

# Digital Equity in Higher Education: A Global South–North Dialogue on Inclusion and Accessibility

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## Introduction

Digital inclusion in higher education (HE) is often shaped by Global North perspectives and universalist standards (e.g. WCAG). While valuable, these models may not reflect the lived realities of Global South institutions.

**Pakistan:** Systemic barriers persist, including limited access to assistive technologies, reliance on faculty goodwill, and ad hoc accommodations despite emerging support structures (e.g. NUST Disability Resource Centre).

**UK:** Compliance structures (Equality Act 2010) exist, but staff face tension between regulatory compliance and personalisation. Accessibility features are available but often under-used.

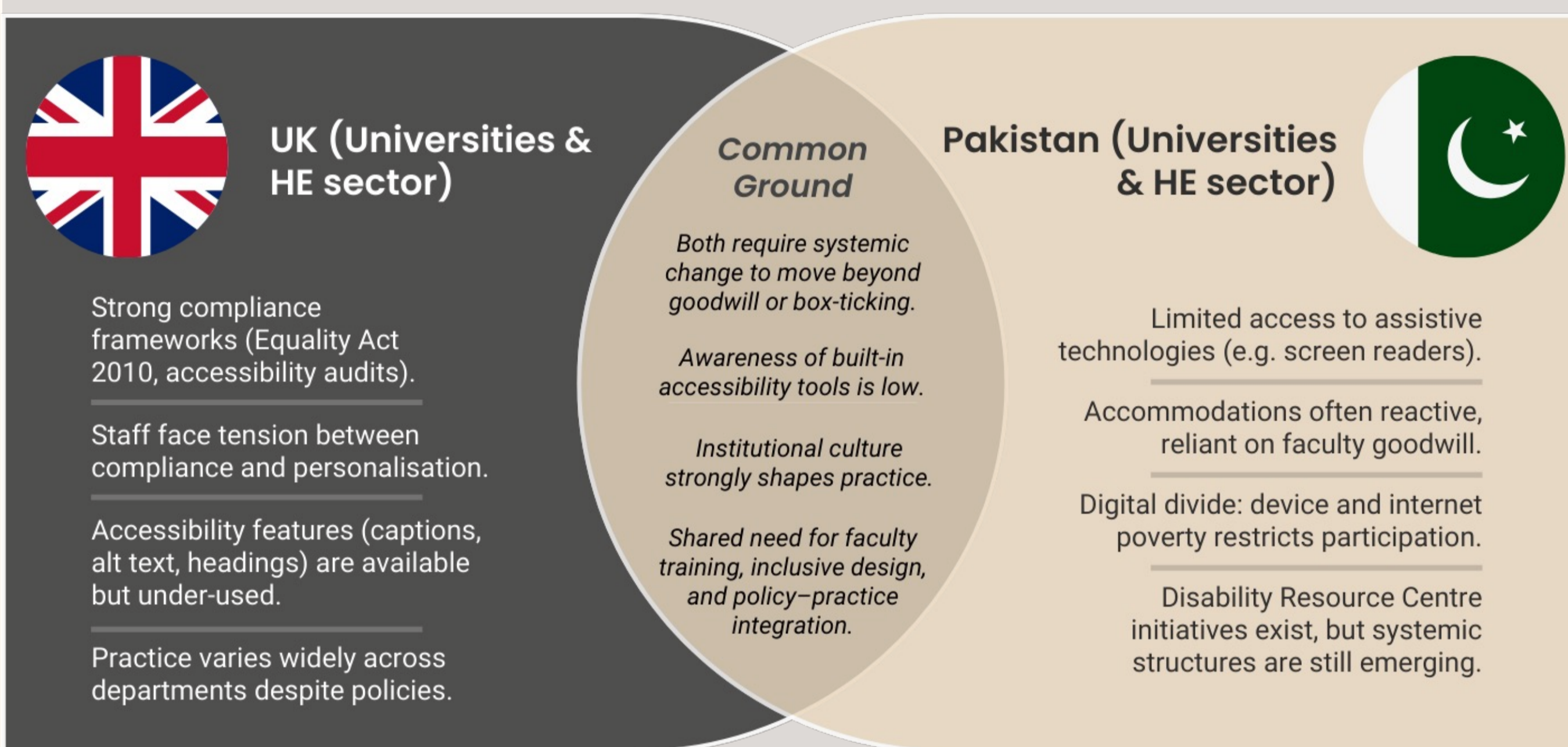


Figure 1. Higher Education Accessibility: Contrasting Contexts, Shared Challenges. Venn diagram created by the authors to illustrate findings from the British Council-funded project.

