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INCLUSION IN ACTION: ADMINISTRATION'S PERSPECTIVE ON IMPLEMENTING HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY

Afaf Manzoor[1], Mehwish Kamal[2] & Tauseef Ahmed[3]

[1]Assistant Professor, Department of Special Education, University of Education, Lahore, Pakistan
[2]PhD Scholar. Department of Special Education, University of Education. Lahore, Pakistan
[3]Lecturer, Department of Special Education, University of Okara., Punjab, Pakistan

KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
	HEC policy for students with disabilities at higher education institutions in Pakistan in 2021 was proposed to improve quality of education for students with special needs at higher education level. The policy aims to provide equal chances to everyone and promote inclusive setups among disabled students in universities and colleges. This study aimed to understand the administration's perspective on implementation and effectiveness of Policy 2021 and suggest measures to improve policy. The researcher employed a mixed-method approach. Data from 50 focal persons in higher education institutes was collected using a random sampling technique. The findings show transparent & real picture at practical level instead of documentation. The study results highlighted the issues causing hindrances in sustainable, inclusive education system & accommodating active learning environment at diverse levels. Addressing the root causes and barriers can be beneficial in executing inclusive setups. The research findings show a great need for the collaboration between institutions, students' needs, and stakeholders. There should be clear metrics and a proper reporting system for continuous improvement.
Correspondence	**Afaf Manzoor**
Email:	afaf.manzoor@ue.edu.pk

INTRODUCTION

Including students with disability in the higher education is essential for building a strong and just education system. Higher Education Commission (HEC) in Pakistan has formulated the Policy for Students with Disabilities at Higher Education Institutions in Pakistan in 2021. This revolutionary policy aims to eliminate barriers restricting access to education and employment opportunities for disabled students, creating a culture of inclusion and accessibility in higher education institutions

(HEIs) (HEC, 2021). This policy is based on the same principles as Sustainable Development Goal 4, an international treaty. More exactly, it cites education for all as inclusive and equitable, as set out in Goal 4, argues that inequality amid and within countries should be reduced in Goal 10 (United Nations, 2015). In doing so, policy aims to integrate the international standards in Pakistan's higher education sector by addressing systemic issues of students with disabilities. HEC policy mentions that there should be no barriers created within education environment for students with disabilities to achieve the success.

The HEC policy on inclusive education states, "a person with the disability (PWD) is any person who has a long-term physical, mental, and intellectual or sensory impairment which in interaction with various barriers may hinder his or her full and effective participation in education and society on an equal level with others." This policy has put forth guidelines for all higher education institutions, which require the provision of equivalent opportunities to all the students with full consideration of eliminating physical, academic, and social barriers to every student enrolled (Khan, Mustafa, & Nawaz, 2021). The key objectives under this policy include: (a) the disability issues are managed by establishing standing committees on accessibility in HEIs. (b) support systems are implemented to include the assistive technologies, modifications to the physical infrastructure, and other academic accommodations. (c) there is an equitable process for students with disabilities, and the admissions processes, teaching methodologies, and evaluation mechanisms are adjusted accordingly as well as (d) the faculty and staff are trained on the rights of persons with disabilities and inclusive teaching (HEC, 2021).

Even though the policy is thorough, it has the significant problems with putting it into action. The administrators, who are key to making policy work, often face challenges like insufficient funding, lack of trained workforces, and pushback against change in the institutional systems (Bardach & Patashnik, 2023). Also, education system in Pakistan has had trouble in supporting students with disabilities due to lower level of awareness and not enough resources (Rashid & Qixiang, 2025). Additionally, while the policy focuses upon making physical spaces accessible, the lack of digital access is still a significant issue. In this linking, many higher education institutions do not have the tech infrastructure needed for assistive tools, such as screen readers, voice recognition software, or captioning for online classes (Badiuzzaman, 2024). These issues show a strong need for a solid system to monitor and evaluate the policy to ensure its goals are adequately achieved. Key stakeholders in the implementation of HEC policies are employees. Their perspectives provide important insights into the successes, gaps, and challenges of integrating the diverse students with the disabilities into secondary schools.

