

A web content audit of accessibility and linguistic inclusivity for students with disabilities on SAARC countries university websites

Mahmood K., University of Management and Technology, Pakistan,
[ORCID 0009-0003-8034-3950](https://orcid.org/0009-0003-8034-3950), teflmate@gmail.com

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Abstract: Disability-friendly university campuses and inclusive language play a pivotal role in smooth and motivated learning for students with disabilities (SwDs). This quantitative web content audit study aims at auditing the availability of disability support services information and person-first (inclusive) or identity-first (exclusive) language on official websites of universities in the member States of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Official websites of eight universities (one public and private sector University each) from the capital cities of four SAARC countries (Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh), considering the demographics of disability, ranking of universities and geo-political locations have been selected through a purposive sampling technique. An adapted checklist of ten closed-ended questions has been used to collect data on the availability of disability support services. The data on the use of inclusive or exclusive language have been collected through a researcher developed data extraction sheet. The study found a dearth of disability support services information as 40% staple information focusing the building infrastructure and allied disability support services was missing from the websites of sampled universities. India has 50%, Pakistan 40%, however Sri Lanka and Bangladesh 30% information apiece flashed on university websites. The study has also found that sampled university websites have used both person-first (inclusive) and identity-first (exclusive) languages homogeneously. The study recommends uniformed availability of disability support services information on the websites of universities. Moreover, inclusive language is recommended instead of exclusive language. Global policy-makers, organizations, government stakeholders, universities, and web designers should ensure availability of disability support services at homepages of university websites for accessibility. Researchers should explore this novel field of research from different standpoints to contribute for higher education and rehabilitation of students with disabilities. The study will be aligned with SDG-4 *Quality Education* and SDG-11 *Reduced Inequalities*.

Keywords: Accessibility, disability support services (DSS), identity-first language, person-first language, SAARC countries university websites, students with disabilities (SwDs)

1. Introduction

According to the World Health Organization's report (2022), an estimated 16% (1.3 billion) of the global population is of people with disabilities. Out of which, 60% population with disabilities lives in the Asian Pacific regions. In 1975, for the first time at an international forum, the United Nations Organization (UNO) through UN General Assembly resolution number A/RES/30/3452 of December 9, 1975 raised the voice for provision and protection of the rights of persons with

disabilities. In 1982, UN General Assembly recognized the World Programme of Action for Disabled Persons advocating the inclusion of persons with disabilities in mainstream of life in the fields of education, health, and rehabilitation services. United Nations Organization through General Assembly resolution number 37/52 of December 3, 1982 declared 1983 to 1992 as UNO Decade of Disabled Persons. To ensure implementation on the policies, UNO Commission for Social Development (1994) initiated a three-year monitoring programme for the implementation of legislation and policies for persons with disabilities. International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) was a major milestone urging member states to provide physical mobility, technology, and support services access to persons with disabilities.

South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was established on December 8, 1985 with its headquarters at Kathmandu, Nepal. The association is a regional body for cooperation among eight member states, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Although, the scope of SAARC is very vast from education, health, social life, science, technology, and trade (Shaheen, 2013: 1). The association is committed to provide disability support services to persons with disabilities living in this region.

The SAARC member states have chalked out certain legislative Acts and ordinances for the rights of persons with disabilities. These policy guidelines warrant all stakeholders to ensure protection of the rights of persons with disabilities. Moreover, Higher Education Commissions of SAARC countries are bound to provide free and facilitated higher education to students with disabilities through disability support services at university campuses. Ahmed and Khan (2011) in a study argued that countries across the world have passed legislation for equal opportunities and rights to the persons with disabilities in compliance with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2006.