**Purpose:** This study explores how institutional and cultural contexts shape digital inclusion in Pakistan and the UK, advancing models that are context-sensitive and equity-driven (Freire, 1970; Bohm, 1996; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

## Section 1: British Council Funded Project Overview

**Project Title:** Fostering Education Inclusion: Strengthening Accessibility and Support for Students with Disabilities in Higher Education

**Funding:** Funded by the British Council (2025–26, 12 months); Award amount: £24,420.03

**Project Lead:** Dr Seemab Farooqi (UoD); Co-Investigator: Dr Ying Wu (UoD)

**Local Partner Lead:** Professor Asfia Obaid; Co-Investigators: Dr Fatima Saman Qaisar, Dr Lubaba Sadaf (NUST, Pakistan)

**Core Project Team:** Dr Kishwar S. Gulzar; Dr Sumbal Babar (NUST, Pakistan); David Millar; Liam Brown (UoD); James Duncan (UoD)

**Underpinning Research and Theory:** Grounded in Social Model of Disability and Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Informed by Institutional Work Theory to track change within HEIs. Builds on RSE-funded 'Price of Inclusion' project in Scotland. Emphasises participatory research and lived experience.

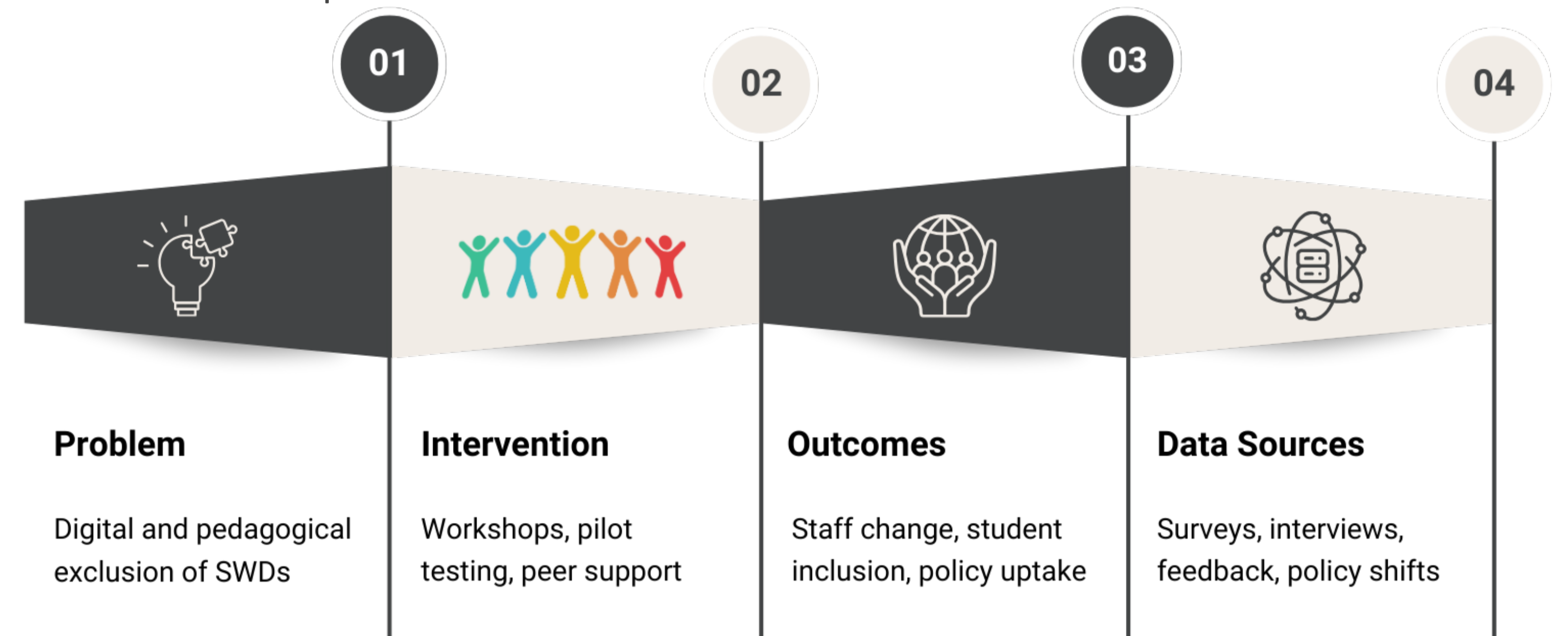


Figure 2. Impact Strategy for REF Impact Case: British Council Disability Inclusion Project. Created by the authors.



## Section 2: Methodology

A sequential multi-method qualitative design with participatory dialogue (Freire, 1970; Bohm, 1996; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017), aligned with emergent design principles (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), guided the research.

