inclusion guided the examination of participation, recognition, belonging, and dignity.

5.6 Ethical Considerations

This study followed proper ethical standards. Participants knew about the details of the study and gladly responded. They were informed about the rights before answering questions. Informed consent was taken. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured. Data was stored secretly and was limitedly accessible to the researcher's only. Moreover, as the research was conducted under the social research course (PA-311), ethical clearance was granted by the Department of Public Administration, University of Dhaka for this research.

The participants were well known for voluntary participation. They were informed that they could withdraw any moment and at any stage of the interview without thinking twice. The authors were careful asking sensitive questions so that participants do not feel triggered to past experiences.

In response to participant distress during one interview, recording was immediately paused to protect privacy. Empathetic support was provided and voluntary participation was reaffirmed. The participant subsequently chose to continue, ensuring that autonomy and well-being were prioritized over data collection.

6. Data Analysis and Results

The study highlights a clear reflection of the thematic analysis in order to examine the lived experiences of the disabled students at the University of Dhaka. Data were processed from the analysis of 10 students with disabilities, 5 non-disabled students and 3 KIIs which makes a total of 18 participants. From the obtained information five major themes were generated which clearly explains the structural formation and lived experiences of students with disability.

The qualitative findings gathered from extensive interviews provide valuable insights into the lived experiences of students with disability and their changes of perception and adaptability over time. The discussion engaged a broad spectrum of participants with

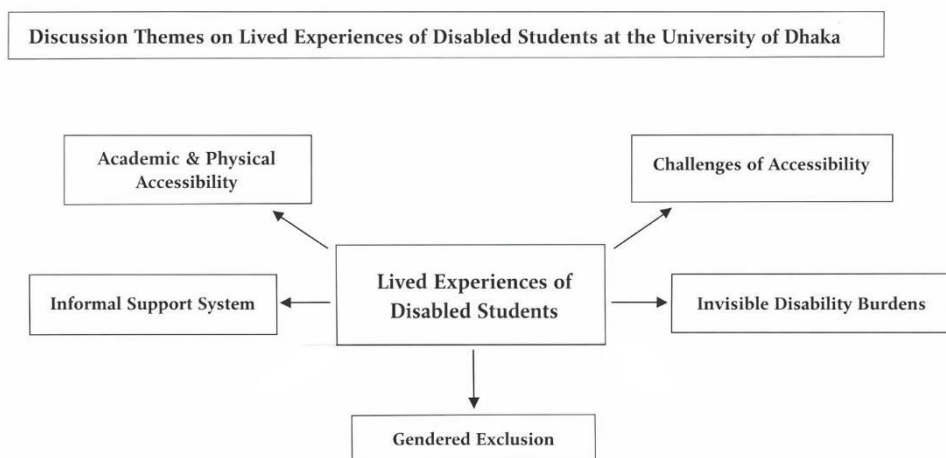
several types of disability revealing their perception, lived experience, change over time and their demands.

Through the application of thematic analysis process (Brawn and Clarke,2006), the data has been meticulously examined and categorized into a set of core five themes that highlight the diverse aspect of their experiences, their problems, policy inclusions for them, current condition of those policies, how environment perceive them, the way they adapt to the situation and these changes over time including academic and physical accessibility , informal support system, invisible disability burden, gendered exclusion and Disability inclusive friendly learning environment. Inputs from participants were included under different themes and it helped systematically to reach a conclusion including specific problems, probable solutions and future prospects.

The themes were analyzed in relation to the research questions and the established theoretical framework. The Social Model of Disability facilitated the examination of environmental, institutional, and attitudinal barriers. The Capability Approach was applied to investigate the disparity between the availability of facilities and students' actual opportunities to utilize them. The Theory of Social Inclusion informed the interpretation of participation, recognition, belonging, and dignity.

