



*Aga Khan University Institute for Educational Development &
Network of Organizations Working for People with Disabilities, Pakistan*

Higher Education as a Catalyst for Addressing Educational Challenges of Persons with Disabilities in Pakistan

2026

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a Catalyst for Addressing Educational
Challenges of Persons with Disabilities
in Pakistan**



Credits

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List of Abbreviations

AKU	Aga Khan University
AKU-IED	Aga Khan University Institute for Educational Development
AIOU	Allama Iqbal Open University
ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
B.Ed.	Bachelor of Education
CAST	Centre for Applied Special Technology
C-ARTS	Centre for Autism, Rehabilitation, and Training Sindh
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
DEPD	Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities
DGSE	Directorate General Special Education
EBPs	Evidence-based Practices
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
EHC Plan	Education, Health and Care Plan
FCCs	Family Connections Centres
FAPE	Free Appropriate Public Education
GB	Gilgit-Baltistan
GTPA	Graduate Teacher Performance Assessment
HEC	Higher Education Commission
HEIs	Higher Education Institutes
IDEA	Individuals with Disabilities Education Act
IEPs	Individualized Education Plans
IFSP	Individualized Family Service Plan
IQ	Intelligent Quotient

ICT	Islamabad Capital Territory
KIIs	Key Informant Interviews
KP	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
LRE	Least Restrictive Environment
M.Ed.	Master of Education
M.Phil.	Master of Philosophy
MTSS	Multi-Tiered System of Supports
NCERT	National Council for Educational Research and Training
NCTE	National Council for Teacher Education
NDIS	National Disability Insurance Scheme
NPQ	National Professional Qualification
NOWPDP	Network of Organizations Working for People with Disabilities Pakistan
PDHS	Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey
PSLM	Pakistan Social and Living Measurement
PSL	Pakistan Sign Language
PWDs	Persons with Disabilities
PITE	Provincial Institute of Teacher Education
RCI	Rehabilitation Council of India
RTI	Response to Intervention
SELD	School Education and Literacy Department
SMC	School Management Counsel
SRS	Schooling Resource Standard
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics

SETTAS	Special Education Teachers Training Academy Sindh
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SENCO	Special Educational Needs Coordinator
SWOT	Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats
UCL	University College London
UK	United Kingdom
UNCRPD	United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
US	United States
UDL	Universal Design Learning
UMT	University of Management and Technology

Foreword

One good principle to organise a society around is to do so around the welfare of its most vulnerable members. Most societies, including our own, are far from being such a society. Here, vulnerables live with fear everyday. Being disabled often is being vulnerable, with fate more often than not unenviable. One of the goals and strengths of the Aga Khan University Institute for Educational Development (AKU-IED) is its longstanding commitment to be on this side of these vulnerable people through education that empowers, teaching criticality and gives courage to ask questions. This report, and the underlying instinct that led to its commissioning, marks an important prelude to AKU-IED's another step in the field of Special Educational Needs (SEN). It reflects our recognition that higher education institutions must play a catalytic role in addressing systemic inequities faced by persons with disabilities in Pakistan.

We extend our sincere gratitude to the Network of Organizations Working for People with Disabilities Pakistan (NOWPDP) for their partnership, intellectual leadership, and dedication throughout this research endeavour. This collaboration exemplifies the kind of cross-sector engagement that is essential for generating meaningful, contextually grounded knowledge and translating it into practice.

A central insight emerging from this study is that effective intervention in SEN cannot rely solely on intent or advocacy; it must be grounded in robust evidence. Data, measurable indicators, and well-documented good practices are indispensable for designing, implementing, and evaluating interventions that are both impactful and sustainable. Without such data, policy formulation and programmatic responses remain fragmented and insufficiently targeted. Clearly, data is necessary but not sufficient. Far more important is empathetic policy underpinned by political will.

This report also reinforces the importance of sustained collaboration. As AKU-IED moves towards institutionalising SEN within its academic and research frameworks, our continued partnership with NOWPDP will remain central. Together, we aim to bridge the gap between research, policy, and practice, ensuring that the development of SEN in Pakistan is informed by evidence, guided by equity, and driven by a shared commitment to inclusion.

We hope that this work will serve not only as a foundation for future academic initiatives at AKU-IED but also as a call to action for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers to collectively advance the agenda of inclusive education in Pakistan.



Farid Panjwani

Dean

AKU-IED

Foreword

The question is not whether Pakistan's education system can accommodate students with disabilities. The question is whether we have the courage to redesign it so that it must. This research marks a departure from advocacy rooted in aspiration to advocacy grounded in evidence. Network of Organizations Working for People with Disabilities, Pakistan's (NOWPDP) Advocacy, Research, and Certification (ARC) mandate represents a maturation of mission: sustainable change requires not just moral clarity but measurable proof of what works, where gaps persist, and how resources can be deployed most effectively.

Aga Khan University Institute for Educational Development's (AKU-IED) decision to institutionalize Special Educational Needs (SEN) within its academic framework is transformative. When a university of this caliber commits intellectual resources to SEN, it signals to the entire education sector that inclusion is core business, not peripheral work. This collaboration has allowed us to move beyond anecdotal narratives and establish a rigorous baseline. The findings are uncomfortable; revealing exclusion, fragmentation, and policy inadequacy but discomfort is the price of honest assessment.

What matters now is velocity. Data without action is decoration. NOWPDP's certification programs, teacher training, and policy advocacy will now be informed by this evidence base, allowing accuracy and depth. To our partners at AKU-IED, to policymakers, and to practitioners: this research is an invitation to co-ownership. Inclusion is an economic imperative, a governance obligation, and a test of our collective integrity. We are ready to move and have same hopes from the system. The time is now, and the roadmap is in our hands.



Omair Ahmad

Chief Executive Officer

NOWPDP

Abstract

The issue of education for persons with disabilities (PWDs) in Pakistan is rooted in various social, economic, and political challenges, which also make the entire educational ecosystem for the PWDs fragmented in the country, with no standardization. Against this backdrop, there remains uncertainty about the current landscape and future of the field of inclusive and special education in Pakistan and the relevant professionals. This also becomes a challenge for higher education on how to pursue the academic structure and plans for Special Educational Needs (SEN). Thus, this study serves the purpose of examining the contemporary SEN dynamics, including laws, policies, market demand and challenges, and potential opportunities for higher education on future SEN pathways. The research has focused on both primary and secondary data for qualitative analysis, guided by recognized frameworks, such as the ecological model and evolutionary approach. Findings reveal a serious lack of awareness, policy support, and funding for SEN across all educational levels in Pakistan, resulting in limited development of inclusive and special education. This gap reduces demand for SEN professionals, discourages academic engagement with the field at the level of higher education, and ultimately restricts PWDs' access to specialized services, affecting their educational and professional outcomes. Within this context, the study develops a comprehensive framework for higher education, explaining what, why, where, when, and how they can implement the proposed SEN model within their system to deal with the prevailing SEN challenges in the country from a two-pronged approach of academic evolution and advocacy.



Chapter 1:

Introduction

Chapter 1: Introduction

The challenges of providing equitable education for Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) in Pakistan lie in complex social, political, and economic realities. A key barrier is the prevailing lack of awareness in society that disability is a shared social responsibility rather than an added burden to be merely accommodated. This mindset is reflected in the limited access to basic education for PWDs at the primary and secondary levels, which ultimately restricts their progression to higher education.⁵ Although the state is the primary duty-bearer, it has not adequately fulfilled its role in developing an inclusive and enabling educational system supported by coherent welfare policies and institutional mechanisms. Moreover, even where educational opportunities exist, they remain underdeveloped, fragmented, and non-standardized, largely because the government has continued to rely on a segregated model of special education rather than strengthening inclusive education frameworks.⁶ On the other hand, schools lack awareness of the educational needs of PWDs and frequently reject students with disabilities, while universities demonstrate similar negligence, hence, reinforcing systemic exclusion. Economic marginalization further exacerbates these challenges, as many PWDs, despite nominal access to schooling, cannot sustain their educational journey due to persistent poverty. Additionally, the development and nonprofit sector, which could otherwise supplement state efforts, continues to struggle with financial constraints that hinder the expansion and standardization of its educational services for PWDs.

As per the 7th Population & Housing Census of Pakistan 2023, 9.64 percent of the population reported functional limitations, the broadest measure of PWDs, capturing all levels of difficulty (“some,” “a lot,” and “cannot do at all”) across seeing, hearing, walking/climbing, communication, memorization/focus, and self-care. Within this, 3.10 percent (7,448,574 persons) have reported “a lot of difficulty” or “cannot do at all” which according to the Washington Group meets the narrower “disability” threshold, the 3.10 percent is therefore a severe subset of the 9.64 percent, not the total PWD population.

With regard to gender (within the 3.10 percent disability count), a slightly higher prevalence of males at 3.30 percent (of the total male population) compared to females at 2.88 percent (of the total female population) was noted. Disability rates are marginally higher in rural areas than in urban settings, about 63.57 percent of the population with disabilities resides in rural areas compared to 36.43 percent in urban areas, reflecting the overall population distribution of Pakistan. When disability is measured as a percentage of the total population within each area, prevalence is slightly higher in rural areas (3.22 percent) than in urban areas (2.91 percent), indicating that disability affects a relatively larger proportion of the rural population.⁷

⁵ British Council, *Moving from the margins: mainstreaming persons with disabilities in Pakistan*, (2014), https://www.britishcouncil.pk/sites/default/files/moving_from_the_margins_final.pdf.

⁶ British Council, *Moving from the margins*.

⁷ Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, *National Census Report*, (2023), 141-144, <https://www.pbs.gov.pk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/National-Census-Report-2023.pdf>.

Table 1.1 Population of PWDs Based on Gender and Geography⁸

DESCRIPTION	TOTAL PWD POPULATION	MALE	FEMALE
TOTAL	7,448,574	4,088,899	3,359,675
RURAL	4,735,395	2,583,031	2,152,364
URBAN	2,713,179	1,505,868	1,207,311

Disability Percent			
TOTAL	3.10	3.30	2.88
RURAL	3.22	3.42	3.00
URBAN	2.91	3.11	2.70

Among the provinces, Punjab records the highest prevalence at 3.52 percent, followed by Sindh at 2.33 percent. The disability rates in Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT), Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), and Balochistan are 3.20 percent, 3.16 percent, and 2.10 percent, respectively. Across all provinces, the share of males reporting disability is higher than that of females.

With regard to the individuals experiencing functional limitations.⁹, they form 23,170,373 (9.64 percent) of the country's total population. Within the context of gender-divide, 9.88 percent male (of total male population) and 9.37 percent female (of total female population) have functional limitations. In terms of geographic distribution, although a larger proportion of persons with functional limitations reside in rural areas (58.83 percent) compared to urban areas (41.17 percent), this shows the total population distribution of Pakistan. However, when functional limitations are measured as a percentage of the total population within each area, the prevalence is slightly higher in urban areas (10.24 percent) than in rural areas (9.26 percent), indicating that functional limitations affect a relatively larger proportion of the urban population, unlike disability.¹⁰

⁸ Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, *National Census Report*, (2023).

⁹ Functional limitation refers to the degree of difficulty an individual experiences in performing everyday activities. It ranges from minor difficulty, to significant difficulty requiring assistance or adaptations, to complete inability to perform the activity independently.

¹⁰ Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, *National Census Report*, (2023).

Table 1.2 Population of People with Disability & Functional Limitations Based on Gender and Geography¹¹

DESCRIPTION	TOTAL PEOPLE WITH FUNCTIONAL LIMITATIONS	MALE	FEMALE
TOTAL	23,170,373	12,239,992	10,930,381
RURAL	13,630,475	7,158,341	6,472,134
URBAN	9,539,898	5,081,651	4,458,247

Functional Limitation Percent			
TOTAL	9.64	9.88	9.37
RURAL	9.26	9.49	9.01
URBAN	10.24	10.50	9.96

Provincially, Punjab records the highest proportion at 10.61 percent, followed by Sindh at 9.24 percent, KP at 8.38 percent, and Balochistan 6.40 percent and ICT at 8.12 percent. Across all provinces, the share of males reporting functional limitations is higher than that of females.

The census further indicates that a notable segment of the population faces difficulties that affect everyday functioning. Walking or climbing stairs is the most commonly reported challenge, affecting 3.12 percent of the population. Other commonly reported limitations include hearing impairments (1.99 percent), visual impairments (1.79 percent), difficulties with memory or concentration (1.47 percent), self-care challenges (1.09 percent), and communication difficulties (1.07 percent).¹²

With regard to education, when compared to their peers without disabilities, children with disabilities show lower participation and completion rates in education. As previously noted, PWDs are particularly vulnerable to educational exclusion. Compounding this issue, reliable data on disability has historically been limited. However, the Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey (PDHS) 2017-18 included disability information for the first time, followed by the Pakistan Social and Living Measurement (PSLM) 2019-20, which also incorporated disability-related data. Thus, perhaps the most recent PSLM 2019-20 data informs educational disparities associated with disability across various indicators, including the proportion of 15- to 29-year-olds who have ever attended school,

¹¹ Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, *National Census Report, (2023)*.

¹² Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, *National Census Report, (2023)*.

out-of-school rates for primary and lower secondary age children, completion rates for primary and lower secondary education, average years of schooling for individuals aged 25 and above, and adult literacy rates for the population aged 15 and older.

The data, as analysed, indicates that the proportion of PWDs (aged 15 to 29 years) who have ever attended school is substantially lower than that of persons without disabilities. Only 31 percent of the total population of PWDs have ever attended school. It also shows that the children with disabilities are 33 percent less likely to have ever attended school compared to their peers without disabilities. Further analysis reveals that girls with disabilities face greater educational disadvantages than boys with disabilities, as well as compared to girls without disabilities, with a parity index of 0.65. Among children aged 6 to 11 years, many have never attended school or have dropped out. While one-quarter of children without disabilities are out of school, with a slightly higher proportion of girls than boys, the situation is far more difficult for children with disabilities. They are more than twice as likely to be out of school compared to children without disabilities. Within this group, girls are disproportionately affected, with 71.5 percent of girls with disabilities out of school compared to 67.6 percent of boys.¹³

Considering these figures, it is alarming to note the extent to which PWDs remain excluded from formal education. This educational deprivation does not exist in isolation; rather, it permeates multiple dimensions of their lives, limiting their opportunities for socially meaningful engagement, intellectual development, and economic participation.¹⁴ The absence of these pathways results in a stagnated life trajectory, where future prospects and personal growth remain severely constrained. Given this context, it becomes imperative to intervene in a system that is not only insufficient but deeply entrenched in structural exclusion. One important avenue for initiating meaningful change is the utilization of higher education as a transformative catalyst. Strengthening higher education pathways for PWDs can play a significant role in addressing systemic inequities, reshaping societal attitudes, and promoting an inclusive ecosystem that enables PWDs to participate fully and productively in society.

One of the significant initiatives that higher education institutes (HEIs), such as the Aga Khan University-Institute for Educational Development (AKU-IED), can undertake is the generation of qualified Special Educational Needs (SEN) professionals through targeted academic interventions. This study, therefore, centers on the exploration of SEN within the context of AKU-IED, examining how the institute's academic frameworks, resources, and interventions can contribute to the preparation of competent SEN professionals and ensure the suitability of the interventions. Additionally, the research sheds light on the broader realities of SEN in Pakistan, highlighting existing challenges, structural barriers, and opportunities for enhancing educational access and quality for learners with diverse needs.

¹³ Saima Bashir et al., *Educational exclusion of children with special needs*, (2023), <https://file.pide.org.pk/pdfpideresearch/kb-109-educational-exclusion-of-children-with-special-needs.pdf>.

¹⁴ British Council, *Moving from the margins*.

Through this dual focus, linking institutional capacity-building with national SEN realities, the study seeks to provide insights into how higher education can act as a catalyst for transformative change in the field of special education through both academia and targeted advocacy.

As a result, this approach not only aims to reduce the educational barriers faced by PWDs but also seeks to address the broader socio-economic and political challenges associated with their educational needs. It is important to note, however, that this study employs the terminology of SEN rather than inclusive education. This does not reflect a preference for segregated special schools; rather, SEN is used as a comprehensive umbrella term encompassing the full spectrum of educational provisions for PWDs, including both special schools and inclusive education models.



Chapter 2:

Methodology

Chapter 2: Methodology

OBJECTIVES AND QUESTIONS

The primary objective of this study is to critically examine the current SEN landscape in Pakistan, with a focus on Sindh, Gilgit Baltistan (GB), and Chitral, within the higher education realm, with a view to identifying existing requirements, challenges, and emerging demands. The study specifically focuses on examining existing educational needs of PWDs and SEN programs and departments at the higher education level, with the aim of developing a practical framework to guide the integration of SEN as a specialized area within higher education. The ultimate goal was to generate evidence that would inform the integration of SEN within AKU-IED's educational framework, thus strengthening its inclusivity agenda.

This study is guided by the following research questions, with a focus on higher education, specifically examining the implementation of SEN programs and their dynamics;

1. What are the prevailing SEN laws and policies at the institutional, provincial, and national levels, guiding the implementation of SEN programs, and to what extent are these policies being effectively enforced in practice?
2. What constitutes the best SEN program implementation practices or models at provincial, national, and global levels?
3. What SEN programs currently exist in Pakistan, and how do these compare with the international programs?
4. What are the current resources utilized/functional in provincial, national, and global HEIs for the implementation of SEN programs?
5. What gaps exist in training, service delivery, and institutional capacity for teaching SEN programs at HEIs within provincial, national, and global realms?
6. What is the current demand for SEN programs and professionals in the country at higher education level?
7. What are the existing structures and programs at AKU-IED, and based on them, which SEN model and programs would be best suited for the institution?
8. What specific resources (faculty expertise, curriculum development, infrastructure, and allied support) are required to establish a sustainable framework for SEN programs implementation within AKU-IED?

The intended outcome of this study is to develop a comprehensive roadmap that outlines both short-term and long-term strategies for establishing a dedicated SEN framework that guides the implementation and sustainability of SEN programs at AKU-IED. This framework will serve as a practical guide for embedding inclusive education into the institution's systems and for positioning AKU-IED as a leader in advancing SEN in Pakistan.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach as it seeks to critically examine the provincial and national SEN laws, policies, models, challenges, and demands in comparison with the global standards of SEN models, making the approach both analytical and comparative. Data has been collected through both secondary and primary sources. In the first phase, a comprehensive literature review was conducted to map existing SEN laws, policies, and frameworks at the provincial and national levels. In addition, prevailing national and provincial SEN programs' implementation models at primary and higher education level have been examined and benchmarked against international best practices. Further, the social, political, and economic challenges of education faced by PWDs have also been analyzed. The secondary data was collected from government education reports and policy documents, academic publications, peer-reviewed journals, research articles, and theses, as well as from national education statistics, reports by donor agencies and non-governmental organizations, and institutional documents from universities offering SEN programs. The data has been sourced from reputable online research portals, digital libraries, and institutional databases to ensure both national and international perspectives are captured. To maintain credibility, only authentic, verifiable, and peer-reviewed sources were included, and all documents have been critically appraised for reliability, validity, and relevance before being incorporated into the analysis. Also, portions of the literature review were structured around pre-defined thematic categories, while other sections were developed by integrating themes emerging from the primary data. The pre-designed themes are as follow;

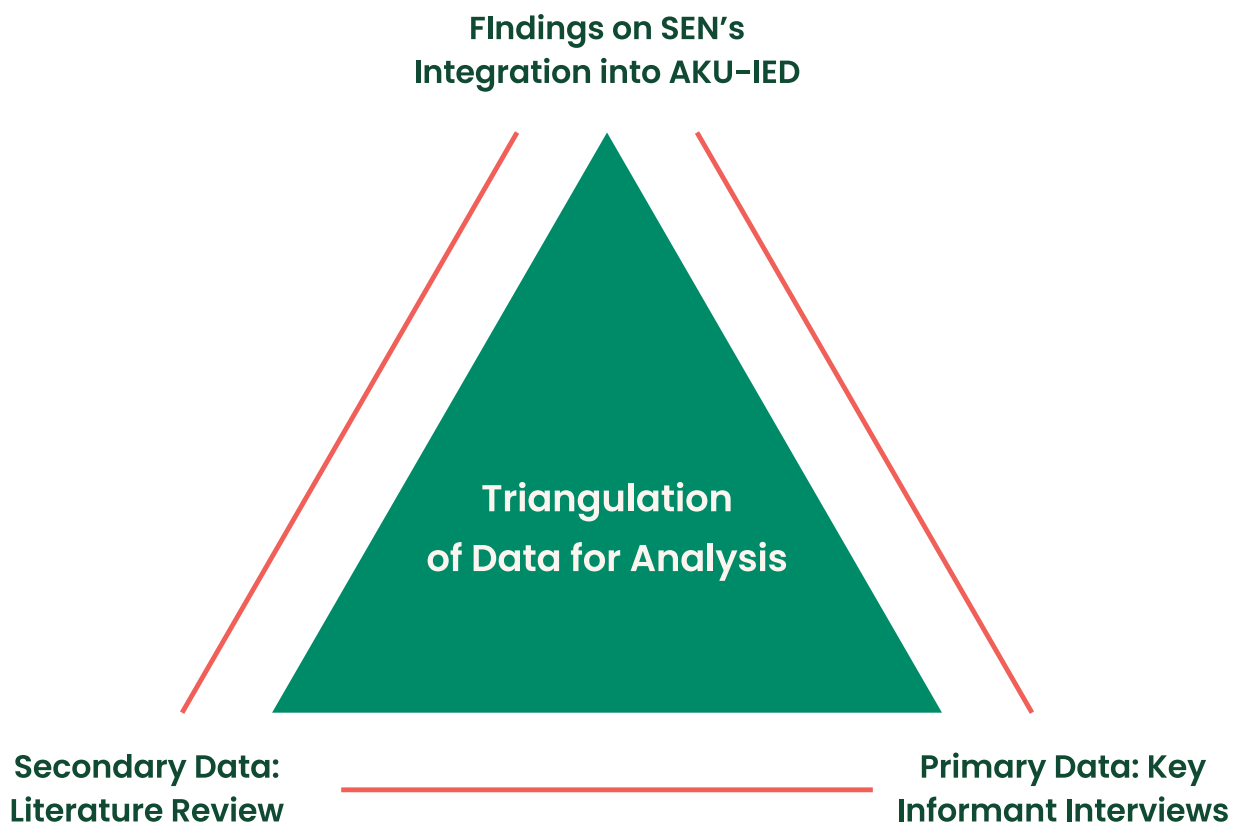
Table 2.1 Themes for Literature Review	
SR.	THEMES
1.	Policy and Legal Landscape of Disability and SEN: Concepts, Laws, Policies, and Implementation Status at Institutional, Provincial, and National Levels
2.	SEN Models, Programs, and Best Practices: Global, National, and Provincial Perspectives with Comparative Analysis
3.	Market and Capacity Assessment: Gaps in Training, Service Delivery, Institutional Capacity, and Demand for SEN Programs and Professionals in Pakistan
4.	Resource Requirements: Faculty, Human Resources, Curriculum, Infrastructure, and Institutional Support for SEN Programs at Provincial, National, and Global Levels

Moreover, based on the same and additional themes, emerging from the literature review, data collection tools (semi-structured interview guides and discussion protocols) were designed to guide the primary data collection phase. Primary data has been collected through 24 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with stakeholders such as disability and SEN experts from national and global

organizations/institutes (some of them were also parents of PWDs), professors from public and private universities with and without SEN programs, government representatives, and AKU-IED's faculty members. Further, for sampling, a purposive and convenience sampling strategy was adopted to identify respondents with relevant expertise and context, and those who were available within the given time period of the study. Also, snowball sampling was used to reach additional informants and participants with specialized knowledge or experience who were not known to the researchers.

Findings from both the primary and secondary phases were triangulated and thematically analyzed, enabling the identification of strengths, gaps, and opportunities across the SEN landscape

The evidence generated has been synthesized into a strategic roadmap that outlines short-term and long-term actions for establishing a dedicated SEN framework that guides the implementation of SEN programs at AKU-IED, with emphasis on policy alignment, programs' development, faculty training, resource mobilization, and infrastructure development.



ETHICS

Ethical integrity has been upheld throughout the study to ensure that the process is transparent, respectful, and responsible. Prior to data collection, all participants were informed about the objectives, scope, and intended outcomes of the study. Their participation was entirely voluntary, and they were free to withdraw at any stage without facing any negative consequences. Informed voluntary consent was obtained before conducting interviews in written form. Moreover, confidentiality and anonymity have been strictly maintained. No personal identifiers have been disclosed in the reporting of findings, and all responses have been presented in a way that protects the identity of participants. The 'do no harm' principle has been carefully observed while conducting interviews with the stakeholders. This entails creating a safe and respectful environment where participants do not feel pressured or criticized. Particular attention was given to sensitivity in language, accessibility of the process, and safeguarding the dignity and well-being of all respondents throughout data collection. Moreover, about data storage, it was stored securely and accessed only by the research team for purposes directly related to the study. Sensitive information, particularly from stakeholders involved in disability and SEN sectors, has been handled with diligence to avoid any unintended harm or misrepresentation. Further, efforts were made to minimize any form of researcher bias and to ensure that the findings reflect participants' perspectives accurately.

Regarding secondary data, information was sourced exclusively from credible and reputable platforms, including peer-reviewed journals, government publications, institutional databases, and reports produced by recognized organizations. All the sources have been cited in line with established academic standards to ensure transparency, respect intellectual property rights, and uphold academic integrity. Particular care has been taken to capture a diverse range of perspectives and to avoid selective representation of evidence, hence, ensuring that the findings are balanced, rigorous, and reflective of the broader SEN landscape.

Finally, the research has complied with broader institutional and international ethical standards for social science research, ensuring that the study contributes responsibly to knowledge building and policy development without compromising the dignity or rights of any participant or stakeholder.

LIMITS

While this study is designed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the SEN landscape, certain limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study relies heavily on secondary data sources to extract global information and SEN practices which vary in quality, availability, and timeliness. Further, a significant challenge encountered during the literature review was the evident scarcity of research and data on disability in Pakistan. This limitation was so pronounced that several chapters of the study had to rely heavily on primary data to draw meaningful insights. The lack of comprehensive secondary sources not only constrained the scope of the literature review but also highlights a broader issue: systematic research on disability in Pakistan remains limited. Also, the available official statistics and reports on disability and SEN are not very recent, potentially limiting the accuracy of the

analysis. Similarly, access to institutional documents or unpublished data on the SEN programs of Pakistani universities was restricted, constraining the scope of the desk review.

Second, the primary data collection was based on purposive, convenience, and snowball sampling of key informants and stakeholders. Although this approach ensures the inclusion of experts and relevant voices, it can possibly introduce selection bias and limit the generalizability of findings. Furthermore, conducting interviews with informants, particularly from GB and Chitral, proved challenging due to limited availability and willingness of participants, as well as internet connectivity issues, which have affected the breadth of perspectives captured from these areas. Moreover, the time constraints have also limited the scope of engagement with disability and SEN experts, as well as universities and government stakeholders, for primary data collection. Further, due to time constraints, interviews with only three SEN experts from the global universities were conducted. More global experts' might have enriched the analysis with their diverse insights.

Additionally, due to time constraints, the study was unable to collect data from key stakeholders such as primary and secondary schools specifically engaged in special education, university students with disabilities, and the parents or caregivers of PWDs. Inclusion of these perspectives could have provided deeper insights into the practical challenges, lived experiences, and contextual realities of special education at both school and higher education levels. Their absence represents a limitation in capturing the full spectrum of experiences and viewpoints that are essential for a comprehensive understanding of the educational landscape for PWDs.

Third, given the qualitative method, the findings have emphasized depth of understanding rather than statistical generalization. While this aligns with the study's exploratory and analytical objectives, it has restricted the ability to generate quantitative estimates regarding the market demand for SEN professionals or precise resource requirements (faculty, curriculum, infrastructure). Additionally, the time-sensitive nature of the study has also limited opportunities for large-scale surveys or extensive data collection that could have provided a more robust quantitative dimension.

