

# A Case Study on the Personal and Social Challenges Faced by College Students with Disabilities in Higher Education

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**Abstract**—This study seeks to explore the multifaceted challenges encountered by disabled students in the realm of higher education. Focusing on colleges within the Ernakulam district, the research aims to investigate impediments to academic and social engagement, including physical accessibility, social stigma, and lack of support resources using a mixed-methods methodology. The study's goal is to assess the impact of these issues on mental health and well-being, investigate coping methods, and propose recommendations for policymakers, educators, and stakeholders to create inclusive environments. The findings are expected to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by disabled students. Using a qualitative case study approach, data will be collected through purposive sampling, employing surveys, interviews and focus group discussions, as well as inform strategies to promote equal opportunities, accessibility, and social inclusion, ultimately improving their overall college experience.

**Index Terms**—Academic and Social Engagement, Accessibility, Disabled Students, Higher Education, Inclusive Environment, Social Inclusion, Social Stigma.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Higher education is a key platform for individuals to gain knowledge, skills, and competences that will improve their socioeconomic opportunities. However, for disabled individuals, obtaining higher education can be difficult. Despite efforts to promote inclusivity, disabled students continue to encounter a variety of personal and societal problems that impede their academic achievement and social integration.

According to the World Health Organization (2011), around 15% of the world's population is disabled at least one billion people have some form of disability, whether present at birth or acquired later in life. Nearly 240 million of them are children. According to the 2011 Census, India had 26.8 million people with disabilities, representing 2.21% of the total population. The Government of India has undertaken several initiatives since independence in 1947 for the education of children with disabilities, and efforts have been made towards inclusion of children with disabilities in general education after ratifying the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2007. India has made considerable progress in terms of putting in place a robust legal framework and a range of programs and schemes that have improved the enrolment rates of children with disabilities in schools (UNESCO, 2019). But when it comes to their higher education, it seems there has been no improvement or almost zero improvement even after decades of implementation of the Persons with Disabilities (PWD) Act 1995. There are only a little over 0.5 percent of students with disabilities enrolled in the higher education institutions of India (NCPEDP, 2015).

This study explores the personal and social challenges faced by disabled students in higher education, focusing on Ernakulam college students. Higher education is crucial for individuals to acquire knowledge and skills, but disabled students face numerous challenges, including physical barriers,

social exclusion, academic barriers, and emotional and psychological challenges. Despite efforts to promote inclusivity, disabled individuals remain underrepresented in higher education, with only 0.56 % of students enrolled in higher education institutions in India being disabled. This study aims to identify the challenges, understand the experiences, and inform inclusive practices to promote inclusive education and enhance the academic and social integration of disabled students.

## II. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

As educational institutions strive to promote inclusivity and equal access, understanding the lived experiences of disabled students becomes essential for informed policy-making and institutional reform. This research provides valuable insights into the barriers these students encounter, ranging from negative perceptions and inadequate infrastructure to emotional struggles and limited career opportunities. By highlighting these issues, the study aims to contribute to the development of inclusive practices, support mechanisms, and policy interventions that can foster a more equitable and empowering academic environment for disabled individuals, ultimately enhancing their participation, performance, and personal growth in higher education.

## III. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Welfare measures for differently abled individuals are vital for promoting equality, enhancing quality of life, and empowering individuals. They enable differently abled individuals to participate actively in society, contribute to the economy, and lead fulfilling lives despite their disabilities (Akhil Antony and Mithunlal, 2024). Though the literacy rate among persons with disabilities in India gradually increases over time, still half of the persons with disabilities were illiterate compared to one-fifth of non-disabled peers (Haldar and Bisai, 2024). (R B, 2024) in their study explores the challenges in policy implementation, including inadequate infrastructure, a shortage of trained special educators, and societal stigma, which continues to hinder the full realization of inclusive education in India. Initiatives like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) and Inclusive Education for Disabled at Secondary Stage (IEDSS) are assessed, revealing their limitations due to insufficient resources and training.