SAARC countries legislation for students with disabilities is homogenous to ensure reservation of quota for admission to higher education, provision of scholarships, fee concessions, the availability of wheelchair, the construction of disability-friendly campuses for smooth movement, and other allied disability support services. Moreover, from time to time policies and executive orders are issued to use inclusive language with person-first terms (persons with disabilities) instead of exclusive language with identity-first terms (disabled person). The use of person-first language for students with disabilities enhances the motivation, sense of inclusion, and will to progress. On the other hand, identity-first language demotivates, stigmatizes, and emotionally damages the students with disabilities. In a study (Sharif et al., 2022) concluded that disability studies is an interdisciplinary field of research but still scholars are not well aware whether to use person-first or identity-first language. The study recommended to use proper language for persons with disabilities and the preferred choice was person-first instead of identity-first language. Iqbal (2023) reports that Supreme Court of Pakistan has given a verdict that thenceforth, the identity-first term “Disabled Persons” would not be used in official correspondence of all departments of Pakistan and person-first term “Persons with Disabilities” would be used.

The advent of modern day technology and websites of universities have made it easy to upload information regarding availability of disability support services at campus using person-first language keeping in view of the sensitivity of the emotions of potent students with disabilities. This novel study is set to explore information regarding availability of disability support services for accessibility and linguistic inclusion of students with disabilities flashed on SAARC countries university websites. .

1.2. Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to audit the availability of disability support services and person-first (inclusive) versus identity-first (exclusive) language on the SAARC country universities' websites.

1.3. Objectives of the Study

The study has the following objectives to achieve:

- 1) To audit the availability of disability support services information on the official websites of SAARC countries' universities.
- 2) To explore person-first versus identity-first language on the official websites of SAARC countries' universities.
- 3) To align the study with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG)-4 *Quality Education* and SDG-11 *Reduced Inequalities* in compliance with the United Nations Organization agenda and betterment of students with disabilities, particularly in the South Asian region, and the world in general.

1.4. Research Questions

This study examined and answered the following questions:

- 1) What is the frequency of availability of disability support services information for students with disabilities on the official websites of SAARC country universities?
- 2) What is the tendency of official websites of SAARC country universities using person-first or identity-first language to display disability support services information?

2. Review of Literature

2.1. Global Context

UN resolutions and guidelines for the rights of persons with disabilities require signatory States to enforce these regulations. The higher education institutions around the world are also bound to display comprehensive details about disability services on their websites. Wilson and Meyer (2009) noted that contemporary prospective students possess greater technological proficiency as compared to previous generations. According to Coomes and DeBard (2004), today's global generation remains interconnected around the clock, relying heavily on information available on college and university websites. Therefore, it is obligatory upon universities to ensure their websites are designed to meet student needs effectively. These websites serve as the virtual face of an institution and must provide sufficient and pertinent information for prospective students. Meyer and Jones (2011) observed that many institutional websites prioritize publicity and marketing over student-related information, leading to dissatisfaction among students due to inadequate relevant content. Furthermore, students often become frustrated and abandon their search when required information is scattered across multiple pages from the homepage. Consequently, institutions should prioritize the provision of pertinent information on their websites to enhance student satisfaction and facilitate their access to necessary resources.

Jackson and Jones (2014) examined the official websites of 40 Public Community Colleges in the USA regarding the availability of disability services information. They emphasized that these

websites served as the virtual representation of educational institutions and should adhere to web policies to support students, particularly those with disabilities.

2.2. South Asian Context

The Population of South Asia (2024) data indicates that approximately 25.2% of the global population resides in South Asian countries. The National Survey on Persons with Disabilities (2021) reported a 2.80% disability prevalence in Bangladesh, whereas the Washington Group (2015) estimated 9.1%. Pakistan's census figures showed 2.49% in 1998, decreasing to 1.4% in 2017, with 6.2% estimated by the UNDP in 2022. India's 2015 census reported 2.2% disability prevalence. SAARC aims for inclusive education and rights for all genders and disabilities, though its official website only briefly mentions disability initiatives from 1993. The Review of Evidence on Disability Programmes in South Asia (2019) critically analyzes regional policies and laws safeguarding disability rights, emphasizing intellectual and developmental disabilities. The summary of these policies and laws is given below in Table 1:

The table 1 above illustrates that South Asian countries have enacted numerous laws to uphold the rights, privileges, employment opportunities, and inclusive education for individuals and students with disabilities. However, the lived experiences of persons with disabilities in this region reveal that the challenge lies in effectively implementing these laws, policies, and ordinances. The Higher Education Commission (HEC) Policy for Students with Disabilities at Higher Education Institutions of Pakistan, 2021 (Amended) outlines various benefits such as waiving upper age limits for admission, fee concessions, reserved seats in advanced programs, and infrastructure enhancements such as ramps and accessible facilities.

