

**RESEARCH PAPER****Inclusive Higher Education: An Analysis of the Implementation and Effectiveness of the “HEC Policy for Students with Disabilities at Higher Education Institutions in Pakistan 2021”**

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Corresponding AuthorAfaf.manzoor@ue.edu.pk**ABSTRACT**

The Higher Education Commission is also responsible for increasing access and equal opportunities for all students with disabilities. Recently, HEC has launched a policy titled “HEC Policy for Students with Disabilities at Higher Education 2021” which aims to promote inclusive education in all universities and colleges in Pakistan. The study aims to get the opinions of students with disabilities on various components of an inclusive learning environment, from the admission process to the award of a degree. The researchers collected data from 100 students with disabilities enrolled in various programs at universities by using the snowball sampling technique. For this purpose, a survey questionnaire was developed using validation and reliability protocols. The study's findings revealed that the policy has a positive impact by the higher education institutions under its umbrella. The research will be beneficial for current students, future students, Institutions, and stakeholders.

Keywords: Academics, Accommodation, Disability, Equality, Inclusive Education, Students

Introduction

Education is a basic root for personal and national development, glorified as an essential human right in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948) and strengthened by the standard Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, United Nations, 2006). For individuals with special needs, inclusive education is responsible for ensuring fairness among all and social integration. For people with disabilities, this conversion from basic education to higher education is a great challenge as they lack policy implementation, resources, and societal attitudes (Anwer & Chaudhry, 2020). HEC Policy for Students with Disabilities at Higher Education Institutions in Pakistan 2021 was proposed for addressing the critical aspects like quality, equality, equity, access, and sustainability of higher education for students with special needs at higher Education level.

Literature Review

In the last few decades, Pakistan has launched several policies and reforms in support of children with special needs. Since its independence in 1947, Pakistan has steadily built policies and frames to protect disabled individuals, as this group needed more social, educational, and economic inclusion. Largely based on fragmented effort, reforms implemented later formed a cornerstone for the establishment of the National Policy for Persons with Disabilities of 2002.

In the early years, there were no formal policies addressing the needs of people with disabilities. Support for people with disabilities relied heavily on charity-based initiatives led by voluntary organizations and religious institutions (Hameed & Manzoor, 2020). These were special schools for children with disabilities, which NGOs established sporadically with very little government support. The First Education Policy (1972–1980) was an important milestone since it formally acknowledged the need for education for children with special needs. This policy suggested: Special education schools and centers to meet the special needs of children with disabilities and to integrate children with minor disabilities into general schools. Despite its promise, the implementation of these provisions was slow, constrained by a lack of funding and trained personnel (Farooq, 2012).

The first legislation that defined the rights of people with disabilities in Pakistan was the Disabled Persons (Employment and Rehabilitation) Ordinance of 1981. Its major provisions are: (a) 1% quota for jobs of persons with disabilities in both public and private sectors. (b) National and Provincial Councils for the Rehabilitation of Disabled Persons, NCRDP, and PCRDP, respectively to oversee the activities for the rehabilitation of disabled persons. (c) Vocational training and rehabilitation services to improve the employability of persons with disabilities (Government of Pakistan, 1981). It was an ordinance that marked the shift from welfare-based support towards rights-based support for persons with disabilities.

The social welfare policy of 1994 focused on the community-based rehabilitation and skill development of people with disabilities. Key activities included: (a) increasing awareness programs to minimize stigmatization and maximize inclusion; (b) scaling up vocational training programs for people with disabilities in both urban and rural areas; and (c) expanding partnerships with NGOs and private sector organizations for technical services (Malik, 2019). The 2002 National Policy for Persons with Disabilities was a watershed moment in that regard since it addressed several of these issues and laid down the foundation of an inclusive society. This National Policy was a landmark initiative that realized the importance of education and vocational training for persons with disabilities.

This policy was based on inclusive education and required changes in teaching methods, infrastructure, and curriculum to meet the needs of diverse students. However, there were still several challenges. Lack of awareness and stigma around disabilities made them socially isolated (Hameed & Manzoor, 2020). The Special Citizens Act (2008) added further strength to the rights of disabled people as it made all public places accessible, including schools. Under the Right to Education Act of 2012 under Article 25-A of the Constitution, the responsibility of the state towards free and compulsory education for every child, with disabilities also being included up to the secondary level, is further highlighted.