Lastly, the study also faced some limitations with regard to the themes; due to temporal constraints, the themes of research couldn't be highly expanded to primary and secondary education, teacher training, and centre of disability for overall inclusion in the varsities. Covering these themes are also significant as they can give the whole picture of SEN at all three levels of education comprehensively. Moreover, another theme-related limitation is the lack of findings on specific articulation regarding the buffer period between the launch of each phase of courses and degree programs. This gap primarily stems from constraints of time and resources, as well as the fact that determining such intervals falls beyond the broader scope of this study. Recommending exact timelines would have required a separate study with extensive comparative review of local and international universities offering SEN programs, including a detailed analysis of their program evolution patterns, pacing models, and inter-phase buffer durations, in order to identify the most appropriate approach for AKU-IED.

Similarly, at both the bachelor's and doctoral levels, definitive guidance on the effective pacing of future program expansion could not be provided. Establishing precise timeframes for introducing undergraduate and PhD-level SEN programs remains challenging because such decisions are inherently dependent upon evolving contextual variables. Factors such as institutional capacity, availability of specialized faculty, market demand dynamics, and shifts in higher education and disability-related policies will significantly influence their feasibility and pacing. Given that these determinants are neither fixed nor fully predictable at this stage, setting a conclusive launch schedule lies outside the evidentiary and analytical boundaries of the present study. Although limitations, they also open the pathways for further research or expanding the same study. Despite these limitations, the use of multiple data sources, triangulation, and comparative analysis have helped mitigate these challenges and strengthen the reliability of the findings.



Chapter 3:

Conceptual and Legal Lens on Disability and SEN

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Conceptual and Legal Lens on Disability and SEN

Disability is inherently not part of an individual's identity; rather, it is created by the surroundings that are designed as per the standards of "normality." This, as a result, divides individuals into two rigid categories of "abled" and "disabled." The world is curated and built as per the needs of the former and the latter is neglected, pushed to the margins, thus giving rise to discrimination against them.

The preamble of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) recognizes that "disability is an evolving concept and that disability results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others."

Article 1 of the UNCRPD defines

"persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others." ¹⁵

LEGAL DEFINITIONS OF DISABILITY IN PAKISTAN

Pakistan is committed to promoting and protecting the rights of PWDs and is a signatory to the UNCRPD, which it ratified in 2011. The matter of PWDs is a provincial subject under the Constitution of Pakistan after the 18th Amendment.¹⁶ Pakistan has developed constitutional, policy, legal, and institutional measures since the 1980s to ensure the rights of PWDs, aligning with constitutional guarantees. Key legislation includes the Disabled Persons (Employment and Rehabilitation) Ordinance, 1981, the Accessibility Code of Pakistan, 2006, the Special Citizens Act, 2008, Special Citizens (Right to Concessions in Movement) Act, 2009, Gilgit-Baltistan Persons with Disabilities Act, 2019, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Disabled Persons (Employment and Rehabilitation) (Amendment) Act, 2012, the Punjab Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities Act 2022, the Balochistan Persons with

¹⁵ Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and Optional Protocol, United Nations, 2008, <https://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/convention/convoptprot-e.pdf>.

¹⁶ Ummar Ziauddin, "Towards an inclusive Pakistan," *Daily Times*, April 18, 2018, <https://dailytimes.com.pk/229450/towards-an-inclusive-pakistan/>.

Disabilities Act, 2017, Sindh Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2018, and ICT Rights of Persons With Disability Act, 2020. The “National Policy for Persons with Disabilities, 2002” and the subsequent “National Plan of Action for Persons with Disabilities, 2006” aimed to empower PWDs by providing an enabling environment for the realization of their full potential.¹⁷

Table 3.1 Legal Definitions of Disability in Pakistan

SR.	LAWS	DEFINITION OF DISABILITY OR PWDS	COMPARISON
1.	Disabled Persons (Employment and Rehabilitation) Ordinance, 1981) ¹⁸	“A person who, on account of injury, disease or congenital deformity, is handicapped for undertaking any gainful profession or employment in order to earn his livelihood, and includes a person who is blind, deaf, physically handicapped or mentally retarded.” ¹⁹	Out-dated and derogatory terminologies; not aligned with UNCRPD
2.	Sindh Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities Act 2018	“Person with disabilities” is “a person with long term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairment which, in interaction with barriers, hinders his/her full and effective participation in society equally with others.” ²⁰	Aligns closely with the definition provided in Article 1 of the UNCRPD.
3.	Punjab Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities Act 2022	“Person with disabilities” means “a person who has a long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairment which in interaction with various barriers may hinder his full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others, and shall include a person with any of the long-term disabilities specified in the Schedule.” ²¹	Aligns with UNCRPD—adopts the social model of disability.

¹⁷ Government of Pakistan, Initial report submitted by Pakistan under article 35 of the convention, due in 2013, (2019),

<https://d3mzwj73vfgwms.cloudfront.net/uploads/2021/02/The%20Convention%20on%20the%20Rights%20of%20Persons%20with%20Disabilities-State%20Party%20Report%20Submitted%2018%20Oct%202019.pdf>

¹⁸ This law was enacted in 1981, following the United Nations International Year of Disabled Persons.

¹⁹ Disabled Persons (Employment and Rehabilitation) Ordinance, 1981, Ordinance No. XL of 1981, <https://pakistancode.gov.pk/english/UY2FqaJwI-apaUY2Fqa-bZ6c-sg-jreflectjjjjjjjjjjjjj>.

²⁰ Sindh Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2018, Act No. XIX of 2018, <https://sindhlaws.gov.pk/setup/publications/PUB-18-000046.pdf>.

²¹ Punjab Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2022, Act No. XLII of 2022, <https://autism.punjab.gov.pk/system/files/punjab-empowerment-of-persons-with-disabilities-act-2022-pdf.pdf>

4.	ICT Rights of Persons with Disability Act, 2020	"A long term physical or mental condition that limits a person's movements, senses or activities and shall include physical, mental, intellectual and developmental disorders or sensory impairments which in interaction with participate fully and effectively in day to day performance and interaction with others on an equal basis." ²²	Aligns with the definition of UNCRPD like Sindh and Punjab.
5.	Gilgit-Baltistan Persons with Disabilities Act, 2019	"A physical or mental condition that limits a person's movements, senses, or activities and shall include physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments while interacting with various other physical and psychological barriers and hinder performance of persons suffering from such conditions to participate fully and effectively in day to day performance and interaction with others on an equal basis." ²³	Progressive; aligns with UNCRPD
6.	Balochistan Persons with Disabilities Act, 2017	"Disability" means "a physical or mental condition that limits a person's movements, senses, or activities and shall include physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments while interacting with various other physical and psychological barriers and hinder performance of persons suffering from such conditions to participate fully and effectively in day to day performance and interaction with others on an equal basis." ²⁴	Progressive; aligns with UNCRPD
7.	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Disabled Persons (Employment and Rehabilitation) (Amendment) Act, 2012	Same as 1981 Ordinance's definition ²⁵	Focused on the individual impairment and that affecting the ability to earn a livelihood only.

²² ICT Rights of Persons with Disability Act, 2020, Act No. XXXIV of 2020, https://na.gov.pk/uploads/documents/1601028302_229.pdf.

²³ "The Gilgit-Baltistan Persons With Disabilities Act, 2019," NOWPDP, <https://nowpdp.org.pk/rehnumai/laws-and-regulation/the-gilgit-baltistan-persons-with-disabilities-act>.

²⁴ Balochistan Persons with Disabilities Act, 2017, Act, No II of 2017, https://pabalochistan.gov.pk/storage/3942/2018-10-23-11_12_48act-2-2017-disability.pdf.

²⁵ The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Disabled Persons (Employment and Rehabilitation) (Amendment) Act, 2012, Act No. XVI of 2012, <https://www.pakp.gov.pk/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/The-Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa-Disabled-Persons-Employment-And-Rehabilitation-Amendment-Act-2012-Act-No.-XVI-2012.pdf>.

MODELS OF DISABILITY

1. Medical Lens on Disability

There are multiple approaches that view disability from various lenses. The Medical or Biological Model of Disability views disability as a problem that exists within an individual's body due to an impairment. It focuses on functional limitations as the root cause of any disadvantages experienced, suggesting that these disadvantages can only be rectified by medical treatment or cure. This model often aims to "fix" the disability or help the individual adapt to it. However, the evidence shows that this model can lead to PWDs feeling excluded, undervalued, and pressured to fit a questionable norm.²⁶

2. Social Lens on Disability

The Social Model of Disability fundamentally differs from the medical perspective by separating impairment, a variation in bodily structure or function, from disability, which arises from societal systems that fail to accommodate such differences. This model argues that disability is not an intrinsic feature of an individual but a consequence of external barriers such as inaccessible buildings, exclusionary attitudes, and rigid institutional norms.²⁷ It suggests that social transformation, like replacing stairs with ramps or adopting universally accessible communication methods, can remove many disabling conditions. The UNCRPD reinforces this understanding by emphasizing that disability emerges from the interaction between people with impairments and the attitudinal or environmental barriers that prevent equal participation in society.

For most PWDs, the challenges they encounter are not rooted in their physical or cognitive conditions but in how society receives and accommodates them. Exclusionary environments, institutional biases, and negative stereotypes create disadvantages that are socially constructed rather than naturally inevitable.

Within this model, the difference between impairment and disability is central. Impairment refers to a bodily state that diverges from typical norms, such as missing limbs or organs, without necessarily implying a negative judgment. Many individuals, like those with visual impairment from birth, do not perceive their condition as a deficiency but as one mode of being. Writer Deborah Kent articulates this view, stating that her visual impairment was not a loss but simply a neutral characteristic of her life. Thus, impairment has also been defined as merely a physical description of the body, whereas disability results from social arrangements that fail to consider people with impairments, thereby excluding them from mainstream life.

²⁶ Sara Goering, "Rethinking disability: the social model of disability and chronic disease." *Current Reviews in Musculoskeletal Medicine* 8, no. 2 (2015): 134–38, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC4596173/>.

²⁷ Sara Goering, "Rethinking disability: the social model of disability and chronic disease."

This distinction shows how what is disabling is often not the impairment itself, but the way environments and norms are organized. Stairs can disable where ramps would enable; rigid job descriptions can exclude where flexible accommodations would include. Similarly, inclusive education and making reasonable adjustments will just demonstrate how PWDs are capable of education as their peers without disabilities. People with impairments are often perfectly capable of working, socializing, and contributing, provided society offers an inclusive framework for participation.

3. The Integrative or Biopsychosocial Model

The Integrative (or Biopsychosocial) model provides a more nuanced perspective by combining social and medical understandings.²⁸ It acknowledges that while social barriers are a major source of disadvantage, the physical or psychological effects of impairment, such as pain, fatigue, or chronic illness, also shape lived experience. Proponents of this model see disability studies as instrumental in moving medicine toward a biopsychosocial approach and argue that the understanding of disability should incorporate both the reality of impairment and that of social discrimination.²⁹ This model, therefore, recognizes that people may simultaneously seek to dismantle social barriers and pursue medical or therapeutic interventions to manage impairment-related challenges.

4. The Social Constructionist Approach

The Social Constructionist approach, championed by scholars such as Susan Wendell, extends the social model by emphasizing how cultural expectations, social norms, and collective meanings actively create disability.³⁰

Factors like the pace of life, beauty standards, or ideals of productivity define who is considered “normal” and who is excluded. For example, buildings designed only for people who walk easily produce disability for those who cannot use stairs. Likewise, media portrayals that depict PWDs as dependent or pitiable reinforce stereotypes that hinder inclusion.

²⁸ Andreas Petasis, “Discrepancies of the medical, social and biopsychosocial models of disability; a comprehensive theoretical framework, *The International Journal of Business Management and Technology* 3, no.4 (2019), <https://www.theijbmt.com/archive/0928/1686534688.pdf>.

²⁹ Sara Goering, “Rethinking disability: the social model of disability and chronic disease.”

³⁰ Susan Wendell, “The Social Construction of Disability,” In *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability*, (Routledge, 1996), http://www.drvalverde.com/uploads/1/0/5/3/10538520/social_construction_of_disability__wendell__-apr_30_2020-_1-29_pm.pdf.

In her work, “The Social Construction of Disability,” Wendell explores how stigma and lack of cultural representation reinforce the “otherness” of PWDs. The absence of authentic portrayals creates fear and misunderstanding among individuals without disabilities, making disability appear alien or tragic rather than ordinary and diverse. Cultural stigmatization varies; some differences are stigmatized more heavily than others, depending on the society’s values and expectations.

Wendell recounts a striking example from her friend Francine Arsenault, who had polio-related mobility impairment. At her wedding, a guest’s father remarked that her husband had taken on a “burden,” assuming Francine’s disability made her dependent and undeserving. Wendell uses this story to illustrate how stereotypes about women with disabilities, as helpless or unworthy, distort social perception. Physical “imperfection,” especially in cultures that equate female worth with appearance, often carries deeper symbolic meanings like fragility or pity. These cultural associations show how stigma, gender norms, and disability intersect to reinforce social exclusion.

She also highlights how social conditions themselves produce impairments. Conflict, poverty, unsafe labor, pollution, and lack of healthcare or basic necessities contribute to illness and injury. Thus, disability is not merely a matter of individual bodies but of social environments that neglect or harm them.

Even in technologically advanced societies, the relentless pace of life creates exclusion: those who cannot move or think quickly enough are marginalized in workplaces and public life. Here, disability stems less from bodily limits and more from the performance standards society imposes. The division between public and private life reinforces this marginalization. Strength, productivity, and health are celebrated in public spaces, while weakness, ageing, and illness are hidden away.

When disability is treated as a private matter rather than a social responsibility, accessibility and visibility suffer.

Social support systems, such as assistance with daily living, healthcare, education, or transport, are crucial, and their absence can be disabling in itself. Architectural and organizational structures also perpetuate exclusion. Inaccessible buildings, inadequate transport systems, and inflexible employment practices create functional barriers that transform impairment into disability.³¹

³¹ Susan Wendell, “The Social Construction of Disability.”

5. Philosophical Reflections

Philosophical approach to disability offers yet another angle, showing how disability challenges established philosophical concepts about personhood, justice, and morality. Considering disability perspectives exposes biases that may be hidden in supposedly universal theories. The notion of “normalizing,” where average human functioning becomes the standard, risks excluding those whose experiences diverge from it. Philosophy thus plays a key role in revealing and correcting these assumptions.³²

LAWS ON DISABILITY IN PAKISTAN

1. Sindh Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2018

The Sindh Act is one of the progressive laws for safeguarding the PWDs’ rights in Pakistan. It provides a holistic definition of disability and other terms like reasonable accommodation etc. It also defines different categories of disabilities, such as physical disabilities as locomotor disabilities (including those due to accidents, cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy, polio), visual impairment (including low vision and blindness), hearing impairment, neuro-developmental disorders (including intellectual disabilities and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Specific Learning Disorder, Communication Disorder, Syndromes), disabilities due to chronic neurological conditions (such as multiple sclerosis, Parkinson’s disease, dementia, and Alzheimer’s), multiple disabilities, and any other category as may be notified by the Government.

Further, the Act defines “Discrimination on the basis of disabilities” in sub-section 2(i) as;

“any distinction, exclusion or restriction on the basis of disabilities which has the purpose or effect of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal basis with others, of all human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field. It includes all forms of discrimination, including denial of reasonable accommodation.”³³

Moreover, the Sindh Act, as guided by UNCRPD, establishes a comprehensive framework to protect and promote the rights of PWDs, grounded in principles of equality, dignity, and non-discrimination. It guarantees PWDs equal access to education, healthcare, work, housing, and justice, while also

³² “Philosophy and Disability: An Overview,” Anita Silvers, 2000, https://philosophynow.org/issues/30/Philosophy_and_Disability_an_overview.

³³ Sindh Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2018.

mandating reasonable accommodations and support services to ensure full societal participation. Special emphasis is placed on vulnerable groups – women, children, and the elderly – who face heightened risks of violence, exploitation, and exclusion. The Act outlines measures for accessibility across physical infrastructure, public transport, and information services, and enshrines the right to independent living, privacy, freedom of expression, and political participation. PWDs are also entitled to protection from abuse and harmful treatment, as well as support during disasters and emergencies.

Additionally, the Act highlights the state’s responsibility to promote inclusive employment by enforcing job quotas, promoting self-employment, and ensuring non-discriminatory work environments. PWDs have the right to own property, manage finances, and receive legal support when needed. Health rights encompass access to inclusive services – particularly for women and persons with specific health needs – without discrimination. The government is tasked with ensuring an adequate standard of living through targeted social protection schemes, allowances, and access to essential services. Participation in cultural, recreational, and sports activities is also protected, with efforts made to ensure inclusion through accessible facilities and adaptive equipment. The Act emphasizes the importance of awareness-raising campaigns to dismantle societal stigma, promote understanding, and encourage positive perceptions of disability at all levels of society.

To implement the law, it provides for the formation of the Authority for the Empowerment of PWDs – that acts as a watchdog in the province on disability-related matters – and a Provincial Advisory Council on Rights of PWDs. Currently, in Sindh, there is Department for Empowerment of People with Disabilities (DEPD) that oversees the Authority and ensures government’s support and implementation of the law. Establishment of special courts for PWDs for speedy justice is also part of the law. Contravention of the Act’s provisions or exploitation of PWDs can result in fines and imprisonment.

2. ICT Rights of Persons with Disability Act, 2020

The ICT Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act defines disability in alignment with the UNCRPD framework, adopting a social model of disability, similar to the approach taken in Sindh’s law. Further, the law defines discrimination on the basis of disability as defined in the Sindh’s Act. The law further says on discrimination;

“(2) No person or institution, whether public or private, shall discriminate against persons with disabilities or violate their rights or restrict benefits in any manner.”³⁴

³⁴ICT Rights of Persons with Disability Act, 2020.

Further, the Act guarantees privacy, accessibility, and protection for PWDs in all settings, including homes, hostels, rehabilitation centers, and public or private accommodations. It ensures personal, family, and communication privacy, with additional safeguards for vulnerable groups such as women, children, senior citizens, and transgender persons. The Act mandates barrier-free access in public and private spaces, including buildings, streets, hospitals, recreational facilities, and transport systems, along with accessible washrooms, seating, parking, and transport services. The government is tasked with removing obstacles, providing access to information, technology, and communication, and promoting mobility and independence.

Equity in education and employment forms a core part of the law. PWDs are guaranteed equal access to all educational institutions, free education from pre-primary to higher education, and specialized facilities for moderate to severe disabilities. Inclusive education is supported in mainstream institutions with trained teachers, learning aids, and accessible accommodations. Employment discrimination is prohibited, with reasonable accommodations required, quotas maintained in government departments, and incentives for private sector inclusion. Employment terms must be equitable, and non-compliant establishments contribute to a fund supporting PWDs.

The Act also ensures healthcare, rehabilitation, independent living, and participation in society. Barrier-free health services, special insurance, preventive care, early intervention, and community-based rehabilitation are provided to enhance independence and societal inclusion. PWDs have the right to live independently, access housing and residential services, and maintain family life without forced separation or sterilization. Participation in social, cultural, recreational, and sports activities is guaranteed with assistive devices and accessible facilities. The law also provides for a dedicated council that monitors compliance, raises awareness, and enforces the rights of PWDs in the capital.

3. Gilgit-Baltistan Persons with Disabilities Act, 2019

The GB Act defines disability in alignment with Sindh and ICT laws. The Act also establishes that every PWD has the right to dignity, equality, and full participation in society. The law prohibits discrimination by any individual or institution, whether public or private, and ensures that disabilities cannot be used to restrict rights unless there is a reasonable cause related to safety or capacity. It emphasizes respect for personal privacy, protection against abuse, and safeguards for vulnerable groups, including women, children, and senior citizens with disabilities.

Accessibility and mobility are core provisions of the Act. Public and private buildings, transportation systems, streets, and communication infrastructure must be barrier-free and accessible. The Act mandates signage, seating, parking, and transport accommodations, while ensuring PWDs can access information and communication technologies. Guidelines are developed by the dedicated Council for removing obstacles and promoting personal mobility at concessional costs.

Education is a major focus, ensuring PWDs have equal access to public and private institutions. The law guarantees fee concessions, special quotas, and inclusive education with trained teachers,

accessible facilities, and learning accommodations. Special education institutions are also to be established to cater to students with moderate to severe disabilities. The Act promotes vocational training, online learning, and other educational opportunities to enhance skills and personal development. Also, employment and healthcare rights are equally emphasized. With regard to employment, discrimination in hiring, promotion, or career development is prohibited, with reserved quotas in government departments and incentives for private sector inclusion. Employers are required to provide reasonable accommodations, and minimum wages are guaranteed. In healthcare, PWDs receive barrier-free access to medical services, early interventions, rehabilitation, and community-based programs.

The Act also covers rights related to family, housing, political participation, property, recreation, and emergency protection. PWDs are entitled to marry, own property, vote, participate in cultural and sports activities, and live independently in the community. Special measures prioritize their protection during natural disasters, emergencies, or armed conflicts. The Provincial Council for the Rights of PWDs has been tasked with implementation, monitoring compliance, raising awareness, managing rehabilitation funds, conducting research, and ensuring that both public and private entities adhere to the law's provisions, thus promoting inclusion and equity across GB.³⁵

4. Punjab Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2022

Punjab's disability law, similar to the Sindh, defines major terms like discrimination and categorizes different types of disabilities into physical, neuro developmental disorders, and chronic neurological disabilities. It also recognizes the dignity, liberty and autonomy of PWDs and provides for protection against discrimination in educational, social, economic, cultural and all other activities in the society. The Act also provides for accessibility and mobility, including barrier-free access to roads, transportation and public facilities etc. It also emphasizes protection from abuse and exploitation for PWDs. Further, the Act guarantees equity in education, access to justice, and highlights the role of judicial officers and relevant institutions in ensuring that PWDs receive effective legal protection and remedies. It also provides that PWDs shall be given barrier-free access to all necessary public health services and infrastructure, free of cost and on a priority basis.

In addition, it provides for employment inclusion by requiring that not less than three percent of the total number of persons employed in an establishment at any time shall be PWDs. Aligned with the other provinces, Punjab Act says that PWDs have the right to inherit and own property. The Act also ensures their participation in sports, cultural and recreational activities by providing equal opportunities. It further guarantees priority protection and safety in situations of risk or disasters, including immediate evacuation and rehabilitation.

³⁵ Gilgit-Baltistan Persons with Disabilities Act, 2019, Act No. V of 2019.

Further, the Act empowers the Government to establish the Council on Rights of PWDs to carry out the purposes of the law, including overseeing and facilitating the execution of policies and projects aimed at supporting PWDs. The law provides for penalties in case of violations, including fines ranging from one hundred thousand to five hundred thousand rupees. It also prescribes punishment in cases of abuse and exploitation of PWDs. Furthermore, the law calls for the establishment of special courts to ensure efficient access to justice for PWDs.

5. Balochistan Persons with Disabilities Act, 2017

Similar to other provinces, the Balochistan disability law also provides definitions and outlines various rights for PWDs and provides safeguards for their protection. These include freedom from discrimination, the right to dignity and respect, equality before law, special safeguards to women, children, and elderly people with disabilities, right to education and rehabilitation as well as accessibility and mobility. The law also defines reasonable accommodation, similar to the laws in Sindh, ICT, and GB, describing it as;

“2 (m)...necessary and appropriate modification where needed in a particular case, to ensure that the Persons with Disabilities enjoy or exercise on equal basis access with others, of all human and fundamental rights of freedoms at home, workplace and in social life.”

Further the law defines access and barriers as;

“2 (b) “Access” means meaningful and effective access to various physical and intangible means made suitable to fulfill the special needs of the Persons with Disabilities.”

“2 (c) “Barrier” means the physical, psychological, illegal or attitudinal hurdles in the way to access to infrastructure and services.”

To implement the law in the province, the Act provides for the restructuring and renaming of the Provincial Council for the Rehabilitation of Disabled Persons to an autonomous body in the form of Provincial Council for the Rights of PWDs. Other than implementation, the Council has a role of a provincial watchdog for other public and private institutions with regard to the protection of PWDs’ rights. The Balochistan Act also provides for the formation of special courts but unlike Sindh and Punjab laws, the Act lacks any penalties in case of violation.

Except for KP, the disability laws across Pakistan’s administrative units largely follow the approach of the UNCRPD and provide ample scope for comparative analysis across key provisions, including rights, councils, penalties, and quotas. Thus, a comparison between these laws is presented below.

Table: 3.2 Comparison of Disability Laws

SR.	MAJOR PROVISIONS	COMMON SECTIONS	LAWS/PROVINCES
1.	Rights of PWDs	Protection from discrimination; Right to privacy; Special protection for women, children, transgender and elderly people with disabilities; Accessibility and mobility; Protection from abuse; Equity in education, employment, healthcare & rehabilitation; Right to home, family, & living independently; Freedom of expression, right to information, & political participation; Access to justice; Right to inherit and own property; Participation in sports, cultural & recreational activities; Protection in risk and disaster situations	Sindh, Punjab, Balochistan, GB and ICT laws
2.	Implementation of Rights via Establishment of Council for PWDs	The law provides for the establishment of a specific body that implements the laws' objectives and provides for the safeguard of the PWDs' rights. While Sindh, Punjab, and GB call for creation of a new body, the ICT and Balochistan laws provide for reconstituting the previous National and Provincial Council for the Rehabilitation of Disabled Persons for the purposes of the new Acts.	Sindh, Punjab, Balochistan, GB and ICT laws
3.	Education and Employment Quota	Punjab: 3 percent in inclusive education systems and 3 percent in employment Sindh: 5 percent employment quota in public and private entities Balochistan: 5 percent job quota in government departments, corporate entities managed by the government, etc., and 5 percent education quota in public and private institutes ICT: 2 percent employment quota in government departments, corporate entities managed by the government, etc GB: 5 percent in public and private educational institutes and 3 percent in government departments, institutes, etc.	Punjab, Sindh, Balochistan, ICT, GB laws

4.	Offences and Penalties	Provides fine for contravention of the Act; Punishment for fraudulently availing any benefit meant for PWDs (fine and imprisonment); Punishment for abuse and exploitation & failure to furnish information	Sindh and Punjab
5.	Special Courts for PWDs	The laws provide for the establishment of the Special Court for PWDs.	Sindh, Punjab, Balochistan, and ICT laws

6. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Disabled Persons (Employment and Rehabilitation) (Amendment) Act, 2012

The KP Act serves as an amendment to the original federal Disabled Persons (Employment and Rehabilitation) Ordinance, 1981.³⁶ However, unlike other provinces, KP does not yet have a comprehensive law that addresses the broader rights and welfare of PWDs beyond employment and rehabilitation. In contrast, laws of GB, Sindh, Balochistan, Punjab, and ICT are holistic that cover multiple aspects of the lives of PWDs, including education, accessibility, healthcare, and social inclusion.

Following the 18th Constitutional Amendment, disability became a provincial subject, prompting provinces to develop and enact their own disability-specific legislation. Thus, in Punjab, Balochistan, ICT and GB, the earlier federal ordinance was repealed. Similarly, in Sindh, the Sindh Differently Able Persons (Employment, Rehabilitation and Welfare) Act, 2014, was repealed and replaced by the more comprehensive 2018 Act, which expanded its scope to align with the principles of the UNCRPD.

The KP amendment does not introduce any progressive measures to the 1981 ordinance; it primarily replaces references to federal authority with provincial authority, leaving most of the original provisions largely unchanged. Nonetheless, the law provides important employment safeguards to PWDs. It mandates that no less than 2 percent of the total workforce in every public or private establishment must consist of registered PWDs certified as fit to work by the Employment Exchange and Provincial Council. These employees are entitled to equal terms, benefits, and working conditions as other employees holding similar positions.

If any establishment fails to fulfill this quota, it must contribute monthly to a government fund the equivalent amount of salary or wages that would have been paid to a PWD, ensuring financial responsibility and continued welfare support for PWDs. The Act also formalizes a systematic registration

³⁶ "The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Disabled Persons (Employment and Rehabilitation) (Amendment) Act, 2012, Act No. XVI of 2012,

<https://www.pakp.gov.pk/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/The-Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa-Disabled-Persons-Employment-And-Rehabilitation-Amendment-Act-2012-Act-No.-XVI-2012.pdf>.

and assessment process, allowing PWDs to register for employment and be evaluated by medical officers or assessment boards to identify suitable jobs or training areas.