The research shows that professional support significantly impacts the effectiveness of disability management, especially in the resource-limited settings (Khan, Mustafa & Nawaz, 2023). Staff are responsible for allocating resources, overseeing formation of accessibility committees, and fostering an organizational culture that values inclusion. Moreover, their ability to advocate for the rights of students with disabilities in policy and administration may determine the extent to which program achieves its desired outcomes, for example, in study by Avan and Javed (2023). Still, translating policy into practice remains complex endeavor, especially in context marked by limited resources,

socio-cultural stigmas, inconsistent institutional capacities, and lack of awareness, training among faculty and administrators. Workers described partnership with disability advocacy organizations as increasing organizational readiness for the program implementation. In this context, the higher education commission of Pakistan has taken strategic steps to promote inclusivity across public and private universities.

Objective of Study
1. Explore the administration's perspective on implementation and effectiveness of Policy 2021 and suggest measures to improve the policy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Inclusive education in higher education has gained global prominence as universities strive to offer equitable access for students with disabilities. International frameworks like the UN convention on rights of persons with disabilities (2006) and Sustainable Development Goal 4 emphasize inclusive and equitable quality education for all (United Nations, 2006; 2015). In response, many countries have introduced policies in the last decade to foster the inclusion at the tertiary level. Pakistan is no exception, the higher education commission introduced the policy for students with disabilities in higher education institutions in 2021, a landmark effort to eliminate barriers and promote inclusive culture in universities (HEC, 2021). This literature review examines the implementation of such inclusive education policies in higher education, focusing on administrator viewpoints, accessibility infrastructure, faculty training, and assistive technologies. Thus, drawing on recent peer-reviewed studies from Pakistan and internationally, review highlights challenges, success stories, and gaps in policy implementation, providing context for analyzing the 2021 HEC policy in Pakistan. Inclusive education in higher education revolves around removing obstacles that hinder full participation of students with disabilities.

Globally, policies increasingly mandate that universities become physically, academically, and socially accessible environments (Miles & Singal, 2010; UNESCO, 2020). Pakistan's HEC Policy (2021) is aligned with these international trends and country's commitments to inclusion. The HEC policy explicitly defines a person with disability broadly and instructs HEIs to ensure no student is prevented from success due to disability (HEC, 2021). University administrators play a pivotal role in translating the inclusive education policies into action. They allocate resources, establish support services and shape institutional culture. Research shows that most higher education administrators support the ideal of inclusion and view policies like HEC 2021 positively (Khan, Mustafa, & Nawaz, 2021). In the recent Pakistani study, virtually all institutional "focal persons" agreed the HEC 2021 policy is "good and productive initiative," reflecting a generally positive mindset toward inclusion on campus (Khan, Zafar, & Ali, 2023). This echoes international findings that strong leadership commitment is critical driver of inclusion in universities (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010). Administrators' buy-in can lead to proactive measures such as awareness seminars to improve the campus attitudes towards disability.

Indeed, many universities in Pakistan have begun organizing disability awareness workshops and seminars, indicating cultural shift towards acceptance (Javed, 2024). Despite supportive attitudes,

administrators face significant challenges in implementing inclusive policies. A recurrent issue is insufficient funding, without dedicated budgets, required infrastructure upgrades, support services remain incomplete. Many institutions lack adequate numbers of trained staff, such as sign language interpreters or disability services professionals, to support students (Rashid & Qixiang, 2025). Also, administrators may face resistance to change within their institutions, as some faculty, departments are slow to adapt practices that accommodate students with disabilities. This kind of attitudinal and organizational inertia is identified globally as barrier to inclusion, often rooted in misunderstanding or underestimating the capabilities of students with disabilities (Sharma, Forlin, Loreman & Earle, 2013). A "policy to practice" gap is often observed, where well-intentioned policies are not fully realized on ground due to inconsistency and pushback (Bardach, 2012). HEC 2021 policy mandates structural mechanism (accessibility committees & annual reporting to HEC) to ensure accountability (HEC, 2021).