In 2019, the provincial government also implemented a Punjab Special Education Policy to increase the number of special education institutions in the province. It also aimed at improving the identification of disabilities among children but after all these efforts of the government a great number of students are reported out of school and school distance is reported as one of the main reasons (Parveen, 2023).

Recognizing this gap, the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan (HEC) introduced the Policy Guidelines for Inclusive Education at Higher Education Institutions (2021). This policy outlined measures such as:

- Establishing disability resource centers at HEIs.
- Providing assistive technologies and learning aids.

- Offering financial support, including scholarships, to SWDs.
- Training faculty and staff to foster an inclusive learning environment.
- Ensuring the availability of accessible infrastructure, including ramps, elevators, and accessible classrooms.

Despite these reforms, the implementation of inclusive practices remains inconsistent across HEIs. Many institutions lack the necessary resources to accommodate SWDs, and awareness among students and educators about disability rights is limited.

Recognizing this gap, the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan (HEC) introduced the Policy Guidelines for Inclusive Education at Higher Education Institutions (2021). This policy outlined measures such as Establishing disability resource centers at HEIs, Providing assistive technologies and learning aids, Offering financial support, including scholarships, to SWDs, Training faculty and staff to foster an inclusive learning environment, and Ensuring the availability of accessible infrastructure, including ramps, elevators, and accessible classrooms. Despite these reforms, the implementation of inclusive practices remains inconsistent across HEIs.

By collecting data from 100 purposively selected SWDs, the study examines their perspectives on the inclusivity of HEIs, implementing policies, and providing necessary facilities. The findings aim to provide actionable insights to policymakers and educationists for fostering equity, accessibility, and inclusivity in higher education.

Material and Methods

The study applied a quantitative research approach to comprehensively understand the implementation of policy by educational institutions. It employed a survey research design. A questionnaire was developed, and its face and construct validity were ensured through expert validation. The questionnaire was used for public and private sector university and college students.

Instrument Development: The questionnaire was developed based on the “Policy for Students with Disabilities at Higher Education Institutions (HECs) in Pakistan 2021” and a comprehensive literature review. The instrument consists of two parts:

Part I: Demographic Information: This section collects demographic information, including Name, gender, Type of University: (a) Private / (b) Government, and Type of Disability.

Part II: Questionnaire for Students: This section comprises 28 questions/statements rated on a four-point scale (strongly disagree, disagree, strongly agree, agree). The statements are categorized into multiple factors as per policy specifications. The section on the Institution's Environment includes Infrastructure, Learning environment, Socioeconomic Structure / Resources, Counseling & Referral Services. The Section of Academic Activities includes Student participation, Academic Policies, and Equitable opportunities.

The grouping of statements under these factors allowed for a comprehensive assessment of the various aspects of the successful implementation of HEC policy 2021 for special students. It is important to note that the methodology outlined above aims to gather data and insights that contribute to a deeper understanding of the challenges and potential solutions related to special needs students in educational institutions.

Refining the instrument entails multiple steps. Validity establishes that data presents what it should describe accurately. Validity and reliability

are core considerations in making effective research work. Validity sets the guarantee of the collected data to represent, with accuracy, the phenomena or constructs under observation (Sudaryono, et al., 2019). This study carefully addressed the validity of the instrument used to measure the Implementation and Effectiveness of the New "HEC Policy for Students with Disabilities at Higher Education Institutions in Pakistan in 2021. Additionally, reliability is an essential aspect of research, ensuring consistency and stability in the measurements. In this study, the reliability of the instrument was assessed. The reliability coefficient for the questionnaire, specifically about the Effectiveness of the New "HEC Policy for Students with Disabilities at Higher Education Institutions in Pakistan 2021 among university students, was found to be 0.92. This indicates a good level of reliability, suggesting that the instrument consistently measures the intended constructs and provides stable results. This study looked at validity and reliability to help in strengthening and trustworthiness of the findings from the research.

The population of the Sample

A sample of 100 students with special needs from public and private sector universities and colleges under HEC was chosen for the questionnaire on purposive sampling.

Data Collection

Data collection is the sensitive phase of the research study. A comprehensive approach is followed in gathering data from several sources in this study. The major source of data The collection of the study was the students themselves, who formed the target population. The survey method was used to collect information from the students, using a questionnaire that would help in examining different aspects of the actual situation of policy implementation.