Additionally, the Provincial Council is empowered to establish training centers and organize vocational programs to enhance the skills, employability, and rehabilitation of PWDs. The law also requires all establishments to submit necessary data and information to the authorities for effective monitoring and implementation.

SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

Special education involves the systematic and personalized adaptation of teaching strategies, learning materials, and educational environments to address the distinct needs of students with disabilities. It represents an approach that values individual differences and strives to create equitable opportunities for learning. By tailoring instruction and support to the specific abilities and challenges of each learner, special education seeks to enhance independence, self-confidence, and success. Its purpose extends beyond academic development, aiming to prepare learners for meaningful participation in their communities and daily lives.

Students who benefit from special education encompass a broad spectrum of disabilities, including learning disabilities, speech and language impairments, emotional and behavioral disorders, physical disabilities, and developmental conditions. Due to this diversity, programs in special education are designed to offer a variety of supports and services such as differentiated instruction, assistive technologies, resource rooms, and specialized classrooms. These adaptations ensure that every learner receives an education that aligns with their unique strengths and requirements. The overarching goal is to promote accessibility and inclusion, allowing all students to engage fully and effectively within educational settings.

A key element in the success of special education is the integration of evidence-based practices (EBPs). These practices, grounded in research and supported by empirical data, ensure that instructional decisions are both effective and appropriate for the needs of students with disabilities. Through the use of EBPs, educators can implement interventions that have been proven to enhance academic performance, social skills, and behavioral outcomes. The reliance on scientifically validated strategies helps maximize learning potential and ensures that educational practices remain accountable and results-driven.

DEFINITION OF SEN

The definition of special education has long been debated among professionals, parents, and those directly involved. Various terms have been used to describe individuals who need specific types of education, such as “exceptional children,” “handicapped children,” and “children with special

educational needs.” These children are recognized as having mental, emotional, physical, or social challenges that may require specialized care, therapy, or educational support from trained professionals.

The term ‘Special Educational Needs’ was introduced in the Warnock Report in 1978 to promote greater social acceptance of PWDs and to reshape how special education was understood in Britain. Before this, legal categories used labels such as “disabled.” However, the new term ‘special educational needs’ has also been controversial. Some consider it too vague, while others believe it can lead to discrimination, as any child might experience learning disabilities at some stage. Another perspective suggests that the word “special” highlights a sense of dependence rather than empowerment. Others question whether this terminology simply created an administrative label that influenced children’s educational paths.

However, another perspective views “special needs” as a more positive way to describe individuals, lessening stigma compared to older expressions such as “handicapped” or “mentally retarded,” which reflect outdated, deficit-based views of disability. Special education covers a wide range of disabilities and individual differences, acknowledging that every child is unique and that many needs are interconnected.

Over time, several of these terms have been used interchangeably, although they carry different meanings. For example, “handicapped” refers to difficulty in performing a task in a typical way, while “disabled” refers to a long-term physical or mental condition that limits a person’s ability to perform certain functions. ‘Developmental disability’ describes conditions that affect a child’s mental or physical growth or restrict important life activities, requiring ongoing special services.

‘Special education,’ however, refers to the field focused on assessing, diagnosing, and designing educational programs and teaching methods for children with different needs.

Thus, special education aims to provide suitable learning opportunities for children who require different approaches, not only for those with disabilities or handicaps.³⁷

The Special Educational Needs Code of Practice defines the

term ‘special educational need’ as: “a learning difficulty which calls for special educational provision to be made.”

³⁷ “ Mohammed Ali Alkahtani, “Review of the literature on children with special educational needs,” *Journal of Education and Practice* 7, no. 35 (2016), <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1126490.pdf>.

This Code of Practice says that children have a learning difficulty if they:

“a) have a significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of children of the same age; or
b) have a disability which prevents or hinders them from making use of educational facilities of a kind generally provided for children of the same age in schools within the area of the local education authority; c) are under compulsory school age and fall within the definition at (a) or (b) above or would do so if special educational provision was not made for them.”

According to international education standards, children with special educational needs include those who struggle in school for various reasons and therefore require extra help. This definition focuses on how schools adapt their teaching, curriculum, and structure to support effective learning. Specific disabilities may include problems with reading, writing, arithmetic, listening, or handwriting.

Further, the 2004 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of the United States (US) describes special education as “specially tailored instruction provided at no cost to parents, designed to address the unique learning requirements of a child with a disability.”³⁸

TYPES OF SEN

SEN's Categorization Based on Curriculum and Externalities

The Warnock Report identified three main categories of SEN, each focusing on different aspects of support required by children to access education effectively.³⁹

1. Access to Curriculum

The first category is “the need for special means of access to the curriculum.” This refers to situations where children face barriers in accessing learning due to sensory or physical disabilities. For instance, children with hearing or visual impairments may require specialized tools, such as hearing aids, braille materials, or sign language interpreters, to help them communicate and learn. Similarly, children with motor or physical disabilities may need assistive devices or adjustments to their physical environment, such as ramps or modified seating, to enable their full participation in classroom activities. In this sense, ‘access’ is taken quite literally: ensuring that every learner can reach and engage with the curriculum regardless of their physical or sensory limitations.

³⁸ “Special Education in the United States,” EBSCO,

<https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/education/special-education-united-states>.

³⁹ The Warnock Report, 1978, <https://education-uk.org/documents/warnock/warnock1978.html>.

2. Special or modified curriculum

The second category is “the need for the provision of a special or modified curriculum.” This applies to learners with significant learning disabilities who cannot follow the standard curriculum at the same pace or level as their peers. For such students, the curriculum **may need to be adapted, broken down into smaller, more manageable learning steps, to ensure progress. This is sometimes referred to as the ‘salami-slicing effect,’ meaning that complex learning objectives are divided into smaller, sequential parts that can be taught step-by-step.** This approach helps children with severe learning challenges acquire essential skills and knowledge that others may develop naturally, but only through more intensive, structured, and individualized teaching strategies.

3. Social structure and emotional climate

The third category outlined by the Warnock Report is “the need for particular attention to the social structure and emotional climate in which education takes place.” This category recognizes that some students require supportive and nurturing learning environments to thrive, especially those who are emotionally vulnerable or have behavioural difficulties. The goal here is to create an atmosphere that reduces stress, builds confidence, and creates positive relationships among students and teachers. By modifying the social and emotional climate, through smaller class sizes, consistent routines, or counselling support, schools can better accommodate the emotional and psychological needs of these learners.

The categorization proposed by the Warnock Report focused on adapting the curriculum and other external factors to meet the diverse needs of students with disabilities, aiming to create an inclusive environment where all learners could access education equitably. However, beyond this curriculum-based framework, other classifications have also been developed, particularly those that categorize SEN based on the type or nature of disability itself.

SEN’S CATEGORIZATION BASED ON DISABILITIES

Government documents, such as the United Kingdom (UK) Government’s Green Paper on Excellence in Education, identified children with SEN as a group that includes those from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with official statements of need. These children are identified based on the challenges they face in school rather than purely medical or physical conditions. Because of this approach, a large percentage of primary school students can be labeled as having SEN, which sometimes makes it difficult for teachers to clearly understand the different types of needs. The Code of Practice, however, did not specify detailed categories of SEN.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Mohammed Ali Alkahtani, “Review of the literature.”

THE QUESTION OF SEN CATEGORIZATION

Some believe that categorization itself goes against the principle of inclusion, which seeks to remove barriers and promote equality. Others argue, however, that categorization can help describe a condition, identify its cause, and predict future needs. This means that identifying groups such as those with intellectual, emotional, or behavioral difficulties is likely to continue. These ongoing debates show that while major progress has been made in special education, not all changes are universally accepted.

The main purpose of special education is to help students with SEN gain social acceptance and access to education that supports their development and participation in society. Special education consists of specialized programs designed for individuals who differ significantly from their peers in learning ability. These programs aim to help such students reach their potential, strengthen their abilities, and play an active role in their communities.

Besides the Warnock Report, many official documents across the globe have categorized disabilities to guide SEN. For instance, under the IDEA, disabilities are classified into several categories for SEN, including, ASD which affects communication and social interaction, often leading to repetitive behaviors and resistance to change. Visual impairment limits sight, which can hinder communication and learning, while hearing and visual impairments combine vision and hearing loss, causing severe developmental and communication challenges. Hearing impairment affects an individual's ability to hear sounds, impacting communication and learning.

Developmental delay refers to slower progress in areas such as behavior, cognition, emotional growth, physical development, or communication. Emotional disturbance involves difficulties in emotional regulation, leading to inappropriate behavior, unhappiness, or challenges in forming relationships. Intellectual disability results in limitations in reasoning, problem-solving, and adaptive behavior, and may also be associated with other health conditions. Orthopedic impairments caused by injuries or diseases affect bones and muscles, restricting movement and learning.

Specific learning disabilities, such as dyslexia, interfere with understanding or using language in reading, writing, or speaking. Speech or language impairments involve difficulties in communication, including stuttering or articulation problems. Traumatic brain injury can lead to a range of difficulties in cognition, memory, behavior, language, and physical function. Multiple disabilities refer to the presence of two or more impairments, such as visual and intellectual disability, which together intensify learning challenges. Lastly, other health impairments, including conditions like ADHD, epilepsy, or Tourette syndrome, can affect focus, energy, and learning ability. These categories ensure that each child's unique needs are identified and supported under educational legislation.

In Canada, education is a provincial responsibility, which means the terminology used to describe students requiring additional support varies across regions. For instance, Prince Edward Island and British Columbia use the term students with special needs. In British Columbia, this refers to students

who have intellectual, physical, sensory, emotional, or behavioral disabilities, learning disabilities, or exceptional gifts and talents. Manitoba uses the phrase students with exceptional learning needs to describe learners who require specialized services due to challenges in areas such as social, emotional, behavioral, sensory, physical, cognitive, communication, academic, or health-related functioning that affect their educational progress. Alberta employs the terms diverse learning needs and students with disabilities to describe similar groups. In Nunavut, the Inclusive Education Policy uses the term students with high needs to refer to those with severe disabilities typically identified through medical diagnosis. Meanwhile, New Brunswick avoids using labels such as students with special needs altogether. Overall, across Canada, both inclusive education and special education are recognized concepts, but their interpretation and application differ among provinces and territories.⁴²

SHIFT FROM SPECIAL TO INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Special education is a comparatively new branch within education and psychology. The formal and scientific exploration of this field began around the early twentieth century.⁴³ Although children with unique or exceptional needs have always been part of society, structured programs designed specifically to address their educational requirements have emerged only in more recent times. Basically, in the eighteenth century, researchers in France and the US began studying how to educate individuals with specific disabilities, such as hearing impairments. During the nineteenth century, attention expanded to include children with intellectual disabilities. At that time, most efforts were focused on protecting and isolating these children from society through “institutionalization,” since it was believed they could not adapt to normal life. However, the democratic values emerging from the French and American revolutions encouraged new ideas, leading to demands for education in separate schools or institutions designed specifically for children with disabilities.

“The responsibility for children who remained excluded from education, then described as severely educationally sub-normal, was transferred from health to education authorities.”⁴⁴

The modern idea of special education began to take shape in the nineteenth century with the formation of associations that promoted laws and programs for different categories of special needs. Over time, many countries introduced specific legislation to guarantee that children with disabilities received at least a basic, appropriate education.⁴⁵

⁴² “Canada: Inclusion,” UNESCO, <https://education-profiles.org/europe-and-northern-america/canada/~inclusion>.

⁴³ Mohammed Ali Alkahtani, “Review of the literature.”

⁴⁴ Lani Florian, “Inclusion: special or inclusive education: future trends,” *British Journal of Special Education* 35, no. 4 (2008): 202–208, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8578.2008.00402.x>.

⁴⁵ Alkahtani, “Review of the literature.”

However, over time, criticism began to emerge regarding SEN. What was once viewed as a solution to issues of social justice gradually came to be seen in a different light as a problem.⁴⁶ Criticism of special education from a socioeconomic perspective highlighted that the way children are categorized, labeled, or placed in special education often reflects broader social, political, and professional agendas, rather than purely humanitarian or educational concerns.⁴⁷ For example, some special education experts with vested economic interests perceived integration proposals as a threat to their professional market, since they risked losing clients. Additionally, SEN can reflect societal biases toward particular groups; historical racial prejudices and colonial assumptions led educators to view Black children as potentially problematic. Although educational ideals emphasized equality, in practice these children often faced low expectations and limited opportunities. Thus, children with special needs can experience the same prejudice. However, from a more strictly educational perspective, the central criticism of SEN is whether it truly serves as a solution to learning needs or whether it functions as a mechanism that further excludes PWDs from mainstream society.

“As many commentators have pointed out, special needs education is widely seen as one of the mechanisms by which students who experience difficulties in learning are both included in and excluded from the forms of schooling that are otherwise available to children of similar ages.”

For some, providing alternative forms of education where individual needs can be addressed is considered preferable to placing children in mainstream schools where they are perceived to struggle, or to leaving them without any schooling. Others, however, have challenged this approach, advocating instead for inclusive education as a solution to the marginalization and exclusion often associated with special education. Many scholars have argued strongly for moving beyond special education and focusing on understanding the processes of inclusion and exclusion for all learners. Despite such research and advocacy, inclusive education has not led to the elimination of special education.

One key reason for the persistence of “special” or “additional” support is that school systems are largely utilitarian, structured around the long-standing, though increasingly questioned, belief that intelligence is a fixed, measurable trait that follows a normal distribution.

⁴⁶ Alkahtani, “Review of the literature.”

⁴⁷ Sally Tomlinson, “A sociology of special education,” 1st Edition, (Routledge, 2012), <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/mono/10.4324/9780203126592/sociology-special-education-rle-edu-sally-tomlinson>.

The education systems generally differentiate between the majority of learners and those who need extra help. In standard educational thinking, most students are expected to succeed with the ordinary provision offered in schools. However, a small number of students, those at the extremes of performance or ability, may require something “additional” or “different” to meet their needs. This principle forms the basis of special needs education in many countries, where extra support is provided to ensure that all students have the opportunity to learn effectively.

While some forms of additional support are clearly unrelated to intelligence, such as mobility training, sign language, or other practical assistance, these supports are often grouped under the umbrella of “learning difficulties.”

This categorization tends to reinforce the idea that most learners fit within the average range and only a few are seen as needing special attention. In other words, the system frames additional support in terms of statistical differences in ability, linking it closely to conventional notions of intelligence and learning performance.

However, the full spectrum of disabilities is often overlooked in such categorization, resulting in an uneven focus on the two extremes.

These issues reveal the inherent tensions in schooling, which is often organized around the principle of benefiting the majority and assumes that student abilities follow a normal distribution. **This creates a conflict between education designed for “most and some” versus the ideal of “education for all,” or between mainstream and special education compared with fully inclusive approaches.** Despite these structural and conceptual challenges, there is evidence for positive change. Research demonstrates that teachers’ actions in the present can make a real difference, improving inclusion and outcomes for all learners. In other words, while schooling systems have built-in tensions, thoughtful and proactive teaching can help bridge gaps and move toward a more equitable approach.⁴⁸

Thus, the discourse shifted from learners to teachers and learning outcomes that also by default shifted focus from SEN to inclusive education. It was opined that instead of focusing on learners’ differences, attention should be on learning outcomes and how students respond to tasks. For instance, Kershner’s model emphasizes holistic teaching strategies that address individual needs without relying on disability categories. The main idea was that inclusive education valued differences as normal, and questions remained about the most effective ways to support learners when they struggle. However, the perceived lack of teacher knowledge was often cited as a barrier to inclusion, but evidence showed that mainstream teaching strategies could be adapted to support students with SEN, and effective methods were not inherently tied to disability categories. Inclusive practice required teachers to focus on learning for all students, responding to differences as degrees rather than categorical distinctions, and using specialist knowledge to support, but not replace, their own teaching. The goal was a cultural shift in education which meant moving away from deterministic views of ability and the categorization of learners, and toward pedagogical approaches that ensure meaningful engagement and learning for all students, reimagining special education as part of a broader commitment to diversity.

⁴⁸ Florian, “Special or inclusive education.”

However, the idea of inclusive education challenges the traditional model of special needs education, which assumes that some students require support that is additional to or different from what is provided to others of the same age. Decisions about this extra support fall within the professional responsibility of teachers, who must make numerous choices when students encounter learning disabilities. While these decisions are shaped by various factors, one aspect that is often overlooked is the impact of teachers' professional training and how well it equips them to manage diverse classrooms and collaborate effectively with other adults.

Thus, inclusive education has taken on multiple meanings, ranging from the focused goal of integrating children with disabilities into mainstream classrooms to a broader understanding of social inclusion, which governments and international organizations use to address the diverse needs of all learners.

Nonetheless, rejecting educational models that rely on identifying individual differences does not imply that differences among learners are unimportant. The introduction of inclusive education does not automatically entail a complete abandonment of the special education model. Primary data collected for this research, examining both inclusive and special education practices, indicate that these approaches do not represent two mutually exclusive extremes; rather, there exists a continuum or middle ground between them.⁴⁹

For example, as per experiential knowledge of the Network of Organizations Working For People With Disabilities Pakistan (NOWPDP) in education, rural and highly underprivileged areas of Pakistan, inclusive education cannot be implemented as an initial step.

Children with special needs typically begin their schooling within the special education system, and only after some time can they transition into inclusive settings. This is largely due to limited accessibility in mainstream schools, inadequate resources, and low levels of awareness regarding disability. Conversely, in urban areas, children with mild to moderate disabilities can often be included directly in inclusive education. However, for children with severe disabilities, special education remains the preferred option, and transition to inclusive settings is rarely considered.⁵⁰ A review of the literature similarly reflects a lack of consensus; the debate often oscillates between arguments supporting the superiority of special education or proposals to improve inclusive education, but there is no definitive agreement on which approach should be prioritized.

⁴⁹ Florian, "Special or inclusive education."

⁵⁰ Research Interview with Disability and Education Expert, September 25, 2025.

MODELS OF SEN

There are different models used in special education that are grouped based on what they focus on and how they explain children's disabilities and learning needs. The first way to group these models is by looking at whether they focus only on the disability within the child or also consider the interaction between the child and their environment. Models that focus solely on the child view the disability as something internal, such as a physical, cognitive, or emotional limitation. In contrast, interactive models look at how the child's environment (like home, school, or society) can influence the disability, either exacerbating it or helping to reduce its effects.

Recent research has increasingly recognized that environmental factors, such as social disadvantage, poor schooling, or lack of support, can play a significant role in shaping how a child experiences their disability.

Some studies even suggest that environmental deprivation can have powerful, sometimes dominant, effects on children's development. Thus, these models are grouped into two broad categories: 'within-child' models, which focus on the child's internal characteristics, and 'interactive' models, which consider how the child's environment interacts with their abilities and needs.

The second way to classify these models is by their purpose whether they are descriptive or explanatory. Descriptive models focus on identifying and categorizing characteristics of disabilities, for example, describing patterns of behavior or developmental stages. Explanatory models, on the other hand, aim to understand why certain disabilities or learning difficulties occur and how they can be addressed. Under descriptive models, we have normative, developmental, and syndrome models, which describe the child's condition or behavior. Under explanatory models, examples include organic, process, attitudinal, and instructional models, which focus on causes or interactions between the child and their environment (like in the classroom). Thus, these models help educators and specialists better understand and respond to the diverse learning needs of children with disabilities.

WITHIN-CHILD MODELS

1. Descriptive Models

The **normative model** is based on standardized testing and has historically been central in identifying children with special needs. It compares an individual child's performance to that of peers of the same age, using measures like intelligence, personality traits (e.g., introversion), or academic achievement. Its main goal is to differentiate between individuals accurately. However, while it reliably identifies

⁵¹ Klaus Wedell, "Concepts of special educational need," *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs* 3, no. 2 (2003), <https://nasenjournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/1471-3802.00002>.

differences, it does not explain what kind of educational support the child needs, knowing a child has an intelligence quotient (IQ) of 80, for example, doesn't specify what kind of teaching would help them. This model has traditionally been used for selection purposes, such as deciding eligibility for special programs, and its strength lies in the reliability of its data, not in its instructional guidance.

The **developmental model** describes children's progress in relation to stages of development, most famously outlined by Jean Piaget. These stages have influenced education by highlighting what types of reasoning are typical at each age. However, while the model shows what stages exist, it doesn't explain how or why children move from one stage to the next. Moreover, it assumes that development is sequential, one stage must follow another, but real life shows exceptions, e.g., some children walk without first crawling. This is especially true for children with special needs, whose development may not follow standard patterns. Thus, while this model helps describe developmental gaps (e.g., in preschoolers), it doesn't tell teachers how to help a child progress.

The **syndrome model** groups symptoms that tend to appear together, such as dyslexia, autism, dyspraxia, or dysphasia, to categorize individuals. These terms originated from medical studies of adults with brain injuries, where specific areas of brain damage were linked to certain impairments. Applying such labels to children is controversial because children typically haven't lost a skill but rather failed to develop it. There is also disagreement about which symptoms define each syndrome and what their causes are. Educationally, such labels are descriptive but not instructive; they help categorize but don't guide teachers on what strategies to use next. Therefore, the syndrome model is classified as descriptive rather than explanatory.

2. Explanatory Models

The **organic model** explains a child's difficulties in terms of neurological or biological causes. It links learning or intellectual challenges to brain function or damage. For example, if a child has learning disabilities without social or emotional reasons, the cause may be assumed to lie in the brain's functioning. However, this model has limitations as identifying brain damage doesn't automatically tell teachers how to teach the child effectively. Even in cases of known neurological conditions, like epilepsy or hearing loss, the educational implications vary greatly, showing that organic factors interact with other influences and cannot directly determine teaching strategies.

The **process model** (or functional model) identifies the skills and functions required for a child to perform a specific task. For example, learning to write involves eye-hand coordination, visual discrimination, and fine motor control, which must be developed in sequence. This model is highly instructional, helping teachers determine the next steps in learning based on the child's current performance. However, there are disagreements among educators about what skills are necessary and in what order they should be developed. Despite extensive research, there is limited consensus on these details. Still, this model directly connects assessment with teaching, making it valuable for curriculum planning.

The **attitudinal model** focuses on the child's motivation and emotional relationship to learning, essentially the "will or won't" rather than the "can or can't." A change in attitude can sometimes turn failure into success. These models explore how children perceive themselves and their learning challenges. While difficult to measure, they are crucial for understanding the emotional and motivational dimensions of special education. This model is especially relevant to the third category of special education provision identified in the Warnock Report, which emphasizes emotional and social support.⁵²

⁵² Klaus Wedell, "Concepts of special educational need."

INTERACTIVE MODELS

Interactive models recognize that learning disabilities are shaped by both the child and their environment. These can also be descriptive or explanatory.

1. Descriptive Models

These include analyses of classroom communication that how teachers and students interact, and sociometric studies, which examine how children relate to peers. Such analyses help identify environmental factors that may hinder or support learning and provide practical insights for improving the classroom environment.

2. Explanatory Models

These models explore why learning problems occur through environmental interactions. The **instructional or applied behavioral analysis model** is one example. Rooted in behaviorist psychology, it emphasizes giving specific feedback and reinforcement based on student performance. It combines motivation theory with structured curriculum design and helps determine whether interventions should focus on the child or the learning environment. Further, the **Attitudinal Interactive Models** explore how social perceptions and labeling affect a child's learning and self-image. For example, labeling theory suggests that if a child is repeatedly seen as a "troublemaker" or "failure," they may internalize and act according to those labels. Teacher expectations have a strong impact on student achievement, as highlighted by various educational reports.

Further, **the system theory models** analyze how different parts of an organization (like a school or family) interact. For example, a headteacher noticed many students were punished for not submitting homework. By introducing a lunchtime quiet room where students could complete work, the number of punishments dropped. This shows how changing one part of the system (providing study space) can positively influence behavior and outcomes. Such models highlight the interconnectedness of environmental factors in solving educational problems.

The professionals may agree on a child's difficulty but differ in which model best explains it. For instance, one teacher might view a problem as attitudinal, while another sees it as instructional. This shows that specifying child's special educational needs is a complex process.

A child's needs arise from the interaction between personal strengths and weaknesses and the resources and limitations of their environment, a dynamic process known as compensatory interaction.

Recognizing this complexity is vital as effective special education must consider both the child and their environment, not just one or the other.

Table 3.3 Models of SEN ⁵³

	DESCRIPTION	EXPLANATORY
WITHIN-CHILD	NORMATIVE	ORGANIC
	DEVELOPMENTAL	PROCESS
	SYNDROME	ATTITUDINAL
INTERACTIVE	CLASSROOM INTERACTION	INSTRUCTIONAL
	SOCIOMETRY	ATTITUDINAL
		SYSTEM

LAWS AND POLICIES ON SEN

Article 24: Education – UNCPRD

Article 24 of the UNCPRD establishes that PWDs have the right to education without discrimination and on an equal basis with others. Inclusive education at all levels should support the full development of an individual's potential, dignity, self-worth, talents, and abilities, while promoting respect for human rights and diversity.⁵⁴ The ultimate aim is to enable PWDs to participate effectively in society. States must ensure that PWDs are not excluded from primary or secondary education due to disability and can access inclusive, quality, and free education in their communities. This includes providing reasonable accommodations and individualized support that maximizes both academic and social development. Education should also include opportunities to develop life and social skills, promoting independence and full participation in school and community life.

To facilitate inclusion, States are required to provide accessible learning formats, such as Braille, sign language, and other augmentative communication methods, especially for learners who have visual, hearing, or both impairments. Teachers, including those with disabilities, should be trained in disability awareness and inclusive teaching strategies. Additionally, PWDs must have equal access to tertiary education, vocational training, adult education, and lifelong learning, with reasonable accommodations to ensure full participation.

⁵³ Klaus Wedell, "Concepts of special educational need."

⁵⁴ Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and Optional Protocol, United Nations, 2008, <https://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/convention/convoptprot-e.pdf>

“5. States Parties shall ensure that persons with disabilities are able to access general tertiary education, vocational training, adult education and lifelong learning without discrimination and on an equal basis with others. To this end, States Parties shall ensure that reasonable accommodation is provided to persons with disabilities.”

SECTION 9: EQUITY IN EDUCATION – SINDH ACT, 2018

Section 9 of the Sindh Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities’ Act, 2018 states that the Government of Sindh is responsible for ensuring that all educational institutions under its funding or recognition promote inclusive education for children with disabilities.⁵⁵ To achieve this objective, these institutions must admit such children without discrimination and offer them the same opportunities in academics, sports, and recreation as other students. Educational environments are to be made accessible, including buildings, campuses, and facilities, while reasonable accommodations must be provided based on each student’s specific needs. Institutions are also required to arrange individualized or general support systems that enhance both academic and social development in a fully inclusive setting.

For learners who have visual, hearing, or both impairments, education should be delivered through suitable language and communication modes that best meet their needs.

Schools must also identify learning disabilities as early as possible and apply appropriate teaching strategies and interventions to address them.

Regular monitoring of students with disabilities should be carried out to assess their participation, academic progress, and completion of studies. The government must also make arrangements for transportation facilities for such students, including attendants for those who require significant support. Furthermore, PWDs should be trained in essential life and social skills to enable their full participation in education and community life. Equal access must also be ensured to all educational opportunities, such as vocational training, online and distance learning, and adult education programs.

To implement these provisions effectively, the government is to take a range of measures. These include conducting a survey of school-going children with disabilities every three years to identify their needs and assess how well these are being met, with the first survey to be completed within two years of the Act’s commencement. The government is also required to establish adequate teacher training institutions, both specialized and general, to produce educators skilled in inclusive teaching

⁵⁵ Sindh Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2018.

for various types of disabilities. It must employ teachers proficient in Braille, sign language, and methods suited for children with intellectual disabilities, while also training other professionals and staff to support inclusive education at all school levels.