Figure 2

Discussion Themes on Lived Experiences of Disable Students at DU



6.1 Academic and physical Accessibility

The findings in this section are quite interesting. According to the non-disabled students, the University of Dhaka offers sufficient facilities for the students with disabilities. And all the non-disabled participants agreed on this case. But, the scenario is totally different from the perspective of students with disabilities. The consequences are reflected in the next theme. Even though in pen and paper and some cases practically, some accessibility is visible or at least implemented at a point of time.

6.1.1 Infrastructure accessibility

Some of the visible infrastructure for the inclusiveness of disabled students include ramps in some of the academic buildings and halls, elevators in both academic and residential areas, 24/7 washroom facilities in almost every floor.

6.1.2 Academic accessibility

Some of the academic accessibilities we figured out from the information collected includes reserve seats in the front row for the students with poor eyesight, separate sessions for the disabled students in very few departments, least imposition of attendance percentage in some departments. Provisions for separate grants for the disabled students in almost every department is present. The university asserts the existence of a separate curriculum for students with disabilities. However, none of the participants interviewed for this study reported any experience with or awareness of such a curriculum.

These findings indicate that the mere presence of facilities does not guarantee meaningful access. According to the Capability Approach, if students cannot utilize the resources as an opportunity then the resources cannot be significant.

6.2 Accessibility

Though there were accessibility measures, non-functional facilities were reported by the participants. Their statements revealed a contrast between formal existence and the practical functionality of the accessibility provisions.

6.2.1 Accessibility theatre

The study named this pattern “accessibility theatre” where visible measures appear as inclusion but does not provide functionality.

The findings highlight a significant gap between the accessibility claims of the university and the real scenario in current context accessing feedback from the aggrieved parties. Among the participants, a total of 8 participants mentioned about performative inclusive measures that appears during audit or VIP visits and then disappear. According to one of the visually impaired participants,

“The elevator of Mohsin hall has been non-functional for the last 14 months. This scenario is very common. Most of the time, it remains nonfunctional. And it only gets repaired before any audit or national election.” - IDI3 (Personal communication)

6.2.2 Symbolic, not functional

Among the accessibility that the university claims, most of them do not have any management for repair and maintenance. Verily, after a period of time it remains only symbolic accessibility. And another scenario is there. Some of the accessibility is false claimed. The burning example is the Entrance of Library, which does not have any scope of entrance with the wheelchair. One of our participants shared shocking information on this case. He is a student of third year and never went to library actually could not as he cannot walk into the gate of central library. Another participant shared most shocking story,

“Last year (2025), from June to August, both the elevators were nonfunctional for

several times and I could not attend most of the classes as my classroom is on the top floor (Disaster Management department) except for the exam dates when my friends picked me up all way to the exam room”- IDI1 (Personal communication)

6.2.3 Policy-implementation gaps

Aligning with the Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Act 2013, Dhaka University took several policies for the disabled students. But there is a huge gap between policy formation and implementation process. Every participant described at least one policy that exists on paper but not in practice. As per one of our participants,

“As per the policy there should be a 24/7 washroom facility. But, in Bijoy Ekattor Hall, the washroom on the ground floor was inaccessible for us. Because those were locked most of the time and the key was available with the administrative staff and provost. This was a common scenario even 1 year ago”- IDI9 (Personal communication)

6.2.4 Lack of inclusiveness

The accessibility, policies, facilities should be for all. For able and disabled both students. And even if we consider the special facilities for disabled students, it should also be inclusive. But most of the time it remains as a dream. Some of the responses from our participants-

“Digital accessibility is worse than physical accessibility. At least the ramps exist somewhere, but there is no trace of an online portal that exists for all of us.”- IDI4 (Personal communication)

“In my department, most of the time faculties provide study materials for exams. And one teacher sends me word documents instead of PDFs as PDFs are images and he even told me to ask one of my friends to read for me which would be the solution as I have very poor eyesight. Am I supposed to be treated like this?”- IDI7 (Personal communication)

The Social Model of Disability provides a framework for interpreting these findings by emphasizing environmental, institutional, and attitudinal barriers that restrict participation. The perspective denotes that the difficulties are not defined to individuals but also embedded in environment.