Ethical considerations

Any research study is bound to face ethical considerations. To ensure the privacy and confidentiality of the respondents, the questionnaire used in the study did not seek any personal information or identities of the respondents in the demographic section. This approach was aimed at creating a safe and comfortable environment for the participants so that they feel at ease while giving their responses. In addition, before collecting the data, the researcher made explicit to all the participants the confidentiality of the information. The participants were assured that their responses would be treated with the utmost confidentiality and would only be used for research purposes. These ethical considerations were necessary to maintain the principles of research integrity, respect for participants' rights, and the ethical guidelines established by relevant institutions. By maintaining confidentiality, seeking informed consent, and providing a secure research environment, this study aimed to uphold ethical standards and ensure the well being and trust of the participants.

Results and Discussion

The analysis began with the frequency distributions of the demographic variables to get a more detailed understanding of the characteristics of the sample. This step gave insight into the composition of the 100 participants in terms of gender, institution, type of disability, demographic factors, and 28 instrument items. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data and summarize the main characteristics of the variables under investigation.

Measures such as mean (average), standard deviation, minimum, and maximum values were calculated to provide a comprehensive description of the data set. The mean

value allowed for assessing the average response or level of agreement/disagreement among the participants regarding various factors related to HEC policy 2021.

Table 1
Institution Environment

Sr. No.	Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean	S.D.
Institution Environment							
Infrastructure							
1.	The seating arrangement in the classroom is comfortable for you.	44.4	38.1	6.3	11.1	3.16	.971
2.	The movement of the students in the institute is facilitated according to their needs.	12.7	49.2	23.8	14.3	2.60	.890
3.	Your institution has arrangements and accommodations that are according to your individual needs.	11.1	36.5	38.1	14.3	2.44	.876
4.	The building design is according to the needs of students with special needs	14.3	34.9	33.3	17.5	2.46	.947
					Average Mean	2.66	
Learning Environment							
1.	Your institution recognizes individual needs and provides equal learning opportunities to all students.	15.9	50.8	23.8	9.5	2.73	.846
2.	Your institution promotes the academic skills of all students through encouragement and rewards.	9.7	51.6	29.0	9.7	2.61	.797
					Average Mean	2.67	
Socioeconomic Structure / Resources							
1.	You feel secure in terms of the socioeconomic matters in your institute.	23.8	50.8	14.3	11.1	2.87	.907
2.	Your institution provides opportunities to strengthen your economic position for education.	19.0	44.4	23.8	12.7	2.70	.927
3.	Your institution provides you with assistive devices and other helpful equipment according to your need	9.7	35.5	38.7	16.1	2.39	.975
					Average Mean	2.65	
Counseling & Referral Services							
1.	Counseling services are provided upon your request.	14.3	44.4	39.7	1.6	2.71	.971
2.	Other health-related services are provided in case of need.	6.3	49.2	33.3	11.1	2.51	.890
3.	Your institute informs the students about the facilities available to students with special needs.	27.0	20.6	31.7	20.6	2.54	1.10
					Average Mean	2.22	

Table 2
Academic Activities

Academic Activities							
Students Participation							

1	You have equal participation opportunities in academic activities.	8.1	19.4	58.1	14.5	2.69	.801
2	Your institution cooperates with you to improve your social skills.	9.7	22.6	56.5	11.3	2.63	.747
3	Your institution provides opportunities for communication between students and staff, to resolve issues.	7.9	28.6	55.6	7.9	2.63	.747
4	The institute provides a healthy environment and encourages community engagement activities.	9.5	23.8	60.3	93.7	2.63	.747
5	Opportunities for discussions and workshops are provided for your personal development.	6.3	54.0	27.0	12.7	2.54	.800
6	Seminars on awareness of disability-related issues are held to promote the rights of students.	6.3	44.4	28.6	20.6	2.37	.885
7	Practical activities are included in your educational material to enhance your abilities.	7.9	41.3	31.7	19.0	2.38	.888
8	The institute arranges Sports and cultural events for you in an inclusive manner.	3.2	60.3	23.8	12.7	2.54	.758
						Average Mean	2.22