(Durian and Perena, 2022) found out the lack of facilities, policies and student support services that will cater the needs of the students with disabilities in the HEIs. Challenges met by the students were due to limitations of these provisions. Thus, it was recommended that provisions on basic facilities for mobility and accessibility be provided. Likewise, clear admission policies and guidelines may be established to give equal opportunities and provisions on support services and facilitate the documentation of the disability of the students. (Arora, 2023) revealed that not only were SWDs facing barriers such as physical infrastructure, academic and financial, but they were also prone to the indifferent behaviour of teachers and fellow students in a few instances. With a view to improve the access and academic performance of SWDs, speedy implementation of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act, 2016, introducing infrastructure accessibility as a parameter to rank universities in the national ranking survey and providing accessible academic resources are the need of the hour.

(Kunnath et al., 2023) in the study found that the gaps identified in the disability sector in Kerala were primarily in the areas of the availability of sustainable model programs, innovations, research, education, skill development, and employment coupled with an inadequate ecosystem for the implementation of projects and schemes. (Mary Anson, 2023) revealed that the majority of the disabled persons have limited financial resources and lack of education, skills and job opportunities. Therefore, it is important that government policies and programs, NGOs and other support systems must provide support to disabled persons in the pursuit of self-employment. Disabled students remain systematically disadvantaged compared to their non-disabled peers. It is, therefore, essential that educational practitioners and policy makers appreciate the complexity of the disabled student experience. (Brewer et al., 2025).

(Asiri et al., 2024) underscores the importance of exposure and training in shaping student's attitudes toward PWDs. Schools should prioritize structured teaching, greater contact with the disabled community, and hands-on experiences to ensure professionals are both well prepared and positively inclined to treat PWD. This could significantly improve education curricula. (Ali et al., 2018) emphasize that monitoring progress and offering

opportunities for people with disabilities can contribute to their empowerment. Collaboration between the Department of Social Welfare, other government agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and other parties is critical in promoting positive social change. By leveraging their respective strengths, resources, and expertise, they can create innovative solutions, implement effective policies, and significantly impact society.

(Rosli et al., 2024) indicate that the ability of academic staff in HEIs is perceived as limited due to insufficient knowledge of teaching practices. Additionally, the lack of necessary resources and support for PWD students poses significant challenges for academic staff. Consequently, the study explores the challenges and responsibilities of educators in incorporating specialized education into higher education. Addressing these challenges is crucial in strengthening intervention efforts and promoting inclusive discussions aimed at raising awareness of PWD issues in society.

#### IV. OBJECTIVES

- 1) To analyze the attitudes and perceptions of non-disabled students and faculty towards disabled students.
- 2) To identify the psychological and emotional challenges faced by disabled students in higher education.
- 3) To identify the barriers to employment and career advancement faced by disabled college graduates.
- 4) To examine the infrastructural needs that enable them to easily access classrooms, laboratories, toilets, etc. for a barrier free learning environment.

#### V. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design to examine the personal and social challenges faced by disabled individuals in higher education, focusing on college students in Ernakulam district. The study is based on both primary and secondary data. Primary data were collected from a purposive sample of 100 disabled students enrolled in various colleges in Ernakulam using structured questionnaires, direct interviews, and focus group discussions. Secondary data were sourced from relevant books, academic journals, newspapers, magazines, government reports, and other research publications related to the subject. The study explores

attitudes of non-disabled peers and faculty, psychological and emotional challenges, infrastructural barriers, and post-education employment issues. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis to identify key patterns and insights. Statistical tools like frequency distribution, percentage analysis, and graphical representations were used to analyze the primary data. Ethical considerations such as informed consent, confidentiality and voluntary participation were strictly adhered to throughout the research process.

#### VI. RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

This section presents a detailed analysis and interpretation of the data collected from disabled students pursuing higher education in Ernakulam district. The analysis is structured around the core objectives of the study: understanding the attitudes and perceptions of non-disabled students and faculty; identifying the psychological and emotional challenges faced by disabled students; exploring the barriers to employment and career advancement; and examining the infrastructural needs required for a barrier-free learning environment. This analysis aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the real-life experiences of disabled students and uncover critical areas that require attention to promote inclusivity, accessibility, and equal opportunity in higher education institutions.

##### 1. Attitudes and Perceptions of Non-Disabled Students and Faculty Towards Disabled Students.

Understanding the social environment and the level of inclusion experienced by disabled students is vital in assessing the accessibility of educational opportunities and the quality of peer interactions. To assess this, five specific indicators were considered: equal participation opportunities, willingness to help, patience and understanding, inclusion in class discussions, and the quality of friendships. The responses collected from disabled students provide insights into the inclusivity and social support they experience within college settings. Table 1 shows the attitudes and perceptions of non-disabled students and faculty towards disabled students.

