



## Self-Perception and Educational Experiences of Visually Impaired Students in Research Programs: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims to understand how visually impaired students in a Pakistani university make meaning of their identities and educational experiences. By using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), rich, descriptive data on five visually impaired doctoral candidates' perceptions, coping strategies and challenges encountered within the academic environment was obtained using semi-structured interviews. The data analysis yielded the following three superordinate themes: (1) negotiating an academic identity in world of sight, (2) managing institutional barriers and support systems, and (3) developing resilience and adaptive strategies. Participants were found to be unable to remain stable or unchanging in relation to the educational institutions to which they are attached. Rather, a complex between personal agency, social interactions, and institutional factors occurs, in which participants actively reconstruct their academic identities. The study concludes that more inclusive educational policies, adaptive technologies, and support services are required in higher education institutions. This paper contributes to the limited literature on visually impaired students in the research degree programs, particularly in the Pakistani context, and informs on how practices of higher education can be inclusive to all.



## Introduction

In recent years, there has been a greater interest in integrating students with visual impairments with mainstream higher education institutions in developing countries, including Pakistan (Rahman & Alam, 2022). Widening this trend towards inclusivity is in aligned with global efforts to ensure accessibility to education for everyone, irrespective of their physical abilities or disabilities (United Nations, 2020). However, Visually Impaired advanced research degree students in mainstream universities in Pakistan have not been studied well (Malik & Hasan, 2022).

Worldwide, 2.2 billion people are visually impaired (meaning that visual acuity or field of vision is significantly reduced to the extent that standard eyewear or medical interventions cannot overcome) (World Health Organization, 2021). According to the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (2023), about 2.9 million people are living with visual impairments in Pakistan who significantly suffer from poor access to quality education and professional opportunities. Recent policy initiatives promoting inclusive education in higher education institutions are inconsistently and insufficiently implemented (Khan et al., 2023).

The problem concerns insufficient support and accommodation of visually impaired students in research degree programmes. Advanced academic pursuits require a high degree of independence, critical thinking, and conducting research, all of which could be challenging for students with visual impairments (Lee & Thompson, 2022). Mainstream universities usually fail to provide suitable academic and institutional structures and social conditions that support students with visual impairments (Garcia & Patel, 2024).

Self-concept together with their perceptions about the educational processes of students with visual impairments pursuing research-based degrees at Pakistan's mainstream universities was the focus of the current study. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as a research tool, this study explores deep, complex data about students' lived experiences regarding how their identity develops and how they navigate challenges while dealing with institutional support programmes (Smith et al., 2022).

In researching those visually impaired students enrolled in research degree programmes within a mainstream university setting, the main question was how they construct their academic identities. This research study focuses on addressing the following sub questions:

1. What institutional barriers and enabling structures intervene in the careers of these students, and how do they act about these?
2. How do visually impaired students acquire resilience and adaptive strategies to progress in their research degrees?

This study is important in that it could shape the educational policy. Institutional practices and support services of visually impaired students at higher academic education levels. This research sheds light on visual impairment in higher education in Pakistan, where there is currently very little literature about the topic (Ahmed & Qureshi, 2022). Consequently, the conclusions can benefit educators, administrators, and authorities in charge of building more tolerant and supportive learning places for students with special abilities.

Indeed, this research is timely because of the emphasis on inclusive education and the rise in the enrolment of students with disabilities in higher education institutions worldwide (OECD, 2022). This study fills a gap in the literature regarding how visually impaired students feel in research degree programmes because it focuses on the experiences of visually impaired students in research degree programmes; it also contributes to the broader debate on accessibility, equity, and inclusion in higher education.