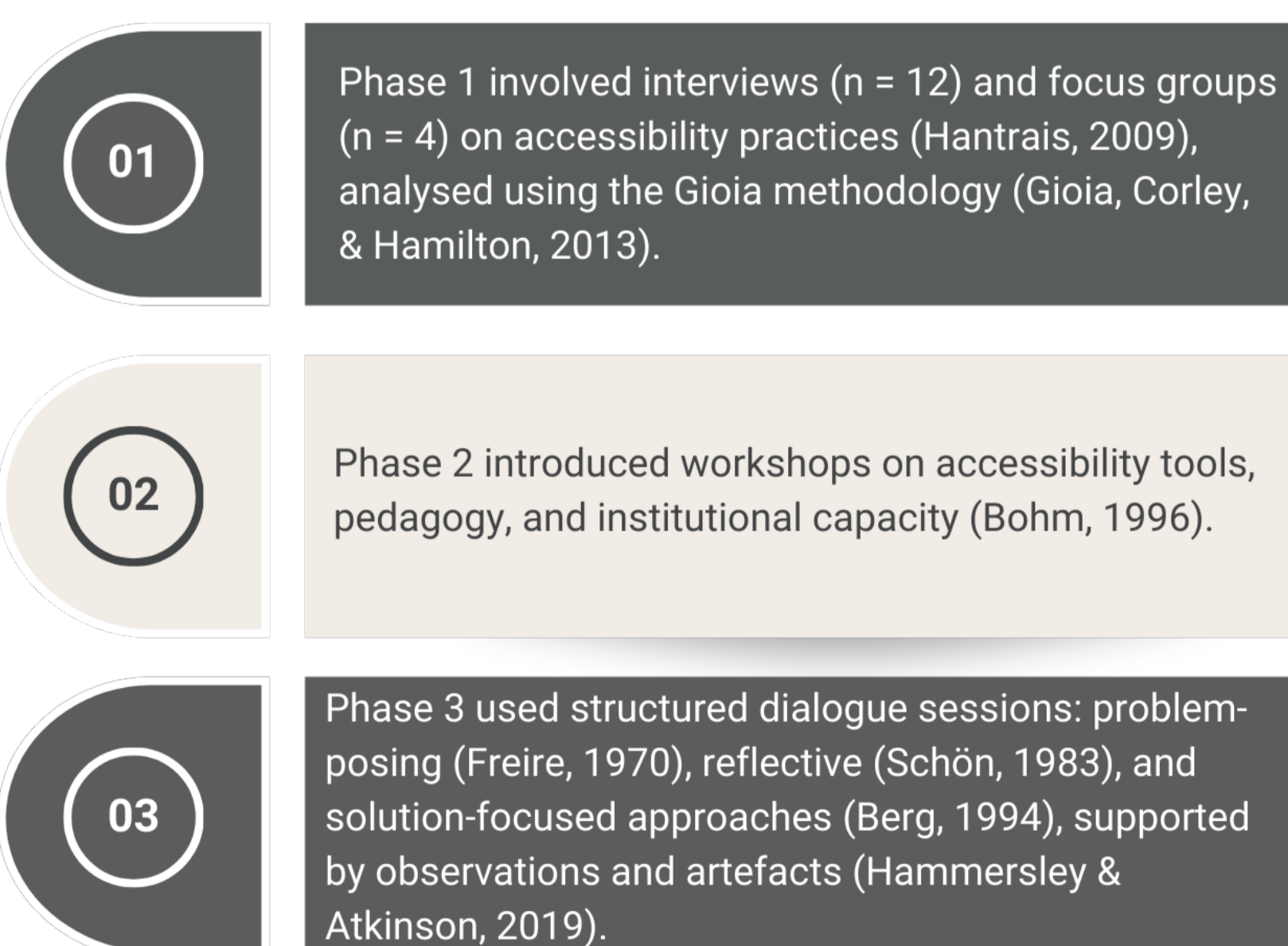


Figure 3. Multi-method Qualitative Research Phases. Created by the authors.

Integration followed multi-method principles (Fetters, Curry, & Creswell, 2013). Validation used member checking, triangulation, peer debriefing, and thick description (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tracy, 2010).

In parallel, surveys with students and staff are ongoing. Please scan the QR codes on this poster to participate in the Student Survey or Staff Survey (Anonymous, Approx. 10 minutes).