Table 1. Policies and Laws in the Six South Asian Countries

Country	Policies
Afghanistan	The comprehensive National Disability Policy in Afghanistan, submitted to the Ministry of Martyrs and Disabled in 2003 The Law on Rights and Privileges of People with Disabilities, n.d.
Bangladesh	National Policy of Disability, 1995 Disability Welfare Act, 2001 National Action Plan on Disability, 2006 Bangladesh Labour Law, 2006 National Education Policy, 2010 National Women Development Policy, 2011 National Health Policy, 2011 Child Act, 2013 Revised Persons with Disabilities' Rights & Protection Act, 2013 Revised Persons with Disabilities' Rights & Protection Act, 2015 National Plan of Action, 2018 (following above Act and Rules) Neurodevelopmental Disability Protection Trust Act, 2013 Neurodevelopmental Disability Protection Trust Rules, 2015 National Strategic Plan for Neurodevelopmental Disorders, 2016-2021 National Plan of Action, 2019 (following above Act and Rules)
India	National Health Act, 1987 The Rehabilitation Council of India Act, 1992 Persons with Disabilities Act, 1995 National Trust Act for the Welfare of Persons with Autism, Cerebral Palsy, Mental Retardation, and Multiple Disabilities, 1999

Country	Policies
	National Policy on Disability, 2006 Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (Divyangian), 2012 The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 National Mental Health Program, 2017
Myanmar	Act on Job Opportunity for Handicapped People (1958) (Only paper, not enacted) Myanmar National Strategy for Development of Persons with Disabilities (2011-2012) The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Law, 2015 Bye Laws of The Rights of Persons with Disability (2017-2027) Myanmar National Strategy for Development of Persons with Disabilities (2016-2025)
Nepal	Disabled Persons Protection and Welfare Act, 1982 Disabled Protection and Welfare Regulation, 1994 National Policy Plan of Action, 1996 Disabled Persons Service National Policy, 1996 Special Education Policy, 1996 (2053 BS) Childhood Disability Management Strategy, 2008 (2064 BS) Guideline for Disability ID Card Distribution, 2006 National Plan & Policy of Action on Disability, 2006 Rights of Persons with Disability Act, 2017 First amendment on Guideline for Disability ID Card Distribution, 2017 10 year National Policy and Plan of Action, 2017 (2073-2082 BS) Regulation on Rights of Persons with Disability, 2018
Pakistan	Disabled Persons (Employment and Rehabilitation) Ordinance, 1981 Mental Health Ordinance, 2001 National Policy for Persons with Disabilities, 2002 National Plan of Action for Persons with Disabilities, 2006 Special Citizens Act, 2008 Disabled Persons (Employment and Rehabilitation) Ordinance, 2012 (Amended) Promotion and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Rights, 2020 Higher Education Commission Policy for Students with Disabilities at Higher Education Institutions in Pakistan, 2021 (Amended)

Naz, Akhtar, Nawaz, and Yasin (2010) found in a study that many parents in Pakistan encounter difficulties accessing information about disability support services for their children, and advocated for wider dissemination of such information through electronic media to empower parents to groom children with disabilities to become valuable members of society. Ahmed, Khan, and Naseem (2011) analysed the implementation of policies for persons with disabilities in Pakistan. They emphasised the role of the National Plan of Action (NPA) in enforcing the National Policy for Persons with Disabilities across public, private, and provincial sectors. The NPA identified seventeen critical areas for the effective delivery of disability services and proposed short and long-term measures for implementation from 2009 - 2025. Mahmood (2016) conducted a virtual face study of Pakistani university websites and found a dearth of information on disability support services. In the context of disability support services information on websites, private-sector universities outnumber public-sector universities. The study recommended policy guidelines for the stakeholders.

