

## Uzair Ibrahim

### Profile:

Uzair Ibrahim is the Farhad Daftary Doctoral Scholar in Arab and Islamic Studies at the University of Exeter.



Before joining Exeter, he completed an MA with distinction in South Asian Studies at SOAS, University of London, funded by The Institute of Ismaili Studies as part of their flagship Graduate Programme in Islamic Studies and Humanities, which he completed in 2020.

He arrived at the Institute from Habib University, Pakistan, where he obtained a BSc (Honors) in Social Development and Policy in 2018. He has been a lifelong wheelchair user.

### Transcript:

[00:00:00] So, my name is Uzair Ibrahim, and I was born in Pakistan, and I grew up there, and I moved to London six years ago. So, a substantial chunk of my life as someone who lived with disability was spent somewhere that's not really accessible. And so, you know, then you learn to, work your way around, um, many things, uh, you know.

[00:00:31] Um, which has, you know, made out about me and helped me when I moved here because, you know, I was okay with, you know, not, I was in a way okay with, um, doing, making things accessible in an unorthodox way for me. So I think, yeah, I think the contrast of living somewhere that's not accessible as opposed to somewhere like London, which is accessible, has really, you know, shaped my experience.

[00:01:02] Yeah, so, you know, there's never been an official diagnosis of what disability I have. Um, when I was little, doctors used to think, some doctors thought that I had cerebral palsy. But then some thought that I didn't, um, you know, and in Pakistan, you know, uh, diagnosis still, um, you know, it's not easy to come by.

[00:01:28] Um, so, in a way I don't know the official name, official medical name of my disabilities. I just know that I can't walk. Um, everything else I can pretty much do except walking.

(Voiceover) Why is it important to have diverse inputs in research?

[00:01:45] You know, um, so, uh, so when I, I went to a brand new university in Pakistan and one of the reasons why I chose that university was, um, that the campus was fully built, accessible, um, and, and because it was a brand new university, they were experimenting with a lot of things.

[00:02:06] They built a thing called Playground on the model of the Stanford Design School. You know, and, you know, design thinking was a big thing there, still is. But when I first entered, um, you know, um, the Playground, uh, the space, uh, it had high tables and high chairs, you know, the, you know, the corporate sort of design that's in these days.

[00:02:35] And you know, uh, and they were like, we didn't think about this. Well, maybe you should have consulted someone when you were designing this place. So, you know, and I wasn't a design student at all, but you know. But that meant that that space was, um, largely sort of unusable for me. Um, but now all of my research has to do with the humanities.

[00:03:05] Uh, and as such I have to use all libraries. You know, and sometimes you just want to browse the library. And, you know, some shelves are too high and you can't read. And, you know, there's all sorts of hoops, bureaucratic hoops, that you have to go through to get, you know, a book. So, you know, designing research spaces, if we can, and, you know, my disability I consider to be, easier to work around, you know, you just need to put a ramp in it.

[00:03:41] And, uh, imagine someone who can't speak, who can't see, who can't hear. There's a whole host of others things that you have to do to make things accessible for them. So it's very important for there to be a disability sort of design consultant in every product, I feel. Just as there might be, you know, a gender consultant, uh, you know, uh, in spaces, yeah.

(Voiceover) Have you been involved in contributing to co design, or as a research participant?

[00:04:11] I, to be honest, I haven't. I've designed, you know, all the projects that I've been involved in because I'm in the humanities, are largely to do with texts. You know, images and things like that. So, in terms of the execution of the research, all we have to do is write.

[00:04:36] Uh, you know, which is easy enough. Uh, you know, in terms of accessibility. Um, so, well, even in the humanities, for example, there are a lot of areas of research that I'm interested in that I cannot I can maybe participate as a designer, as a co-designer, but I can't participate in executing that research in any way because, you know, that would require fieldwork to parts of the world that are not accessible, for example, the country I'm from.

[00:05:10] Um, you know, so those things are still, you know people might think that people who do research in the humanities or social sciences deal largely with only text, but that's not always true because, you know, as someone doing a PhD right now, I decided that all my interviews would be on Zoom because it's much easier to, you know, navigate the computer.

[00:05:40] Rather than get a physical space, which might end up being inaccessible. And, you know, even if something is accessible on paper, the lift could run out on the day, you know. Anything can happen. Um, so yeah.