## **Literature Review**

In recent decades, including students with visual impairments in higher education has become a highly researched and purposeful area worldwide (Garcia & Patel, 2024). Visual impairment is a large spectrum of conditions, from partial sight to total blindness, that create obstacles in an academic setting (World Health Organization, 2022). It has been demonstrated and recently pointed out that there is a wide range of varied experiences in experiencing higher education by visually impaired students who need individualised support and adaptive technologies (Lee &

Thompson, 2023). It has been reported that visually impaired students sometimes have barriers to accessing educational materials, interacting in classroom activities and interacting in campus environments (Ahmed & Qureshi, 2022). The challenge of barriers can negatively affect academic performance, social integration, and well-being. Still, research has demonstrated that for visually impaired students, with the corresponding accommodations and support, there can be equal academic outcomes compared to seeing students (Garcia & Patel, 2024).

In recent years, Pakistan has improved inclusive education policies that conform with the international agenda of achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2021). Inclusive education is to be advocated, and children with disabilities must be accommodated within mainstream educational institutions according to the National Education Policy 2021 (Government of Pakistan, 2021). Although these policies are meant to be implemented, they are inconsistent, especially in higher education settings (Khan et al., 2023; Muhammad & Bokhari, 2024).

Certain gaps exist between policy intentions and practical implementation of Pakistani universities (Malik & Hasan, 2023). These gaps are believed to arise due to lack of resources, poor infrastructure or inadequate faculty and staff training to accommodate students with disabilities. In particular, visually impaired students seeking advanced research degrees encounter great difficulties since these programmes usually necessitate specific accommodations and support services (Rahman & Alam, 2022).

However, to the extent above and beyond those undergraduate students face, students with visual impairments must cope with their challenges in research degree programmes. Such challenges include searching and reading through complex research literature, conducting independent fieldwork and delivering research findings differently (Lee & Thompson, 2023). With the exception that research programmes tend to be intensely collaborative, and so the degree of autonomy expected from the visually impaired students is high, these can function as additional stressors (Garcia & Patel, 2024). In addition, visual impairment may hamper the social and communication of several research projects in laboratories and field research settings (Ahmed & Qureshi, 2022). All of these add up to the need for specialised adaptive technologies and accommodations, further complicating these students' academic journey (García-Villalobos et al., 2022; Waqar et al., 2024). The experience of identity formation for visually impaired students in higher education is varied and multi-dimensional. Studies reveal that these students tend to manoeuvre different identities at the same time with their disability and academic aspirations (Lee & Thompson, 2023). As such, "academic identity" is especially relevant in research degree programmes where students are expected to become experts and contribute to their field of study (Garcia & Patel, 2024).

The studies have been aimed at understanding how visually impaired students created their identity in academic environments built for sighted inhabitants (Ahmed & Qureshi, 2022). Revising so frequently involves negotiating with what it seems you ought to do, what you are supposed to do, what your aspirations are, and what your personal goals should be. Positive academic identity has been associated with visually impaired students' development of resilience, academic success, and overall well-being (García-Villalobos et al., 2021).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) offers a strong theoretical and methodological approach to studying the life experiences of visually impaired students in higher education (Smith et al., 2022). Through the connection of phenomenology and hermeneutics, IPA allows researchers to study personal and social world meaning-creation processes at an individual level (Johnson &

Lee, 2021). The exploration of visually impaired students' subjective experiences regarding their perceptions, emotions, and rational thinking becomes possible to a large extent through IPA research practises (Smith et al., 2022). Researchers should use this approach to study such phenomena because it effectively handles complex relationships between personal experiences within both individual social worlds and institutional settings (Johnson & Lee, 2021). Research utilising IPA enables scholars to uncover the complex life stories of participants, thereby uncovering their methods of coping and the identity creation process when conducting research at the post graduate level for visually impaired students. The investigative method matches the study targets by allowing researchers study how students view their personal development at this Pakistani academic centre.

## **Methodology**

This study applied Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as part of its qualitative research framework to understand Visually Impaired graduate students studying at Pakistani academic institutions. IPA research fits this study because it enables participants to give detailed descriptions of their experiences together with their interpretations of personal and social matters (Smith et al., 2022).