6.3 Informal support system

Due to the lack of formal facilities or support that the students with disability were supposed to get, most of the time they have to rely on an informal support system, which fills the gap of institutional support. Every disabled student agreed that they have to rely on informal support from their peers, academic staff, and Hall staff. One of them stated this crucial common problem-

“Most of the time I have to rely on my wheelchair. But, in such a case I cannot avoid getting help from my friends. The washrooms in academic buildings were designed especially for us. Thus, to sit on the commode even, I have to take support from my friend. Which is very embarrassing for both of us. Therefore, I entirely try to avoid using washrooms in academic time.”- IDI10 (Personal communication)

6.3.1 Unclear policy provision

Even though there are policy provisions for the disabled students, but most of the time

provisions of policies or even the whole policy is not clear and as a result, the policy remains of no work. Even if there are many such examples, one shocking example from one of our participants is as such-

“There is a policy for recruiting writers in the exams for those who are physically impaired, but who will recruit the writer is not there and even when someone manages any writer on his own, he has to pay the writer. Is it fair? At least the University should compensate those disabled students to pay the writers.”- IDI3 (Personal communication)

6.3.2 Non friendly infrastructure

Sometimes, the policy is good, inclusive, and feasible, but the University lacks the required infrastructure to implement the policy properly. A female participant brings this issue to the light-

“There is a common room for only females in the FSS (Faculty of Social Science). But the common room is on the second floor. So, students like us have to take an elevator to go to the first floor, which is often a serious cause of disturbance for others as most of the time they are in a rush and for more than 10 departments, there are only two elevators for the students. As no ramps or other friendly infrastructure are there, we do not have any other choice”- IDI2 (Personal communication)

The Capability Approach suggests that informal support is a significant factor enabling students to transform available resources into actual opportunities. However, participants' reliance on such support indicates that meaningful access often depends on personal relationships rather than consistent institutional arrangements.

6.4 Invisible disability burdens

Apart from the visible problems and issues, there are some invisible issues which the disabled students have to face occasionally. Most of our participants tried to bring those issues to the light,

6.4.1 Disability erasure

Many students with disabilities often face this issue where they have to provide proof of their disability just because they are not in a wheelchair or walking with a stick in hand. It possesses a double burden of navigating inaccessible environments and also the administrative burden of proving legitimacy. A participant with albinism-associated nystagmus and photophobia almost burst into tears while giving interview-

“I have had faculty ask for proof- medical certificate, doctors note. Many often ask why I need to sit in the front row as I look normal. What does disability look like, actually? How many times do I have to prove my disability?”- IDI7 (Personal communication)

6.4.2 Testimonial burden

The participants get emotionally exhausted while narrating his/her struggle to institutional actors who failed to act. Seven participants expressed these feelings while one participant withdrew from research entirely. The concept of “accessibility theatre” developed inductively from participants' accounts and resonates with Ahmed's (2012) broader analysis of the gap between institutional commitments and lived institutional

experience.

This testimonial burden is often invisible. One participant expressed as follow-

“Every survey or interview- they want to know my experience. But I have to face difficult moments.....you will write a paper, it will get published, people will read it...then what? Will the arts building’s lift work smoothly from then on? No, nothing will change. And if your research cannot fix it, do not ask me to help in your academic achievement.”- ID11 (Personal communication)

6.4.3 Gendered exclusion

Women with disabilities face compound barriers. Along with the inaccessible environment, they have a critical safety concern and social vulnerability, which shows the complex scenario of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) a framework that shows how political and social identities like gender double the burden and make a more complex scenario. One of the females (visibly impaired) participants narrated such-

“Male students can easily ask strangers for help in navigating campus. But it is very difficult for me. I cannot randomly ask anyone as I have to think about my safety. I must take a longer but crowded road even though I am exhausted to avoid unwanted incidents.”- ID18 (Personal communication)

The experiences of women with disabilities demonstrate that inclusion is shaped by a range of social conditions. Barriers extend beyond physical access to impact participation, safety, recognition, and a sense of belonging within the university environment. These accounts highlight that inclusion involves more than physical accessibility. According to the Theory of Social Inclusion, challenges related to recognition and understanding constitute significant obstacles to equal participation, recognition, and belonging.