2.3. Person-first Language (PFL) versus Identity-first Language (IFL)

Person-first language (PFL) and identity-first language (IFL) are two approaches used to refer to individuals with disabilities. PFL, which places the person before the disability (e.g., "person with autism"), aims to prioritise the individual over their condition, emphasising their humanity (American Psychological Association, 2020). Conversely, IFL integrates the disability as part of the person's identity (e.g., "autistic person"), reflecting a perspective where disability is seen as integral to one's identity and culture (Autistic Self Advocacy Network, 2019).

Smith (2021) found that some individuals with disabilities prefer PFL for its emphasis on personhood and respect, while others advocate for IFL as it validates their identity and community belonging. In educational and healthcare settings, sensitivity to these preferences is crucial for fostering inclusive environments (Johnson & Martinez, 2023). In response to these preferences, organisations such as the American Psychological Association (2020) recommend using language that respects individual choice and context. This approach encourages dialogue and mutual understanding while promoting dignity and empowerment for individuals with disabilities.

The above literature review indicates abundant global and South Asian legislation for the rights of persons with disabilities. However, there remains a significant gap in auditing the availability of disability support services and inclusive language on the official websites of universities. This study will fill this gap by integrating the audit of the availability of disability support services on university websites, and to examining the linguistic inclusivity or exclusivity. The findings of this study are expected to provide valuable insights for policymakers, stakeholders, universities, web designers, researchers from linguistics, and special education. Ultimately, students with disabilities will benefit to be able to access necessary information on university websites without visiting campuses prior to admission.

3. Methodology

3.1. Study Design

This study has quantitative paradigm with exploratory research design. The analysis of data on disability support services information and person-first versus identity-first language on websites of universities is a novel approach. Website content audit (Jankovic, 2020) method has been used for analysis of the data. She describes websites content analysis, or content audit as the process of navigating all the content from website, pages, posts, videos, landing pages, and more. This method determines strengths, weaknesses, and current trends of website content. The website content audit performed effectively delivers key insights about current status and loopholes to address in future.

3.2. Population and Sample

Virtual face sampling technique of Meyer (2008a & 2008b) has been used to purposively sample eight official websites (one public and one private sector university) of four SAARC countries, Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh. The make sample homogenous, all the eight universities were sampled from the capital cities i.e., Islamabad, Delhi, Colombo, and Dhaka. The sample has been bifurcated into public and private sector universities under the different headings shown in Table 2. While selecting these universities, their rankings and reputation were given due consideration:

Table 2. Sample and Demographics of SAARC Country Universities Websites

Ser	Name of University	Country	Sector	Official Website Address
1.	Quaid – e – Azam University, Islamabad	Pakistan	Public	https://www.qau.edu.pk
2.	Riphah International University, Islamabad	Pakistan	Private	https://www.riphah.edu.pk
3.	University of Delhi, New Delhi	India	Public	https://www.du.ac.in
4.	Sharda University, New Delhi	India	Private	https://www.sharda.ac.in
5.	University of Colombo, Colombo	Sri Lanka	Public	https://cmb.ac.lk
6.	Asia Pacific Institute of Information Technology (APIIT), Colombo	Sri Lanka	Private	https://www.apiit.lk
7.	University of Dhaka, Dhaka	Bangladesh	Public	https://www.du.ac.bd
8.	North South University, Dhaka	Bangladesh	Private	http://www.northsouth.edu

3.3. Instrumentation

A virtual content analysis checklist (Mahmood, 2016) has been adapted for data collection (see Appendix A). The checklist consists of 10 items with information on availability of disability support services based on dichotomous statements (Yes or No). The instrument for collection of data on person-first and identity-first language has been developed by the researcher (see Appendix B). This instrument has two sections i.e., section one is for person-first and section two for identity first language items flashed on official websites of sampled universities. A total five person-first and identity-first terms space was provided for each websites of the sampled universities on the tool.