- “2 (b) to establish adequate dedicated and general institutions for teacher training with a view to train adequate number of specially trained teachers equipped with skills for inclusive education to teach students with various disabilities;
- 2 (c) to train and employ teachers, including teachers with disabilities who are qualified in sign language and Braille and also teachers who are trained in teaching children with intellectual disabilities;
- 2 (d) to train professionals and staff to support inclusive education at all levels of school education.”

Education for children who have visual or hearing impairments should be provided using the most appropriate languages, modes, and means of communication to promote both academic and social growth. The government must supply students with disabilities with free learning materials, textbooks, and assistive devices up to the age of eighteen. Scholarships should also be made available when necessary, and the curriculum and examination systems should be adjusted to accommodate different needs, such as allowing additional exam time, providing scribes or amanuenses, exempting certain language requirements, or offering age relaxation for specific examinations. The Act also calls for the promotion of research to improve learning outcomes and allows for any other steps the government deems necessary to enhance inclusive education.

In addition, the government must establish special education and rehabilitation centers to cater to the unique requirements of PWDs.

General educational institutions should also be equipped and staffed adequately to ensure the availability of inclusive learning environments.

Finally, the government must promote and safeguard the participation of PWDs in informal, adult, and continuing education programs on an equal basis with others.

SECTION 9: EQUITY IN EDUCATION – GB ACT, 2019

The Gilgit-Baltistan Persons with Disabilities Act, 2019 upholds the principle of equal educational opportunities for PWDs. It mandates a 5 percent quota for their admission to all educational institutions, both public and private, and grants an age relaxation of at least five years to facilitate their entry. The Act ensures that no individual is denied education on the basis of disability and that access remains equitable across all levels. It guarantees free education for PWDs from pre-primary through secondary levels, while also providing a fifty percent fee concession for higher education. For

individuals with disabilities, the government is tasked with establishing specialized institutions to address their unique learning and developmental needs.⁵⁶

“9 (2) The government shall provide free education to Persons with Disabilities in pursuance of article 27 of the Government of Gilgit-Baltistan Order 2018 or higher education in all educational institutions whether Public or Private shall give 50% fee relaxation. They shall also be entitled to a special quota seats in institutions as per notification issued by the government from time to time.”

This law also says that all educational institutions, whether government-run or privately owned, are legally required to reserve 5 percent of their total admissions specifically for students with disabilities. In addition to this reserved quota, the law also allows for an age relaxation of at least five years when necessary. This means that if a student with a disability is older than the usual age limit for admission, perhaps due to delays in schooling, medical conditions, or accessibility barriers, they can still be admitted within this extended age limit.

“9 (5) A Quota of 5% with age relaxation minimum 5 years if needed shall be dedicated for admission to all educational institutions whether State owned or private for persons with Disabilities.”

Educational institutions are required to provide reasonable accommodations, including accessible facilities and hostels, to support an inclusive learning environment. The Act also emphasizes the training of teachers and educational staff to equip them with the skills and understanding necessary to work effectively with students with diverse disabilities. Furthermore, the government is obligated to ensure that PWDs can fully participate in all forms of education, whether vocational, online, distance learning, or adult education, thereby promoting lifelong learning and inclusion within the broader educational system.

SECTION 9: EQUITY IN EDUCATION – ICT ACT, 2020

The ICT Rights of Persons with Disability Act, 2020 ensures that PWDs are granted equal and non-discriminatory access to education across both public and private institutions. The government is responsible for providing free education from pre-primary to higher levels and for establishing specialized institutions for individuals with moderate to severe disabilities, alongside promoting inclusive education within mainstream schools.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ The Gilgit-Baltistan Persons with Disabilities Act, 2019.

⁵⁷ ICT Rights of Persons with Disability Act, 2020.

“(2) The government shall provide free pre-primary to higher education to persons with disabilities.”

“(3) The government shall take necessary measures to establish special educational institutions for persons with moderate to severe disabilities to cater to their special needs, in addition to making other institutions reasonably equipped and staffed to provide appropriate facilities for inclusive education to such persons in those general educational institutions.”

The Act explicitly prohibits any denial of admission, discrimination, or abuse against students with disabilities. It also emphasizes inclusive learning environments that promote personal development, creativity, and the enhancement of physical and mental capacities. Educational institutions are required to provide reasonable accommodations, such as accessible facilities, learning aids, and inclusive hostel arrangements. Furthermore, the Act mandates the training of teachers with the skills necessary to support students with diverse needs and directs the government to ensure full access to all forms of education, including vocational training, online learning, distance education, and adult education.

SECTION 9: EQUITY IN EDUCATION – BALOCHISTAN ACT, 2017

The Balochistan Act ensures that PWDs are given equal access to education in both public and private institutions without discrimination. Similar to the GB law, the government is responsible for providing free education at basic levels and significant financial support, such as 50 percent fee reduction in higher education along with reserved seats and a 5 percent admission quota.

“(5) A Quota of 5% with age relaxation minimum 5 years if needed shall be dedicated for admission to all educational institutions whether State owned or private for persons with disabilities.”

It also guarantees that no student can be denied admission based on disability and requires institutions to provide reasonable accommodations, including accessible facilities and supportive learning environments.

Additionally, the law provides that the government must promote inclusive education by improving general institutions and establishing special education centers where needed. It emphasizes teacher training so educators are equipped to handle diverse learning needs and ensures access to various forms of education, including vocational, online, and distance learning.

SECTION 8: EQUITY IN EDUCATION – PUNJAB ACT, 2022

Section 8 of the Punjab disability law ensures the same educational rights for PWDs as the other provinces. It provides for PWDs' equitable access to educational institutions at concessional fees. It

clearly states that no qualified student can be denied admission based on disability, and institutions must provide a safe, respectful, and supportive environment. It also promotes inclusive education by requiring that at least 3 percent of students in institutions be PWDs, along with providing hostel accommodation at reduced rates and necessary academic support, appropriate teaching methods (like Braille and sign language), and fair examination arrangements such as extra time or scribes.

“(5) There shall be established an inclusive education system in the educational institutions where not less than three percent of the total number of students shall be students with disabilities.”

Furthermore, the government and educational institutions share responsibility for supporting students with disabilities. Institutions must monitor student progress, adapt curriculum and teaching methods, and identify learning disabilities early. Similar to Sindh law, the government must conduct surveys to identify PWDs and ascertain their needs, train teachers and staff, provide free learning materials and assistive devices up to age 18, offer scholarships, and promote communication tools like sign language.

Table 3.4 Equity in Education

SR.	MAJOR PROVISIONS	COMPARISON OF LAWS
1.	Equal Access to Education	All laws ensure that PWDs are granted equal and non-discriminatory access to education across both public and private institutions.
2.	Inclusive and Special Education	All laws ordain for inclusive and special education provision for PWDs.
3.	Free Basic Education & Fee Reduction	GB & Balochistan laws provide for free basic education and 50 percent fee concession at higher education level for PWDs in all private and public institutes. ICT law provides free primary to higher education for PWDs. Punjab law also mentions concession in fee. Sindh Act provides free learning materials/assistive devices up to age 18 and scholarships.
4.	Age Relaxation	GB and Balochistan laws include age relaxation of 5 years for admission.
5.	Quota	GB, Balochistan, & Punjab provide for education quota for PWDs.
6.	Prohibition of Admission Rejection based on Disability	All laws provide that no PWD shall be denied admission into any educational institution based on disability.

HIGHER EDUCATION COMMISSION POLICY FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES AT HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN PAKISTAN, 2021

The Higher Education Commission (HEC) Policy for Students with Disabilities aims to ensure that PWDs have equal access to higher education in Pakistan. Its primary objective is to create an inclusive and enabling environment in colleges and universities, supporting students with disabilities in both academic and extracurricular activities. Recognizing the wide range of disabilities and their varying impacts on learning and participation, the policy mandates that HEIs remove physical, regulatory, organizational, academic, and social barriers.⁵⁸

“1.4. This policy affirms that persons with disabilities are valuable members of society and the HEC and all HEIs have an obligation to undertake all reasonable actions to enable persons with disabilities to avail the opportunities for higher education available to other students. Through this policy, the HEC endeavors to eliminate regulatory, physical, organizational, academic and social obstacles at HEIs that might hamper the academic and career pursuits of persons with disabilities and provide people with disabilities with equal educational opportunities, recognition of their inherent dignity, and protection of their rights.”

Moreover, the policy applies to all students with disabilities, including prospective, enrolled, and those who acquire disabilities during their studies. HEIs are required to establish an Accessibility Committee to assess and coordinate accommodations, provide counseling, advise faculty, promote awareness, and liaise with philanthropic organizations. Additionally, Disability Coordinators serve as points of contact between students and the committee, ensuring students receive guidance, support, and timely accommodations. Committees and coordinators are tasked with individualized assessment of students' needs rather than generic solutions, ensuring fair and equitable support.

In terms of admissions, students with disabilities are entitled to full disclosure of facilities and accommodations, including special arrangements for entrance exams, interviews, and selection procedures. HEIs must provide quotas, age relaxations, financial aid, and support for higher degree programs to ensure equitable access. The policy also emphasizes non-discrimination on the basis of disability, ensuring that students with disabilities feel comfortable and safe in disclosing their condition, rather than experiencing fear or stigma associated with it.

⁵⁸ Policy for Students with Disabilities, 2021 (amended), Higher Education Commission Pakistan, <https://file.pide.org.pk/pdfpideresearch/policy-for-students-with-disabilities-2021-amended.pdf>.

“4.1 (b) It is important to note that there shall not be any adverse impact on the application of a prospective student based on his or her disclosure of a disability. The application will be processed in the same manner as other applications, without any discrimination on the basis of the disclosed disability.”⁵⁹

furthermore, the policy outlines a range of reasonable accommodations to ensure that students with disabilities can participate fully and equally in academic and campus life. The Accessibility Committee at each HEI is responsible for determining appropriate accommodations based on the specific type and degree of a student’s disability. These measures are not intended as advantages but as supports that provide fair access to educational opportunities. `

“It is important to remember that accommodations are not advantages, but are a means of providing each student with full access to study programs.”⁶⁰

Moreover, depending on individual needs, accommodations may include medical and psychological assistance, such as access to counseling services, or physical infrastructure adjustments like ramps, accessible washrooms, specialized furniture, clear signage, and dedicated pathways. HEIs are also encouraged to provide free on-campus transport for students with mobility challenges.

Students may also receive assistive and technological support such as Braille materials, audio-recorded lectures, large-print books, hearing aids, laptops equipped with screen readers, and other adaptive devices to aid learning. Accommodations can include extra time, quiet testing areas, or alternative assessment formats to help students demonstrate their learning effectively. However, while assessment methods may be adjusted, academic standards and learning outcomes remain the same. To access such accommodations, students are required to submit a valid Disability Certificate, and exam-related adjustments must be approved in advance through consultation between faculty, Disability Coordinators, and the students themselves.

The policy further ensures accessible residential facilities, recommending that hostels allocate specially designed rooms for students with disabilities that include private washrooms and other essential amenities. Likewise, HEIs are expected to promote equal participation in sports, cultural, and recreational activities by providing necessary modifications or support. Accommodations also extend to continuing education, distance learning, vocational and skill development programs, ensuring that

⁵⁹ Policy for Students with Disabilities, 2021, Higher Education Commission.

⁶⁰ Policy for Students with Disabilities, 2021, Higher Education Commission.

online and adult learners with disabilities receive equal access to resources and learning tools. Finally, HEIs must take measures to enable students with disabilities to fully participate in convocation ceremonies, ensuring that graduation events are inclusive and accessible for all.

The policy also establishes a grievance mechanism where students can report discrimination, abuse, or inadequate services, starting with Disability Coordinators, escalating to the Accessibility Committee, Vice Chancellor, or HEC Disability Officer if necessary. HEIs are required to maintain a special fund for supporting accessibility needs and ensure anticipatory planning for accommodations rather than reactive measures. The HEC oversees compliance, provides guidance through a designated Disability Officer, evaluates HEIs based on adherence to the policy, and supports students during degree attestation or equivalence processes, including fee waivers.

Thus, the policy provides a comprehensive framework ensuring that students with disabilities can participate fully and equitably in higher education. It emphasizes individualized support, anticipatory accommodations, inclusive infrastructure, financial aid, awareness-building, and alignment with both national law and international standards, thereby promoting dignity, access, and meaningful participation for all students.

NATIONAL POLICY FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES, 2002

The National Policy for Persons with Disabilities highlights the importance of early identification, prevention, and intervention to minimize the impact of disabilities. Prevention is viewed as a multidisciplinary effort involving medical professionals, psychologists, social workers, and educators. While healthcare experts play the primary role, schools and colleges also contribute through awareness and health education programs that equip families with knowledge to prevent disabilities. Early detection is considered crucial; timely diagnosis within the first few weeks or months of life, followed by appropriate professional and family support, can significantly improve developmental outcomes. For children with moderate or severe impairments, intervention through multidisciplinary teams at the district level is recommended to ensure comprehensive care. The policy also emphasizes counseling, integrating insights from sociology, psychology, and social work to support both individuals and families. Additionally, genetic counseling is identified as a public necessity, requiring collaboration among the Ministries of Health, Women Development, Social Welfare, and Special Education to educate parents about hereditary risks. Family guidance is considered a key component of early support, with training programs for parents to enhance their skills, confidence, and understanding of their child's needs, thus promoting early learning and emotional adjustment.⁶¹

In terms of education and training, the policy recognizes Pakistan's progress since the establishment of the Directorate General of Special Education (DGSE) and the National Trust for the Disabled in the 1980s. Both government and non-government organizations have expanded services to improve access to

⁶¹ National Policy for Persons with Disability, 2002, Government of Pakistan, <https://dgse.gov.pk/SiteImage/Downloads/National%20Policy%20for%20Persons%20with%20Disability.pdf>.

education for children with disabilities. The policy advocates for the integration of children with disabilities into mainstream education, ensuring inclusivity at all levels. It calls for the development of specialized teacher training programs that incorporate disability awareness and inclusive pedagogical skills, particularly at the postgraduate level. Institutions such as the National Institute of Special Education are tasked with expanding teacher education and research to improve service delivery.

“Training programs for teachers and social welfare workers and the course content at post-graduate level shall include an element of awareness training in disabilities from the perspective of that profession and its role related to persons with disabilities.”

Furthermore, the policy stresses the need for training medical professionals, including doctors, pediatricians, and therapists, in early diagnosis and management of disabilities. It also recommends increasing the number of institutions offering occupational therapy, physiotherapy, and speech therapy, supported through collaboration among federal, provincial, and district governments, as well as donor agencies. To ensure effective integration and mainstreaming, the policy calls for alignment of educational policies across government levels, curriculum reform, and provision of specialized aids and equipment to facilitate learning for students with disabilities.

SPECIAL CITIZENS ACT, 2008

The Special Citizens Act was introduced to ensure that PWDs have equal and unhindered access to all public spaces in Pakistan. The Act mandates the provision of accessible infrastructure and facilities, such as designated seating in public transport and pathways designed for wheelchairs and visually impaired persons. It requires the government to ensure that no new public or private construction, including educational institutions, hospitals, banks, shopping centers, police stations, airports, railway stations, bus stops, and hotels, is approved without accessibility features. These include ramps, suitable entrances, and other structural adjustments that facilitate movement for wheelchair users and individuals with visual impairments.⁶²

2024 JOINT POLICY BY SELD AND DEPD

The Joint Policy formulated by the School Education and Literacy Department (SELD) and the DEPD, approved by the Provincial Cabinet in 2024, operationalizes inclusive education in both public and private schools in accordance with Section 9 of the Sindh Disability Act, 2018. In the policy, inclusive education is defined as “an approach to education that values diversity and promotes the full

⁶² Mughees Ahmed, et al., “Policies for special persons in Pakistan analysis of policy,” Berkeley Journal of Social Sciences Implementation 1, no. 2 (2011), <https://www.humanitarianlibrary.org/sites/default/files/2014/02/Feb%201.pdf>.

participation of all students, regardless of their background, abilities, or needs. It aims to create a learning environment that is welcoming, supportive, and inclusive of all students, including those with disabilities, cultural and linguistic diversity, and other marginalized groups.”⁶³

The policy identifies a central implementation barrier that the mainstream public and private schools frequently refuse admissions to children with mild autism and borderline intellectual disabilities, resulting in their diversion to special schools. Thus, it is a violation of constitutional rights and statutory provisions. The policy further refers to the Sindh Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2013, and the Early Childhood Care and Education Policy, 2015. It also outlines a set of terms of reference that structure the functional responsibilities of SELD and DEPD for the policy implementation. These include: designation of selective SELD schools as Inclusive Education Schools; linking renewal of private school registration to demonstrable compliance with inclusive education requirements; provision of infrastructural support; establishment of joint child assessment committee; and teacher preparation initiatives through institutions such as the Centre for Autism, Rehabilitation, and Training Sindh (C-ARTS), Special Education Teachers Training Academy Sindh (SETTAS), and Provincial Institute of Teacher Education (PITE) etc.

The policy also mentions admission and tuition provisions. In the initial phase, inclusion will be instituted in schools with a minimum monthly tuition fee of PKR 10,000 to enable coverage of associated accessibility and support costs. School networks with multiple branches are required to designate at least one branch exclusively for inclusive enrolment. Additional components include curriculum adaptation guidelines, monitoring mechanisms, procedural provisions for withdrawal of admissions of students, and the establishment of an Inclusive Education Implementation Support Unit to coordinate and track progress.⁶⁴

GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS FOR SEN

Under the direction of the President of Pakistan, the Federal Government established the DGSE in 1985 as part of the Ministry of Health, Social Welfare, and Special Education.⁶⁵ The DGSE was created to provide training, education, and rehabilitation for children with disabilities. The DGSE’s functions include establishing model facilities for special education, vocational training, community-based rehabilitation, and skill development; promoting public and professional awareness; formulating and

⁶³ Joint Strategy/Policy of SELD and DEPD for Implementation of Inclusive Education in the Province, No. So VI (SGA&CD)/7(35)/2024, December 12, 2024.

⁶⁴ Notification to Establish the Inclusive Education Implementation Support Unit (IEISU), No: SO(P.S)/SE&LD/1-205/2024-25, School Education & Literacy Department, Government of Sindh, 2025, [https://www.sindheducation.gov.pk/Contents/Notifications/123323%20Notification%20to%20established%20the%20Inclusive%20Education%20Implementation%20Support%20Unit%20\(IEISU\).PDF](https://www.sindheducation.gov.pk/Contents/Notifications/123323%20Notification%20to%20established%20the%20Inclusive%20Education%20Implementation%20Support%20Unit%20(IEISU).PDF)

⁶⁵ Zahida Shakiel Lari, Aspects of special needs education in Pakistan and other developing countries. (Saturday Night Press, 2006), <https://bookscouter.com/publisher/saturday-night-pr>.

implementing policies for PWDs; and providing medical care and rehabilitation services.⁶⁶ The department offers around 14 different services and manages 13 projects, serving children with hearing, visual, physical, and developmental impairments through four National Special Education Centers. Additionally, the DGSE operates the National Institute of Special Education, the National Training Center, a library, a resource center, and a braille press. Specialized services include support for autistic children, mobility training, and vocational rehabilitation, ensuring a comprehensive framework for the education and empowerment of children with disabilities.⁶⁷

Further, at the provincial level, in Sindh, the SELD primarily oversees general education while also addressing components of special education.⁶⁸ In parallel, the DEPD specifically focuses on educational initiatives for PWDs. In GB, the Directorate of Higher Education serves as the higher authority overseeing education overall, while the Secretary for Higher, Technical, and Special Education specifically manages the special education component within the directorate. In KP, the Directorate of Social Welfare, Special Education, and Women Empowerment is responsible for social welfare services, special education, and initiatives aimed at empowering PWDs. Also, HEC looks into special education at the higher level in the country.

⁶⁶ Ministry of Human Rights, Government of Pakistan, Yearbook 2021-2022, (2023), <https://mohr.gov.pk/SiteImage/Downloads/YearBook2021-22.pdf>.

⁶⁷ "National Institute of Special Education," Directorate General of Special Education, Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training, <https://dgse.gov.pk/Detail/Mjg1ZmNjNjUtYTE5Ny00OTAwLTg0N2UuYTQ1YW5yZTE5YzU1>.

⁶⁸ "School Education and Literacy Department," Government of Sindh, <https://www.sindheducation.gov.pk/>.



Chapter 4:

Global SEN Framework and Best Practices

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To understand how inclusive education is implemented globally, it is helpful to consider the relationship among legal frameworks, school environments, and student experiences. Although countries adopt different policies and practices to promote inclusion, the key issue is how these elements are enacted in everyday classroom settings. This broad perspective on interacting factors aligns with ecological theory, which examines how students are influenced by multiple interconnected systems, ranging from national policies to their immediate learning environments.

The Ecological Systems Theory is a framework for understanding human development in the context of the multiple environments that influence it. It was developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner in the 1970s and is widely used in education, psychology, and social work. These factors are bi-directional, meaning they not only affect the individual but also influence and are influenced by other ecological levels. For example, a child's behavior can affect their family dynamics or classroom environment, just as family or school policies can impact the child. This shows that development is shaped by dynamic interactions across multiple environmental levels, rather than by any single factor alone.⁶⁹

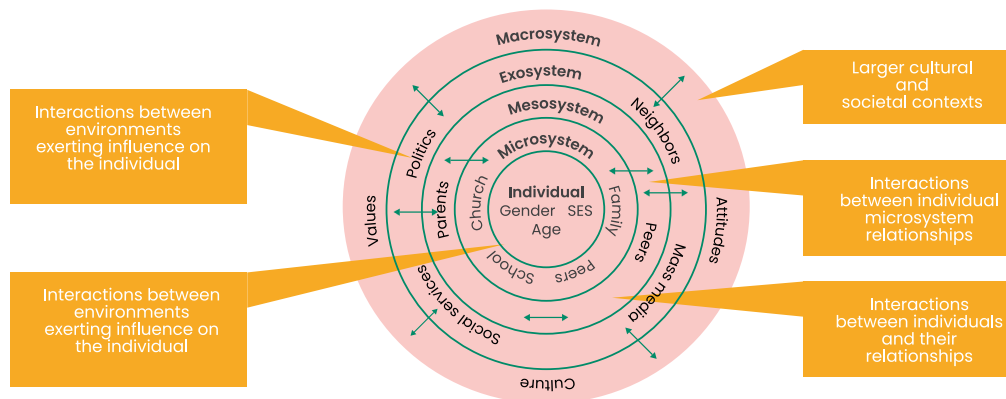


Figure 4.1. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model⁷⁰

1. **Microsystem:** The immediate environments in which the individual has direct interactions (e.g., family, school, peers, teachers).
2. **Mesosystem:** The relationships and connections between elements of the microsystem (e.g., communication between home and school).
3. **Exosystem:** Settings that the individual does not directly participate in but that still influence their experience (e.g., parents' workplace, community services, school governance structures).
4. **Macrosystem:** The broader cultural, social, economic, and policy contexts (e.g., national legislation, cultural values, economic conditions).
5. **Chronosystem:** The dimension of time, including life transitions, historical events, and shifts in policies or societal attitudes.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Olivia Guy-Evans, "Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory," Simply Psychology, (2024), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/383500583_Bronfenbrenner's_Ecological_Systems_Theory.

⁷⁰ "Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model," Paul Main, 2023, <https://www.structural-learning.com/post/bronfenbrenners-ecological-model>.

⁷¹ Olivia Guy-Evans, "Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory."

While Ecological Systems Theory emphasises the nested layers that influence a learner's development, it is equally important to consider what happens within the classroom itself. This microsystem is where teaching and learning interactions take place every day, and where inclusive pedagogical approaches shape learners' experiences. Two key approaches, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and differentiated instruction, provide structured ways for teachers to respond to learner diversity within this immediate context.

UNIVERSAL DESIGN FOR LEARNING

UDL is an educational framework developed by Centre for Applied Special Technology (CAST) that aims to make learning accessible and effective for all students. Instead of adapting instruction after barriers arise, UDL promotes designing lessons, assessments, and learning environments from the outset to reduce barriers.⁷²

According to CAST, UDL is built around three simple principles that help teachers design lessons that work for all students. The first principle, Multiple Means of Engagement, is about keeping students motivated and emotionally connected to learning. Teachers can do this by offering choices in assignments, using real-life or culturally relevant examples, providing clear goals or visual schedules, and supporting emotional regulation through calm spaces or breaks. The second principle, Multiple Means of Representation, focuses on presenting information in different ways so every student can understand it. This includes using visual, auditory, and hands-on materials; adding captions or transcripts; simplifying language when needed; and using diagrams or graphic organisers to build understanding. The third principle, Multiple Means of Action and Expression, gives students different ways to show what they have learned. This might involve choosing between writing, speaking, or creating a digital product, using assistive technology such as speech-to-text tools, breaking tasks into smaller steps, or offering flexible timing for assessments. Together, these principles help teachers create flexible and accessible learning environments that support the diverse needs of all learners.

UDL can serve as a schoolwide framework that strengthens collaboration between general and special education. Further, as UDL becomes more widely adopted, the distinction between tools used exclusively as supports for students with disabilities and tools used for general instruction becomes less rigid. Many technologies that were once provided only as accommodations through an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) can now be incorporated into everyday teaching for all students. For example, a student with an IEP might require assistive technology such as voice-to-text software to complete written assignments. Under UDL, the same option can be offered to every student as part of providing multiple means of action and expression. These choices not only support accessibility

⁷² "Universal Design for Learning," CAST,
<https://www.cast.org/what-we-do/universal-design-for-learning/>.

but can also enhance motivation and engagement for students who benefit from varied formats.⁷³

DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION

Differentiated instruction is an inclusive pedagogy in which teachers deliberately adapt curriculum and instruction to meet the diverse readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles of individual students. Unlike UDL, which designs flexibility into the curriculum at the outset, differentiated instruction is a responsive, micro-level pedagogy implemented with specific learners in mind.⁷⁴ For example, a teacher may provide varied reading levels for the same text, offer both written and visual ways to process information, or allow students to choose between a written essay, a concept map, or an oral presentation to demonstrate understanding. These adjustments occur during instruction based on ongoing assessment and learner needs.

UDL and differentiated instruction both aim to adjust the learning environment rather than expecting the student to change, but they differ in timing and focus. UDL is a proactive, system level approach that builds flexibility into lessons before teaching begins and promotes student choice. Differentiated instruction is a reactive, micro-level approach in which teachers adapt content, process, or assessment in response to specific learners during instruction. Used together, UDL reduces barriers in advance while differentiation ensures that remaining individual needs are met. Viewed through Ecological Systems Theory, both approaches highlight the classroom as a key part of the microsystem where daily interactions shape learning. UDL reflects broader commitments to inclusion across system levels, while differentiation responds to the immediate diversity within the classroom. Together, they create a learning environment that is responsive, equitable, and aligned with ecological understandings of development.

Comparing global models of inclusive education is important because it reveals how different countries organise and deliver support across the various ecological levels that shape a learner's experience. Using an ecological framework highlights that inclusion is not determined by a single factor, but by the interaction of policies, institutions, relationships, and classroom practices.

⁷³ "UDL in Special Education," Kiersten Hensley and Sally Huddle, 2023, <https://www.naesp.org/resource/udl-in-special-education/>.

⁷⁴ "UDL in Special Education," Kiersten Hensley and Sally Huddle.

COUNTRY-SPECIFIC BEST PRACTICES

1. United Kingdom

The UK SEN system is shaped by key legislation, including the Children and Families Act 2014⁷⁵ and the Equality Act (2010).⁷⁶ **The SEND Code of Practice 2015 provides statutory guidance on implementing the duties and procedures set out in Children and Families Act 2014. This means that local authorities, schools, early years providers, colleges, and health services are legally required to ‘have regard’ to it when carrying out their duties.**⁷⁷ Before the 2014 reforms, support for children with more complex needs was delivered through Statements of SEN, an education-only document; these were replaced by the Education, Health and Care (EHC) Plan to create a more integrated, holistic system. EHC Plan, a legally binding document that provides coordinated education, health, and social care support from birth to age 25 for children whose needs exceed the school’s ordinarily available SEN support.