## **Research Design**

The research adopted the principles of IPA from phenomenology together with hermeneutics and idiography domains (Johnson & Lee, 2021). This method enabled us to conduct deep investigations into participants' subjective experiences of their academic-related feelings together with their sense of perception and emotional views. IPA's natural connection to idiography enabled us to carry out an intensive examination of individual participant experiences prior to making generalised statements (Smith et al., 2022).

## **Participant Selection and Recruitment**

According to IPA, small, homogenous samples like this one provide rich information (Johnson & Lee, 2021). The researcher purposively selected five participants. The inclusion criteria were:

1. Must be registered in a research degree programme (e.g., MPhil, PhD) in one of the mainstream Pakistani universities.
2. All of them were diagnosed with visual impairment (ranging from partial sight to total blindness).
3. They were willing to participate in in-depth interviews and share personal experiences.

Individuals with disabilities were recruited through the university's disability support services and student services office. Informed consent was obtained from potential participants only after they had been provided with detailed information about the study in accessible forms (braille, large print, audio recording).

## **Data Collection Methods**

The primary data collection method was semi-structured interviews, field notes and observations. For this reason, this approach provided some flexibility in exploring participant experiences but kept the research questions at the centre. Each participant was engaged in a 60 to 90-minute face-to-face interview. It was based on the research questions and literature review, such as academic experiences, struggles, coping strategies, and identity formation. Participants were asked open-ended questions to share vivid and detailed experiences. Participants consented to audio-record interviews, which were transcribed into one or two pages of verbatim text.

Throughout and immediately after each interview, the researcher wrote very detailed field notes of these cues, environmental factors, and initial interpretations. These notes helped the analysis and supported the reflexive process associated with IPA (Smith et al., 2022).

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

The data analysis aligned with the iterative steps of IPA, as Smith et al. (2022) indicated. Reading and re-reading: All transcripts were read several times to better comply with the narrative content and better understand the overall storey structure.

1. Initial noting: Descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments were made on every transcript, from what the participant meant explicitly to what the researcher meant.
2. Initial notes were then analysed to develop emergent themes, which are the aspects of the participants' experience that were most valuable.
3. Identifying emergent themes and searching for connexions across them: After the data was analysed, we formed related themes with each student to develop superordinate themes within each student.
4. In the next case, Steps 1–4 were repeated among each participant using an idiographic approach.

Superordinate themes were compared across participants to look for patterns across cases, patterns concerning themes shared across participants and diverse patterns concerning their unique variations.

### **Ethical Considerations, Trustworthiness and Rigor**

The study was conducted in strict accordance with institutional IRB. Key ethical considerations included:

Detailed information regarding the study was given to participants in easily accessible formats, with ample time for the decision to participate. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured by using pseudonyms and omitting all identifying information from the research materials.

We established a protocol for support if any participants were distressed during interviews for emotional support. All data were collected and stored securely and encrypted, and no research data was accessible to anyone other than the research team.

1. Several strategies were used to ensure the trustworthiness and rigour of the study.
2. The participant could read their interview transcripts and comment on the initial interpretations using member checking.
3. Regular discussion with one's peers who were not working on the study enabled us to challenge assumptions and interpretations.
4. The research process was audited: A detailed record of decisions made within the methods and reflective notes was kept.
5. The researcher conducted ongoing reflexive practices, identifying reflexive aspects to account for and make sense of possible pertinent reflexive aspects that could have impacted the research process.

These methodological approaches aimed to offer a thorough and sensitive picture of the experiences of visually impaired students in research degree programmes in a Pakistani mainstream university. However, implementing these principles rigidly and thoughtfully, in conjunction with careful consideration of ethical aspects and trustworthiness, led to a study that provided important knowledge for the study of inclusive higher education.

## **Findings**

The key findings from the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) of five visually impaired students studying for a research degree at a mainstream Pakistani university are discussed below. Three superordinate themes that characterise the essence of participants' experiences about being a visually impaired grad student emerged from the analysis: (1) Negotiating academic identity in a sighted world, (2) Navigating institutional barriers and systems of support, and (3) Developing resilience and adaptive strategies. In turn, each superordinate theme is further divided into subthemes, each of which helps refine the understanding of a participant's lived experiences.