(Voiceover) What advice would you recommend to Early Career Researchers to create inclusive settings when co-creating or conducting research?

[00:06:09] You know, sometimes, um, really, sometimes it could be something as small as the way people are, you know, required to sit in a space. For example, I was, um, teaching a couple of years ago and I found out that I had a student who was deaf and, you know, required, you know, lip reading to keep up. Um, so, you know, we had to completely reimagine how the classroom would look like and, you know, we had to sort of figure out a way for the student to sit in a place where she could see everyone's faces without, you know, it can't be a U shape or lecture theatre kind of setting because that is counterproductive.

[00:06:54] Um, and then we had to, as the other students, we had to tell them that there's only one rule, which is that you never speak over anyone else and always raise your hand so that the student can see who's talking. So, inclusivity or accessibility might sound like a, you know, a daunting task, but sometimes it can be as simple as how you require people to sit in a space, yeah.

[00:07:28] So I mean, my advice, coming to your question, my advice to early career researchers would be to, you know, not feel bound by conventions. Because, you know the, the way the world is designed and the way to make the world accessible is, you know, at times it requires sort of unconventional sort of thinking, which can be complex, but also can be very simple. Yeah.

(Voiceover) In terms of your lived experience, what have you seen done well, or what has worked well for you in the past?

[00:07:57] Some, a place like the British Library, for example, you know. Everyone, regardless of whether they, you know, have accessibility needs or they don't, everyone is required to order some things to come up.

[00:08:20] Things are not on the shelf. Very little things are on the shelf. You know, reference books, catalogues. Um, so you know, a system, a system like that, uh, which is to say that a system where people with disabilities or access needs can easily call for an item, even if, even if they are available on the shelf.

[00:08:46] You know, it has really worked for me, and you know, can have the potential to work for other people as well, I think. Yeah, and just like making sure I've been to, you know, I've used the Bodleian libraries at Oxford quite a bit, and sometimes because the libraries are old, you know, those spaces can be very narrow, um, you know, and so if, you are designing a project, even if it's in, is, even if it is in a library and you require people to come, just make sure that the spaces are wide enough, you know, and yeah.

(Voiceover) Can you share any common mistakes that researchers should avoid?

[00:09:34] Well, well, I think, and it's not anybody's fault but I think, uh, it should not be default in anyone's thinking that, uh, you know, uh, that people will be able to access things as they are, you know? Because, um, my name wouldn't tell you that I have a disability, you know, we don't carry, people who have disabilities don't carry a disability card, you know.

[00:10:03] So it's not built into their identity, you know, a name is a name, you know, and it, it sort of, uh, denotes a person rather than a disability. You know, and a person may have a disability or may not have a disability. So I think when you're talking to people, I think, um, the negative is that people just assume that sort of you will be able to access everything, but then you have to, you know, sometimes remind them constantly that, you know, is it, you know, will I be able to access?

[00:10:41] And that can be sort of cumbersome and, you know, you don't want to, uh, do that every time as well. You know? Yeah.  
(Voiceover) Is there anything else researchers should be mindful of when working with the disabled community?

[00:10:54] So, you know, I think it would be a very good idea if, you know, you just ask, you know, just ask upfront rather than rely on the person with the disability to come and tell you.

[00:11:13] And also then to make sure that once you've asked, unless you need another piece of information, that that the person with the disability does not have to repeat themselves, you know, because that can be, uh, that, you know, and nobody wants to, you know, hello, I'm here, you know, every time. So, yeah, I think just being open-minded and forthcoming can go a long way.

(Voiceover) Do you have any final tips or recommendations you would like to share?

[00:11:48] I think one thing that everyone I think should keep in mind is that when you make things accessible, you don't make them accessible only for people with disabilities. If something is accessible, it becomes accessible for everyone, regardless of whether they have a disability or not.

[00:12:07] Um, you know, so I think if we design things with that in mind, I think a lot of the mental barriers that come with, you know disability innovation in particular, I think will go away because, you know you will be thinking about everyone, which is ideal, which is what we want at the end of the day, you know, so there, there, there is very little access to technology that, you know, needs to be there only for particular kinds of disabilities, you know.

[00:12:46] Most, I think most technology can help everyone regardless of whether they have a disability. I think designing something with that in mind uh, yeah, yeah.