



Resilience in the face of exclusion: A qualitative case study on how students with disabilities adapt to campus life in resource-constrained universities.

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Abstract

Background

Students with disabilities continue to face substantial barriers in accessing and participating fully in higher education, particularly within resource-constrained institutions where inclusive infrastructure and support services are limited. Understanding how these students navigate such environments is critical for informing inclusive practice.

Methods

A qualitative case study design was employed at a South African university of technology. Purposive sampling was used to recruit 18 participants, comprising 12 students with disabilities, 3 academic staff members, and 3 student support personnel. The student participants included 7 females and 5 males, aged between 19 and 32 years, with physical, visual, and hearing impairments. Data were collected through semi-structured individual interviews and focus group discussions. Thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's framework. Credibility was enhanced through peer debriefing and member checking.

Results

Four major themes emerged. Structural barriers and inaccessibility were evident through inadequate physical infrastructure and limited access to learning materials. Social exclusion and stigma manifested in experiences of isolation and misunderstanding from peers and staff. Personal agency and resilience were demonstrated as students adopted coping strategies such as audio-recording lectures, negotiating informal accommodations, and forming peer support networks. The theme of limited institutional support reflected gaps in policy implementation, with staff citing budgetary constraints and limited institutional prioritisation of disability services. Despite these challenges, students displayed strong determination and adaptive capacity, relying heavily on peer-based support.

Conclusion

While students with disabilities in resource-constrained universities demonstrate notable resilience, systemic barriers continue to undermine equitable participation. Reliance on individual coping strategies alone is insufficient to achieve meaningful inclusion.

Recommendations

Universities should prioritise low-cost inclusive interventions, including disability awareness training, accessible learning materials, clear signage, and structured peer mentorship programmes to strengthen institutional support for students with disabilities.

Keywords: Students with disabilities, resilience, higher education, inclusive education, structural barriers, resource-constrained universities, adaptation strategies, social exclusion, institutional support, South Africa

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Background Information

Globally, access to higher education for students with disabilities has improved in policy but remains inconsistent in practice, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. In South Africa, although progressive legislation such as the Constitution (1996), the White Paper on Post-School Education and Training (2013), and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) affirm the right to inclusive education, many public universities struggle to translate these policies into reality. Resource-constrained institutions, in particular, face significant challenges, including limited funding, inaccessible infrastructure, inadequate training of staff, and a lack of assistive technology. Students with disabilities navigating these environments often contend with multiple layers of exclusion: physical, social, academic, and institutional. Nevertheless, many manage to persist and succeed, driven by personal resilience, informal support systems, and adaptive learning strategies. This study aims to understand how students with disabilities develop and exercise resilience in such contexts and what institutional barriers still hinder their full participation.

Study Objectives

- I. To explore the lived experiences of students with disabilities in a resource-constrained university setting.
- II. To identify the structural, social, and institutional barriers these students face.
- III. To examine the resilience and adaptation strategies employed by students to navigate campus life.
- IV. To assess the perceived effectiveness of institutional support structures from both student and staff perspectives.

Methodology

Study Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore the adaptive strategies and resilience of students with disabilities within a resource-constrained university setting. The design enabled in-depth, context-rich exploration of lived experiences shaped by social, institutional, and environmental factors.

Study Setting

The study was conducted at a South African university of technology located in an urban township setting. The

institution is characterised by limited physical infrastructure, underfunded student support services, and a growing population of students with diverse needs. Data collection took place over three months, from February to April 2025. Interviews and focus group discussions were conducted in English and isiZulu, depending on participant preference.

Participants and Recruitment

A total of 18 participants were enrolled, comprising:

- 12 students with disabilities (4 with mobility impairments, 4 with visual impairments, and 4 with hearing impairments),
- 3 academic staff members, and
- 3 student support personnel from the disability office and the student services unit.

Participants were approached face-to-face and via institutional email invitations, facilitated through the disability support office. Follow-up contact was conducted telephonically, where necessary, to arrange interview times.

Description of Sample

Of the 18 participants, 10 were female, and 8 were male. Student participants ranged in age from 19 to 34 years, while staff participants ranged from 32 to 56 years.

Inclusion, Exclusion, and Non-Participation

Eligible student participants were enrolled in undergraduate or diploma programmes, had completed at least one academic year at the institution, and had formally disclosed their disability status. Staff participants were selected based on direct involvement in teaching or disability support. Of the 22 individuals initially approached, 3 declined participation due to time constraints, and 1 did not respond to follow-up communication. No participants withdrew after consenting, and there were no dropouts during data collection.

