# Beyond Physical Access: Coping Strategies of Students with Disabilities in Navigating Higher Education – A Qualitative Case Study.

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## Abstract
### Background
Students with disabilities face a wide range of challenges in accessing and succeeding in higher education, beyond just physical accessibility. These include socio-emotional barriers, limited institutional support, and systemic exclusion. In resource-constrained universities, these challenges are often amplified due to infrastructural and policy limitations. This study explores the coping mechanisms employed by students with disabilities as they navigate such higher education spaces.

### Methods
This qualitative case study was conducted at a South African public university between January 2023 and March 2025. A purposive sample of 20 students with various physical, visual, and hearing disabilities participated in the study. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and one focus group discussion. Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis approach was used to identify key coping strategies and barriers.

### Results
Findings revealed that students with disabilities employed a combination of personal resilience, peer support networks, assistive technologies, and informal arrangements with lecturers to cope. Key themes included "adaptive self-reliance," "strategic social integration," and "navigating institutional silence." While some reported supportive academic staff, others experienced marginalization due to poor disability inclusion policies. Emotional exhaustion and the need for constant self-advocacy were also highlighted as significant stressors.

### Conclusion
The study concludes that while students with disabilities demonstrate remarkable agency, their coping strategies often compensate for institutional failures rather than reflecting inclusive education. There is an urgent need for systemic reform in university disability support systems.

### Recommendations
Higher education institutions should adopt a holistic inclusion model that goes beyond infrastructural access to include emotional, academic, and policy-level support. This includes disability training for staff, establishment of peer-mentoring programs, and investment in adaptive technologies. Institutional policies must be co-designed with students with disabilities to ensure relevance and effectiveness.

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## Background Information

Globally, the inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education is increasingly recognized as a fundamental human right and a critical component of social justice. In South Africa, legislative and policy frameworks such as the South African Constitution (1996), the Integrated National Disability Strategy (1997), and the White Paper on Post-School Education and

Training (2013) explicitly mandate equal access to education for students with disabilities. These policies call on universities to create inclusive environments that not only eliminate physical barriers but also address systemic inequalities that hinder full participation. Despite these legal and policy advancements, the reality within many South African higher education institutions, particularly in resource-constrained settings, remains marked by persistent challenges for students with disabilities. Most institutional responses have focused primarily on infrastructural compliance, such as the installation of ramps, elevators, and modified restrooms. While these changes are necessary, they are far from sufficient. They often overlook the non-physical and deeply embedded barriers students face, including academic exclusion, social isolation, stigmatization, and inconsistent access to assistive technologies. The absence of comprehensive institutional support and the failure to implement inclusive teaching practices place the burden of adaptation on students with disabilities themselves.

Research has shown that these students often rely heavily on personal resilience, informal peer networks, and ad hoc arrangements with lecturers to survive in environments not designed with their needs in mind (Mutanga, 2017; Chataika et al., 2012). This over-reliance on individual coping strategies underscores the lack of systemic planning and inclusive institutional cultures. As a result, disability support in higher education remains fragmented, reactive, and exclusionary in its effects. Against this backdrop, the aim of this study is to explore the lived experiences and coping strategies of students with disabilities in navigating South African higher education institutions, with a focus on identifying gaps in institutional support and opportunities for inclusive transformation.

## The objectives of this study are:

To identify and describe the primary coping mechanisms employed by students with disabilities in navigating academic, social, and institutional challenges in higher education.

## Methodology

### Study Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore the coping strategies used by students with disabilities in navigating higher education. A case study approach was appropriate as it allowed for an in-depth, contextualized understanding of participants lived experiences within a single institutional setting.

### Study Setting

The study was conducted at a South African public university located in the KwaZulu-Natal province. The institution is known for serving students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds and operates within a resource-constrained environment. Data collection took place over a three-month period, from January 2024 to March 2024.

### Participants

The study targeted undergraduate and postgraduate students with self-identified physical, visual, or hearing disabilities who were registered at the university during the data collection period. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, in collaboration with the university's Disability Support Unit, to ensure that individuals with relevant lived experiences were represented.

**Inclusion Criteria:**

Registered as an undergraduate or postgraduate student at the university during the study period

Self-identified as having a physical, visual, or hearing disability

Had completed at least one full academic year at the institution

Willing and able to participate in an in-depth interview or focus group discussion

Provided informed consent for participation

### Exclusion Criteria:

Students with temporary disabilities or conditions not formally identified as long-term physical, visual, or hearing impairments

First-year students with less than one year of academic experience at the institution

Students who declined to participate or could not commit to an interview or focus group

Individuals with cognitive or psychiatric disabilities were excluded in this particular study due to the study's focus on physical, visual, and hearing impairments (though future studies are encouraged to address these categories)

### Recruitment Process:

Participants were recruited through informational posters, email invitations, and referrals by the Disability Support Unit. Efforts were made to ensure diversity in gender, academic level, and type of disability to enrich the range of perspectives captured.