6.5 Disability inclusive friendly learning environment

Each and every participant, disabled and normal, everyone demanded changes. And their wish or goal is focused on a disability-inclusively friendly learning environment through different means.

6.5.1 Disability inclusive infrastructure

Most of the participants demanded infrastructure development based on inclusiveness. Then, those will be equally accessible and beneficial for all. A participant emphasized on developing infrastructure in such way-

“The varsity administration should focus on inclusive infrastructure first. They should at least focus on washroom facilities for all. We need to urinate also. It is difficult to program your daily schedule based on the washroom facility.”- ID110 (Personal communication)

6.5.2 Separate inclusive curriculum design and training program for teaching staffs

Being in a state of disability obviously needs special support on the completion of an academic journey. Pressurizing them following the same curriculum as the one who is physically and mentally sound cannot be justified. And teaching staff should be more

sensible with students with disabilities. A participant narrated such-

“When the teacher and staff criticize and humiliate me for my inability to compete with everyone in the class, I feel very ashamed of myself and could not find whom I should blame for my disability. If some pressures were released, I could live with minimal dignity and try my best.” - IDI4 (Personal communication)

And across all themes, dignity emerged as the most crucial concept, which is often unexpressed but navigates how students perceive everything of their surroundings and shape their experiences.

7. Discussion

The findings suggest that, though there are infrastructures and formal policies to include students with disabilities in the learning environment, they continue to face barriers every day. This finding ends up asking if there is effectiveness in formulating and fostering an inclusive environment.

To interpret the contrast, this study employed the “accessibility theatre” concept. According to the statement of the participants, this concept refers to a situation where visible accessibility measures generate an appearance of inclusion not ensuring it consistently.

The University has a number of ramps, infrastructures and policies but these are often poorly maintained and often remain nonfunctional to be ready for use by the disabled students which creates an illusion of accessibility. These findings support those of Tudzi et al. (2020), and Ijadunola et al. (2019), who also denotes these barriers. The authors also highlighted the gap between availability and functionality as the maintenance is poor and the enforcement is weak. Rahaman et al. (2024) identified challenges related to accessibility in the same way this research did. The authors denoted challenges specifically in the residential area. The Social Model of Disability can interpret these findings such as environmental, attitudinal and institutional barriers. The authors in this study used this perspective and found out that poorly maintained facilities and infrastructure restricted the students with disabilities to participate which is a barrier within the environment of the university.

An important finding of the study is the gap of how the normal and disabled students perceive inclusion to be. It was found that the normal students generally believe that the system is inclusive but the disabled students perceive it not to be inclusive. It is also supported by Edwards et al. (2022) and Alam & Kabir (2023) that people who lack the lived experiences can overlook the barriers existing in the society.

The existing difference of perception can easily be understood by using the Theory of Social Inclusion, which focuses on the meaningful participation, acknowledgement, and belonging. When the experiences and perspectives of the physically challenged students are not recognized adequately in the decision-making processes, formal inclusiveness can fail to represent their day to day realities.

An important finding of the study is the impact of insufficient and unavailable resources

on the physically challenged students. Although, the University has policies like to keep reserved seats, flexible attendance for the disabled students, providing financial aid, but most of times these remain implemented partially and the support seems insufficient. By using the Capability Approach, the findings demonstrate that availability of resources alone does not guarantee proper inclusiveness. If the students are not capable of benefitting themselves effectively from the available facilities, policies, or support, these resources then do not convert into real opportunities for participation and access in higher education.

Informal Support Systems like the reliance on peers is a key finding of the study. This reveals the positive attitude of students and the weak institutional structures at the same time. This supported by Alam & Kabir (2023), Asdaq et al. (2025) that the disabled students rely on their peers when the infrastructures are found to be weak. The findings therefore indicate that informal support should not be regarded as sufficient evidence of genuine inclusion. While on one hand support from the peers can help the students to manage their daily challenges, over-reliance on personal and individual connections may expose the gaps in the formal institutional system of assistance and may also transfer the responsibility from the institution to individuals.