3.4. Data Collection

The data collection for this study spanned over two weeks to explore each and every click of the websites. In the first week, twenty-one hours (three hours per website per day) were consumed to explore the availability of disability support services on the official websites of sampled universities. To ensure validity of the data, only two websites per day were examined. Each and every link available on the website was clicked for information. Search option through keywords related to disability support services. “Admission”, “Registration”, “Inclusive Education”, “Diversity and Inclusion”, “Life at University”, “Rules & Regulations”, “Scholarships”, and “Facilities” links were navigated. Moreover, other popup menus were also thoroughly audited. It was ensured that no option, button or link on website was left unexplored. The responses were recorded in the ‘Yes’ column in case of availability of information and ‘No’ if not found.

In the second week, twenty-one hours (three hours per website per day) were invested to extract person-first and identity-first language terms from websites of sampled universities and recorded on researcher developed data extraction sheet (see Appendix B). Two hours for each website on daily basis were consumed to carryout review and veracity of data. In this round, discrepancies if any were observed and removed accordingly.

4. Results

The results and findings of this study have been associated with the past studies on the topic, like Irwin and Gerke (2004) and Quick et al. (2003). Irwin and Gerek (2004), in a study on Liberal Arts Colleges, found that information regarding disability services was “difficult or impossible to locate from several of the websites”. This study has examined official websites of eight universities of four SAARC countries to explore the availability of disability support services information and use of person-first or identity-first language. The results and findings have been presented in prescriptive and descriptive form.

4.1. Availability of Disability Support Services Information on Websites of Universities

A rigorous exploration process of websites for information on disability support services was carried out to answer the first research question “What is the frequency of availability of disability support services information for students with disabilities on official websites of SAARC country universities?” The study found that none of the sampled universities have made disability support services information available on homepage of websites. 50% (n = 4) have made E-prospectus facility available on websites. Online admission facility is available at 62.5% (n = 5) websites of the universities. As far as reservation of seats for admission of students with disabilities is concerned, 37.5 (n = 3) universities have provided basic information of reservation of seats or quota. Only one university, 12.5% (n=1) has the information regarding fee concession to students with disabilities. No university, 0% (n=0) has displayed information of availability of fleet of manual/electric wheelchairs on campus. 12.5% (n-1) university has provided information about wheelchair ramps/ special pathways and accessible toilets for students with disabilities. 0% (n=0) university has the information on website about lifts/ elevators at campus. On the same, no university, 0% (n=0) has the information on websites whether special transport and hostel facility is provided to students with disabilities or not. Only two universities, 25% (n=2) has the virtual tour link of the campus building infrastructure. Item wise breakdown of availability of disability support services on official websites of sampled SAARC countries’ universities is shown in Table 3. However, 40% staple information of disability support services on the following four items out of ten was missing from the websites of the universities:

- Homepage link for disability support services information.
- Availability of the fleet of manual/ electric wheelchairs at campus.
- Availability of lifts/ elevators.
- Provision of special transport and hostel facilities.

4.2. Country-wise Comparison of Disability Support Services Information on Official Websites

The study has found that situation in all the four sampled countries, Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh is almost homogenous with the slight difference. The information on five out of ten items was found on sampled official websites of Indian universities. Hence, 50% (n=5) information on disability support services was available on websites of Indian universities. On the other hand, Pakistan has 40% (n=4) information on disability support services on the sampled official websites of two universities. However, official websites of Sri Lankan and Bangladeshi universities have flashed 30% (n=3) information apiece. The above results have been tabulated in Table 4 and summarized in Figure 1:

Table 3. Breakdown of Disability Support Services on SAARC Countries University Websites