### Bias

To minimize selection bias, efforts were made to include students with diverse types of disabilities, academic levels, and faculties. The use of open-ended interview guides allowed for emergent themes to surface organically rather than being directed by the researcher's assumptions. Reflexive journaling was maintained throughout the data collection and analysis process to reduce researcher bias, and participant validation (member checking) was used to verify the accuracy of transcribed data and interpretations.

### Study Size

A total of 20 participants were included in the study, comprising 15 in-depth interviews and one focus group discussion with 5 additional participants. The sample size was determined using the principle of data saturation, whereby new data no longer generated new insights or themes. Saturation was reached by the 18th participant, with two additional interviews conducted to ensure confirmability.

### Statistical Analysis

Given the qualitative nature of the study, no inferential statistical methods were used. Instead, thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework was applied. This involved familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. NVivo 12 software was used to assist with data management and coding. As interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, there was no missing data in the final dataset.

### Ethical Consideration

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the University Research Ethics Committee. All participants provided written informed consent before participation and were assured of confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw at any time without consequence.

### Results and Findings

The results illustrated in the figure 1 demonstrate that adaptive self-reliance was the most prevalent coping strategy among students with disabilities, with 90% of participants employing it. This finding suggests a strong sense of internal resilience and self-motivation, often necessitated by institutional shortcomings in formal support. Peer support networks were the second most utilized strategy at 75%, highlighting the importance of social belonging and communal assistance among students facing similar challenges. Assistive technologies were employed by 60% of participants, indicating moderate access to technological aids, though this figure may also reflect infrastructural or financial limitations that hinder broader adoption. Lastly, informal arrangements with lecturers were noted by 55% of students, pointing to the reliance on personalized, ad hoc accommodations rather than systemic inclusion practices. These results underscore a coping landscape shaped more by necessity and improvisation than by structured institutional support, emphasizing the urgent need for higher education reforms that go beyond physical accessibility to foster comprehensive inclusion.

**Table 1: Participant Demographics**

| Variable | Category | Frequency (n) | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Gender | Female | 9 | 60.0 |
| Gender | Male | 6 | 40.0 |
| Disability Type | Physical | 7 | 46.7 |
| Disability Type | Visual | 5 | 33.3 |
| Disability Type | Hearing | 3 | 20.0 |
| Academic Level | Undergraduate | 10 | 66.7 |
| Academic Level | Postgraduate | 5 | 33.3 |

**Table 2: Themes and Codes Summary**

| Theme | Number of Codes | Sample Codes |
|---|---|---|
| Navigating Physical and Digital Access | 3 | Classroom accessibility, Online platform design, Transport issues |
| Institutional Support and Responsiveness | 4 | Disability office response, Delays in accommodations, Policy gaps, Staff attitudes |
| Peer and Lecturer Engagement | 3 | Peer support, Lecturer flexibility, Communication barriers |
| Coping Strategies and Resilience | 3 | Self-advocacy, Faith, Informal support networks |
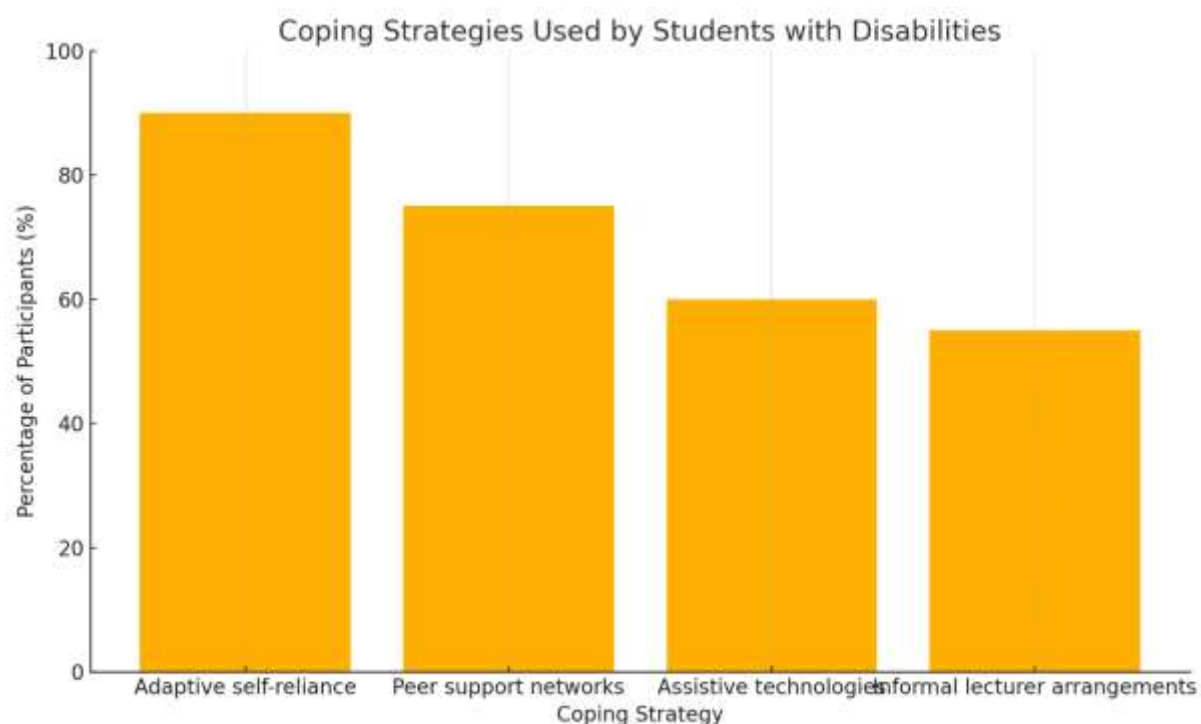