## **Participant Profiles**

Brief profiles of the five participants are presented under pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality and contextualise the findings.

1. Amira, a 28-year-old female PhD student in Sociology, is partially sighted.
2. Bashir: 32-year-old male, PhD candidate in Education, legally blind
3. Fatima is 26 years old. She is studying for her MPhil in English Literature and is partially sighted.
4. Hassan: 30-year-old male, PhD candidate in Economics, totally blind
5. Nadia: 27-year-old female, MPhil student in Psychology, legally blind

## **Superordinate Theme 1: Academic identity in a sighted world**

**Moulding an Academic Identity:** In a world largely built for sighted people, participants lived the experiences of creating and sustaining their academic identities. Three subthemes were derived from the analysis.

### **Subtheme 1a: Balancing Visibility and Invisibility**

This is a complex process. They try to be visible to be recognised (more) as a student. However, as visually impaired students, the visibility needs to be managed. However, this balancing act consisted of making strategic decisions such as when and how to disclose their visual impairment. Amira articulated this struggle:

I wanted to be perceived as much more than just 'the blind student,' somebody that I could research with, that I was an able researcher. But, I occasionally have to flag my disability so I can obtain the requisite accommodations. It's a constant negotiation.  
(Amira)

Other participants concurred with this sentiment, raising the tension between the need to receive the necessary support and the fear of doing so and eliciting the stigmatising belief that one is potentially failing or that friends and faculty may have already lowered expectations for them.

### **Subtheme 1b: Redefining Academic Success**

With visual impairments, the participants needed to readjust their definitions of academic success. They tackled internalised ableist notions of achievement and worked on creating my standards of progress and achievement. Hassan reflected:

I've learned that my path could vary from my sighted colleagues.' But success is not in publications or conference presentations, but in coming up with ingenious ways to research these challenges. (Hassan)

Typically, this redefinition of success also entailed a change towards the valuation of personal growth, the capacity to adapt and make unique contributions to their chosen field of work.

### **Subtheme 1c: Navigating Peer Relationships and Collaborations**

There were challenges and opportunities for participants to develop academic relationships with sighted peers. To some, they were isolated or excluded from informal academic networks, while others discovered that their outlooks enrich collaborative projects. Bashir shared:

Initially, some classmates were reluctant to work with me on group projects. Once they saw how differently I approached problems and that there was a benefit to the team with it, attitudes changed. Today, I'm quite often approached to collaborate with others. (Bashir)

The second subtheme explains how environments conducive to social inclusiveness significantly create positive academic identities for visually impaired students.

### **Superordinate Theme 2: Institutional Barriers and Institutional Support**

The tone of this theme is an expander of rigid and distensions of the structural aspects of the academic environment as they pertain to participants, both as limitations and as sources of support. Three subthemes emerged:

#### **Subtheme 2a: Accessibility of Academic Resources**

All participants stated issues with locating and getting course material, research literature and other learning tools in formats that their assistive devices can access. Fatima described:

And finding textbooks and journal articles in accessible formats is a fight that continues. I sometimes feel that more time is taken to access these materials than to read them (Siddiqui et al.)

Importantly, this subtheme reiterates universities' urgency to ensure academic resources are accessible for visually impaired students.

#### **Subtheme 2b: Faculty Awareness and Accommodation**

Faculty members were available and knowledgeable about the needs of participants and willing or unwilling to provide accommodation. Some professors supported it, while others were completely unaware or inflexible. Nadia reflected:

Some professors ensure I can fully participate in research activities and seminars. Some appear uneasy or indecisive on how to converse with me. This hurts my confidence in those classes and makes me not want to participate. (Nadia)

One of the main subthemes in this paper is relevant to the importance of training faculty to thoroughly engage in inclusive teaching practices and disability awareness.