Ser	Disability support services information	Pakistan		India		Sri Lanka		Bangladesh		Total	%
		Pub*	Pvt#	Pub	Pvt	Pub	Pvt	Pub	Pvt		
1.	Is the link for disability support services for students with disabilities available on the website homepage?	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0	0%
2.	Is the e-prospectus available on the website?	-	1	-	1	-	1	-	1	4	50%
3.	Is the online admission facility available?	-	1	1	1	-	1	-	1	5	62.5%
4.	Have seats been reserved for students with disabilities?	1	-	1	-	1	-	-	-	3	37.5%
5.	Is the fee concession/ scholarship granted to SwDs?	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	1	12.5%
6.	Is the fleet of manual/electric wheelchairs available on campus?	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0	0%
7.	Are ramps / special pathways and wheelchairs accessible toilets available for SwDs?	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	12.5%
8.	Are lifts/ elevators available?	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0	0%
9.	Are any special transportation and hostel facilities available for SwDs?	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0	0%
10.	Does the virtual tour of the university building cover disability support services for SwDs?	-	1	-	1	-	-	-	-	2	25%

* Public Sector Universities

Private Sector Universities

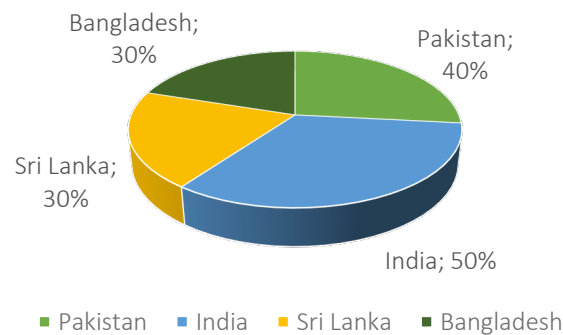
Table 4. Comparison of Disability Support Services Information on SAARC Countries University Websites

Ser	Countries	Public Sector ¹	Private Sector ¹	Total
1.	India	2	3	5
2.	Pakistan	1	3	4
3.	Sri Lanka	1	2	3
4.	Bangladesh	1	2	3

(1) Number of Disability Support Services Information available on University Websites

The above statistical results of country-wise comparison of disability support services items found on official websites of the sampled universities have been summarized in graphical form in Figure 1 below:

Figure 1. Percentile of Disability Support Services Information on SAARC Countries University Websites



4.3. Use of Person-first (Inclusive Language) and Identity-first (Exclusive Language) on Official Websites of SAARC Country Universities

A thorough navigation of the websites was conducted to address the second research question: “What is the tendency of official websites of SAARC country universities using person-first or identity-first language to display disability support services information?” In this phase, person-first and identity-first terms used for students with disabilities were sifted from the websites of sampled universities. The person-first terms were recorded under the relevant column of the instrument (see Appendix B), and identity-first terms were jotted down in the other section.

The result shows that five terms each for person-first and identity-first language have been used by five university websites out of eight. However, three universities have neither used person-first nor identity-first language on their websites. In the person-first language terms, like *students with disabilities*, *persons with disabilities*, *serving personnel* and *ex-servicemen disabled in action*, *defense personnel disabled in peacetime*, and *persons with disabilities* have been used by one Pakistani private sector and one Indian public sector university. On the other hand, university websites have used five identity-first language terms, like *disabled fee concession*, *wheelchair scheme for disabled students*, *disabled policy HEC*, *blind and differently abled candidates*, and *disabled students trust fund scholarship*. The results have been elaborated in Table 5 below:

Table 5. Person-first and Identity-first language on SAARC Countries University Websites

Ser	Universities/Country/ Sector	Person-first (Inclusive Language)		Identity-first (Exclusive Language)	
		Words	Frequency	Words	Frequency
1.	Quaid – e – Azam University, Islamabad, Pakistan (Public Sector)	-	-	(i) Disable Fee Concession (ii) Wheelchair Scheme for Disabled Students	2
2.	Riphah International University, Islamabad, Pakistan (Private Sector)	(i) Students with disabilities (ii) Persons with Disabilities	2	Disabled Policy HEC	1
3.	University of Delhi, New Delhi, India (Public Sector)	(i) Serving personnel and ex-servicemen disabled in action (ii) Defence personnel disabled in peacetime (iii) Persons with Disabilities	3	-	-
4.	Sharda University, New Delhi, India (Private Sector)	-	-	-	-
5.	University of Colombo, Colombo, Sri Lanka (Public Sector)	-	-	Blind and Differently Abled Candidates	1
6.	Asia Pacific Institute of Information Technology (APIIT), Colombo, Sri Lank (Private Sector)	-	-	-	-
7.	University of Dhaka, Dhaka, Bangladesh (Public Sector)	-	-	Disabled Students Trust Fund Scholarship	1
8.	North South University, Dhaka, Bangladesh (Private Sector)	-	-	-	-
		Total:	5		5