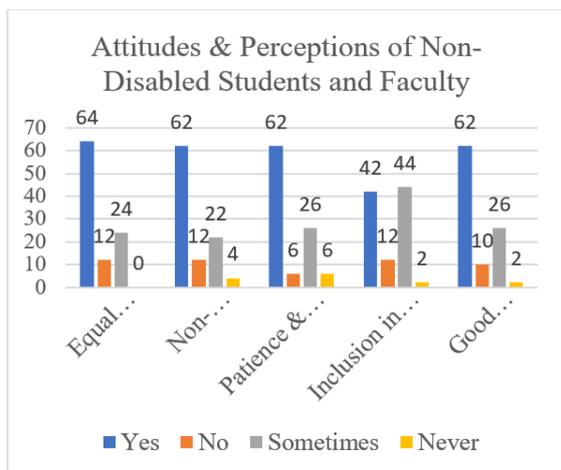
Table 1: Attitudes and Perceptions of Non-Disabled Students and Faculties.

Attitudes and Perceptions	Yes	No	Sometimes	Never
Equal Opportunities	64	12	24	0

for Participation				
Non-Disabled Students Willingness to Help	62	12	22	4
Patience & Understanding by Non-Disabled	62	6	26	6
Inclusion in Class Discussion & Activities	42	12	44	2
Good Conversation & Friendship	62	10	26	2

Source: Primary Data

Figure 1: Attitudes and Perceptions of Non-Disabled Students and Faculty.



Source: Primary Data

The analysis of responses from 50 disabled college students in Ernakulam reveals a generally positive perception of the attitudes and behaviours of non-disabled students toward their disabled peers. A majority of respondents reported being provided with equal opportunities for participation in both curricular and extracurricular activities, and expressed satisfaction with the willingness of non-disabled peers to assist with tasks when needed. Most students also felt that their peers were patient and understanding during interactions, and many reported having good conversations and friendships within the college environment. However, a notable portion of students indicated that these positive experiences were not consistent, particularly in terms of inclusion in class discussions and activities, where a significant number felt only sometimes included or excluded

altogether. These findings suggest that while inclusive practices are present to some extent, there are still gaps in consistent implementation, pointing to the need for improved awareness, sensitivity, and structured inclusion efforts among both students and faculty in higher education institutions.

2. Psychological and Emotional Challenges Faced by Disabled Students in Higher Education.

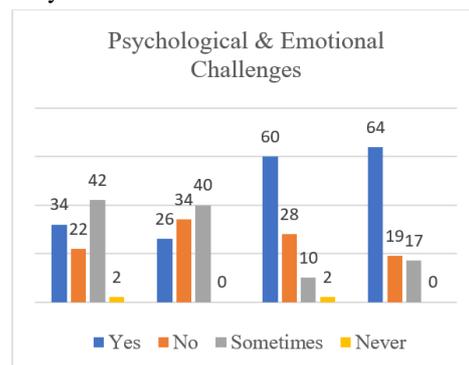
Understanding the psychological and emotional well-being of disabled students is critical to ensuring a supportive and inclusive educational environment. This section analyzes key emotional challenges such as fear of rejection, feelings of loneliness, confidence in academic progression, and the perceived need to exert extra effort to prove oneself. The findings offer insights into the internal struggles and resilience of disabled students. Table 2 reveals the psychological and emotional challenges faced by disabled students in higher education.

Table 2: Psychological and Emotional Challenges Faced by Disabled Students.

Psychological and Emotional Challenges	Yes	No	Sometimes	Never
Worry About Being Rejected by Peers	34	22	42	2
Feel Lonely or Disconnected from Others	26	34	40	0
Confidence in Academic Succession	60	28	10	2
Work Harder To Prove Yourself	64	19	17	0

Source: Primary Data

Figure 2: Psychological and Emotional Challenges Faced by Disabled Students.