Local authorities oversee needs assessments, determine eligibility, and coordinate multidisciplinary input, while health and social care services contribute therapy and specialist provision. Differences in local resources mean that the level and quality of support can vary across regions. It is widely recognised that England’s system needs major reform to control rising costs and improve support for children, as the number of EHC Plans continues to grow and local authorities face large financial pressures.⁷⁸

As one key informant in the interviews explained, “If the child attends a public school, it is mandatory for the school to follow and implement the EHC Plan. For example, if a child needs a sensory room and the school lacks one, the government must decide whether to transfer the child or take responsibility for providing the facility. The system covers such details comprehensively.”⁷⁹ This perspective shows how professionals experience the statutory duty on local authorities to secure the provision specified in an EHC Plan.

Coordination across home, school, and external agencies occurs through EHC Plan reviews and structured multi-agency collaboration. Children with special needs and disabilities often experience a system focused more on identifying problems than providing support, forcing families to “chase an EHC Plan to secure the help their child needs.” Within schools, the SEN Coordinator (SENCO) leads the

⁷⁵ Children and Families Act 2014, c. 6, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2014/6/part/3>.

⁷⁶ Equality Act 2010, c. 15, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents>.

⁷⁷ Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice: 0 to 25 Years, Department for Education and Department of Health and Social Care, Gov. UK, 2015, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/send-code-of-practice-0-to-25>.

⁷⁸ Luke Sibieta and Darcey Snape, Spending on special educational needs in England: something has to change, (2024), <https://ifs.org.uk/publications/spending-special-educational-needs-england-something-has-change>.

⁷⁹ Research Interview with SEN Expert, October 27, 2025.

identification of needs,⁸⁰ supports teachers in planning and implementing provision, and ensures legal compliance. SENCOs must be qualified teachers and are required to complete the National Professional Qualification (NPQ), a nationally standardised professional training program, within 3 years of taking up the role.

At the classroom (microsystem) level, teachers and support staff deliver adapted instruction, interventions, and therapies outlined in the EHC Plan, guided by the SENCO. These daily interactions shape the child's learning, development, and well-being.

One research found that students with intellectual disabilities are often two years behind in writing and mathematics than their peers.

It was argued that mainstream schools depend too much on teaching assistants, while specialist teachers are largely absent. SENCOs mainly handle administration and coordination rather than classroom teaching.

It was recommended that placing trained special education teachers in mainstream classrooms to provide effective, evidence-based support.⁸¹ The transition from Statements of SEN to EHC Plan in 2014 extended support up to age twenty-five and integrated education, health, and social care into a single coordinated system, reflecting the UK's broader commitment to long-term, holistic support.

2. Finland

Finland's development of inclusive education progressed from the 1960s–1970s shift away from segregated institutions toward rehabilitative integration through comprehensive school reforms and upgraded teacher education.⁸² **This work was formalized with the Basic Education Act of 1983, which mandated compulsory education for all learners and enabled differentiated instruction tailored to meet individual needs.** The trajectory advanced further with the 2010 amendment to the Basic Education Act, which introduced the three-tier support system, solidifying the support paradigm and strengthening Finland's commitment to fully inclusive schooling.

⁸⁰ "New Statistics on Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCP) for Children with Special Educational Needs," Children's Commissioner, May 2023, <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/blog/new-statistics-on-education-health-and-care-plans-ehcp-for-children-with-special-educational-needs/>.

⁸¹ "Students with Special Educational Needs are Years Behind Their Peers – They Need Specialist Teachers in Mainstream Classrooms," Johny Daniel, September 2024, <https://theconversation.com/students-with-special-educational-needs-are-years-behind-their-peers-they-need-specialist-teachers-in-mainstream-classrooms-240147>

⁸² European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, Country system mapping country report: Finland, (2020), <https://www.european-agency.org/sites/default/files/CSM%20Country%20Report%20Finland.pdf>.

The Finnish special education system emphasizes teacher professionalism and local judgment, allowing individualized support without requiring formal diagnoses, unlike diagnostic-focused systems in other countries. This cultural context supports a slow, professionally guided approach to inclusion, grounded in high societal trust in teachers rather than legal pressure or parental advocacy.⁸³

The Finnish government has reformed its learning support system in basic education by discontinuing the former three-tier model, which consisted of general, intensified, and special support, effective August 1, 2025. The new approach emphasizes low-threshold, proactive, and group-specific support that is integrated into everyday teaching. Under the revised legislation, support is now organized into two simplified categories: universal group-specific support and targeted pupil-specific measures. This structure is intended to strengthen individualized assistance within regular classrooms while reducing the need to move to special education placement.⁸⁴

The new system separates legal entitlement from daily teaching plans, reducing paperwork and prioritizing early, group-based support over detailed IEPs. Learning support follows an inclusive framework, with group-specific support available to all pupils. It includes general remedial teaching provided by the classroom teacher and co-teaching or in-class support from a SEN teacher. When additional help is needed, pupil-specific measures are provided, including small-group instruction (e.g., targeted literacy or numeracy), subject-focused small groups (e.g., intensive math or language support), or full-time special needs classes (e.g., fully adapted curriculum). Moreover, additional assistance may include interpretation, assistant services, and assistive devices (e.g., sign language, classroom support, or screen readers).

To address recent declines in student outcomes, the reform also allocates additional resources to foundational skills and limits teachers to supporting no more than five students who require additional assistance within a single group.⁸⁵ The reform further promotes the use of co-teaching, meaning that two teachers share responsibility for leading the class. This approach aims to integrate support directly into regular classroom practices, enabling students to stay with their classmates while accessing necessary help.⁸⁶

⁸³ Markku Jahnukainen, "Different strategies, different outcomes? The history and trends of the inclusive and special education in Alberta (Canada) and in Finland," *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research* 55, no. 5 (2011): 489–502,

https://tuhat.helsinki.fi/ws/portalfiles/portal/44083317/Jahnukainen_SJER.pdf

⁸⁴ "Changes in Support for Learning 2025," City of Helsinki,

<https://www.hel.fi/en/childhood-and-education/changes-in-support-for-learning-2025>.

⁸⁵ "Changes in Support for Learning 2025," City of Helsinki.

⁸⁶ "Finnish schools hire more teachers under new learning support rules," Helsinki Times, 2025,

<https://www.helsinkitimes.fi/themes/themes/education/27620-finnish-schools-hire-more-teachers-under-new-learning-support-rules.html>.

Teaching in Finland is a highly selective profession, in basic and upper secondary education, all teachers are required to hold a master's degree.

Pre-primary teachers are university educated, holding a bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) or advancing to roles such as special education teacher or completing a master's in education or ECEC.⁸⁷

3. United States

The U.S. presents a model shaped by federal civil rights legislation, local district governance, and a strong emphasis on individualized planning. **A central feature of the American system is the Individualized Education Program, a legally binding document required under the 2004 IDEA for students aged 3 to 21.**⁸⁸ The IEP outlines the child's strengths, educational needs, measurable annual goals, and the services and accommodations required to ensure access to a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). The Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) requirement under IDEA means that students with disabilities should learn alongside their peers without disabilities whenever possible, with segregated classrooms used only when a student's needs cannot be met in a general classroom. A student is eligible for an IEP if the student meets criteria for at least one IDEA disability category, the disability adversely affects educational performance, and the student requires special education services. For children under age three, early intervention is provided through an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP), which supports development within the home or community setting.⁸⁹

At the exosystem level, state departments of education and local school districts determine how services are organised, staffed, and funded. Local property taxes often fund schools, so access to resources can vary widely, creating inequities. Federal IDEA funding contributes only a portion of the additional costs of special education, and the formula for distributing funds has not been updated in decades. **These funding disparities mean that students' access to support often depends on geography, race, and socioeconomic status.**⁹⁰

Approximately two decades ago, revisions to IDEA introduced Response to Intervention (RTI), which proposed providing additional, targeted instruction to struggling students and monitoring their progress before determining whether they had a learning disability. This approach enabled schools to make more accurate and data-based identification decisions. Over time, the principles of RTI

⁸⁷ European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, Country system mapping country report: Finland.

⁸⁸ "Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)," National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2024, <https://ncld.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/240502-Learn-the-Law-Individuals-with-Disabilities-Education-Act.pdf>

⁸⁹ "Key Definitions in IDEA | A Reference List," Center for Parent Information and Resources, 2017, https://www.parentcenterhub.org/wp-content/uploads/repo_items/brief-fape-reference-list.pdf.

⁹⁰ National Council on Disability, (IDEA Series) The segregation of students with disabilities, (2018), <https://www.ncd.gov/assets/uploads/docs/ncd-segregation-swd-508.pdf>.

expanded beyond special education and evolved into the broader Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS), which offers structured, tiered support for all students. MTSS is a whole school approach in which educators use academic, behavioral, and attendance data to identify student needs early and match them with appropriate support. Most states and districts now use MTSS, although no national database tracks implementation.⁹¹ MTSS resembles Finland's earlier three tier structure, but unlike Finland's universal early support, it is not a national mandate and adoption varies widely across states and districts. MTSS integrates with special education, using data from its ongoing evaluations to guide IEP development and provide a continuum of support, with special education serving students who need the most intensive assistance.

It operates through three tiers of increasing intensity. Tier one provides high quality instruction and universal support for all students. Tier two offers targeted small group intervention for students who show emerging difficulty. Tier three delivers intensive, individualised support for students with significant or persistent needs. For example, a student who begins to struggle with reading comprehension would first receive strengthened classroom instruction in tier one. If difficulties continue, the student may join a small group reading intervention in tier two several times a week. If the problem persists despite these supports, the student would move to tier three and receive one-to-one intervention using specialised evidence-based methods. However, unlike Finland, where early support is provided immediately on the basis of observed need, MTSS in the US often functions as a pre-referral stage. Access to long term individualised support continues to depend on formal identification, parental advocacy and district capacity.

Within the mesosystem, IDEA requires active collaboration among parents, teachers, special educators, students (when appropriate) and related service providers such as school psychologists and therapists. This collaborative decision making ensures that assessment, goal setting, and service delivery remain coordinated across home and school. At the microsystem level, classroom teachers and support staff deliver the daily instruction, accommodations, and interventions outlined in the IEP. Universal MTSS practices, combined with targeted and individualized supports where needed, shape the child's everyday learning experience and progress. However, the primary data for this research shows that not all schools in the US cater to the needs of PWDs, especially teachers are not well-trained in pedagogical approaches aligned with SEN.⁹²

Historically, children with disabilities were often excluded from public schooling. The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, later renamed IDEA, marked a major shift by establishing enforceable rights to education. More recent developments, such as the expansion of MTSS during the 2000s, represent a move toward early intervention and more systematic, data-informed support within general education.

⁹¹ "MTSS: What Is a Multi-Tiered System of Supports?," Eesha Pendharka, October 2023, <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/mtss-what-is-a-multi-tiered-system-of-supports/2023/10>.

⁹² Research Interview with a SEN Expert with US-based experience, February 24, 2026.

4. India

India has moved from a predominantly segregated system of special schooling to an increasingly inclusion-oriented model, although progress remains uneven. Prior to the 1990s, education for children with disabilities was delivered mainly through segregated institutions run by missionary groups and non-governmental organisations. This history traces back to the colonial era, with the first school for the persons with hearing impairment established in Bombay in 1884 by a Roman Catholic Mission and the first school for persons with visual impairments founded in Amritsar in 1887 by Annie Sharp, a British Christian missionary. Although this early system established a foundation for disability education, it remained largely segregated. In the decades that followed, India introduced a series of national laws and policies that marked a clear shift toward integrated and subsequently inclusive education.⁹³

The federal legal framework provides a strong rights-based foundation for inclusive education. The Right to Education Act of 2009 is a federal law guaranteeing free and compulsory schooling for all children between 6 and 14 years, explicitly recognising the rights of children with disabilities to attend neighbourhood schools. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act of 2016, also a federal law, expands disability recognition to 21 categories and extends free education up to 18 years for children with benchmark disabilities, defined as individuals who experience at least 40 percent impairment as certified by the appropriate authority. It further mandates accessibility, reasonable accommodation, and inclusive school environments. The National Education Policy 2020 reinforces this commitment by emphasising teacher preparedness, multilingual materials, and accessible digital ecosystems. However, the translation of these policy commitments into equitable practice remains uneven, particularly in rural and marginalised regions.⁹⁴

The National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) has played a central role in operationalising federal commitments to inclusive education, working alongside major government programs such as Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, a flagship program which has provided national level funding and policy support for the education of children with special needs. NCERT's work contributes to measurable gains in enrolment and literacy for PWDs and can be understood through three strategic areas. First, screening and capacity building have been strengthened through tools such as the PRASHAST app for early disability identification in schools and the NISHTHA teacher training program, which equips teachers with essential competencies in inclusive pedagogy.

⁹³ Mousuf Raza, et al., "From segregation to inclusion: assessing India's journey towards inclusive education," *International Journal for Humanities, Social Science and Management* 5, no. 3 (2024): 579-594, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/392509538_From_Segregation_to_Inclusion_Assessing_India's_Journey_towards_Inclusive_Education.

⁹⁴ Mousuf Raza, et al., "From segregation to inclusion: assessing India's journey towards inclusive education."

Second, NCERT has advanced resources and digital accessibility by producing audio books and developing learning materials in Indian Sign Language that align with UDL principles. Third, NCERT has expanded accessible digital platforms, particularly ePathshala and DIKSHA, which disseminate curriculum content, interactive modules, and assistive features to ensure availability across diverse regions and schooling contexts.⁹⁵ Despite these efforts, research highlights persistent gaps, including financial limitations, infrastructural inequalities, and the digital divide, all of which prevent national initiatives from reaching the most underserved communities.⁹⁶

Coordination among teachers, special educators, itinerant resource teachers, and school leadership also remains inconsistent. Research identifies curriculum limitations and insufficient professional coordination as significant obstacles that impede sustained inclusive practice. In many districts, itinerant resource teachers serve numerous schools, reducing the continuity of guidance available to mainstream teachers.⁹⁷

The immediate classroom environment is where policy implementation gaps become most visible.

It is reported that in a mainstream school in rural Karnataka, inclusion was frequently understood simply as having children with and without disabilities sit together, with minimal focus on differentiated instruction.⁹⁸ Pedagogical barriers remain significant, including insufficient teacher awareness and limited training in inclusive methods, which restrict personalised support.⁹⁹ These challenges are compounded by attitudinal prejudices, infrastructural shortages, and regional disparities. It is reported that less than half of schools have accessible washrooms, and many rural and northeastern regions face severe teacher shortages and limited accessibility. These conditions particularly disadvantage girls and young women. As documented, entrenched societal biases and gender inequalities further limit access, contributing to markedly lower literacy and employment rates among women with disabilities.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁵ Mousuf Raza, et al., "From segregation to inclusion."

⁹⁶ Bandhana Kumari, "NEP 2020 and inclusive education: potential for enhancing access and equity," *International Education and Research Journal* 11, no. 7 (2025), <https://ierj.in/journal/index.php/ierj/article/view/4307>.

⁹⁷ Bandhana Kumari, "NEP 2020 and inclusive education: potential for enhancing access and equity."

⁹⁸ Nidhi Singal, "Education of children with disabilities in India and Pakistan: critical analysis of developments in the last 15 years," *Prospects* 46, (2016): 171-183, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11125-016-9383-4>

⁹⁹ Bandhana Kumari, "NEP 2020 and inclusive education: potential for enhancing access and equity."

¹⁰⁰ Mousuf Raza, et al., "From segregation to inclusion."

Thus, these concerns demonstrate the gap between a strong national policy vision and the realities of practice. Although India has established a comprehensive legal framework and invested in national programs and digital initiatives, pedagogical limitations, infrastructural shortages, societal biases, insufficient coordination, and regional inequalities continue to restrict meaningful inclusion. Hence, many children with disabilities remain present in school but are not fully included in learning.

5. Canada

Canada's education system operates through provincial and territorial legislation, local school board policies, and collaborative professional practice. Provincial responsibility for education results in significant variation in how students with special education needs are identified and supported. Ontario employs a categorical model, requiring students to fit one of the officially defined "exceptionality" categories to access services.¹⁰¹ In contrast, provinces such as Alberta and Manitoba use needs-based frameworks that prioritise educational programming rather than diagnostic classification. Alberta conceptualises inclusive education as a continuum of universal, targeted, and individualized support for all learners, including those who are gifted, struggling, or have disabilities.¹⁰² Manitoba similarly adopts the broad term special learning needs, emphasizing supports that enable meaningful participation in school regardless of diagnostic status; however, funding and access to more intensive supports may still depend on documented levels of need, meaning that some categorization remains in practice.¹⁰³

A major structural disparity persists within this system because the federal government alone oversees on reserve schooling, which limits access to the broader range of supports available in provincial systems.¹⁰⁴ Although the High Cost Special Education Program¹⁰⁵ provides funding for specialized services, special needs identification in First Nations schools remains two to three times higher than in provincial settings.¹⁰⁶ This gap illustrates that funding parity cannot address the deeper social and economic determinants influencing learning needs. These inequities contribute to significantly lower educational attainment among First Nations adults compared with the general population.

¹⁰¹ Ontario Regulation 181/98, Identification and Placement of Exceptional Pupils, O. Reg. 181/98, <https://www.ontario.ca/laws/regulation/980181>.

¹⁰² "Inclusive Education." Government of Alberta, <https://www.alberta.ca/inclusive-education>.

¹⁰³ "Education and Early Childhood Learning," Government of Manitoba, <https://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/>.

¹⁰⁴ Helena Towle, Disability and inclusion in Canadian education: policy, procedure, and practice, (2015), https://www.policyalternatives.ca/wp-content/uploads/attachments/Disability_and_Inclusion_in_Education.pdf

¹⁰⁵ "High-Cost Special Education Program: National Program Guidelines 2025 to 2026," Government of Canada, <https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1737046726633/1737046762470>.

¹⁰⁶ "Education," Assembly of First Nations, <https://afn.ca/community-services/education/>.

IEPs in Canada are widely implemented, sharing common elements and processes across jurisdictions; however, they arise from provincial legislation and policy rather than a unified national law, resulting in variation in legal frameworks and documentation.¹⁰⁷ The functions of IEPs are generally consistent, with the exception of identification, which differs between categorical and non-categorical provinces. In Ontario, IEPs are required for formally identified “exceptional pupils” but can also be developed for students needing support without formal identification, detailing strengths, learning expectations, services, and progress monitoring.¹⁰⁸ Students without formal exceptionality in Ontario may have more limited access to specialized programs and funding. In contrast, Alberta and Manitoba use needs-based approaches, allowing IEPs for any student who requires targeted or individualized support. In these needs-based systems, teacher and school-level professional judgment plays a central role in determining support. Parental collaboration is also expected in IEP development, and students participate where appropriate, though these practices are not uniformly mandated. Manitoba emphasizes meaningful participation for all learners, while Alberta provides a continuum of universal, targeted, and individualized services. In Manitoba, access to more intensive support may still require documented evidence of need. In British Columbia, while IEP eligibility generally depends on the impact of a student’s abilities on learning, a formal diagnosis may be required for certain low-incidence categories, such as intellectual disabilities or significant mental health conditions.¹⁰⁹

At the microsystem level, these structural arrangements shape the everyday experiences of students and families. Both the diagnostic-based model in Ontario and the planned needs-based model in British Columbia create stress, although for different reasons. For example, in Ontario, more than 6,000 children were waiting for autism assessments at provincially funded diagnostic hubs in 2022–23, an increase of over 2,800 children in three years, highlighting delays in early intervention services.¹¹⁰ These pressures are compounded by uneven access to supports. Only 21 per cent of elementary schools in low-income areas reported regular access to psychologists, compared to 36 per cent in higher-income areas.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁷ Philippe Tremblay and Stéphanie Belley, “Individualized education plans in Canada: a comparative analysis,” *International Journal for Cross-Disciplinary Subjects in Education* 8, no. 1 (2017): 3017–3024, <https://infonomics-society.org/wp-content/uploads/ijcdse/published-papers/volume-8-2017/Individualized-Education-Plans-in-Canada-A-Comparative-Analysis.pdf>.

¹⁰⁸ Ontario Regulation 181/98, Identification and Placement of Exceptional Pupils.

¹⁰⁹ “Inclusive Education Services: A Manual of Policies, Procedures and Guidelines 2024,” Ministry of Education and Child Care, British Columbia, https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/education/administration/kindergarten-to-grade-12/inclusive/inclusive_ed_policy_manual.pdf.

¹¹⁰ Sneha Duggal, “Waitlist for autism assessments at provincially funded diagnostic hubs up by nearly 3,000 kids,” *Orillia Matters*, 2024, <https://www.orilliamatters.com/local-news/waitlist-for-autism-assessments-at-provincially-funded-diagnostic-hubs-up-by-nearly-3000-kids-8509204>.

¹¹¹ Sneha Duggal, “Schools with lack of educational assistants more likely to ask special needs students to stay home: report,” *The Trillium*, June 3, 2024, <https://www.thetrillium.ca/news/education-and-training/schools-with-lack-of-educational-assistants-more-likely-to-ask-special-needs-students-to-stay-home-report-8943936>

Shortages of educational assistants sometimes require special education resource teachers to fill gaps, limiting support for struggling students. In British Columbia, wait-times for autism diagnostic assessments remained high in 2024, ranging from about 1 year and 3 months to over 2 years and 3 months depending on the health authority. These challenges are compounded by the planned introduction of Family Connections Centres (FCCs) in pilot communities, which provide centrally coordinated, needs-based services to all children with support needs, including those who did not previously have Individualized Autism Funding, a program that provided families with funding to purchase autism-related services directly.¹¹²

6. Australia

Australia's inclusive education framework is grounded in the Disability Discrimination Act 1992,¹¹³ which prohibits discrimination in education. It provides broad legal protection for people with physical, intellectual, sensory, psychiatric, and learning disabilities, including past, present, future, or perceived conditions. It reflects a medical model and does not fully capture modern views that disability results from social and environmental barriers, and its broadness can make consistent implementation challenging. Furthermore, the Disability Standards for Education 2005 are legally binding regulations, which require schools to ensure students with disabilities can participate on the same basis as their peers.¹¹⁴ **Despite these strong legal protections, a 2020 review found that many educators lack awareness and understanding of their responsibilities.**¹¹⁵ Moreover, students with disabilities and their families are often excluded from decisions that affect them. This has prompted state governments to strengthen safeguards through measures such as the Education Amendment Bill 2024 in the Australian Capital Territory and revised enrolment rules in New South Wales, while the national government plans to expand the Standards to include ECEC by 2025.¹¹⁶ To support these efforts, the government provides additional funding through the needs-based Schooling Resource Standard (SRS),¹¹⁷ which includes a student with disability loading calculated using data from the

¹¹² Representative for Children and Youth, *Too many left behind: ensuring children and youth with disabilities thrive*, (2025), <https://rcybc.ca/reports/too-many-left-behind/>

¹¹³ Disability Discrimination Act 1992, No. 135, 1992, <https://www.legislation.gov.au/C2004A04426/2018-04-12/text>.

¹¹⁴ Disability Standards for Education 2005, Australian Government, <https://www.legislation.gov.au/F2005L00767/atest/text>.

¹¹⁵ Commonwealth of Australia, *Final report of the 2020 review of the disability standards for education 2005*, (2020), <https://www.education.gov.au/download/10886/final-report-2020-review-disability-standards-education-2005/20837/final-report-2020-review-disability-standards-education-2005/pdf>.

¹¹⁶ "Recommendation 7.1 – Provide Equal Access to Mainstream Education and Enrolment," Australian Government, Department of Health, Disability and Ageing, <https://www.health.gov.au/node/55848>.

¹¹⁷ "Schooling Resource Standard," Australian Government, Department of Education, <https://www.education.gov.au/recurrent-funding-schools/schooling-resource-standard>.

Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability.¹¹⁸ While this funding helps schools deliver tailored support, its focus on reporting requirements rather than outcomes can limit its impact on students' participation and achievement.

At the meso level, Australia continues to sustain a dual structure of mainstream and segregated schooling, often justified as parental choice.

However, families frequently turn to segregated schools only after encountering rejection, unsafe environments, or insufficient support in mainstream settings.¹¹⁹

Limited workforce capability exacerbates this issue, as many young and early-career teachers reported inadequate preparation in their initial teacher education programs to teach students with disabilities, contributing to in-class segregation and restricted curriculum engagement.¹²⁰

The National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) provides funding for people with permanent and significant disability to access supports such as therapy, assistive equipment, personal care, and other services, helping them participate in daily life activities and the community.¹²¹ However, schools remain responsible for delivering the support necessary for students' participation in education. Challenges arise from confusion over whether the NDIS or schools are responsible for funding support, as parents and carers report that providers often claim the other is responsible, creating stress and uncertainty.¹²² Programs such as Foundational Supports, including the Thriving Kids program, aim to fill the support gap for young children with disabilities or developmental delay by delivering general and targeted assistance directly in schools, health clinics, and community settings.¹²³ Students with disabilities in rural and remote areas face additional barriers in accessing essential educational support. For instance, a child with a speech disability in a small town may lack access to a speech pathologist, which limits the school's ability to provide necessary adjustments for learning and participation.¹²⁴

¹¹⁸ "Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability (NCCD) Guidelines," Education Ministers Meeting, 2025,

<https://www.nccd.edu.au/sites/default/files/NCCD%20Guidelines%20Effective%202026%20Onward.pdf>.

¹¹⁹ "Why are Special Schools Still on The Menu?," Glenys Mann,

<https://research.qut.edu.au/c4ie/2020/06/29/why-are-special-schools-still-on-the-menu/>.

¹²⁰ "Australia: New Report Reveals Young Teachers' Struggle to Cope with Diversity," Education International, October 27, 2014,

<https://www.ei-ie.org/en/item/19542:australia-new-report-reveals-young-teachers-struggle-to-cope-with-diversity>.

¹²¹ "How the NDIS works?," NDIS, <https://www.ndis.gov.au/understanding/how-ndis-works>.

¹²² Commonwealth of Australia, *Final report of the 2020 review of the disability standards for education* 2005.

¹²³ "Thriving Kids," Australian Government, Department of Health, Disability, and Ageing, February 3, 2026,

<https://www.health.gov.au/resources/publications/thriving-kids-fact-sheet?language=en>

¹²⁴ Jordyn Beazley, "'Breaks your heart': rural kids waiting on critical development services," *The Guardian*, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/may/02/breaks-your-heart-rural-kids-waiting-on-critical-development-services>

At the classroom level, IEPs are intended to tailor learning to each student's needs, yet they often fail to incorporate the student's voice.¹²⁵ Many students with disabilities experience bullying and exclusion, and schools frequently misinterpret behaviours as misconduct rather than indicators of unmet needs.¹²⁶ These issues contribute to lower educational attainment, with only 34 percent of adults with disabilities completing grade 12, and many students reporting unmet support needs. Implementing effective teaching strategies and structured classroom support is essential to promote full participation and reduce educational inequities.

CROSS-NATIONAL INSIGHTS INTO INCLUSIVE AND SPECIAL EDUCATION FRAMEWORKS

A comparative analysis of the US, the UK, Canada, Australia, Finland, and India shows important similarities and differences in how countries organise inclusive and special education. **The US and the UK are distinctive because they use legally binding individualized plans.** In the US, the Individualized Education Program is a statutory document that obligates schools to provide specified services and supports. In the UK, the EHC Plan creates a similar legal entitlement that requires local authorities and schools to deliver the provisions outlined in the plan.

Canada and Australia both demonstrate strong commitments to inclusive education, yet the legal force of individualized plans varies across provinces and states. IEPs are widely used, but their enforceability depends on local legislation rather than a single national mandate. Following recent reforms, Finland has replaced its former three-tiered model with a nationally coherent system of group-specific and pupil-specific learning support, emphasizing early, needs-based intervention through school-led planning rather than formal IEPs. India continues to strengthen its inclusive education system through policy reform, although challenges remain in implementation, teacher preparation, and consistent access to support.