5. Discussion

This study examined two major questions: the availability of disability support services and the use of inclusive versus exclusive language for students with disabilities on official university websites across four SAARC countries.

The findings have revealed significant accessibility shortcomings. Key resources such as links to disability support services, manual or electric wheelchairs, lifts/elevators, and special transport or hostel facilities were found missing. These results portray broader patterns as Cerilli et al.

(2025) demonstrated that top American universities often scored poorly on disability inclusion metrics, with critical information snubbed or omitted completely. Similarly, Bhuiyan et al. (2025) found that fewer than 40% of university and public-sector websites across the Global South met WCAG 2.1 checkpoints, particularly those affecting screen-reader and motor-impaired users. Region-specific research from Sri Lanka by Wedasinghe et al. (2023) further highlighted failures in semantic HTML structure, navigation consistency, and alt-text usage barriers consistent with this audit across SAARC websites.

In terms of linguistic inclusivity, the analysis revealed limited use of both person-first and identity-first language across the sampled university websites, triggering a lack of institutional language policy. This is particularly important considering evidence of nuanced language preferences. Taboas, Doepke, and Zimmerman (2023) reported that while autistic adults overwhelmingly preferred identity-first language, but professionals were inclined toward person-first. Further reinforcing this point, Grech, Koller, and Olley's (2024) study in *Social Science & Medicine* found that respondents used identity-first language when referring to themselves, but rated person-first language as more appropriate when referring to others, particularly in healthcare or educational contexts.

This social model of disability is explained by Harpur et al. (2025) that university websites frequently use identity-based or exclusive language that may not be appropriate for prospective applicants with disabilities. Such linguistic framing can unintentionally marginalise students with disabilities, leading some prospective students with disabilities to perceive institutional spaces as socially distant. Resultantly, this identity-first language may function as a psychological barrier to enrolment and participation. Within the social model of disability, these barriers emerge from institutional and communicative structures that shape access and belonging.

These observations suggest that universities in the SAARC region fall short of international norms for both digital accessibility and inclusive language practices. Beyond legal compliance, these gaps may deter prospective students with disabilities, limit institutional outreach, and reinforce exclusion. Addressing these deficiencies requires regular web accessibility audits, adoption of WCAG 2.1 or 2.2 standards, the development of evidence-based learning, and co-created language policies involving students with disabilities and advocacy groups.

6. Conclusions

Based on the results of this study, it is evident that there are significant gaps in the provision of disability support services and the use of inclusive language on official university websites across SAARC countries. The analysis revealed that information crucial for prospective students with disabilities, such as links to disability support services, availability of wheelchair-accessible facilities, lifts/elevators, and special transport/hostel facilities were frequently absent or inconsistently presented on the sampled university websites.

Moreover, while general information like online admissions and e-prospectus availability was more commonly found, specific disability support services such as reserved seats for admissions, fee concessions/scholarships, and accessible infrastructure were notably underrepresented. This discrepancy highlights a concerning lack of adherence to government policies aimed at promoting accessibility and inclusivity in higher education institutions.