Source: Primary Data

The data shows that a significant number of disabled students experience psychological and emotional challenges during their academic journey. A notable 64 percent affirmed that they feel the need to work harder to prove themselves, suggesting a strong internalized pressure linked to their disability. Additionally, 60 percent of the students expressed confidence in their academic succession, indicating a positive outlook despite their challenges. However, emotional distress is evident as 32 percent of the students reported worrying about being rejected by peers, and 42 percent sometimes shared this concern. Feelings of loneliness or disconnection were also reported by a considerable 26 percent said “yes” while 40 percent chose “sometimes.” These findings highlight that while many disabled students maintain academic confidence and motivation, they still face substantial emotional challenges related to peer relationships and social inclusion. This underscores the importance of emotional support systems and inclusive social practices within higher education institutions.

3. Barriers to Employment and Career Advancement Faced by Disabled College Graduates. Career advancement and employment opportunities are critical indicators of social inclusion and economic independence for disabled individuals. The third objective of this study seeks to understand the specific employment-related challenges that disabled students encounter as they transition from higher education into the workforce. By examining their experiences regarding promotion prospects, further education, job accessibility, hiring discrimination, and self-confidence, this analysis provides valuable insights into the systemic and personal obstacles that hinder their professional growth. The findings are as follows:

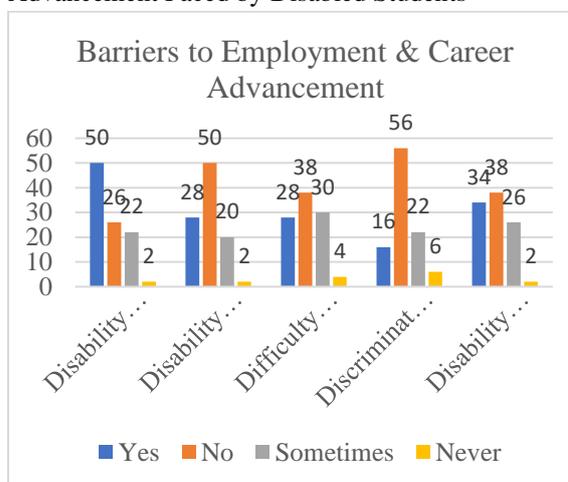
Table 3: Barriers to Employment and Career Advancement Faced by Disabled Students.

Barriers	Yes	No	Sometimes	Never
Disability Affects Opportunities for Promotion	50	26	22	2
Disability Affects Ability to Pursue Further Education	28	50	20	2
Difficulty in Finding Job Openings	28	38	30	4

Discrimination or Bias in Hiring Process	16	56	22	6
Disability Affects Confidence or Self efficiency	34	38	26	2

Source: Primary Data

Figure 3: Barriers to Employment and Career Advancement Faced by Disabled Students



Source: Primary Data

The data reveals that a substantial number of disabled students perceive their disability as a barrier to career advancement. Half of the respondents (50 percent) agreed that disability affects their opportunities for promotion, indicating a widespread concern about long-term career growth. In contrast, opinions were more balanced regarding the impact of disability on pursuing further education – 28 percent agreed, while 50 percent of the respondents disagreed, suggesting that while some feel limited, many still see education as accessible. Difficulty in finding job openings was another major concern, with 28 percent of the respondents saying “yes” and 30 percent indicating “sometimes,” which reflects uncertainty and inconsistency in employment opportunities.

Discrimination or bias during the hiring process was acknowledged by 16 percent of the respondents, though a majority (56 percent) did not face such issues directly, indicating varied experiences. Lastly, 34 percent of the participants admitted that disability affects their confidence or self-efficacy in pursuing career goals. These findings highlight the multifaceted barriers that disabled students face, not only in external systems such as hiring and promotion, but also in their internal sense of agency and career confidence. This underscores the need for

both institutional reforms and targeted empowerment initiatives to support disabled graduates in their professional endeavours.