**Figure 1: The graph illustrating the coping strategies used by students with disabilities in higher education.**

## Discussion

Figure 1 indicates that adaptive self-reliance (90%) is the most frequently adopted coping mechanism by students with disabilities in navigating higher education. This aligns with findings by Mutanga (2017), who noted that students with disabilities in South African universities often develop strong internal coping capacities due to the absence of consistent institutional support. The high reliance on self-reliance in this study suggests that these students are compelled to become self-advocates, managing their educational experiences with limited structured assistance. The significance of peer support networks (75%) observed in this study echoes the work of Chataika et al. (2012), who found that peer solidarity among students with disabilities often substitutes for formal services, particularly in under-resourced institutions. The present study reinforces this notion, highlighting that emotional and academic support from peers serves as a crucial buffer against the isolation and marginalization frequently encountered in university spaces.

Interestingly, assistive technologies (60%) were moderately used by participants, suggesting progress but also gaps in access and availability. This contrasts with findings by Alquraini and Gut (2012), who argued that in technologically advanced institutions, assistive technology use is significantly higher due to adequate funding and dedicated support centers. In the current case, limited access may reflect resource constraints or a lack of training in using such tools effectively, a challenge noted by Mavuso (2020) in rural South African universities. The use of informal arrangements with lecturers (55%) reflects the ad hoc and non-standardized nature of disability support in many higher education institutions. This pattern is consistent with the observations of Watermeyer and Swartz (2008), who emphasized the reliance of students with disabilities on individual faculty members' goodwill rather than on institutional policy. While some students benefit from empathetic staff, others are left unsupported, leading to inconsistencies in their educational experiences. This study confirms that students with disabilities employ multifaceted and often self-initiated strategies to cope with systemic barriers in higher education. While similar trends are documented in other studies, the over-reliance on internal and informal mechanisms in this case reveals

a critical gap in institutional responsibility. The graph underscores this dependency hierarchy, which highlights the pressing need for inclusive policy implementation and structured support systems, particularly in resource-constrained environments.

## Generalisability

Given the qualitative and context-specific nature of this case study, the findings may not be generalizable to all higher education institutions in South Africa or beyond. However, the coping themes identified, such as self-reliance, informal arrangements, and peer support, are likely to resonate in similar under-resourced university settings. The study offers transferable insights that can inform disability-inclusive practices in comparable environments.

## Conclusion

This study highlights the significant coping strategies adopted by students with disabilities in navigating higher education, particularly in resource-constrained environments. The dominance of adaptive self-reliance and informal mechanisms points to the inadequacy of institutional support structures. While students demonstrate commendable resilience and creativity in overcoming barriers, their reliance on self-driven and peer-supported strategies reflects systemic neglect rather than inclusive design. The findings underscore the urgent need to reframe disability support in universities to be more proactive, structured, and policy driven.

## Limitations

This study was limited to a single university and involved only 20 participants, which may not fully capture the diversity of experiences across institutions, disabilities, or regions. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data may be subject to recall or social desirability bias. The qualitative nature of the study also limits its ability to quantify broader trends or institutional comparisons.

## Recommendations

Higher education institutions must move beyond infrastructural compliance and adopt a holistic inclusion approach that addresses the full spectrum of needs for

students with disabilities. This begins with implementing mandatory disability awareness and sensitivity training for all academic and support staff to foster an inclusive institutional culture. In addition, universities should establish formalized peer support and mentoring programs that promote both academic and social integration, reducing the isolation often experienced by students with disabilities. Investment in accessible assistive technologies, along with comprehensive user training, is also critical to minimizing technological barriers and enabling equitable participation. Importantly, institutional disability policies should be co-designed with the active involvement of students with disabilities to ensure that support mechanisms are both contextually relevant and practically responsive. Lastly, appointing dedicated disability support officers at the faculty level will help ensure that students receive consistent, individualized assistance throughout their academic journey, thereby advancing equity and inclusion in a meaningful and sustainable way.

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## List of abbreviations

MUT -Mangosuthu University of Technology
HEI- Higher Education Institution
ICT- Information and Communication Technology
FGD- Focus Group Discussion
SPSS -Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
SA -South Africa
UNCRPD- United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
INDS- Integrated National Disability Strategy
WPPSET-White Paper on Post-School Education and Training
REC -Research Ethics Committee
NVivo -Qualitative Data Analysis Software (QSR NVivo)

## 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.

## 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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## Publisher details