The physically challenged students not only face physical resistance but also various forms of psychological resistance like stress and frustration. Edwards et al. (2022) argues that the overall integrated support system like counselling is needed to address the intrinsic disabilities that are not visible as this gradually increases the rate of exclusion. The Social Inclusion framework provides a lens to interpret the lived experiences by explaining that inclusion holds something more than structural access. Acknowledgement, participation, sense of respect, and belongingness are also very crucial aspects in identifying whether students perceive the environment of the university as something genuinely inclusive.

There lies a major crack in the existing policies and their implementation. There are policies, like Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Act (2013), are not properly implemented. Akoto et al. (2022) figures out that the administrative loopholes and the poor accountability mechanism for this problem. The findings additionally suggest that there is a significant gap between the formal policies and their implementation. Although these policies like the Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Act (2013) create a base for inclusion, the participants' experiences indicate that the practical utilization of the accessibility measures does not properly align. Akoto (2022) also argues that administrative challenges and weak accountability are obstacles to implement the policies effectively. As a result of this, inclusiveness may be decreased to simply complying when the policies and assistance are inconsistently synthesized with the daily institutional practice.

Lastly, the study offers a core and crucial concept of Dignity. Though this concept is under expressed but it can navigate and shape the perception and experiences of the students. The study emphasizes the importance of preserving dignity. Dignity came out as an important and significant dimension in students' experience. It is not articulated

explicitly all the time but the lived experience of the students with disabilities suggests that dignity can influence their thoughts and perception about accessibility, recognition, dependence and institutional treatment. The findings indicate that providing facilities cannot alone foster an inclusive environment.

As a result, dignity should be prioritized as an inevitable component of policy and practice that are inclusive in nature. Inclusion is not just an infrastructural issue as the study concludes rather it can be seen as a multidimensional process. The study suggests that institutional and environmental barriers can reduce and restrict participation. Also, the availability of resources cannot guarantee meaningful opportunities. Moreover, experiences of exclusion can affect recognition, dignity, and a sense of belonging. Thus, the three theoretical perspective complement each other about how unequal opportunities, structural barriers and social experiences all together shape the inclusion of the students with disabilities in University of Dhaka.

Though the study provides valuable insights about the lived experiences of the students with disabilities, its contextual and qualitative design has some limitations. The study focused on University of Dhaka to get rich and in-depth data. But the finding may vary in different contexts. The sample of 18 participants helped get thematic saturation. Also, the study prioritized experiential and rich narratives over statistical generalization. Additionally, relying on the qualitative data helped personal reflection and perspectives. As a result, these limitations suggests deliberate scope of future research offering a base that can be compared and invites future multi method research.

8. Recommendations

Drawing on the study's findings, several recommendations are presented to enhance the inclusivity of the learning environment at the University of Dhaka. At the policy level, it is recommended to establish a central Disability Support Unit (DSU). DSU should function effectively by coordinating services and acting as a one-stop help center to address the issue of unclear support systems at the University of Dhaka. A regular biannual accessibility audit is needed to be done to ensure accountability. The audit will look through the public reports and penalties will be given to any non-compliance. Clear implementation pathways concerned with implementation bodies will be selected from the legal guidelines. Implementation bodies will provide a timeline-based plan where inclusiveness will be given highest concern. Adopting a Universal Design (UD) policy should be a priority. Functional ramps and lifts, and inclusive classrooms and libraries should be added to all departments to ensure inclusive infrastructural accessibility. Digital accessibility is needed in the present context. As a result, an inclusive digital platform should be developed including screen reading compatibility and course materials. Academic support should be formalized and institutionalized, such as universities having to provide funded exam scribes and note taking services. Moreover, disabilities should be identified in a one-time process such as one-time certification process so that students with disabilities do not have to prove every time. Faculty members and administration staff should attend sensitivity programs to build awareness within themselves for the students with disabilities. Safe mobility support and secure

common rooms should be introduced for female students with disabilities. Additionally, their security and safety should be maintained at any cost. A probable way can be introducing paid peer-support by female students by the university authority. Lastly, designing and implementing an inclusive curriculum should be prioritized so that students with disabilities can reflect on that and participate with equity and dignity. Effective implementation of these recommendations should prioritize the dignity of students with disabilities. Institutional practices and procedures should reflect respect, independence, recognition, and dignity. Such measures will contribute to the development of a more meaningful and inclusive learning environment.