In terms of linguistic practices, the study found a consistent use of both inclusive (person-first) and exclusive (identity-first) language across the sampled websites, albeit with limited

representation. The need for more inclusive language practices that prioritise personhood while acknowledging disability is underscored by the findings. The study recommends:

- **Enhanced Accessibility and Transparency.** Universities should prioritise updating their websites to ensure comprehensive and transparent information about disability support services. This includes clear links to disability resources, detailed description of accessible facilities, explicit guidelines on admissions, and accommodation for students with disabilities.
- **Promotion of Inclusive Language.** There should be a concerted effort to adopt inclusive (person-first) language across all communications related to disability support services. This approach fosters a more respectful and inclusive environment for students with disabilities, reflecting a commitment to diversity and equity.
- **Adherence to Government Guidelines.** Institutions must align their practices with national and international policies promoting disability rights and inclusion. This entails regular audits of website content to ensure compliance with accessibility standards and the provision of mandated support services.
- **Capacity Building and Awareness.** Training programs for university staff involved in website management should be implemented to enhance awareness of disability rights and effective communication strategies. A core course: *Disability Support Services* should be introduced at the undergraduate level across all disciplines to train students to facilitate persons with disabilities in the society. This will facilitate the creation of more inclusive societal and digital environments for all students.

By addressing these recommendations, universities in SAARC countries can significantly improve their support for students with disabilities, ensuring equitable access to higher education and fostering a more inclusive academic community. This study has been aligned to SDG-04 *Quality Education* and SDG-11 *Reduced Inequalities* as envisioned by the United Nations Organization for global impact and implementation.

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During the writing of this article, the author used AI Tool Grammarly to improve the language and grammar of the manuscript. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and assume full responsibility for the publication's content. The technical content, data interpretations, and conclusions were generated entirely by the human author, who verified all sources.

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Appendix A

Web Content Audit Instrument/ Checklist

Name of University: _____ Country _____

Public / Private Sector: _____

Ser	Disability Support Services Information	Availability of Disability Support Services Information on University Websites	
		Yes	No
1.	Is the link for disability support services for students with disabilities available on the website homepage?		
2.	Is the e-prospectus available on the website?		
3.	Is the online admission facility available?		
4.	Have seats been reserved for students with disabilities?		
5.	Is the fee concession/ scholarship granted to SwDs?		
6.	Is the fleet of manual/electric wheelchairs available on campus?		
7.	Are ramps / special pathways and wheelchairs accessible toilets available for SwDs?		
8.	Are lifts/ elevators available?		
9.	Are any special transportation and hostel facilities available for SwDs?		
10.	Does the virtual tour of the university building cover disability support services for SwDs?		

Appendix B

Web Content Audit Data Extraction Sheet for Person-first and Identity-first Language

Ser	Universities/Country/ Sector	Person-first (Inclusive Language)		Identity-first (Exclusive Language)	
		Words	Frequency	Words	Frequency
1.	Quaid – e – Azam University, Islamabad, Pakistan (Public Sector)	(i)		(i)	
		(ii)		(ii)	
		(iii)		(iii)	
		(iv)		(iv)	
		(v)		(v)	
2.	Riphah International University, Islamabad, Pakistan Private Sector)	(i)		(i)	
		(ii)		(ii)	
		(iii)		(iii)	
		(iv)		(iv)	

	(v)	(v)
	(i)	(i)
	(ii)	(ii)
3. University of Delhi, New Delhi, India (Public Sector)	(iii)	(iii)
	(iv)	(iv)
	(v)	(v)
	(i)	(i)
	(ii)	(ii)
4. Sharda University, New Delhi, India (Private Sector)	(iii)	(iii)
	(iv)	(iv)
	(v)	(v)
	(i)	(i)
	(ii)	(ii)
5. University of Colombo, Colombo, Sri Lanka (Public Sector)	(iii)	(iii)
	(iv)	(iv)
	(v)	(v)
	(i)	(i)
	(ii)	(ii)
6. Asia Pacific Institute of Information Technology (APIIT), Colombo, Sri Lanka (Private Sector)	(iii)	(iii)
	(iv)	(iv)
	(v)	(v)
	(i)	(i)
	(ii)	(ii)
7. University of Dhaka, Dhaka, Bangladesh (Public Sector)	(iii)	(iii)
	(iv)	(iv)
	(v)	(v)
	(i)	(i)
	(ii)	(ii)
8. North South University, Dhaka, Bangladesh (Private Sector)	(iii)	(iii)
	(iv)	(iv)
	(v)	(v)
	Total:	Total:

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