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected using:

- Semi-structured individual interviews with all 18 participants.
- Two focus group discussions, one with students (6 participants) and one with staff/support personnel (6 participants), to validate and expand on emerging themes.



Interview Guide and Pilot Testing

The semi-structured interview guide, including questions and prompts, was pilot tested with two students with disabilities and one staff member, who were part of the final sample were not. Feedback from the pilot informed refinement of question clarity, sequencing, and neutrality.

Duration

- Individual interviews lasted 40–60 minutes.
- Focus group discussions lasted approximately 75–90 minutes.

All sessions were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis and Findings

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using thematic content analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. Analysis involved repeated reading of transcripts, coding, theme development, review, and refinement.

Number of Data Coders

The data were coded by two independent researchers. Initial codes were developed separately and later compared during consensus meetings. Discrepancies were discussed and resolved collaboratively, enhancing analytic credibility.

Coding Tree Description

Table 1: Coding Tree Showing Codes, Categories, and Themes

Initial Codes	Categories	Major Themes
Broken ramps, inaccessible lecture halls, lack of assistive devices	Physical barriers	Structural barriers and inaccessibility
Isolation, stigma, negative attitudes	Social barriers	Social exclusion and stigma
Self-advocacy, peer support, coping strategies	Individual responses	Personal agency and resilience
Limited funding, policy gaps, and a lack of implementation	Institutional challenges	Limited institutional support

Ethical Consideration

The study received ethical clearance from the Mangosuthu University of Technology Research Ethics Committee. All participants provided informed consent before participation. To protect participant confidentiality, pseudonyms were used, and all identifiable information was removed during data analysis and reporting. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences.

Results and Findings

The results from this study reveal four dominant and interrelated themes that shape the lived experiences of students with disabilities: structural barriers and inaccessibility, social exclusion and stigma, personal agency and resilience, and limited institutional support. As illustrated in both the bar graph and the thematic diagram, structural barriers were the most frequently mentioned challenge, cited by nearly all participants. These included the absence of ramps, elevators, and accessible learning materials, which significantly hindered physical mobility

and academic access. The second most prevalent theme was social exclusion and stigma, where students reported being marginalized, stereotyped, or misunderstood by both peers and academic staff. These experiences not only reinforced their sense of isolation but also made it difficult to advocate for accommodations without fear of judgment. Despite these challenges, the theme of personal agency and resilience emerged as a critical counterbalance. Students described how they navigated exclusionary spaces by adopting creative coping strategies such as audio-recording lectures, relying on peer support, and maintaining self-motivation. This theme, highlighted prominently in the diagram, underscores the inner strength and adaptability of students who refuse to be defined by their limitations or institutional shortcomings. However, the capacity for resilience was often exercised in the absence of formal structures, which points to the fourth theme: limited institutional support. Staff participants acknowledged the lack of implementation of disability-inclusive policies, citing financial constraints, insufficient training, and a lack of clear accountability as persistent barriers to progress. The results collectively suggest that while students with disabilities exhibit

remarkable perseverance, they do so in a context that often neglects their basic educational rights. The institutional failure to address accessibility proactively shifts the burden of adaptation onto students, which, over time, can lead to emotional fatigue, academic underperformance, and

dropout. These findings call for an urgent rethinking of how resource-constrained universities can adopt inclusive practices that are both affordable and transformative, ensuring that resilience is complemented, not substituted, by institutional responsibility.

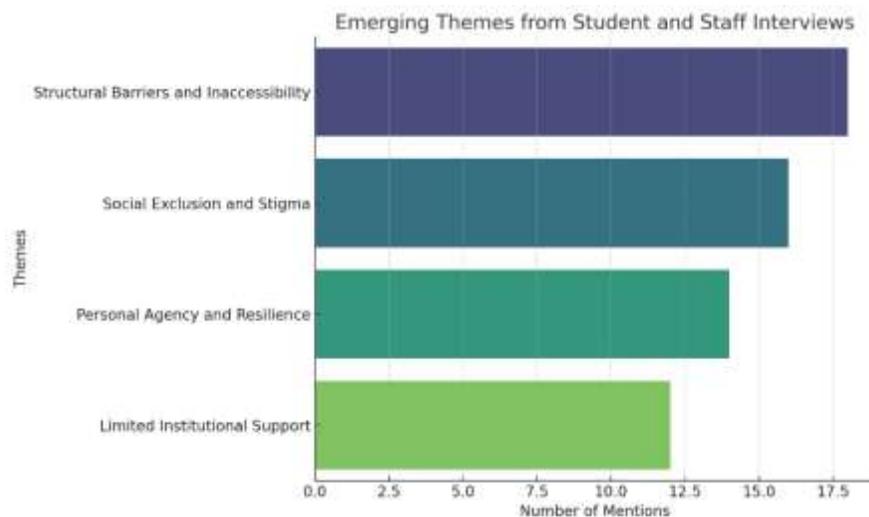


Figure 1: The graph above visually presents the frequency of key themes identified during interviews and focus groups.