4. Infrastructural Needs for a Barrier Free Learning Environment.

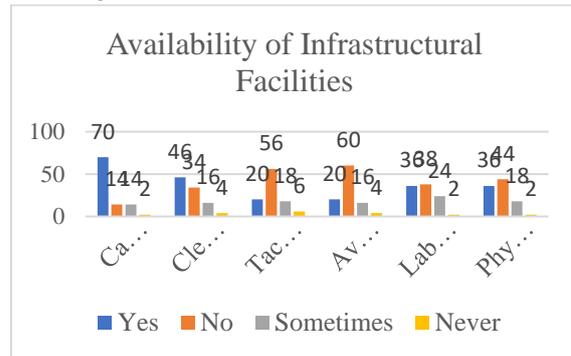
An inclusive and barrier-free learning environment is vital to ensuring equal opportunities for students with disabilities in higher education. The study focuses on evaluating the infrastructural elements within educational institutions that support accessibility. These elements include campus and wheelchair accessibility, signage and wayfinding systems, tactile and braille signage, audible alarms, accessible laboratories and equipment, and toilet facilities. Assessing the availability and adequacy of these facilities helps determine how effectively institutions cater to the physical needs of disabled students, thereby promoting or hindering their academic participation and independence.

Table 4: Infrastructural Needs for a Barrier Free Learning Environment

Free Learning Environment	Yes	No	Sometimes	Never
Campus/Wheel Chair Accessibility	70	14	14	2
Clear Signage & Way Finding Systems	46	34	16	4
Tactile Markers & Braille Signage Availability	20	56	18	6
Availability of Audible Signal Alarms	20	60	16	4
Laboratories, Workshops & Computers	36	38	24	2
Physical Accessibility of Toilet Facilities	36	44	18	2

Source: Primary Data

Figure 4: Infrastructural Needs for a Barrier Free Learning Environment.



Source: Primary Data

The data indicates that campus and wheelchair accessibility is largely satisfactory, with 70 percent of the respondents confirming its presence. This suggests that physical access to the campus is well-established. However, the availability of clear signage and wayfinding systems showed mixed results, with 46 percent reporting “yes” and 34 percent stating “no,” indicating room for improvement in navigational support. Concerns are more significant regarding accessibility features for visually and hearing-impaired students. Only 20 percent of the respondents confirmed the availability of tactile markers and braille signage, while 56 percent denied their presence. Similarly, audible signal alarms were reported available by only 20 percent of the respondents, whereas 60 percent noted their absence. This highlights a substantial gap in inclusive infrastructure for students with sensory impairments.

When examining laboratories, workshops, and computers, responses were evenly divided: 36 percent confirmed accessibility, while 38 percent reported it lacking. This indicates inconsistencies in adaptive infrastructure for academic tools and environments. As for toilet facilities, only 36 percent of the respondents acknowledged physical accessibility, while 44 percent said they were not accessible, which underscores a critical need for improvement in basic amenities. Overall, the findings reveal that while general campus mobility is relatively well addressed, specialized infrastructural provisions, particularly for sensory and personal care needs are significantly underdeveloped, pointing to the urgent need for comprehensive accessibility planning in higher education institutions.

VII. SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- Create peer support programs that pair disadvantaged students with trained peer mentors to foster social relationships and a sense of belonging.
- Plan inclusive campus events and activities that promote socialization and involvement among impaired students.
- Provide disability awareness training to professors, staff, and students to encourage understanding, acceptance, and inclusion.
- Provide faculty members with training and assistance as they build inclusive teaching techniques, make adjustments, and engage with impaired students.
- Make sure that academic accommodations like note-takers, translators, and assistive technology are readily available and easy to use.
- Offer one-on-one mentoring and academic support services to assist impaired students in overcoming academic barriers.
- Conduct frequent accessibility audits to detect and resolve physical barriers on campus.
- Use inclusive design concepts in campus development and renovation projects to ensure that all amenities are physically accessible.
- Provide disabled students with accessible transportation choices, such as wheelchair-accessible vehicles and parking.
- Create a separate disability office or department to manage disability support services and maintain institutional responsibility.
- Develop and execute inclusive policies to meet the requirements of impaired students, such as accessibility, accommodations, and support services.
- Provide adequate funding and resources to support disability services and programs, ensuring that impaired students have equal access to success.

### VIII. CONCLUSION

This study has provided valuable insights into the experiences of disabled students in higher education, highlighting the complex interplay between social, academic, and physical accessibility barriers. The findings unequivocally demonstrate that social barriers have the most significant impact on students' overall experience. By acknowledging the complex interplay between social, academic, and physical accessibility barriers, higher education institutions can take proactive steps to create inclusive environments that foster the success and well-being of disabled students, underscoring the need for institutions to prioritize inclusive campus cultures.

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