#### **Subtheme 2c: Institutional Policies and Support Services**

The participants' experiences with formal support services and institutional policies were diverse. Some admired the disability support office at the university, but others said the services were not meant to meet the specific needs of research degree students. Hassan noted:

Yet the support services are well-meaning and largely built for undergrads. I can't expect the PhD student to have access to specialised materials like data analysis software or accessible lab equipment. (Hassan)

This subtheme highlights the necessity for targeted support services that consider the special needs of a visually impaired student enrolled in a research degree programme.

### **Superordinate Theme 3: Leadership for resilience and adaptive strategies**

This theme revolves around the various ways in which different participants developed unique strategies and resilience in their pursuit of succeeding in their academic pursuits. Three subthemes emerged:

#### **Subtheme 3a: Technological Adaptations and Innovations**

Participants were creative in modifying existing technologies or developing new solutions to solve academic problems. For instance, Bashir designed a custom software tool.

What I ended up doing was using a program that uses complex computer diagrams that get converted into audible representations. But it's not perfect, and at least it allows me to work with visual concepts because this works for me. (Bashir)

It can also be observed as a subtheme of fostering an environment that fosters and supports such innovative problem-solving.

#### **Subtheme 3b: Building Support Networks**

Formal and informal support networks have been crucial in the participants' academic journey. These networks were sometimes linked to the university but often spread beyond this, including visually impaired scholars connected in online communities. Amira shared:

Connecting with fellow visually impaired researchers in my field was invaluable. Sharing strategies, emotional support, and sometimes empathizing make me remember I am not on this journey alone. (Amira)

This subtheme implies that visually impaired students and scholars have to be connected in a way that they learn from one another and develop their resilience.

#### **Subtheme 3c: Cultivating Adaptive Mindsets**

Participants had their frameworks for refocusing challenges and reorienting problems into opportunities for personal and business growth and innovation. It turns out that this adaptive mindset is required to keep motivation and persistence. Fatima reflected:

Each obstacle has helped me learn a new skill or perspective, so I have got used to seeing every obstacle as an opportunity. Not easy, necessarily, but this thought has given me the will to press on when times get hard. (Siddiqui et al.)

This subtheme outlined the psychological strategies used by visually impaired students to overcome the challenges related to research degree programmes.

The research findings enhance our understanding of disabled students who pursue research degrees at a Pakistani mainstream university regarding their self-identification and academic experiences.



The analytics stemming from IPA approaches have revealed a substantial understanding of how personal social and institutional variables affect disabled research students' academic journeys.

## **Discussion**

This research examined the interpretation that visually impaired research students in Pakistani mainstream universities have regarding their educational journey and personal identity. The interpretative phenomenological analysis methodology used to study five participants revealed a detailed set of interactions linking their personal lives with their social connections along with university institutions as educational entities. The findings from this study are analysed in regard to both academic and practical applications toward inclusive education within Pakistan.

### **Interpretation of Findings of Research Questions**

The first research question aimed at determining how visually impaired students create their identities as students in a mainstream university setting. This question is addressed through the superordinate theme, "Negotiating Academic Identity in a Sighted World", as a process of identity formation. Balancing the need to keep their blindness known with the ability to prove their academic potential, participants engaged in a delicate balance of being visibly visually impaired. Such a finding aligns with García-Villalobos et al.'s (2021) idea of "identity negotiation" that concerns disabled students in higher education. The current study assesses the process of redefining academic success, such as expanding our comprehension of visually impaired students' means to modify self-perception and goals to cope with challenges presented by the environment.

The second research question addressed institutional barriers and support systems that visually impaired students faced during their education. The superordinate theme, Navigating Institutional Barriers and Support Systems, provides insight into structural aspects of participants' experience. The findings on challenges to accessing academic resources and variability of faculty's awareness verify similar observations by Ahmed and Qureshi (2022) on the difficulties faced by visually impaired students in Pakistani universities. The current study, however, takes this beyond knowledge and enlightens on particular specific needs of research degree students compared to undergraduate exams, which are sometimes different.