Discussion

The findings of this study illustrate that adaptation among students with disabilities in resource-constrained universities is not the result of inclusive institutional design but rather a response to persistent systemic exclusion. Structural barriers emerged as the most dominant challenge, indicating that physical and learning environments remain inadequately configured to support diverse abilities. This suggests that exclusion is not incidental but embedded within institutional infrastructure, effectively limiting participation and reinforcing marginalisation. Structural inaccessibility therefore functions as both a practical and symbolic barrier, communicating to students with disabilities that their needs are secondary within the academic space. Social exclusion and stigma further compound these barriers, revealing that attitudinal challenges are as restrictive as physical ones. Misunderstandings, lowered expectations, and paternalistic attitudes from peers and staff undermine students' sense of belonging and academic confidence. These findings indicate that disability inclusion is not solely a technical issue of infrastructure but a cultural one, rooted in institutional

norms and perceptions that fail to recognise disability as a dimension of diversity rather than a deficit. The emergence of personal agency and resilience highlights students' capacity to adapt creatively and strategically in the absence of adequate support. Coping strategies such as peer collaboration and flexible learning practices demonstrate agency and determination; however, their prominence also reflects institutional shortcomings. Resilience in this context should be interpreted as compensatory rather than empowering, developed out of necessity rather than choice. While resilience enables persistence, over-reliance on it risks normalising exclusion and shifting responsibility from institutions to individuals. The limited institutional support reveals a disconnect between policy intent and operational practice. Although disability policies exist, their weak implementation reflects constrained resources, limited training, and insufficient accountability. This gap undermines transformation agendas and perpetuates inequity. Overall, the findings suggest that meaningful inclusion requires a shift from expecting students to adapt to exclusionary environments toward institutional

responsibility for creating accessible, supportive, and inclusive learning spaces.

Generalisability

While the findings are context-specific, they are likely applicable to other resource-constrained institutions in South Africa and the broader Global South, where challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, policy gaps, and social stigma remain widespread. However, caution should be taken in applying these findings to well-resourced or policy-advanced institutions, as structural and cultural variables may differ significantly.

Conclusion

This study concludes that students with disabilities in resource-constrained universities face persistent and multifaceted barriers, including structural inaccessibility, social exclusion, and limited institutional support (see diagram 1). Despite these challenges, many students develop resilience by developing adaptive strategies and relying on informal support systems. However, their success often occurs despite institutional systems, not because of them. The findings emphasize the urgent need for systemic transformation to move beyond symbolic inclusion and toward meaningful support that affirms the dignity and rights of all students.



Figure 2: The diagram illustrating the key themes of exclusion and resilience among students with disabilities in resource-constrained universities.

Limitations

The study was confined to one university of technology in South Africa, which limits its institutional and geographic scope. The purposive sampling method and small sample size (18 participants) may not capture the full diversity of

student experiences, particularly those who may be less vocal or invisible within institutional structures. Additionally, the absence of a longitudinal design restricts insight into how students' resilience and adaptation strategies evolve.



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Recommendation

To promote true inclusion, universities, particularly those in resource-constrained settings, should implement practical and cost-effective strategies. These include disability awareness training for academic and administrative staff, the development of accessible learning materials, improved physical infrastructure, and the creation of peer mentorship and support structures. Furthermore, institutions should operationalize existing disability policies through clear implementation plans, monitoring mechanisms, and budget allocation, ensuring that inclusion is institutionalized rather than incidental.

List of abbreviations

UNCRPD - United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

Biography

Dr. Sibonelo Thanda Mbanjwa is a dedicated lecturer in the Department of Nature Conservation at Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT), South Africa. He holds a Ph.D. in Environmental Science and specializes in biodiversity conservation, sustainable development, and environmental education. Dr. Mbanjwa is deeply committed to community engagement, student mentorship, and the integration of indigenous knowledge systems into conservation practices. His work bridges academia and practical application, empowering students and communities through innovative teaching, research, and outreach initiatives.

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Competing Interests

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Author Contributions

I, the author, contributed to the study conception and design. Material preparation, data collection, and research were performed by Mbanjwa S.T. The first draft was written by Mbanjwa S.T.

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the author, but restrictions apply to the availability of these data, which were used under license from various research publications for the current study and are therefore not publicly available.

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