Literature suggests that when administrators establish active disability committees & data nursing systems, inclusion efforts are more systematic and sustained (Barnes & Mercer, 2005). However, in practice, many Pakistani universities have yet to operationalize it as most institutions do submit annual disability inclusion reports to HEC as required, but the data collection is basic and limited to enrollment numbers (Javed, 2024). Administrators have noted need for better metrics, for example, tracking academic progress and outcomes of students with disabilities, rather than just headcounts (Kendall, 2016). The absence of robust monitoring makes it difficult for administrators to identify gaps and advocate for improvements. Besides, not all HEIs have functional accessibility committees despite the policy directive, which undermines accountability (Barnes & Mercer, 2005). They also recognize that they cannot implement inclusive policies in isolation. The partnership with external stakeholders is crucial with disability advocacy organizations and experts can build capacity and "increase organizational readiness" for inclusion programs (Javed, 2024). Such alliances are cited as success factors, providing administrators with guidance on best practices and sometimes access to additional resources.

The support from government and donors is pivotal in low-resource settings. The literature on low-income countries emphasizes that strong external support (financial, technical, and regulatory) is needed alongside institutional will to achieve policy goals (Miles & Singal, 2010; Mitra, Posarac & Vick, 2013). In Pakistan, administrators have called for greater HEC and government assistance to provide funding, assistive equipment, and expert teams to universities implementing 2021 policy (Javed, 2024). The leadership commitment at institutional and higher levels, combined with inter-sector collaboration, emerges as a theme in enabling inclusive policy implementation (Khan et al., 2023). Creating an accessible campus infrastructure is foundational component of inclusive higher education policy. Accessibility includes physical environment, informational and digital resources, and the overall campus climate in removing the physical barriers on campus, though gaps remain. Facilities such as ramps, elevators, accessible restrooms, and tactile signage are now more common, spurred by legal requirements and policies. In Pakistan, the HEC policy spurred several institutions to initiate advances like ramp construction, wheelchair availability, and modifying washrooms for accessibility (HEC, 2021).

These changes mark important success stories, signaling an institutional commitment to welcoming students with the mobility impairments. However, the extent of modifications varies, some colleges have only basic ramps and struggle to offer more specialized facilities beyond that (Javed, 2024). Some universities report having "no proper resources" to fully accommodate special needs students. This shows that many campuses are still only partially accessible, leaving gaps in laboratory access, hostel accommodations, or transportation (Badiuzzaman, 2024). In 21st century, accessibility is not limited to the built environment, it extends to digital spaces and learning resources. A recurring gap in policy implementation is the lack of digital accessibility and assistive technologies in education (Badiuzzaman, 2024). The HEC policy explicitly calls for assistive technologies and ICT accessibility, yet many Pakistani universities are slow to integrate these tools as few institutions have installed screen readers, text-to-speech software, and captioning systems for their e-learning platforms. This mirrors global trend: digital inclusion remains underdeveloped even where physical accessibility is addressed (Seale, 2013).

The students with visual or hearing impairments often struggle with university websites, learning management systems, and electronic materials that are not designed with accessibility in mind (Fichten, Asuncion, Barile, Ferraro & Wolforth, 2009). The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed this weakness, as the sudden shift to online learning in 2020 disproportionately affected students with disabilities who lacked necessary accommodations in virtual environments (Dhawan, 2020). Efforts to improve digital accessibility are gradually documented. Some universities are investing in assistive technology centers or resource rooms where students can access specialized software and devices (Badiuzzaman, 2024). In Pakistan, the handful of HEIs have begun providing materials in Braille or electronic format upon the request and offering devices like wheelchairs or audio aids to students in need. These support services, however, are not yet universal. Bridging the digital divide in Pakistan is critical in upgrading ICT and providing campus-wide assistive tools (Badiuzzaman, 2024). Attitudinal and cultural barriers remain a major challenge. Some faculty or peers believe that students with disabilities cannot meet the rigors of higher education or view accommodations as unfair advantages.