Across these systems, several shared principles emerge. Early identification, coordinated intervention, and collaboration among teachers, families, and specialists appear central to effective provision. Countries differ in how they balance universal design, targeted supports, and individualized planning, but all recognise the importance of accessible and flexible pedagogy. UDL, in particular, reflects a growing international emphasis on proactively shaping learning environments rather than relying

¹²⁵ Lauren Riessen, Disillusion and delay, (2024),

https://cyda.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/DOC_Final_EducationSurveyReport_DisillusionandDelay_20250710.pdf

¹²⁶ The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, People with disability in Australia 2024, (2024),

<https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/725731a5-5296-4b8d-8e49-40fa64937fb2/aihw-dis-72-people-with-disability-in-australia-2024.pdf?v=20240403105922&inline=true>.

solely on reactive accommodations. Thus, these global perspectives demonstrate that although national structures differ, each system seeks to secure equitable, meaningful, and high-quality educational opportunities for learners with diverse needs.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF SEN EDUCATION PROGRAMMES AT THE TERTIARY LEVEL: GLOBAL AND PAKISTANI CONTEXTS

Across the world, the preparation of professionals in Special and Inclusive Education follows a broadly similar pattern. Undergraduate programs introduce foundational knowledge of teaching, learning, and learner diversity, while postgraduate qualifications deepen expertise for specialist, leadership, and research roles. Although this basic structure is shared internationally, countries vary considerably in how they design teacher preparation, regulate special education pathways, and embed inclusive practices within higher education systems.

In the US, students may pursue a dedicated Bachelor of Special Education, which directly qualifies them for teacher licensure. Australia similarly offers undergraduate pathways through a four-year Bachelor of Special Education. Recently, the two-year B.Ed in Special Education program has been discontinued in India, as the Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI) will no longer approve admissions to this course from the academic session 2024–25 onwards.¹²⁷ This change aligns with the shift towards a four-year integrated B.Ed program under the National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE), ensuring that all future special education teacher training follows the longer, comprehensive format.

At Vanderbilt University's Peabody College in the U.S, students in the Bachelor of Special Education choose from well-defined specialization tracks including High Incidence Disabilities (K–8), High Incidence Disabilities (6–12), and Multiple and Severe Disabilities. Each track includes targeted coursework, extensive field-based training, and a direct pathway to licensure. From the first semester, students participate in observations and community-based engagement, making applied practice a continuous element of the program. Vanderbilt is recognised internationally for excellence and consistently ranks among the leading institutions in the field. Graduates qualify for classroom roles and for broader careers such as intervention specialists, curriculum designers, behaviour specialists, disability service coordinators, and research positions. The program emphasises specialised instructional methods for learners with disabilities.¹²⁸

¹²⁷ Circular on Launch of Integrated Teacher Education Program, F.No. 8-A/Policy(Recog)/2009/RCI, Rehabilitation Council of India, January 4, 2024.

¹²⁸ "Special Education (B.S.)" Vanderbilt University, <https://admissions.vanderbilt.edu/academics/fact-sheet/?program=1191>.

In Australia, the University of New England offers a Bachelor of Special and Inclusive Education for the primary level. This accredited four-year program combines theoretical coursework with extensive practicum. Students complete discipline units in English, Mathematics, Science, Humanities, and Creative Arts, and specialist units in disability studies, inclusive pedagogy, intervention strategies, learning disabilities, and gifted education. The program requires 100 days of supervised professional experience across mainstream inclusive and specialist settings. Students must also pass the National Literacy and Numeracy Test and the Graduate Teacher Performance Assessment (GTPA), which serve as external competency benchmarks. The GTPA is completed within the undergraduate initial teacher education degree in Australia. It is a national requirement taken in the final year during the last practicum placement, where student teachers must demonstrate planning, teaching, assessing, and reflection skills that align with the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers at the Graduate level. Universities such as the University of New England embed the GTPA directly into the bachelor program, and students must pass it to graduate and be recommended for teacher registration.¹²⁹

In India, typically two year programmes in the Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) in Special Education are discontinued. Most universities have curriculum on websites that are not updated. The B.Ed Special Education (Intellectual Disability) program at Sardar Patel University is a two-year professional degree that combines theoretical learning with practical training. Students are required to complete a practical component, including observations, lesson demonstrations, school-based assignments, and a 28-day internship in special or inclusive schools, ensuring hands-on experience in teaching and supporting children with intellectual disabilities.¹³⁰

Pakistan has multiple universities offering Bachelor level degrees in Special Education (mapping of universities in Annexure 1). However, program structures, curriculum standards, and practicum requirements vary widely. The HEC's curriculum for Special Education remains the revised 2016 draft. Pakistan therefore lacks a formally updated, nationally endorsed curriculum, creating inconsistencies across institutions.¹³¹

The 2010-11 HEC curriculum includes foundational courses such as Introduction to Special Education, Human Growth and Development, Educational Psychology, Assessment, Exceptionalities, Curriculum and Instruction, Research, and Inclusive Education. Major courses combine disability content and instructional methods but appear under broad thematic categories. The program includes a six credit teaching practice and practicum.

¹²⁹ "Special Education," University of New England, <https://www.une.edu.au/study/education-teaching/special-education>.

¹³⁰ "Course Framework of Bachelor of Special Education (Intellectual Disability) for Two Years," Sardar Patel University, June, 2023, https://www.spuvvn.edu/orbit-cdn/uploads/Syllabi_data/bed_sp_2year/Rules-Regulations-GradesofBEdSpl-Edu-ID-June2023.pdf

¹³¹ "Curriculum of Special Education: BS (4-Years) Program," Higher Education Commission Pakistan, 2016, <https://www.hec.gov.pk/english/services/universities/RevisedCurricula/Documents/2015-2016/Special-Education-Draft.doc>.

Outdated terminology appears in the original document, uses the term “Mental Retardation” verbatim at that time as the title of one specialization area, reflecting the terminology commonly used in the national context at that time.¹³²

The 2016 draft curriculum modernises the structure. It includes 15 specialist courses such as Differentiated Instruction, Differentiated Assessment Practices, Assistive Technology, Development and Implementation of Individualized Education Plans, Transitional Planning, Early Childhood Special Education, Administration of Special Education, and Resource Material Production. Terminology is updated to Intellectual and Developmental Disability. Capstone requirements include a research project and an internship. Since the uploaded document is still a draft, its implementation at the national level is uncertain.

Specialisation depth also remains limited. Universities such as Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU),¹³³ the University of Management and Technology (UMT),¹³⁴ and the University of Karachi¹³⁵ offer elective clusters in disability areas. These clusters are small and do not form a full specialist track comparable to those in the US or Australia. Field experience is also limited. AIOU includes a six credit practicum, the UMT offers an optional internship available to those who will join teaching, and other institutions have variable requirements. Curriculum transparency is low, as some universities do not publish program plans. Most programs are concentrated in Punjab, producing regional inequities.

A key informant from GB explained that one of the universities there had introduced a four-year Bachelor's in SEN but could not sustain it due to structural and financial limitations.¹³⁶ Thus, Pakistan's undergraduate programs provide introductory knowledge but lack integrated specialization, structured practicum, national competency testing, and licensure pathways that define stronger systems internationally.

At the postgraduate level, countries strengthen advanced knowledge, research capacity, and leadership skills. In the UK, preparation includes both professional qualifications and academic degrees. All newly appointed SENCOs in mainstream schools must complete the NPQ for SENCOs,

¹³² “Curriculum of Special Education,” Higher Education Commission, 2011, <https://www.hec.gov.pk/english/services/universities/RevisedCurricula/Documents/2010-2011/SpecialEducation-2010-11.pdf>

¹³³ “B.Ed (4 Years) Special Education.” Allama Iqbal Open University. <https://aiou.edu.pk/bed-4-years-special-education>.

¹³⁴ “BS Special Needs Education (BS SNE),” University of Management and Technology, [https://ssh.umd.edu.pk/Programs/Undergraduate-Programs/BS-Special-Needs-Education-\(BS-SNE\).aspx](https://ssh.umd.edu.pk/Programs/Undergraduate-Programs/BS-Special-Needs-Education-(BS-SNE).aspx).

¹³⁵ “Programs, Department of Special Education.” University of Karachi, <https://www.uok.edu.pk/faculties/specialeducation/programs.php>.

¹³⁶ Research Interview with an Educator, September 30, 2025.

delivered by Department for Education approved providers including the University College London (UCL) Institute of Education. UCL Institute of Education, ranked first in the world for Education in the QS World University Rankings for the subject in 2025,¹³⁷ offers a Master of Special and Inclusive Education with pathways in Autism, Inclusion and Disability, and Learning Difficulties. These pathways allow students to personalise their studies within a single degree while engaging in advanced research, policy analysis, and evidence informed practice.

In the US, universities such as Vanderbilt and the University of Kansas¹³⁸ offer Master level programs with pathways in High Incidence Disabilities, Autism, Applied Behaviour Analysis, and Behaviour Disorders. These programs integrate coursework with supervised practicum and prepare graduates for specialist and leadership roles. In Canada, the University of British Columbia offers a Master of Arts and Education degrees in Special Education with several areas of concentration such as Autism, Visual Impairment, Behaviour Disorders and Deaf & Hard of Hearing etc. The program integrates research training with practicum and community partnerships.¹³⁹

In Australia, universities such as the University of Newcastle offer Master programs with specialisations in Early Childhood Intervention, Deaf Education, Emotional and Behavioural Needs, and Gifted Education. Programs combine coursework with applied professional experience. In India, postgraduate qualifications include the Master of Education (M.Ed.) in Special Education, regulated by the RCI. These deepen expertise in disability specific pedagogy, assessment, and intervention. In Finland, postgraduate preparation is a national requirement. Primary teachers complete an M.Ed., and special education teachers complete a Master of Special Education with extensive practicum in assessment, intervention planning, inclusive pedagogy, and multidisciplinary collaboration. This ensures that advanced professional competence is embedded in the national teacher education system.

In Pakistan, only a few universities offer a Master's or MPhil in Special Education (mapping of universities in Annexure 1), and transparency remains low, as most institutions provide limited access to detailed curricula, course structures and practicum requirements. UMT and AIOU offer two different models of MPhil preparation in Special Education. UMT follows a structured, research-intensive 30-credit program combining core research methods, policy studies, and specialised coursework with a 6-credit thesis. In contrast, AIOU adopts a leadership-oriented and practitioner-focused model delivered through flexible online classes for working professionals, emphasising management, supervision, collaboration, and context-based research across diverse special education settings.

¹³⁷ "QS Rankings Confirm IOE As World-Leading for Education for 12th year." UCL Institute of Education, 2025, <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/news/2025/mar/qs-rankings-confirm-ioe-world-leading-education-12th-year>.

¹³⁸ "Master's in Special Education Degree Programs," University of Kansas, <https://specialedu.ku.edu/academics/masters-degrees>.

¹³⁹ "Graduate Programs," The University of British Columbia, <https://ecps.educ.ubc.ca/special-education/graduate-concentrations/>.



Chapter 5:

The State of Special Education in Pakistan: Challenges, Demand, and Opportunities

The State of Special Education in Pakistan: Challenges, Demand, and Opportunities

DEMAND AND CHALLENGES

In Pakistan, particularly in Sindh, GB, and Chitral, the situation for children with disabilities at the primary and secondary education levels is deeply concerning. These children face significant challenges both in school and in accessing essential therapies and psychological services. Their educational experiences and physical health are compromised, creating a cycle of unmet needs.

Despite a substantial demand for special educators, therapists, and allied support professionals, the supply remains far below what is required. As a result, children with intellectual and physical disabilities continue to struggle academically and medically. This gap is driven by multiple social, economic, and political factors.

1. Social Reasons – Lack of Awareness on SEN and Insufficient Special Schools and Professionals

Socially, there is limited awareness among schools about the importance of special education and inclusive practices. It was repeatedly emphasized during the primary and secondary data collection for this research that there is a widespread lack of awareness and understanding of disability and SEN across mainstream schools, communities, and even leadership structures.¹⁴⁰ Many teachers and school staff do not know how to support children with disabilities; as a result, these children are often physically present in classrooms yet socially marginalized. These practices become part of our social attitudes and shape classroom practices in which children are sidelined not out of malice, but because teachers lack awareness and knowledge.

“Almost every class in Pakistan has two or three children with needs beyond a teacher’s capacity. They generally sit at the back, and no one knows what to do.”¹⁴¹

The teachers are also not trained in the context of baseline delivery and IEP, which is an important part of SEN but is often neglected. Many SEN graduates and educators don’t know how to create IEPs or how to use them in class, pointing towards lack of training in developing, implementing, and evaluating IEPs effectively.¹⁴²

Moreover, social attitudes also shape institutional behavior. Schools rejecting children with disabilities because they believe they lack capacity or because they are unaware of what true inclusion entails shows how disability continues to be viewed as an added burden rather than a shared social responsibility. One parent’s example of withdrawing her own child from an elite school due to teacher frustration further illustrates how social attitudes and lack of preparedness result in children being socially and academically neglected.

¹⁴⁰ Iqra Javaid, et al., “Awareness and knowledge of learning disabilities among school teachers,” *Rawal Medical Journal* 47, no. 2 (2022): 451–453, <https://www.rmj.org.pk/fulltext/27-1564315614.pdf>.

¹⁴¹ Research Interview with an Educator, September 25, 2025.

¹⁴² Research Interview with a Disability Expert, October 15, 2025.

“Even when my son got admission in a prestigious school, I had to take him out because he was not getting anything out of it and the teachers were also getting frustrated.”¹⁴³

Thus, many schools claim to be inclusive, but their understanding is superficial, equating inclusion with mere physical placement in a classroom. This misconception leads to environments where children are present but not meaningfully engaged or understood.

“Many schools say they’re inclusive, but their teachers don’t know how to teach that child. Inclusion isn’t just sitting in class, it’s adapting your teaching so he actually learns”¹⁴⁴

“Some teachers are not even aware of the concept of inclusion. We can’t limit inclusion to special needs children only. Inclusion is very broad. Teachers do cultural inclusion when they do functions where children of different cultures come. However, when we talk about special needs children, then you will not find any ideal example here. Take a simple example, that if a child has a hearing problem, then the teacher’s responsibility is, first of all, to check the hearing aids in the class. If they themselves don’t know how the hearing aid is checked, or what it is, and what is its responsibility, then what will they do? For seating arrangement: where should the child who has a hearing problem be seated? What should be the structure of your seating? How much distance should be there from the teacher? The teacher’s lips should be visually reachable for the child. Where should the teacher stand? These are very minute but important things. Unless these things are included in the courses of the teachers, you can’t expect them to do everything.”¹⁴⁵

Moreover, the common assumption that deaf education falls under general “special needs” education is concerning too. Deafness is not merely a disability requiring special instruction, but as a linguistic and cultural identity that demands its own educational approach. Emphasis should be placed on Pakistan Sign Language (PSL) as the first language for children with hearing disability in order to ensure the meaningful inclusion as it begins with full access to language, not simply with placement in a classroom.¹⁴⁶

Since many schools misunderstand inclusion, hence, they may accept students with hearing disability into classrooms but fail to provide the linguistic environment necessary for communication and learning. Nonetheless, such settings are not inclusive at all, because the child cannot understand or interact with teachers or peers.

When a child with hearing disability is placed in a class without PSL access, the child remains isolated even if physically present. Thus, equating inclusion with “being in the room” produces real exclusion in daily school life.

¹⁴³ Research Interview with a SEN Expert, September 26, 2025.

¹⁴⁴ Research Interview with a Disability Expert, October 6, 2025.

¹⁴⁵ Research Interview with an Educator, October 2, 2025.

¹⁴⁶ Research Interview with a Disability Expert, September 29, 2025.

Moreso, in regions like GB, this limited awareness of SEN results in minimal institutional infrastructure, leaving remote communities without any exposure to structured services or early intervention.¹⁴⁷ For instance, one special education complex has been built in GB, but it only caters to a nearby population; a single complex cannot solve the problem of all the villages and the entire district, especially, if there is an issue of accessibility too.

Further, experiences of parents raising children with learning disabilities also point towards the broader failures of the education system when it comes to integrating SEN within their system.

Parents described how their children constantly faced bullying, were labelled as non-achievers, and consequently developed low self-esteem. While a few teachers are compassionate, the education system itself provides virtually no structured assistance. Children often manage in the early primary years, but as they advance and must sit for Cambridge or Matric examinations, the challenges intensify. These examination systems offer only minimal accommodations, such as extra time, and ignore the core difficulties in comprehension, reading, writing, and memory. With no exemptions or adapted assessments, children with learning disabilities are tested in the same way as their peers, creating immense pressure, heightened stress, and further emotional strain. This lack of systemic support and SEN professionals or coordinators in schools forces parents to spend extensive time preparing their children for exams, adding to their own stress. Moreso, children become noticeably more relaxed and free from academic pressure once removed from school, showing how lack of inclusive education stresses the children with disabilities and deprives them of their basic right of education. Also, many teachers lack empathy and understanding of learning disabilities while in many cases, school administration doesn't provide accommodation in scoring.¹⁴⁸ This shows lack of SEN awareness and neglect on part of the schools.

The challenge of lack of awareness in schools about SEN is further exacerbated by the insufficient government-designated special schools and rehabilitation centres in many parts of Sindh, GB, and Chitral.¹⁴⁹ There is a significant gap in the availability of special schools, with services heavily concentrated in major urban centers and almost absent in rural areas. In Karachi, despite being one of Pakistan's largest metropolitan cities, there are only a few schools dedicated to SEN. This limited number is far too small to meet the growing demand, leading to long waiting lists, overburdened staff, and children who simply cannot access appropriate schooling. The shortage is not only due to unwillingness on the part of institutions, but also because of a structural resource problem; public schools struggle to accommodate even students without disabilities, making specialized accommodations nearly impossible without dedicated facilities. Moreover, in many cases, special

¹⁴⁷ Research Interview with a Government Official, October 8, 2025.

¹⁴⁸ Shazia Nasir, et al., "Experiences of parents with children having learning disabilities and/or ADHD in Pakistan," *Research Association for Interdisciplinary Studies*, (2024): 164-172, <https://rais.education/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/0405.pdf>.

¹⁴⁹ Muhammad Bilal Tahir, et al., "A qualitative analysis of the problems and challenges in special education from the teacher's perspective in Sargodha division," *Global Social Sciences Review* 8, no. 1 (2023): 301-308, <https://www.humapub.com/admin/alljournals/gssr/papers/ac0YYPudqh.pdf>.

special education requires intensive, tailored, often one-on-one instructional support, which overcrowded mainstream classrooms cannot provide. This shortage of specialized schools therefore directly limits meaningful learning opportunities for children with disabilities.

“Karachi only has a handful of schools catering to children with special education needs, which is insufficient. Public schools already struggle with space for non-disabled children so how do we expect them to cater to children with disabilities?”¹⁵⁰

In the case of GB, urban centres may have some level of infrastructure, but rural districts have almost no access to special schools, rehabilitation services, or trained educators. The absence of such facilities means that children in remote areas are entirely excluded from structured education and skill-building.

Compounding this is the scarcity of trained professionals, such as special educators, therapists, and shadow teachers, both within schools and in not-for-profit organizations working in special education and therapies. This shortage leaves children without the support they need for meaningful learning and healthy development. The serious shortage of trained special educators, therapists, and allied professionals directly limits the ability of schools and rehabilitation centers to serve children with disabilities. Further, even well-established institutions face long waitlists, admitting only 25–30 children at a time because of the scarcity of qualified personnel. Families and schools struggle to locate trained professionals capable of delivering these essential services, underscoring that unmet demand is not simply about infrastructure or lack of awareness, but also about human resources capable of translating specialized knowledge into real-world impact.¹⁵¹

The scarcity is particularly pronounced in regions like rural areas of Sindh, Chitral, and GB. For instance, in GB, most districts have no government-run special education centers, rehabilitation units, or qualified personnel. Children in these areas are thus denied both education and rehabilitation, creating systemic inequities between urban and rural populations.¹⁵² Similarly, in Chitral, there is very less number of special schools and the ones present are only in Lower Chitral.¹⁵³ Even higher education suffers from this shortage: faculty often feel unprepared to teach students with disabilities, particularly in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) programs, due to a lack of professionals who can provide guidance on specialized pedagogy.

“We don’t have the professionals who can guide faculty...especially when you ask, ‘How do we teach math to visually impaired students?’”¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁰ Research Interview with a SEN Expert, September 26, 2025.

¹⁵¹ Research Interview with a Disability Expert, October 1, 2025.

¹⁵² Research Interview with a Disability Expert, September 26, 2025.

¹⁵³ Research Interview with an Educator, October 1, 2025.

¹⁵⁴ Research Interview with a Government Official, October 22, 2025.

In cases where special educators exist, proper schooling systems and structured programs are often absent, leaving children without training in essential life skills such as using assistive tools, navigating mobility aids, or building independence. For instance, in one special school in Chitral, the faculty is deprived of specialized training despite the rising need.¹⁵⁵ This gap is exacerbated in rural areas, where families often have limited awareness of disability and minimal access to trained professionals, in contrast to urban families who are more informed and engaged.¹⁵⁶

Moreover, in Sindh, schools face a shortage of special educators in both urban and rural areas. In urban centers, while special educators are present, they often lack adequate skills to effectively teach children with disabilities. In rural areas, however, there is an almost complete absence of special educators. As a result, mainstream school teachers are hired and, after receiving training, are equipped with the skills needed to support children with disabilities in their classrooms.¹⁵⁷

One of the key reasons for the shortage of special educators and professionals in Pakistan is the limited availability of higher education programs in special education. Most universities, both public and private, do not offer degree programs or specializations in this field, resulting in a scarcity of skilled graduates. Even in institutions that do provide such programs, the curriculum often lacks in-depth, hands-on practical training and interdisciplinary approach, leaving graduates underprepared to meet the real-world demands of teaching and supporting children with disabilities.

“Universities are recycling old knowledge. There’s no structured supervision, no practical training.”¹⁵⁸

For instance, in GB, the B.Ed. Special Education program faced systemic challenges from the outset, primarily due to the absence of dedicated faculty and insufficient institutional infrastructure. The reliance on part-time or visiting lecturers, without permanent staff to provide continuity, undermined the program’s sustainability. Essential facilities, such as specialized classrooms, labs, and nearby practicum schools, were also lacking, preventing students from gaining the hands-on experience necessary for effective practice. Financial constraints further exacerbated the problem, limiting the ability of the universities to establish a robust, long-term program. As a result, even when the degree existed on paper, it could not produce graduates adequately trained to meet the region’s pressing need for special educators. The failure of this program underscores a systemic fragility in higher education for SEN, where lack of planning, coordination, and sustained investment prevents meaningful capacity building.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁵ Research Interview with an Educator, October 1, 2025.

¹⁵⁶ Research Interview with a Disability Expert, September 26, 2025.

¹⁵⁷ Research Interview with a Disability and Education Expert, September 25, 2025.

¹⁵⁸ Research Interview with a Disability Expert, October 1, 2025.

¹⁵⁹ Research Interview with a Government Official, October 8, 2025.

Further, even when inclusive education units are planned within other courses, they are often never implemented due to faculty shortages, reflecting a systemic neglect of SEN in teacher training. Also, inclusive education frequently exists only as minor components within broader courses rather than as full programs.¹⁶¹

Also, HEIs continue to face significant challenges in creating fully inclusive environments for PWDs or students with disabilities. These challenges include attitudinal barriers from both students and faculty, limited physical access to classrooms, libraries, and administrative offices, unaccommodating teaching methods, inadequately trained staff, a generally hostile campus environment, curriculum annoyance,¹⁶² and insufficient availability of assistive devices and accessible transport within and to/from campus.¹⁶³ This results in low enrollment or drop outs of PWDs from the varsities.

While many HEIs have established offices and centers for inclusion, persistent gaps highlight ongoing barriers and indicate shortcomings in the implementation of HEC policies related to disability inclusion.

Thus, the higher education landscape around inclusive education also potentially impacts the employability of SEN graduates.

2. Political Reasons – Lack of Compliance and Absence of Mandatory Legal Provisions

The education sector in Pakistan is largely not complying with the laws when it remains negligent toward the needs of students with disabilities¹⁶⁴ which leads to scarcity of employment opportunities for SEN graduates and generation of SEN professionals and thus, results in unmet educational demand for the needs of PWDs. **Article 24 of the UNCRPD, Section 8 in Punjab, and Section 9 in the Sindh, GB, Balochistan, and ICT disability laws clearly outline provisions for providing education to children with disabilities.** These laws apply to both private and government educational institutions and require them to provide inclusive education and admit students with disabilities, including a 5 percent quota in GB and Balochistan and 3 percent in Punjab. They also mandate the government to provide teacher training on inclusive education.

¹⁶⁰ Saira, et al., "Exploring the barriers to inclusive education in Pakistan: perspectives of teachers and parents," *Research Journal of Social Affairs*, 3, no. 1 (2025), <https://rjsaonline.com/journals/index.php/rjsa/article/view/61>.

¹⁶¹ Research Interview with an Educator, September 30, 2025.

¹⁶² Shaista Naz, et al., "The challenges of accessibility and equity for students with disability in higher education institutions with special reference to the university of Karachi, Pakistan," *Siazga Research Journal* 3, no. 3 (2024), <https://journals-uoli.com/index.php/SRJ/article/view/97>.

¹⁶³ Sajjad Hussain, et al., "Challenges to learners with disabilities in the higher education institutions in Pakistan: a review," *Research Journal of Social Sciences and Economics Review* 1, no. 3 (2020), <https://ojs.rjsser.org.pk/index.php/rjsser/article/view/61>.

¹⁶⁴ Research Interview with a SEN Expert, October 27, 2025.

Across all six legal and policy frameworks, a strong shared commitment emerges to guarantee the right to inclusive, non-discriminatory, and equitable education for PWDs.

All frameworks emphasize that individuals with disabilities must have equal access to education at all levels, early childhood, school, tertiary, vocational, adult, and lifelong learning, supported through reasonable accommodations tailored to individual needs. Collectively, they mandate that no PWD should be denied admission or excluded from educational institutions, whether public or private, based on their disability.

Educational institutions must also ensure accessible learning environments, including accessible buildings, learning materials, assistive devices, and communication modes such as Braille, sign language, and other augmentative systems, particularly for learners who have hearing and speech disabilities. All frameworks underscore the importance of teacher training, requiring governments to prepare educators in inclusive pedagogy, disability awareness, and specialized skills for different impairments. They also highlight the need for individualized support that promotes academic, social, and life skills development, enabling full participation in school and community life.

Additionally, these laws and conventions stress the establishment of specialized institutions or support centers when necessary, especially for individuals with moderate to severe disabilities, while still promoting broader integration into mainstream settings. They also reflect the principle that inclusive education is not merely about access but about ensuring dignity, self-worth, and the full development of potential, thereby enabling PWDs to participate meaningfully and equally in society.

However, the non-compliance of these laws does not follow any punitive or enforcement measures that would make these provisions mandatory in the education sector.

Although Sindh and Punjab laws add fines in general violation clause yet enforcement of even that has been weak. Further, the 2024 Joint Policy by SELD and DEPD is significant for the implementation of law that mandates inclusive education in Sindh by requiring schools to provide necessary facilities for children with mild disabilities as a condition for registration and renewal. However, no law clearly mentions the specific penalties for denying students with (all kinds of) disabilities the right to education, for instance, by rejecting admission or denying accessibility or reasonable accommodation. As a result, adherence to these laws remains very low across both private and government schools, colleges, and universities.

The primary data collected for this research also consistently pointed to a deep disconnect between

disability-related laws and their actual implementation in Pakistan's education system. Also, the UK's structured mechanisms, like the binding EHC Plan, underscores how the absence of similarly enforceable frameworks in Pakistan results in laws that exist on paper but do not translate into meaningful accessibility or inclusion.¹⁶⁵

"There are both supply-side and demand-side issues in education. The problem is that the demand side will only increase if the policy changes. The demand exists; people require it...until there is a restriction from the top for schools that they cannot function without this requirement...it will depend on the benevolence of the school owner whether they hire a trained person or not."¹⁶⁶

Similarly, at tertiary level, the HEC Students with Disability Redressal Policy is advisory rather than mandatory. As a result, implementation depends entirely on institutional willingness, creating inconsistent progress across universities. Even though universities have taken steps such as forming the accessibility committees and internal policies, the absence of binding regulatory requirements prevents broader systemic change.