Drawing from their lived experiences and perceptions of the previously discussed challenges, participants proposed several measures that they considered likely to foster a more inclusive learning environment. These suggestions represent the perspectives of the participants and are distinct from the researchers' recommendations. Now, as we already pointed the area of problems, a probable systematic solution is prescribed here-

The participants suggested that accessibility needs to be functional and effective both in the academic and infrastructural sectors. A very profound accountability mechanism needs to be built in order to ensure proper and effective accessibility. Specially, accessibility in register building should be ensured by placing separate help desks for students with disabilities. Several participants suggested the gap between policy formulation and implementation needs to be erased or minimized to a certain extent by ensuring accountability and transparency mechanisms ensuring the inclusiveness of the policy. The formal (institutional) support system should be stronger and more effective so that the role of informal support system is minimized according to the participants.

Several participants emphasized the importance of some infrastructural change in design to ensure basic facilities for the students with disabilities. Moreover, they demanded a strong maintenance mechanism to ensure proper functioning of the elevators in academic and residential areas which will benefit everyone, not only the students with disabilities (Buchanan, 1962). Additionally, an inclusive online portal needs to be built so that students with disabilities can browse it themselves, not with the help of others. The disability erasure should be addressed and dealt with properly by proper authority as it is a very sensitive issue. Additionally, more emphasis should be given on preserving the dignity of the students. Moreover, the verifying mechanism should be made more efficient and to be time bound for the staff relating to the service.

Especially the female participants suggested to create paid peer-support positions for females, and the remuneration should be paid by the University. The creation of a separate inclusive curriculum is a must needed job that is to be done in order to solve the problem from the root and make the learning environment accessible for all. Also, higher authority should monitor the sensitivity training program for the teachers and staff.

9. Conclusion

This study provides an in-depth, experience-centered understanding of disability inclusion at the University of Dhaka by foregrounding the voices of students with

disabilities. Moving beyond conventional assessments of infrastructure and policy, the research reveals how accessibility is lived, negotiated, and often struggled with in everyday university life.

The findings demonstrate that, despite the presence of policies and occasional infrastructural initiatives, inclusion remains largely incomplete and inconsistent. It also suggests that accessibility most of the time is a symbolic compliance. It does not facilitate structural transformation. Therefore, students rely on unstable and informal support systems to address their academic and mobility needs. Such dependence can reduce institutional accountability increase unexpected and unequal condition for participation.

The study has contributed significantly in terms of examining both experiential and emotional dimension of accessibility. Repeated need to just explain the disability both visible and invisible are challenges faced by the disabled participants. Also, gendered exclusion shows the challenges have reached beyond the physical barrier. These barriers now include social, psychological and administrative factors. The study has also identified gap between policy on paper and practice. Participant's experiences suggest that commitments from institutions are not consistent in terms of implementing.

By addressing the identified research gap, this study emphasizes the importance of capturing students lived experiences and perceptions of institutional facilities and inclusion. It shows that meaningful inclusion cannot be achieved through isolated interventions or compliance-driven measures. Instead, it requires a systemic, accountable, and student-centered approach that integrates physical accessibility, digital inclusion, administrative reform, and cultural change. In conclusion, disability inclusion should be an institutional responsibility. Its aim should be to safeguard the rights of the students who have disabilities. Moving from symbolic actions to functional and sustainable practices is necessary. This will enable students to participate more in academic voluntarily and to foster an inclusive learning environment.

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