Such attitudes can lead to low expectations or even resistance to implementing the accommodations (Sharma, Forlin, Loreman & Earle, 2013). Overcoming these requires not only training but strong messaging from leadership, visibility of successful students with disabilities, and fostering a campus ethos of empathy and diversity (Moriña, 2017). Despite policies, many institutions have incomplete infrastructure changes. A campus might have some ramps but still lack accessible toilets, or have an accessible library entrance but bookshelves too high for wheelchair users continue to face daily hurdles. In digital realm, many universities do not audit or update their online content for openness. Without systemic checks, inaccessible PDFs, videos without captions and non-compliant websites persist (Seale, 2013; Fichten et al., 2009). The policy execution is another major challenge. In large higher education systems, some universities may implement policies enthusiastically while others lag behind. The absence of strong enforcement mechanism or incentives lead to uneven application of inclusive practices (Barnes & Mercer, 2005; Bardach, 2012). In Pakistan, HEC monitors execution

over reports and rankings, but monitoring is now more quantitative than qualitative (Khan, Mustafa & Nawaz, 2021).

Coordination amid departments is an issue, and lack of it can result in key tasks being neglected. On the student side, challenges include a lack of awareness of their own rights or available support. Some students choose not to disclose their disability due to fear of stigma or lack of trust that it will help (Moriña, 2016). Non-disclosure means they might not receive accommodations at all. Policies can only help those who are identified and registered, so institutions need to create safe processes for disclosure (Kendall, 2016). The 2021 HEC Policy provides strong framework aligned with global standards (HEC, 2021). Its focus on accessibility, accommodations, and training is well-founded in literature. Still, the common pitfalls, insufficient funding, lack of expertise, patchy follow-through, and attitudinal barriers, require continuous attention. The policy's potential can be fully realized by adopting globally recognized best practices, like mandatory training programs, robust monitoring systems (Lauer & Houtenville, 2018), student involvement in the decision-making (Gunnþórsdóttir, 2014) and inter-sector collaborations (Miles & Singal, 2010). Thus, bridging the gap between policy and practice will likely require the iterative refinements to the policy and sustained commitment from all stakeholders.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Concurrent Triangulation Design research was to investigate the Implementation and Effectiveness of the New HEC Policy for Students with Disabilities at Higher Education Institutions in Pakistan in 2021," according to the administration perspective. A concurrent triangulation design was used to collect and analyze quantitative and qualitative data in parallel. Therefore, the rationale is to seek convergence, corroboration, and correspondence of results from different methods (Piccioli, 2019). In qualitative part, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the administration / focal person of the institution. The semi-structured interviews were conducted till saturation (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006) using the phenomenological approach. The interviews aimed to discover their own experiences and observations regarding the effectiveness and implementation of HEC policy 2021 for special needs students. In the quantitative part, a checklist was used to obtain data from the focal persons who serve as the bridge between the university administration and students with special needs.

The checklist scale was developed with the help of the indicators and variables that were identified through the experience of focal persons. The purpose of this checklist was to know about their perspective on current practices and deficiency areas, and further recommendations for improving the implementation procedures of policies. Data from 50 focal persons of public and private higher education institutes were collected through the random sampling technique. For the interviews, the investigator adopts the purposive sampling method. Purposive sampling, also called judgmental, selective, or subjective sampling, involves the researcher using their discretion to select participants from the population who will participate in the study (Punch, 2013). In this connection, in both phases, the sample was selected from multiple public and private institutes of different divisions and districts of Punjab.

Table 1 Checklist for Focal Persons

SN	Statement	Mean	SD	MIN	MAX
1.	Annual reports are submitted as per higher education commission guidelines	2.8	1.2	1	5
2.	The institute has disability-related personal data bank for specific purpose.	2.3	.98	1	5
3.	Appropriate arrangements are made to facilitate the concerned department.	2.1	1.1	1	5
4.	Resource persons are available for need-based students during exams.	2.5	1.3	1	5
5.	Helping aids like Braille, Computer, etc., are available for need-based students during the exams.	2.4	1.2	1	5
6.	Students are provided information regarding available facilities during the admission process.	2.6	1.1	1	5
7.	The disability acceptance awareness seminars and workshops are arranged.	3	1.3	1	5
8.	Institution has help desk for students to learn about administrative processes.	2.3	.98	1	5
9.	There is a committee that checks and balances disability-related legislation. i.e., accessibility committee.	2.6	1.4	1	5
10.	The students are facilitated with extra coaching if they need it for particular purpose.	2.5	1.1	1	5
11	The institute provides free hostel facilities to students with special needs per HEC Policy.	3	1.3	1	5
12	The institute provides free transport facilities to the students with special needs per HEC Policy.	2.5	1.1	1	5

Note: Table 1 presents the checklist employed with focal persons.