The third research question was about how visually impaired students have adapted and developed resiliency. The superordinate theme, Developing Resilience and Adaptive Strategies, reflects participants' creativity and determination. In line with Lee and Thompson's (2023) finding about the role of assistive technologies in promoting the academic success of visually impaired students, emphasis is placed on technological adaptation and innovations. The new understanding brought by the study about the psychological strategies for example, in the development of adaptive mindsets — that these students use to cope with the challenges of the research degree programmes is what the current study contributes.

### **Comparison with Existing Literature**

This study verifies and expands other research on the experiences of visually impaired students in higher education. Statements regarding the challenges to accessing academic resources and moving over institutional barriers correspond with previously established empirical scholarship developed in diverse international contexts (García-Villalobos et al., 2022; Lee & Thompson, 2023). The current study, however, narrows down the assessment of these issues within the context of the very real environment of research degree programmes at a mainstream Pakistani university.

Among the most important findings of this study are those related to the need for faculty awareness and accommodation, which is well supported by another study we have included, Garcia and Patel's (2024) work on inclusive teaching practises in higher education. This body of knowledge is extended here by a need for specific support and awareness training to the particular needs of visually impaired students in research-oriented programmes. It is consistent with Johnson and Lee's (2021) concept of 'academic resilience' in developing resilience and adaptive strategies among participants. The current study does build a new understanding of how resilience is expressed within the context of research degree programmes, namely via technological innovations and the development of supportive networks for visually impaired scholars.

### **Theoretical Implications**

This study's findings carry several theoretical implications in terms of the experiences visually impaired students have in higher education. These findings contribute to forming the ongoing discourse on the identity formation of disabled students in the academic arena. The participants' descriptions of the complex negotiation of visibility and invisibility in their experience of physical disability identity enhance existing theories and add to them by articulating the fluid and context-dependent nature found in the environment.

Second, the study's findings support and extend resilience theory's application to the academic domain. Adaptive strategies evolved by participants, notably their indigenous technology use and the cultivation of their supportive networks, raise their resilience in academic settings to not be solely about how one conquers adversity but also how one channels adversity into creativity and opportunities for growth and innovation.

Thirdly, the study offers the theoretical realm of inclusive education by making apparent the intersection of disability and the world of higher education, as it was and will likely remain immersed in a cultural context. The cultural attitudes towards disability in a Pakistani university setting, as experienced by visually impaired students, interact with the institutional structures and the individual agency to create the educational experience.

### **Practical Implications for Inclusive Education in Pakistan**

Several practical implications of this study are associated with promoting and implementing inclusive education in Pakistani universities for visually impaired students relating to research degree programmes. The first need is for universities to nurture more comprehensive, specialised support services for visually impaired research students. Such support includes procuring and supplying advanced assistive technologies to enhance the ability of visually impaired students and researchers to interact with accessible research materials and offering specialised training in research methodologies designed for this special population(Waqar et al., 2025).

Second, the study points out the training and awareness of the faculty. As such, universities should ensure that faculty members receive training to know, understand, and be able to support and involve visually impaired students in their research activities. The training should go beyond disability awareness to encompass concrete means of adapting the research methodologies and mentoring practices.

Thirdly, universities must cultivate inclusive social environments to encourage peer collaborations and support networks between students who are differently able. It might entail putting in structured occasions that foster visually impaired and sighted students to look for collaborative research ventures.

The last aspect of the study demonstrates the significance of the participation of visually impaired students in developing and implementing inclusive policies and practices. Institutional decision-making processes should be informed by their insights and experiences to determine whether the available support services and accommodations are appropriate for them.

We addressed the aims and objectives of this study to develop our understanding regarding the experiences of visually impaired students conducting research degrees at a mainstream Pakistani university. These findings enhance our understanding of advanced identity development processes and institutional exploration and resilience building among visually impaired students for academic research programmes. The acquired insights will serve as a direction for policy development and educational practice that aims to create suitable academic spaces for visually impaired students who pursue research degrees in Pakistan as well as other comparable institutions worldwide.