Academic Policies

1	The administration of your institution is following Government rules and regulations for students with special needs.	3.2	50.8	34.9	11.1	2.46	.737
2	The administration of your institution guides you through the admission process.	1.6	74.6	20.6	3.2	2.75	.538
3	Administration provides you with helping aids and resource persons during an examination.	1.6	57.1	27.0	14.3	2.46	.758
4	Your institute provides you with appropriate facilities for writing skills and research work	9.5	49.2	27.0	14.3	2.54	.858
5	The administration is helpful in the implementation of all disability-related legislation	6.3	31.7	44.4	17.5	2.27	.827
						Average Mean	2.49

Equitable opportunities

1	You have equitable educational rights like other students.	19.0	54.0	15.9	11.1	2.81	.877
2	You are facing discrimination at any stage during your academic pursuits.	9.5	36.5	42.9	11.1	2.44	.819
3	You feel respected while receiving incentives from your institute.	15.9	60.3	17.5	6.3	2.86	.759
						Average Mean	2.70

The first factor was infrastructure and under this factor, the high mean of 3.16 indicates that students with special needs are satisfied with the seating arrangement of the classroom. Second 2.60 refers to students having mobility services in the university

according to their needs to some extent. On the other hand, the results showed that institution arrangements, accommodations, and building designs are not up to the mark according to individual needs.

The second factor was the learning environment, and under this factor, an average mean of 2.73 shows that institutions are providing equal opportunities to all students and encouraging their success.

The third factor was socioeconomic structure and resources and under this factor, an average mean value of 2.65 shows that they feel secure in university in socio-economic matters. The second value of 2.39 shows that they are neglected to strengthen economic stability and there is a lack of helping pieces of equipment according to the individual needs.

The fourth factor was the counseling and referral services and under this factor, the average mean value of 2.22 was a little lower and showed that student counseling services are provided on request and they provide all other information to the students but there are still limited health-related services for students.

The fifth factor was Student Participation in academic activities, and an average mean value of 2.22 shows that all students have equal academic opportunities, indicating that institutions cooperate with students to improve their social skills, solve students' academic issues, and encourage students to engage themselves in healthy activities. The results show that there are fewer seminars about the rights of disabled students and limited sports activities.

The sixth factor was Academic Policies and the average mean values of 2.49 showed that institutions provide proper guidelines during admission and facilitate them in writing skills and research work. Although the administration of institutions is struggling to implement government policies and disability-related legislation.

The last factor was Equitable opportunities and an average mean value of 2.70 showed that students with special needs are receiving incentives or grants according to the government policy and getting equal educational rights like other students.

Conclusion

The survey responses and analysis shed light on the challenges surrounding students with disability and resources within our university. Through careful consideration of the findings, we developed a comprehensive recommendation policy aimed at addressing these issues. By implementing the proposed strategies, including checks and balances. Universities are also under economic pressure, but most responses showed that students with special needs are being treated equally and receiving equal resources. The success of these measures will depend on the collaboration and consideration of students' needs and stakeholders. Through continuous evaluation and adjustments, we can ensure the effectiveness and relevance of our policies, reaffirming our commitment to quality education and upholding the highest standards of resources in institutions. Together we can provide an environment for intellectual growth, ethical conduct, reductions in barriers, and the holistic development of our special students. The university recognizes the importance of fostering an environment that upholds academic integrity, promotes student consideration, and ensures an accessible and barrier-free environment. Considering the questionnaires and results obtained through university students, based on analysis for the special needs students, this is the plan to solve associated problems with some recommendations proposed toward a more amicable level for all students; enhance the learning process, and improve the culture with equality and social inclusion.

Recommendations

- Create a well-articulated policy and guidelines in such recommendations as recommended, taking inputs from students, institutions, and other concerned stakeholders
- Offer teacher training and professional development on the policy with strategies on accessible infrastructure and culture.
- Present the policy to all students, parents, and faculty with an understanding that everyone is responsible for the integrity of the academic community.
- Monitor the implementation of the policy through regular assessments, surveys, and feedback from students and faculty.
- A steady evaluation system can strengthen the impact of the policy through data analysis, lack of areas identification, and making necessary changes to ensure relevance and impact
- These recommendations regarding the policy can create a conducive environment for the institute by putting it into action. conducive learning environment where academic integrity is valued, student engagement is fostered, and equal opportunities are provided to all students. The collaboration of students, faculty, and stakeholders are crucial in upholding these principles and increasing the effectiveness of proposed policies.

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