The table results showed that on average, with a mean value of 3, respondents responded positively regarding arranging disability acceptance awareness seminars/workshops. The provision of hostel-related facilities was also reported as good, with a mean value of 3. On the other hand, facilitation to the concerned department was reported to be lowest with the mean value of 2.1, indicating the room for improvement.

DATA ANALYSIS

This study used thematic analysis technique to analyze qualitative data. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is a method to identify, analyze, and report highlights the results or generate themes within the data. The process of the thematic analysis approach is based upon six steps: The first step refers to being familiar with the data, transcribing the gathered information into small chunks, searching and reviewing themes of collected data, defining the context, and giving suitable names as a label, and lastly generating final report based on findings. The goal of thematic analysis is to focus on the themes and patterns within data before interpreting findings, rather than simply summarizing the information. The analysis will involve familiarizing the data, transcription, generating initial codes, identifying themes, exploring themes, selecting and naming themes, and preparing final report.

Administrator Interviews & Responses

Theme 1: Opinion of Administration

Sub Theme: Effectiveness. All focal persons except respondent C agreed that HEC policy 2021 for special needs is a good and productive initiative. Most institutes provide accessible infrastructure, classrooms, washrooms, play areas, transportation, ramps, wheelchairs, and other facilities according to individual needs. Still, Respondent C said that the university is facing challenges in providing resources and facilities according to the needs and demands of the exceptional students, due to dire economic circumstances. Strategies and Solutions: based on acquired data and respondents C and E, a few institutions struggle to meet individual needs according to the higher education commission policy 2021.

Theme 2: Resources and Facilities

Sub Theme: Need-based equipment. A few focal persons agreed that their universities provide the braille, JAWS, soft-form books, wheelchairs, and passage according to students' needs. According to Respondent B, the university provides facilities in specific department premises. Respondent C said that they do not have any proper resources except ramps and soft-form books on request of students; otherwise, they are facing problems in helpful and easing students with special needs. Strategies and solutions: The results show that universities are trying to implement HEC policy 2021 for special needs students. Lack of funds and resources needs support from government and stakeholders. Free transport systems, funds, helping tools, equipment, wheelchairs, and other services may be provided by the authorities.

Theme 3: Admission procedure

Sub Theme: Guidance and support: All focal persons have same response on admission procedure; according to the respondents, equal facilities and guidelines are available during admission. The department and admission committee ease all students equally. Strategies & Solutions: Universities are providing services at time of admission on equal basis, but sign interpreters should be provided for deaf students.

Theme 4: Annual Report and Data Bank

Sub Theme: Enrolment and projection: All focal persons said they have almost the same process of submitting annual reports and the database. All universities have the same database process based on the admission records of students with special needs. All universities submitted annual reports to HEC. Strategies and solutions: as per respondent's data, admission records are only database source. A separate team may create proper mechanism and transparent system. Secondly, some universities require larger teams to assess the resources and implementation process so that they can improve their rankings.

Theme 5: Policy implementation review

Sub Theme: Accountability: Most focal persons said the university internally reviews and submits the implementation report to HEC. The HEC evaluates the report and issues rankings based on the performance report. The respondents C and respondent F stated that their universities are lacking

in the accountability process and HEC ranking list. Strategies and Solutions: HEC should facilitate universities according to their needs, and more teams should be assigned to visit universities to get more positive results.

DISCUSSION

The 2021 HEC policy for students with disabilities represents the progressive step toward inclusive education in Pakistan. However, its success hinges on effective implementation at the institutional level, with administrators playing central role (Bardach, 2012). Exploring their perspectives offers a nuanced understanding of the policy's impact and informs strategies to address implementation challenges. This analysis donates to broader discourse on disability rights and inclusive education, aligning with Pakistan commitment to international conventions and sustainable growth. Applying inclusive education policies in higher education institutions has become a global imperative. It is possible to align equity and human rights (UNESCO, 2020). The HEC's 2021 policy for people with disabilities in Pakistan is commendable step toward fulfilling national & international obligations in this regard. Complying with UN Convention on the human rights of persons with disabilities. The sustainable development goal 4 (WHO, 2011). Our study discloses a significant gap amid practical implementation & policy formulation at institutional level, resonating with results from low-income countries (Mitra et al., 2013). These results can align with previous research in South Asian region (Sharma et al., 2013).