## Section 3: Findings

The study highlights contrasting implementation landscapes characterized by different approaches to digital inclusion. Pakistani institutions exhibit what emerges as "unconscious inclusivity", technology adoption driven by pedagogical engagement rather than deliberate accessibility design. Faculty report experimenting with diverse media (videos, podcasts, simulations) to make lectures "more engaging" without conscious consideration of accessibility implications. However, in the Global South context (Pakistan), the conversation is fundamentally reframed by the primacy of the socio-economic digital divide. Foundational barriers, such as students' lack of personal devices and reliable internet, overshadow pedagogical concerns. This is underscored by the reality that a majority of students at a premier university come from low-income households and often lack personal laptops. This leads to policy-practice gaps, where faculty in Pakistan develop an informal, relational logic of support based on "compassion," a model that contrasts sharply with the more formalized, system-driven approach in the UK. The institutional framework reveals formal but nascent disability support structures, with recently established accessibility committees but limited systematic implementation, characterized by "case-by-case" responses rather than institutionalized systems. In contrast, UK institutions demonstrate more systematic approaches with established compliance frameworks, though challenges center on faculty resistance to standardized protocols and balancing personalization with institutional requirements. A critical finding across both contexts is the widespread lack of awareness regarding built-in digital accessibility tools, representing a significant gap between available technology and practical application for inclusion.

## Contributions

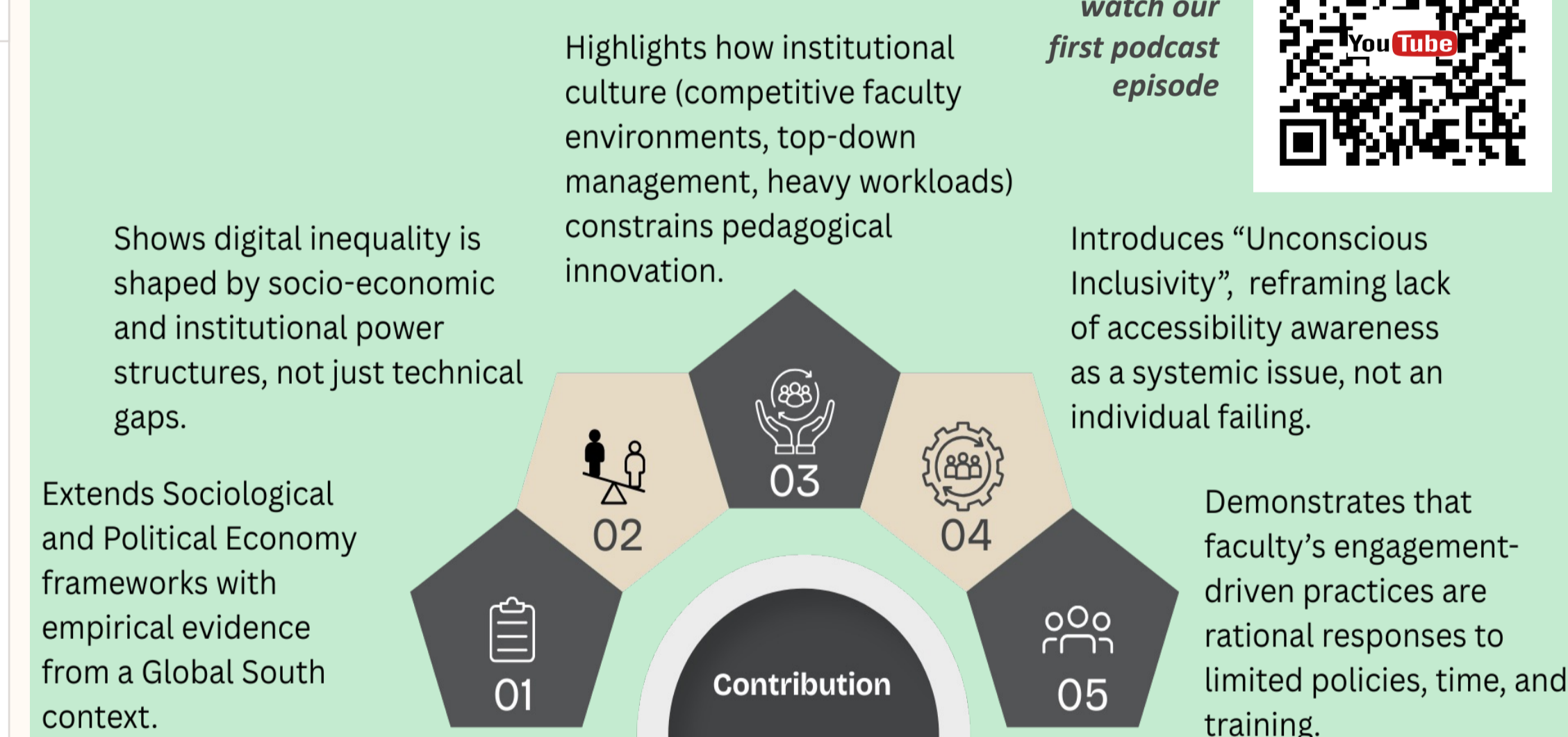


Figure 4. Contributions. Created by the authors.



Student Digital Accessibility Survey



Academic and Professional Services Staff Digital Accessibility Survey

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