"HEC's policy is still advisory... universities can choose not to implement parts of it, and that is hindering the evolution of inclusive education."¹⁶⁷

Moreover, at higher education level, curricula in B.Ed. programs remain basic and disconnected from the principles of inclusive education, and pre-service training is neither mandated nor embedded in teacher preparation. Accreditation frameworks also do not require institutions to demonstrate competencies in inclusive or special education. Thus, the policies lack concrete implementation pathways, resulting in a symbolic rather than functional commitment to inclusion.¹⁶⁸

Further, another expert highlighted that Sindh has progressive policies but inconsistent implementation echoes the gap between theory and practice. Even with laws mandating enrollment and accommodations, schools lack systems, awareness, and enforcement mechanisms, causing wide variations in compliance. Similarly, in GB, while disability policies exist, promised structures such as special schools, have not materialized, revealing a pattern where legislative intentions are not backed by execution.¹⁷⁰

Hence, these perspectives show that Pakistan's challenge is not the absence of laws or policies, but the absence of enforceable mechanisms, clarity, and structural systems required to turn these commitments into practice.

¹⁶⁵ Research Interview with a SEN Expert, October 27, 2025.

¹⁶⁶ Research Interview with a SEN Expert, October 27, 2025.

¹⁶⁷ Research Interview with an Educator, October 9, 2025.

¹⁶⁸ Research Interview with a SEN Expert, October 22, 2025.

¹⁶⁹ Research Interview with a Disability and Education Expert, September 25, 2025.

¹⁷⁰ Research Interview with a Government Official, October 8, 2025.

3. Economic Reasons – Lack of Funding and Low Wages

The demand for special education is not being adequately met, partly due to economic constraints that affect both institutions and children with disabilities. Many special educators in schools receive low salaries, which discourages students from pursuing degree programs that do not promise strong financial returns. As a result, fewer individuals choose to specialize in this field, weakening the overall supply of trained professionals. **One of the reasons for this is that teaching in Pakistan is widely regarded as a low-paid profession, with most private school teachers earning below the minimum wage despite long working hours and significant responsibilities. Salaries for private school teachers remain as low as Rs. 20,000 per month.** The public-sector teachers, although earn above the minimum wage and grade-17 teachers make over Rs. 100,000, yet it is not enough for young people to see teaching as a long-term career in terms of financial viability. The situation is worsened by weak enforcement of wage laws and limited opportunities for teachers to supplement their income. Further, the issue is especially gendered, as teaching is one of the few socially acceptable professions for women, creating an oversupply that allows private schools to keep wages below legal limits while policymakers overlook the exploitation. This persistent undervaluation discourages talented individuals from entering teaching, undermines education quality, and traps mostly women teachers in a low-paying profession with little chance of improvement.¹⁷¹ As a result, teaching remains undervalued, poorly compensated, and unable to attract or retain high-quality professionals, ultimately harming the education system.

Moreover, as discussed earlier, the lack of awareness on schools' part about the importance of integrating SEN professionals within their education systems also creates a scarcity of jobs for SEN graduates, as many institutions still perceive inclusive education as optional rather than essential.

Without a clear understanding of the value SEN specialists bring, whether in supporting diverse learners, strengthening instructional quality, or improving overall school performance, schools are less likely to allocate budgets or create dedicated roles for them. This results in limited hiring, inconsistent demand, and missed opportunities for both students and SEN-trained professionals, further weakening the ecosystem needed to sustain a strong pipeline of specialized educators.

In addition, poverty remains a major constraint that prevents many parents from accessing the services of SEN professionals, such as shadow teachers, whose fees are often unaffordable.¹⁷² This highlights deeper structural issues related to widespread poverty and the absence of strong social welfare mechanisms within the education system in the country. The lack of state prioritization as evident through limited developmental funding further exacerbates the problem.¹⁷³ For example,

¹⁷¹ Faisal, Bari, "Teaching as profession," Dawn, October 24, 2025, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1950919>.

¹⁷² Research Interview with a Disability Expert, October 15, 2025.

¹⁷³ "Development budget hits historic low, warns Ahsan Iqbal," Dawn, September 17, 2025, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1942533>.

in the UK, through EHC Plans, the state takes responsibility for meeting the SEN needs of children. In contrast, in Pakistan, parents must hire shadow teachers privately, as neither schools nor the state provide this support.¹⁷⁴ Thus, parents' limited financial capacity to hire SEN professionals also reduces the financial viability and attractiveness of the SEN market itself, making the field less sustainable and less engaging for qualified professionals.

Additionally, HEIs are also not fully implementing the HEC Policy on Disability,¹⁷⁵ which further limits opportunities for special educators to secure positions within universities. This lack of compliance reflects institutional negligence and a broader absence of awareness regarding the importance of SEN and inclusive education at the tertiary level. When universities do not adopt or operationalize disability policies, they fail to create the structural space, dedicated roles, or academic pathways necessary for SEN professionals to contribute meaningfully. As a result, the higher education sector remains ill-equipped to promote inclusion, develop specialized expertise, or integrate SEN perspectives into mainstream teaching and research.

Further, the organizations in the development sector that work on disability and special education often face funding shortages. Limited budgets prevent them from offering competitive salaries, especially when compared to other professional fields. This further reduces the attractiveness of special education as a career path, contributing to a persistent shortage of qualified personnel. The primary data collected for this research also shows that limited career prospects and low wages for SEN graduates constitute a major structural barrier to the growth of special education in the country. Many organizations working on disability are charity-based and thus, they face chronic staff shortages, particularly in remote locations as they cannot offer good salaries to these graduates. Also, logistical challenges such as travel difficulties are compounded by low salary competitiveness, with charitable organizations unable to match market-based wages. This makes employment in the sector financially unattractive, particularly for graduates who have invested in specialized training, further discouraging entry into the field.¹⁷⁶

Universities similarly face hesitancy in launching SEN programs due to the uncertain economic viability and employability of graduates. Even when there is real demand for special education services, institutions are reluctant to invest in program development because they cannot guarantee students clear career pathways.¹⁷⁷ This creates a "chicken and egg" scenario: without students willing to enroll, programs cannot grow, and without robust programs, students cannot acquire the qualifications needed for employment. This perception of risk is reinforced by the reality that the job market for SEN graduates remains underdeveloped, with few institutions, governmental or private, committed to hiring trained personnel.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁴ Research Interview with a SEN Expert, October 27, 2025.

¹⁷⁵ Research Interview with an Educator, October 9, 2025.

¹⁷⁶ Research Interview with a Disability Expert, September 30, 2025.

¹⁷⁷ Research Interview with a Disability Expert, October 1, 2025.

¹⁷⁸ Research Interview with an Educator, October 9, 2025.

“It becomes a business case...is there enough demand for such a program? There is a misconception that special education lacks economic opportunities.”¹⁷⁹

Further, public sector special schools and universities themselves also operate with constrained finances and facilities.

“...special education centres were facing acute shortage of teaching and nonteaching staff, many teaching posts were unfilled. To cater to this, heads sometimes employed untrained/unskillful teachers through school management counsel (SMC). This staff lacks skills of handling special students.”¹⁸⁰

One of the universities in GB had to close its SEN program due to financial constraints;

“Due to financial issues, the University was not in a position to properly plan, establish a department, and give this responsibility to experts in this field. Moreover, a proper required infrastructure is necessary including labs, special classes and nearby practicum schools. It could not sustain due to lack of proper coordination and planning from the start.”¹⁸¹

Even the department designated for special education at centre has a scarcity of funds with even no fuel to pick and drop students; this lack of finances perhaps then reflects in the lack of hiring and value of special educators in the country.¹⁸² Further, lack of funds for public varsities makes it difficult for them to design, launch, and sustain high-quality special education degree programs. This underinvestment creates a vicious cycle in which few SEN programs and initiatives exist, resulting in fewer graduates. Consequently, the higher education sector also struggles to find qualified faculty and experts to teach and expand these programs, perpetuating the scarcity of special education professionals.

“Based on personal and professional experience, the first gap is the lack of qualified professionals who can competently teach or train others in special education, particularly in higher education. You do find individuals, but questions like, “How do we teach math to visually impaired students?” often go unanswered...We do have students with visual impairments, but we don’t have the trainers or experts who can guide faculty on how to adapt their teaching methods. There is a shortage of such professionals...and I have searched extensively. While there are special education schools...they cater primarily to the primary or secondary level. For higher education,

¹⁷⁹ Research Interview with an Educator, October 9, 2025.

¹⁸⁰ Kawish Tassawar, and Fauzia Khurshid, “Factors distressing the quality of special education centers,” *Journal of Educational Research* 22, no. 1 (2019): 145–156, <https://jer.iub.edu.pk/journals/JER-Vol-22.No-1/12.pdf>.

¹⁸¹ Research Interview with an Educator, September 30, 2025.

¹⁸² Kashif Abbasi, “Special education directorate in financial straits: report,” *Dawn*, January 11, 2025, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1884354>.

it's different. It's not just how you teach but also what you teach. We need professors who are trained in special education and have expertise in their subject areas. That's the first major institutional gap...Another issue is that we don't have a steady stream of graduates with degrees in special needs education at the higher education level. To my knowledge, such individuals are very rare."¹⁸³

The lack of professors is also one of the reasons that a university had to close the program in GB;

"...we were the first to introduce the four-year degree program on Special Education. There are various factors involved in discontinuing it. The major factor is the lack of human resource and regular faculty for this program. Until now the program was run by part-timers or visiting faculty."¹⁸⁴

Moreover, experts interviewed for this research emphasized the same that although there is a genuine need for trained SEN professionals, systemic and policy barriers prevent graduates from finding meaningful employment.

"Until the demand for hiring them arises, you can create programs, but those programs are also based on the fact that there will be employability later. That's a vicious cycle."¹⁸⁵

The government has yet to allocate sufficient resources to integrate these professionals into public institutions, and private sector engagement remains minimal. Consequently, many graduates are limited to pro bono or voluntary work, which does not provide sustainable livelihoods. This lack of economic incentive not only discourages students from pursuing SEN degrees but also perpetuates the shortage of skilled educators and therapists, further widening the gap between demand and capacity in both urban and rural areas.¹⁸⁶

Ultimately, the interplay between low wages, unclear career pathways, and limited institutional support creates a self-reinforcing cycle: universities are hesitant to offer programs, students are reluctant to enroll, and the workforce remains insufficient to meet the growing needs of children with disabilities.

¹⁸³ Research Interview with an Educator, October 9, 2025.

¹⁸⁴ Research Interview with an Educator, September 30, 2025.

¹⁸⁵ Research Interview with a SEN Expert, October 27, 2025.

¹⁸⁶ Research Interview with a Disability Expert, October 1, 2025.

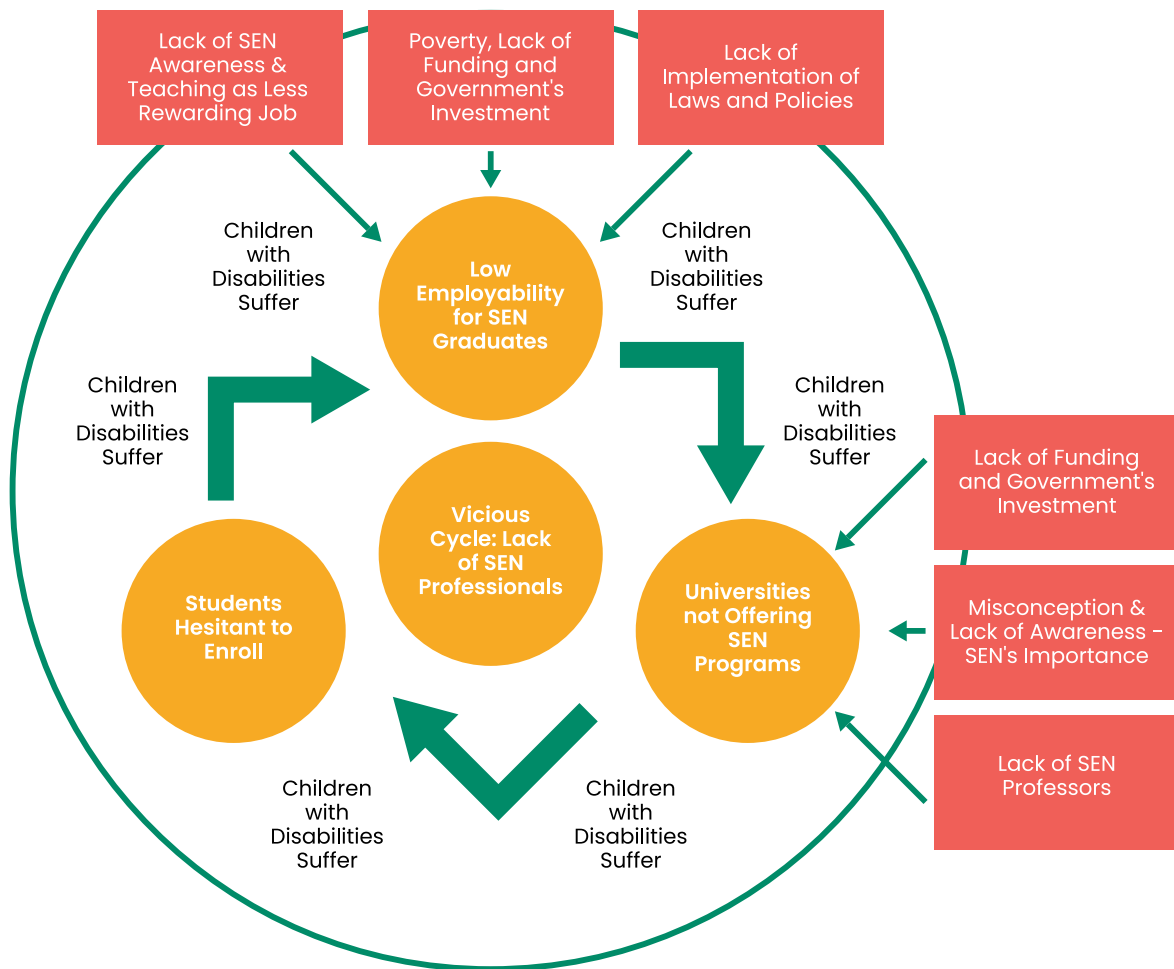


Figure 5.1. Vicious Cycle Explaining SEN Dynamics in Pakistan

THE OPPORTUNITIES FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION IN PAKISTAN

The full picture for SEN graduates in Pakistan is not entirely dark as there are positive employment outcomes as well. While it is true that many SEN teachers in Pakistan do not earn high salaries, there are exceptions. Some well-funded private organizations offer competitive pay for SEN professionals. Additionally, roles such as shadow teachers and therapists have strong demand in the job market and offer reasonable wages.¹⁸⁷ Thus, the widespread conception that degrees in SEN are not economically viable or do not lead to well-paying jobs, is not entirely accurate.

“There is a misconception that a Special Education degree doesn’t offer economic opportunities. But on the ground, there are numerous institutes, rehabilitation centers, non-profit organizations, and schools for children with disabilities. Some pay well, others less, as is the case in any field.”¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁷ Research Interview with a SEN Expert, October 27, 2025.

¹⁸⁸ Research Interview with an Educator, October 9, 2025.

Moreover, even many public schools, paying comparatively better to teachers as compared to private sector, require Senior Special Education Teacher (SSET) but the posts remain vacant due to their non-availability.¹⁸⁹ Also, as per one educator from Chitral, the posts in the special school where he teaches goes vacant,¹⁹⁰ showing a lack of SEN professionals. Further, a SEN degree is not limited to teaching only and has multiple other career prospects.

“When we say special educator, people think that they are teachers for only special persons. Then they immediately ask, “Where will we get a job?” They don’t realize that they are needed in every school. When they graduate with a Master’s in Special Education, they think that they will get a job as a speech therapist or somewhere in a hospital for assessment, or in special schools. If it is attached to general education with a component of special education in it, then they are teachers for every school, not specifically for special schools. Its range will increase.”¹⁹¹

Additionally, the notion that students are entirely disinterested in pursuing degrees in special education does not capture the full picture. Primary data indicate that students do express interest in studying inclusive and special education. For example, one educator reported that her students were keen on pursuing inclusive education, but time constraints prevented them from integrating it into their programs.¹⁹² Furthermore, in GB, when one university introduced an SEN program, a significant number of students initially enrolled. However, enrollment declined over time due to lack of promising economic and career prospects in the field.¹⁹³

Thus, the overall discussion on the realities of SEN in Pakistan highlights a clear and persistent demand for special educators and professionals. In the absence of adequately trained personnel, it is ultimately children with disabilities who suffer the most. Although students remain hesitant to enroll in SEN-related degree programs and universities are reluctant to initiate them due to social, political, and economic constraints, the need for qualified special educators is evident across government-run special schools as well as private organizations. While salary scales vary, this variation signals that SEN remains an underdeveloped and untapped sector. With efforts to address the broader social, economic, and political barriers, the field has strong potential to become more specialized and robust. Importantly, investment from universities is critical: it not only strengthens research in the field but also enhances the academic and professional value of SEN programs.¹⁹⁴ At the same time, greater commitment from HEIs, government bodies at all levels, and civil society is required to overcome systemic challenges, ensure sustainable career pathways for special educators, and meet the growing demand in the market.

¹⁸⁹ Shafiq, Butt, "Teachers' paucity hits school for special education," Dawn, May 5, 2015, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1180018>.

¹⁹⁰ Research Interview with an Educator, October 1, 2025.

¹⁹¹ Research Interview with an Educator, October 2, 2025.

¹⁹² Research Interview with an Educator, September 30, 2025.

¹⁹³ Research Interview with an Educator, September 30, 2025.

¹⁹⁴ "Universities should conduct research to meet requirements of people with special needs," Dawn, July 3, 2018, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1417487>.

The current situation reflects a self-perpetuating vicious cycle that requires intentional disruption, and such disruption often begins with a single structural shift.

This initial intervention may originate from the government through enhanced financial allocations, improved institutional conditions, and SEN laws' implementation across public and private sectors. Alternatively, HEIs can assume the leading role by establishing SEN programs, promoting academic discourse, and generating sustained awareness regarding the importance of SEN professionals. Governmental and non-governmental organizations similarly hold the capacity to advance this agenda by promoting the value of SEN expertise and encouraging educational institutions to prioritize the recruitment of trained professionals. At the primary and secondary levels, a deeper recognition of the developmental and instructional needs of children with disabilities is essential for integrating qualified SEN educators into school systems. Ultimately, breaking this cycle also necessitates a broader reconceptualization of the teaching profession, elevating its social and economic value to ensure that careers in SEN become viable, respected, and competitively compensated. All of it will finally result in meeting the educational requirements of PWDs and providing them with their basic right of education.

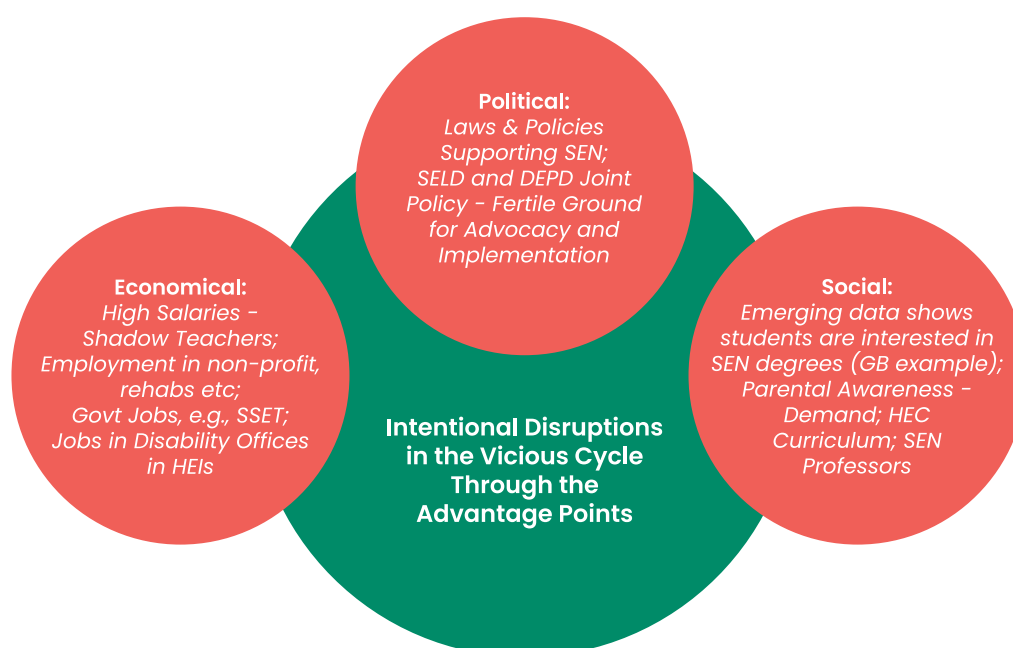


Figure 5.2. Intentional Disruptions in the Vicious Cycle of SEN Dynamics in Pakistan

However, addressing a single component of this cycle will not be sufficient to resolve the systemic challenges embedded within it. For example, even if HEIs begin offering SEN programs, this intervention alone cannot remediate the broader structural gaps. A sustainable solution requires a comprehensive and coordinated approach in which all stakeholders, including government bodies, private and non-governmental organizations, and educational institutions at all levels, undertake targeted actions within their respective domains. Only through such unified efforts can the interconnected issues be addressed, encompassing not merely higher education, but also the financial, structural, social, and economic dimensions that affect primary and secondary schooling, workforce development, and long-term sectoral growth.



Chapter 6:

SEN Framework for AKU-IED

Chapter 6:

SEN Framework for AKU-IED

The state of SEN at the primary and secondary levels in Pakistan remains critically underdeveloped, primarily due to the severe shortage of specialized educators for children and students with disabilities. This deficiency in trained professionals not only limits the quality of education for these students at foundational stages but also has far-reaching implications at the higher education level. A significant proportion of PWDs are effectively excluded from pursuing tertiary education, reflecting a systemic failure to address their educational needs.

A central factor contributing to this exclusion is the limited focus of Pakistani universities on producing special educators. The private universities have largely neglected the development of dedicated special education programs. In contrast, a few public universities have made modest efforts; for instance, the University of Karachi in Sindh has initiated programs targeting special education.¹⁹⁵ However, such efforts are isolated and the proportion of universities offering these programs remains exceedingly low. This raises a critical concern that with such limited higher education preparation, how will the country meet the growing demand for qualified special educators capable of supporting children and students with diverse disabilities.

Within this context, it becomes imperative for both leading public and private universities in Pakistan to establish structured programs aimed at preparing special educators. These programs are essential not only for improving access and quality of education for students with disabilities but also for addressing broader social equity and inclusion objectives. The development of such programs must be informed by an understanding of Pakistan's socio-economic, political, and cultural realities, as well as by global best practices in SEN. Thus, within the context of this study, which aimed to examine the legal framework and realities, challenges, and demands of SEN in Pakistan, the final chapter presents recommendations and a roadmap for AKU-IED on inclusion of SEN within their academic structure.

EVOLUTIONARY OR PHASED APPROACH TO INTEGRATE SEN INTO AKU-IED

Considering the findings from both primary and secondary data, including subject matter experts' opinion, global best practices, and Pakistan's socio-economic and political realities, it is recommended that AKU-IED adopts an evolutionary approach in introducing a special education program within its academic framework, starting from courses and certifications to proper degree programs.

¹⁹⁵ "Department of Special Education," University of Karachi,
<https://www.uok.edu.pk/faculties/specialeducation/index.php>.

SHORT-TERM COURSE

1. Core Courses, Diploma, and CPD on SEN

Importantly, the primary data collected for this research majorly supported an evolutionary, phased approach for integrating SEN into AKU-IED. Educators and disability experts consistently emphasized foundational integration rather than launching a full-fledged degree program at the outset. The immediate priority identified across KIs was the introduction of core compulsory SEN courses within existing B.Ed. and Master of Philosophy (M.Phil.) programs, ensuring that potential educators acquire essential competencies, particularly in areas closely related to diverse forms of disabilities. Further, offering SEN as an elective was deemed insufficient, as students may opt out, thereby perpetuating gaps in teacher preparedness.

“If there is special education in the elective, that might not be enough because people might not choose that elective.”¹⁹⁶

Further, the inclusion of compulsory SEN courses may address the current marginalization of Special Education within education programs. By embedding these courses as degree requirements, universities can counter the existing pattern in which SEN remains overlooked or undervalued by both institutions and graduates. Also, exposure to core content may create awareness, sensitization, and informed understanding of the field’s relevance. This engagement has the potential to cultivate genuine curiosity and intellectual interest among students, thereby encouraging a proportion of them to pursue subsequent specialization. Thus, the introduction of compulsory core courses is not solely a strategic step within an evolutionary rollout; it is also a deliberate mechanism for generating awareness, shifting attitudes, and equipping all future educators with the requisite skills to support diverse learners which is an essential condition for meaningful inclusive education.

In parallel to core course integration, it was also recommended to launch a diploma for potential educators and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) programs for in-service teachers or educators. These short-term certifications would respond to urgent field-level needs, offering immediate first aid to schools that are currently unequipped to support children with disabilities. As the families and schools face immediate challenges with regard to the students with disabilities that cannot wait for long-term structural reforms or the establishment of advanced degree programs, diploma, and CPD in such a situation can work as an immediate solution. CPD and diploma will also allow AKU-IED to test demand, understand market needs, assess job placement outcomes, and refine program design before scaling up. It will also provide a low-risk entry point for the institution while simultaneously generating practitioner-level competencies among current educators.

¹⁹⁶ Research Interview with an Educator, September 27, 2025.

“...we need quick fixes. You may think it is not sustainable, but consider this: when a building is crumbling and there are people inside it, you have to save them to the best of your ability, instead of pondering how strong the foundation should have been. We are in that situation; things are really crumbling, and people are being deeply affected. Their livelihoods, children, and family lives are all impacted. When one child has special needs, it affects the entire family.

Practically speaking, whatever needs to be done has to be done quickly. The only way to do that is to build capacity within schools and to equip them with first aid. First aid should be provided immediately, and then long-term specialists can take over...CPD courses should be the highest priority, considering how much they are needed.”¹⁹⁷

“AKU-IED should take the initiative to offer diploma programs...These diploma programs should directly address this gap. In the long term, doctoral or master’s specializations should also be introduced.”¹⁹⁸

Although AKU-IED currently offers a certification in neurodiversity, it is important to recognize that SEN encompasses a far broader range of conditions and challenges beyond neurodiversity alone.¹⁹⁹ Comprehensive programs must address areas such as cognitive, physical, sensory, and intellectual disabilities, along with effective pedagogical strategies, assessment tools, and inclusive classroom management practices.

Moreover, there is also the strategic value of initiating SEN development through CPD for in-service teachers. The CPD offerings can generate substantial demand and position AKU-IED to work closely with government stakeholders, particularly in training primary school teachers who currently lack adequate preparation in inclusive practices. This approach opens significant market opportunities, as the need for SEN-related competencies is widely acknowledged by educators and parents alike.

“You can propose to the government to train their primary level schools’ teachers. Then, you will have a wide range for your work...If you propose to the government that we will train them, like Agha Khan can do it. The market is open. You have a lot of accessibility, as much as you can spread it. Because there is a need, especially the parents have a great need.”²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁷ Research Interview with a SEN Expert, October 27, 2025.

¹⁹⁸ Research Interview with a SEN Expert, September 26 2025.

¹⁹⁹ “Teaching Children with Neurodiversity in Pre-Primary and Lower Primary Classes,” The Aga Khan University, <https://www.aku.edu/events/Pages/event-detail.aspx?EventID=2874&Title=Teaching+Children+with+Neurodiversity+in+Pre-primary+and+Lower+primary+classes>.

²⁰⁰ Research Interview with an Educator, October 2, 2025.

Further, a phased introduction of SEN programming at AKU-IED, beginning with teacher-training and professional development, is also consistent with global historical trajectories.

Internationally, the evolution of special education as an academic field typically began with teacher-preparation initiatives rather than immediate degree programs.