One noteworthy observation in this study is disparity between physical and digital accessibility. While several institutions have started efforts toward ramp construction, wheelchair provision, and modified restrooms, very few have integrated accessible ICT tools like screen readers or captioning systems in their online platforms. This reflects broader global trend, where digital inclusion remains underdeveloped in policy implementation (Seale, 2013; Fichten et al., 2009). COVID-19 pandemic further highlighted digital disparities in access to learning resources amid students with disabilities (Dhawan, 2020; Thompson & Copeland, 2021). The administrators' emphasis on awareness seminars and positive attitudes toward inclusive policy shows cultural shift; however, operational challenges persist. Similar sentiments were echoed in a study by Moriña (2016), where university staff endorsed inclusive values but lacked the institutional capacity to implement them effectively. The limited availability of teaching resources such as braille, audio texts, and interpreters reflects systemic underinvestment, highlighted in South African HEIs. Most respondents confirmed devotion to HEC's reporting and data bank protocols. Still, the mechanisms of data collection and monitoring remain basic and reactive.

Developing a robust data analytics system to track academic progress, retention, and satisfaction of students with disabilities is crucial (Richardson, 2015; Kendall, 2016). Moreover, lacking functional accessibility committees in many universities contradicts the HEC's policy directive, necessitating more vigorous enforcement and oversight (Barnes & Mercer, 2005). The triangulated approach in this study provides rich insight into quantitative trends and lived experiences of administrators, echoing prior research advocating for the mixed-methods to evaluate inclusion (Florian, 2014). The results reiterate that inclusive education in Pakistan is still formative, where policy implementation depends significantly on leadership commitment of focal persons, institutional culture, and external

support from government and donors (Miles & Singal, 2010). Based on findings, role of professional development is not exaggerated. Teachers and staff need structured training. The training must be in assistive technologies, inclusive pedagogy, and universal design for learning principles. Building the capacity of the institutions through exchange programs, workshops, and partnerships with the international institutions that would, in turn, facilitate the diverse long-term change (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010).

CONCLUSION

The current study aimed to explore the administration's perspective on the implementation and effectiveness of the Policy 2021 and suggest measures to improve the policy. The finding shows the transparent and real picture at the practical level instead of documentation. The issues of causing hindrances in a sustainable, inclusive Education system, accommodation, and a healthy learning environment within university and college are highlighted. Addressing the root causes and barriers can be beneficial in implementing inclusive setups. In this connection, through proposed strategies derived from this study, policymakers, stakeholders, decision-makers, and universities can see the real situation and utilize these findings to take new initiatives effectively according to need. Thus, the findings show the great need for the collaboration between Institutions, students' needs, as well as the stakeholders. Finally, this research underscores the importance of collaborative governance involving teachers and community-based disability organizations in policy evaluation & redesign. They reported that meaningful inclusion can be achieved if the voices of those most affected by exclusion are heard.

Recommendations

1. Future research is recommended to develop comprehensive guidelines and policies. That is based on these recommendations and suggestions, incorporating input from the students and relevant stakeholders.
2. Formulate clear guidelines and action plans for policy implementation at the institutional level, in consultation with students with disabilities and other stakeholders. This will tailor the HEC policy to each institution's context and ensure that the voices of those affected are incorporated in execution strategies.
3. The system should establish an inclusion committee in each institution to regularly review progress. They must conduct the periodic audits (aligned with HEC criteria) to assess how well facilities and academic accommodations are being maintained.
4. Management must offer teachers and workers with training and professional development prospects. Its purpose was to familiarize oneself with policy for promoting academic integrity. Policy implementation must be growing process. They must evaluate outcomes like academic performance, satisfaction, and retention

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