## **Conclusion**

The main research goal involved understanding how visually impaired students accessed education from research degree programmes in a mainstream Pakistani university through Interpretative Phenomenological analysis. Research findings revealed three essential overarching themes between visually impaired students and sighted academic environments: students had to handle dual identities, institutions needed improvement in support networks, and students needed to develop coping mechanisms. These results provide an important understanding of how personal and institutional elements and social environments connect with the higher education journey of visually impaired students in Pakistan.

These findings add to the emerging research on inclusive education within higher education settings, especially in the case of developing countries such as Pakistan. This research also provides a nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by visually impaired students in research degree programmes, and to this effect, this research illuminates the lived experiences of visually impaired students.

Identity negotiation was identified as a central process of participants' experience navigating their academic environments as visually impaired students. This extends our understanding of disability identity in educational contexts along with existing theory, suggesting that such disability identities are fluid and context dependent. What disability identity means in research-intensive settings lies on a continuum defined by the location of that setting on the theory-practice continuum. Moreover, this research highlights the role institutional policies and faculty consciousness play in designing inclusive academic spaces, as existing research has shown that inclusive teaching practices in higher education need to be a part of institutional policy (Garcia & Patel, 2024).

A key finding presented was the development of resilience and adaptive methods of participants that fit into the current discourse on academic resilience. Visually impaired students employ innovative ways to overcome such challenges, which creates the potential for adversity to transform academic settings. This applies resilience theory to higher education contexts and students with disabilities.

## **Limitations of the Study**

However, some limitations of this study should be noted. First, the small sample size, while appropriate for IPA methodology, limits the generalizability of the findings to broader populations. Second, because the study was conducted in just one university in Pakistan, institutional variations that may exist in higher education settings of the country were ignored. Third, using self-reported

data in interviews may have led to some potential biases in recollections and interpretations of participants' experiences.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Several avenues for future research are based on the findings and limitations of this study.

1. Further insights could be gleaned from longitudinal studies regarding the changing nature of their academic identities and their adaptive strategies from the beginning until the end of their research degree programs from the experiences of visually impaired students.
2. The comparative study of the processes of inclusive education practices for visually impaired students across different universities and cultural contexts of Pakistan might contribute towards a better understanding of the impact of institutional and regional variations.
3. Research using the viewpoint of faculty members, administrators, and students might give us a fuller perspective on the environmental and authoritative components mediating visually impaired students' experiences in research stage programs.
4. The long-term career outcomes and professional integration of visually impaired graduates from research doctorate programs represent an area of possible policy and practice change in both the employment and higher education sectors.
5. Further studies involving the interplay between visual impairment and other aspects of identity (i.e., gender and socioeconomic status) with regard to educating these students would help paint a more complex depiction of the varying needs of this student population.

### **Concluding Remarks**

This study uses Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore the experiences of visually impaired students with research degrees in a mainstream Pakistani university. To begin with, it outlines three major themes concerning academic identity negotiation in a sighted world: institutional barriers and institutional support systems, resilience, and adaptive strategies. Some of the difficulties discussed by participants included balancing visibility and invisibility, reconfiguring definitions of academic success, and accessing academic resources, on the one hand, and discrepancy in faculty awareness on the other. Along with that, instead of succumbing, they showed resilience by bringing about technological innovations, support networks, and adaptive mindsets.

This research builds on research in the area of disability and higher education by focusing on the fluidity of disability identity and the place institutional policies play in forming a disability identity. It implies the use of inclusive teaching practices and services specially tailored to assist students, faculty training, and constructing collaborative environments. Although constrained by sample size and scope, the study makes an important contribution to knowledge on the provision of inclusive education in Pakistan while pointing to future work in the development of policy, institutional differences, as well as long-term career outcomes of visually impaired students.

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