For example, in the US, the earliest efforts in SEN were rooted in teacher training within institutions established for children with disabilities during the nineteenth century.²⁰¹ These residential institutions became the foundational sites where teachers were trained informally through on-the-job preparation, as universities had not yet entered the field. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, community-based programs and public day schools began emerging, drawing heavily on the expertise, curriculum, and teacher-training models of the residential schools. Notably, Gallaudet College initiated a formal teacher-training program for educators of children with hearing disability in the 1890s, and the Vineland Training School began summer training sessions for teachers of children with intellectual disabilities in 1904.

It was only in the 1920s and 1930s that universities, such as Wayne University, Teachers College at Columbia University, Eastern Michigan University, and the University of Wisconsin, instituted formal programs to train teachers of children with disabilities. Even at this stage, the training remained closely aligned with the categorical roles established by the earlier residential institutions. Over the following decades, particularly from the late 1940s to the early 1970s, special education expanded rapidly: the enrollment of children with disabilities grew more than six-fold, and the number of teacher-training institutions increased from 77 to over 400. This expansion was propelled by federal support and accompanied by the professionalization of administrative and supervisory roles of teachers within the field.

Critically, the mainstreaming movement of the mid-twentieth century highlighted an essential lesson: effective inclusion depends on the preparation of regular classroom teachers. Scholars emphasized that general educators had long been responsible for teaching children with disabilities without formal preparation. As mainstreaming gained traction, universities and state governments increasingly mandated coursework on disabilities for all teachers, underscoring the primacy of teacher training in systemic reform.²⁰² Thus, this historical trajectory demonstrates that teacher-training is the natural and evidence-based starting point for building SEN capacity.

²⁰¹ Maynard C. Reynolds, "Trends in education: changing roles of special education personnel," University Council for Educational Administration, Columbus, Ohio, 1973, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED136472.pdf>.

²⁰² Maynard C. Reynolds, "Trends in education: changing roles of special education personnel."

2. Specialization in SEN at Bachelor's and Master's Levels

After these foundational layers are established, moving toward specializations at the bachelor's and master's level may be feasible as rushing into doctoral or full undergraduate or graduate degree programs can perhaps come with social and financial costs for both the institute and students. Thus, a progressive pathway, beginning with core courses, diploma, and CPD, followed by a bachelor's and master's specialization, and eventually, contingent on proven demand and capacity, a dedicated degree program, was identified as the most feasible and contextually grounded strategy.

"If (AKU-IED) offers any course or diploma course, it will automatically go ahead and it can be extended. Agha Khan has a good name and reliability, so it will work and people will join. Directly coming for a Master's or a four-year B.Ed is difficult. (They) can do this course and go up to the placement in schools. From there, (they) will start getting feedback, how the schools have benefited from it. It should start with diploma courses and then move forward."²⁰³

Importantly, one of the principal advantages of embedding introductory core courses in Special Education within the Bachelor's and Master's programs of Education, followed by the option to pursue specialized tracks at both levels is the systematic preparation of mainstream educators to competently address diverse learner needs. Evidence from the primary data indicates that teachers in general education settings, not only those working in designated special schools, require foundational and advanced knowledge of SEN.²⁰⁴ This is particularly critical given that a substantial proportion of children with mild to moderate disabilities, especially, intellectual disabilities, are enrolled in mainstream classrooms. Equipping future educators with these competencies at the pre-service level ensures that they are able to support such learners effectively. In this sense, the integration of Special Education content into general teacher education programs represents a fundamental component of authentic inclusive education.

Currently, AKU-IED 2026-27 academic plan provides for courses on inclusive education within the B.Ed and M.Phil programs.²⁰⁵ However, these courses perhaps primarily address inclusion from a broad perspective of diversity, equity, and general inclusion, rather than focusing specifically on the nuanced and complex needs of students with disabilities. That is majorly across other institutes' education degrees as well, evident from the following account;

"Even if I talk about myself, I was an education graduate and I did my Master's, I had to specifically choose SEN-related courses. They were not part of the core subjects. I had to opt for

²⁰³ Research Interview with an Educator, October 2, 2025.

²⁰⁴ Research Interview with an Educator, October 2, 2025.

²⁰⁵ "AKU-IED Prospectus 2026-2027," The Aga Khan University,
<https://www.aku.edu/iedpk/Documents/AKU%20IED%20Prospectus%202026%20-2027.pdf>.

additional courses to study them. Otherwise, they are not a mandatory part of the whole degree. There's just a small course covering "These are the disabilities, their strengths, how to identify and assess them," and that's about it. Nothing major. So yes, this gap definitely exists. Even when SEN is taught, it's not comprehensive or disability-specific. It's very general, which results in one disability receiving a lot of attention while others get almost none."²⁰⁶

Hence, the introduction of a compulsory, dedicated course on SEN at both undergraduate and graduate levels is crucial. Such a course would provide future educators with the foundational knowledge and practical skills required to effectively support children with diverse disabilities across various educational settings.

LONG-TERM COURSE

3. Master's Degree in SEN

Once the specialization tracks in Special Education are introduced at the Bachelor's and Master's levels, it is advisable to move towards a full-fledged Master's program in SEN. However, a reasonable buffer period between the introduction of initial courses and specialization and subsequent Master's is important and will serve strategic purposes. This interval is particularly significant because the specialization tracks will be offered as elective rather than compulsory options, making it necessary to observe the extent to which graduates voluntarily select them and how interest evolves over time. Monitoring student uptake will provide insights into the perceived relevance, acceptance, and professional value of Special Education within the broader teacher education landscape.

Further, the degree, diploma, and CPD completion themselves will take some time. Also, this phased gap allows sufficient time to cultivate a curriculum and qualified cadre of faculty with expertise in specific areas of Special Education, ensuring that Master's program(s) are pedagogically robust and professionally credible. This is essential for sustaining high-quality programs. Second, the interim period enables the institution to assess the performance of the low-risk entry points, viz., core courses, specializations, diploma, and CPD programs, in terms of their responsiveness to the needs of children with disabilities, as well as their capacity to attract enrolments and generate sustainable financial returns. Thus, the gap period offers an opportunity to assess market demand and the financial viability associated with producing graduates trained in SEN, ensuring that future program expansion is grounded in realistic projections of employability and sectoral need.

Third, this time can be leveraged to strengthen policy engagement and advocacy efforts aimed at promoting the awareness of SEN and implementation of relevant provisions of disability and education legislation across both public and private sectors. Advancing such advocacy work is expected not only to stimulate financial viability of the graduates but also to enhance system-level

²⁰⁶ Research Interview with a Disability Expert, October 15, 2025.

awareness and demand among schools, thus, creating a more enabling environment for the introduction of full-fledged degree programs in Special Education.

“Establishing a degree is a very overarching objective. It is a good idea to start small and go big. Ideally, they should start with a short term course and evaluate demand and type of people joining that. For us to be able to provide value, we need to create value for it.”²⁰⁷

Importantly, each phase should be supported by robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. Implementing baseline studies at the introduction of the core courses, CPD initiatives, and the specialization tracks, followed by endline assessments after their completion, will produce empirical evidence on program performance.²⁰⁸ Such evidence may include patterns of student enrolment and specialization selection, stakeholder perceptions, and early indicators of workforce impact.

The resulting data will help AKU-IED understand the evolving trends of SEN at different social, economic, and political levels which will also give them direction to move forward towards establishing a full-fledged Master’s degree program in SEN.

This evidence-driven and incremental progression will help ensure AKU-IED’s academic rigor, institutional accountability, and long-term sustainability in positioning SEN as a credible and transformative field of study.

The proposal to establish a full-fledged Master’s degree in SEN was strongly supported by insights from primary data. Subject-matter experts in education, disability, and special education emphasized the need for a dedicated Master’s program to produce graduates with specialized competencies capable of addressing the diverse needs of students with disabilities, while simultaneously contributing to the broader development of the field of Special Education.

Currently, many roles that should be typically occupied by special educators are filled by professionals from interdisciplinary backgrounds, such as psychology. However, these graduates are not fully equipped to address the complex learning needs and disabilities of diverse learners.

²⁰⁷ Research Interview with a Disability and Education Expert, September 25, 2025.

²⁰⁸ Nusrat Fatima Rizvi, Examining the impact of the enriched B.Ed. (Hons) curriculum: student teachers’ experiences and learning outcomes in government elementary college of education, (2025), <https://durbeen.pk/aku-ied-impact-studt/>.

Although these psychology professionals can also be trained through certifications to have relevant competencies, thus, giving SEN an interdisciplinary approach and immediate context-driven solution for the needs of children with disabilities. Nonetheless, a dedicated Master's degree in SEN would ensure the preparation of highly skilled professionals with expertise specific to this field.

An important consideration arises regarding the retention of core SEN courses and specialization tracks within the Bachelor's and Master's (M.Phil.) programs of Education once the Master's degree is introduced. First, it remains essential to maintain these core courses and the specialization at the Bachelor's level, as not all educators may choose to pursue a full Master's in Special Education. By embedding core SEN knowledge at earlier stages, educators are assured foundational competencies necessary for inclusive education, enabling them to meet the emerging demands of mainstream classrooms where children with learning disabilities require appropriate support. Thus, core courses and specialization serve as both a preparatory and an enabling measure, ensuring that all educators, regardless of whether they pursue advanced specialization, are equipped to contribute effectively to inclusive educational settings. Secondly, the SEN courses and specialization offered at the M.Ed. level align with the objectives of the Bachelor-level SEN courses and specialization. This structure accommodates educators who prefer to pursue a general education degree first and then specialize in SEN at the Master's level, rather than committing to a full-fledged degree in Special Education from the outset. Hence, it provides a flexible and supportive framework for professional development in inclusive education.

4. Bachelor's and PhD in SEN

The recommendation against introducing full-fledged Bachelor's or doctoral programs in Special Education simultaneously with the Master's degree is grounded in several considerations. Launching all programs concurrently could entail significant socio-economic risks, including limited job opportunities, potential market saturation, and incomplete implementation of relevant policies across schools. Such factors could undermine graduates' employment prospects, hence, reducing the perceived financial viability, professional value, and overall attractiveness of Special Education degrees. A negative perception of employability could, in turn, lead to declining enrolments and threaten the sustainability of the program.

A cautionary precedent can be observed in the experience of one of the GB universities as discussed in the earlier chapter, where the introduction of a bachelor's program faced market saturation challenges, although it is important to note that the context there, a relatively remote area with a less developed disability sector, differs markedly from Karachi. Despite Karachi's comparatively more expansive educational and disability infrastructure, it remains prudent to adopt a phased, evolutionary approach rather than launching full-scale programs immediately as evident from the dominant theme in KIIs and in the light of other social, economic, and political challenges. This strategy mitigates risk, allows for gradual capacity-building among faculty and institutions, and supports sustainable growth in the Special Education sector.

Further, several experts also highlighted that offering full-fledged SEN programs consecutively at both the Bachelor's and Master's levels may result in unnecessary repetition and potential saturation of knowledge.²⁰⁹ The current scope and depth of the field in Pakistan perhaps do not require two separate degree programs at these levels. Instead, they suggested that providing a course or specialization in SEN, followed by a comprehensive Master's degree in the same field, is sufficient to meet the educational and professional requirements of the country. This approach ensures that foundational knowledge is acquired during undergraduate studies, while advanced skills and specialized expertise are developed at the Master's level. The Bachelor's program in Special Education is structured as a four-year course, as shown in the 2011 HEC curriculum.²¹⁰ Given that the Master's or M.Phil in Special Education typically spans one or two years, pursuing both a four-year Bachelor's and a one or two-year Master's results in a total of five or six years of study in SEN. In the context of Pakistan, where the field is still developing, this extended duration may be considered unnecessary and potentially redundant.

Moreover, internationally, many universities in countries, such as the US and Australia, as discussed in the earlier chapter, offer Bachelor's programs in Special Education. These programs are perhaps feasible due to well-established disability and education sectors, comprehensive social welfare systems, and mechanisms to support students even with severe disabilities in those countries. In contrast, the disability and education sector in Pakistan remains underdeveloped, with limited infrastructure, funding, and policy implementation. Given these contextual constraints, prioritizing specialized Bachelor's tracks followed by a Master's program is a pragmatic and contextually informed approach, avoiding the risks of program redundancy while ensuring graduates acquire the necessary competencies to address the diverse needs of learners.

Another rationale for introducing a Master's program in Special Education prior to a standalone Bachelor's program is the relative novelty of the field within the Pakistani academic context. Both students and universities remain hesitant to engage with or offer such programs, reflecting the emerging status of Special Education as an academic discipline. In this environment, even after the establishment of specialization tracks, directly launching a Bachelor's program may not generate sufficient interest or enrollment, as students may be reluctant to commit to a nascent undergraduate pathway. Moreover, without the foundation of a Master's program, which can help establish the field's credibility and demonstrate professional and financial viability, introducing a Bachelor's program alone may not attract adequate participation or create sustainable economic incentives for the institution.

²⁰⁹ Research Interview with an Educator, October 22, 2025.

²¹⁰ "Curriculum of special education (4-Year) BS/BEd," Higher Education Commission Pakistan, 2011, <https://www.hec.gov.pk/english/services/universities/RevisedCurricula/Documents/2010-2011/Special Education-2010-11.pdf>

It remains important, however, to implement robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. Following the introduction of Master's programs, baseline and endline assessments, as well as institution-specific evidence-based studies, can determine whether there is sufficient demand or justification for introducing a standalone Bachelor's program in SEN in the future. This phased and evidence-informed strategy allows the university to expand its program offerings prudently, based on demonstrated need and sectoral readiness. At the same time, doctoral-level education in SEN should not be overlooked. Establishing doctoral programs would promote research capacity, deepen understanding of sectoral challenges, and contribute to advancing knowledge, policy, and practice in Special Education in Pakistan. Doctoral research provides a critical foundation for evidence-based advocacy and long-term sectoral growth, complementing the Bachelor's and Master's in a sustainable and strategically sequenced academic framework.

"Right now, there is not a pressing need for more doctoral-level research, because ample data and evidence already exist from other countries...Beyond that, I would stop at a master's specialization, which should definitely be offered. As for a doctoral program, considering the cost and duration, it could be pursued later if the university aspires to do so."²¹¹

Evolutionary or Phased Approach to Introduce SEN at AKU-IED

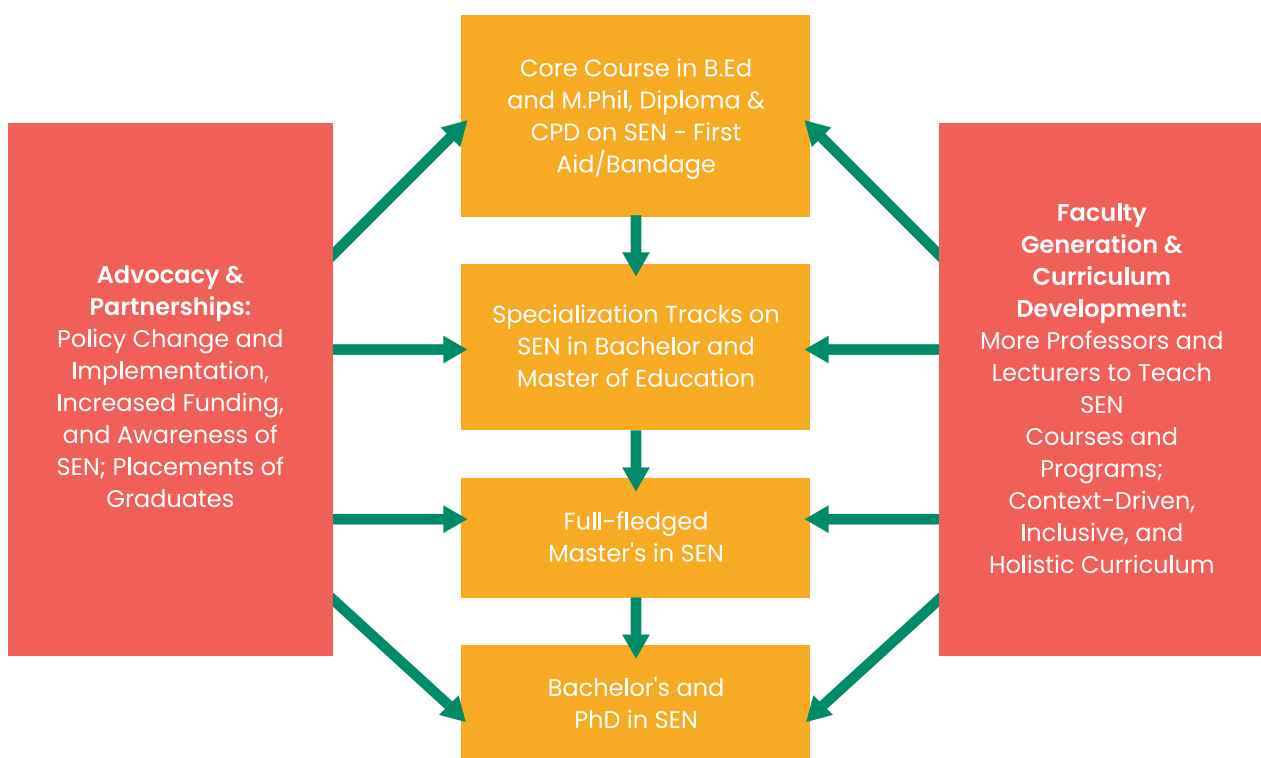


Figure 6.1. Evolutionary or Phased Approach to Introduce SEN at AKU-IED

²¹¹ Research Interview with a SEN Expert, October 27, 2025.

MANDATORY PRACTICUMS AND STUDENT EXCHANGE

Moreover, during primary data collection for this research, for all programs and courses, a strong emphasis was placed on practical training through internships in schools and structured practicum placements in Aga Khan University's (AKU) own clinical services, such as speech and behavioral therapy units. This linkage was seen as critical for bridging theory and practice, addressing a longstanding gap in teacher preparation where students often receive conceptual knowledge but lack exposure to full therapeutic processes and real case trajectories. Also, it will inform students about various career pathways they can choose.

"All their practicums can take place in AKU Hospital. They can be in schools or in therapy centers so students are exposed to different career paths, whether they want to become therapists or special educators. There are many directions you can take. The mindset shouldn't be "What will I do after this?" As a special educator, you're not limited to becoming a classroom teacher; you can be a curriculum developer, consultant, or developmental assessor. Explaining these options to students will really help."²¹²

Further, practical engagement with schools will enable the students to observe learning disabilities, understand classroom accommodations, interact with children with disabilities in real contexts, and work alongside teachers and support staff. This on-ground experience is essential for translating theoretical knowledge into meaningful professional competence.

"If someone is graduating, there should be a mandatory internship or practicum requirement before they receive their degree."²¹³

"It would also be beneficial if AKU-IED's faculty collaborated with schools as practicum sites, institutions that already run inclusive or special education programs. That way, educators and graduates would gain a practical platform to apply what they learn. This hands-on exposure would make it much easier for them to implement inclusive practices once they enter professional life."²¹⁴

Further, clearly defined mandatory practicum hours should be embedded into the certifications and degree structures to ensure that the learning outcomes are not only theoretical but practically implementable. More importantly, this practicum component may enable the development of sustained institutional linkages between the program and both special as well as inclusive education schools. Such linkages may also facilitate professional networking and future employment pathways for graduates.

²¹² Research Interview with a Disability Expert, October 6, 2025.

²¹³ Research Interview with a Disability Expert, October 15, 2025.

²¹⁴ Research Interview with a SEN Expert, October 26, 2025.

Moreover, to address the existing knowledge and practice gap within Pakistan's SEN sector, student exchange programs can be introduced to provide students with opportunities to experience and understand global best practices in special and inclusive education. Exposure to international models, intervention frameworks, assistive technologies, and inclusive school cultures may not only broaden their professional perspectives but also equip them with practical insights that can be adapted and localized within Pakistan's educational context. Through such exchanges, students become better positioned to innovate, replicate effective practices, and contribute to strengthening the country's SEN ecosystem.

PLACEMENT SUPPORT FOR GRADUATES VIA PARTNERSHIPS WITHIN THE SEN SECTOR

With the aim to enhance the employability of SEN graduates, AKU-IED can play a proactive role in facilitating their placements by strengthening institutional linkages with relevant non-profit organizations, governmental bodies, and private sector institutions that require specialized services in inclusive and special education (relevant stakeholders mapping in Annexure 1). Establishing formal partnerships, internship pathways, and recruitment channels may not only enable graduates to secure meaningful positions with fair compensation but may also ensure the economic viability and credibility of the program. Such strategic placement support may also help dispel prevailing misconceptions regarding the limited scope of SEN professions, generate confidence in the market, and ultimately increase the demand for the program within the wider education sector.

BEYOND ACADEMIA: ADVOCACY ON SEN

1. Advocacy on Political Front

Since the issue of SEN is not confined to pedagogical delivery but intersects deeply with broader rights-based and social justice concerns, it also becomes an issue of sustained advocacy. In Pakistan, despite the presence of legislative provisions addressing the education of PWDs, these sections are not accompanied by mandatory mechanisms for enforcement at the primary, secondary, or tertiary levels. This structural gap results in an uneven and often symbolic implementation, as compliance is largely dependent on the willingness, priorities, and resources of individual schools and HEIs. Even if laws have penalties for general violation of laws, the implementation is scarce. Even if laws prescribe penalties for general violations, their implementation remains scarce. Consequently, many schools and HEIs do not operationalize these provisions, hence perpetuating barriers to access and denying PWDs their constitutionally and internationally recognized right to education. The problem is further compounded by the limited availability of government-supported facilities, specialized services, and institutional capacity to cater to the diverse needs of learners with disabilities. The absence of adequate public-sector provision not only restricts access but also creates systemic pressure on families, non-governmental actors, and

private institutions to fill the gap, often inconsistently and inequitably. This reinforces the need for policy implementation to be strengthened, formalized, and monitored through clear accountability structures.

In this context, active advocacy becomes essential. AKU-IED is well positioned to play a leadership role in shaping the national discourse on disability-inclusive education. Through academic scholarship, evidence-based recommendations, policy briefs, conferences, seminars, and collaborative platforms, the institution can amplify the urgency of implementing existing legal provisions. Partnerships with civil society organizations such as NOWPDP and others (mapping of disability and SEN organizations in Annexure 1), which already engage in disability rights work and SEN, can further enhance the legitimacy and collective influence of such efforts.

Moreover, AKU-IED can contribute to more radical yet necessary policy reforms by advocating for mandatory enforcement mechanisms, including punitive measures for non-compliance. Such reforms would shift disability-inclusive education from a voluntary, discretionary practice to a legal and institutional obligation grounded in accountability. In doing so, AKU-IED can help catalyze a much-needed transition from fragmented, goodwill-based efforts toward a systemic, rights-based, and state-supported framework that ensures equitable educational opportunities for all learners with disabilities.

“This is how their (UK’s) system works; schools collaborate with authorities to ensure inclusion and consistency. The role of qualifications in this structure is minimal. Qualifications matter later for employability...but those opportunities exist only if policy and demand align. Otherwise, professionals end up working in low-paid or informal roles such as shadow teachers...For example, where licensing happens...if AKU could contribute there and ensure that policy requires every licensed practitioner to know the basics of SEN, that would be a significant push. Other provinces may then follow suit.”²¹⁵

A positive development in this landscape is the 2024 Joint Policy issued by SELD and DEPD for the implementation of inclusive education in Sindh. The policy seeks to operationalize inclusive education across both public and private schools in the province, in alignment with Section 9 of the Disability Act 2018. It clearly makes binding on private schools to provide inclusive education by linking their registration and renewal on the provision of relevant facilities to children with mild intellectual disabilities (mild autism and borderline intellectual functioning).

²¹⁵ Research Interview with a SEN Expert, October 27, 2025.

“C (I) (2) The registration and renewal of private schools shall be linked with the provision of inclusive education, ensuring that schools admit students who are slow learners and mildly autistic children, and provide them with the necessary facilities within the school.”²¹⁶

Thus, canceling or withdrawing admissions of such children without consultation with the Unit formed under policy will result in action against the school. Although the policy doesn't deal with all kinds of disabilities, it is still a progressive legal development for implementation of disability law.

For AKU-IED, this policy creates a strong and timely opportunity to position itself as a leading institution in the province's inclusive education reforms. The policy's binding nature can open further advocacy pathways for the institute to develop a holistic inclusive education binding policy or propose relevant amendments in the disability law(s) in collaboration with the disability and SEN partners from the civil society or non-profit sector (mapping of relevant partners in Annexure 1). Also, the policy's emphasis on capacity building directly aligns with AKU-IED's expertise in teacher education. Leveraging this policy framework, AKU-IED can expand its advocacy efforts, support the government in fulfilling its mandates, and contribute significantly to the creation of more inclusive schools by developing, delivering, and scaling high-quality professional development programs for teachers and school leaders.

2. Advocacy on Economic Front

Another significant challenge is the insufficient allocation of government funds for special education, which directly contributes to limited action and weak implementation of SEN initiatives.²¹⁷ This underfunding affects not only the establishment and maintenance of inclusive practices in public and not-for-profit educational institutes but also the broader development of structural mechanisms required to support students with disabilities effectively. Consequently, sustained advocacy is needed to urge the government to allocate dedicated budget lines for both overall educational development and, specifically, for special education programs.

In addition to structural funding, it is critical to address the compensation of SEN professionals. Currently, low wages in this sector are influenced by multiple factors, one of which is the broader perception of teaching as a low-reward profession in Pakistan. This societal undervaluation directly impacts SEN educators, particularly those working as resource teachers, making the profession less attractive and economically sustainable. While improving the status and remuneration of teachers in general is a long-term process, initial steps can be taken specifically within the SEN sector to provide

²¹⁶ Joint Strategy/Policy of SELD and DEPD for Implementation of Inclusive Education in the Province, No.So VI (SGA&CD)/7(35)/2024.

²¹⁷ British Council, *Moving from the margins: mainstreaming children with disabilities in Pakistan*.

better financial and professional incentives.²¹⁸ It is important to note that, although some SEN professionals, such as shadow teachers, are able to get higher salaries, many parents cannot afford these costs, creating barriers to access for students with disabilities. This challenge, rooted in the broader issue of poverty, can be mitigated when schools themselves provide inclusive infrastructure and a range of professional support services, such as resource and shadow teachers, rather than leaving families to arrange these supports independently as it happens currently.²¹⁹ In this way, policy reforms that require schools to provide dedicated SEN support staff can simultaneously address issues of professional sustainability for educators, affordability for parents, and access and quality for students.

By improving compensation and establishing structured roles within schools, the sector can create viable employment pathways for SEN graduates while advancing inclusive education practices in a meaningful and equitable manner.

It is important to note that while some of these goals, such as transforming the teaching profession into a more valued and economically viable career, and securing substantial increases in government funding, are long-term and complex, given the contemporary social fabric, competing national priorities, and budgetary constraints across multiple sectors, incremental progress is nonetheless possible. Even small, targeted interventions can lay the groundwork for systemic change over time. Strategic advocacy, particularly when undertaken in collaboration with civil society organizations, professional networks, and other stakeholders, can play a critical role in this process. Such efforts can help secure targeted funding, build awareness about the social, economic, and educational importance of SEN, and cultivate public and institutional support for inclusive education policies and practices.

3. Advocacy on Social Front

Further, on the social front, AKU-IED needs to engage directly with schools and varsities to raise awareness about the importance of SEN and inclusive educational practices. Both private and public educational institutes offer significant opportunities for future SEN graduates in terms of employment, school-based services, and specialist support roles. However, for this potential to materialize, educational institutes, especially, schools first need a deeper understanding of inclusive education and the value of SEN professionals in improving learning outcomes for all students. Awareness efforts should therefore focus on addressing lack of understanding of SEN among educational institutes. Also, prevailing social attitudes toward disability needs to be addressed as well. Instances where schools reject children with disabilities, often on the grounds of limited capacity or a lack of understanding of what true inclusion

²¹⁸ Saad, Malook, "Empowering teachers in Pakistan: respect, training, and job security for the future." The Friday Times, October 7, 2025, <https://www.thefridaytimes.com/07-Oct-2025/empowering-teachers-pakistan-respect-training-job-security-future>.

²¹⁹ Research Interview with a SEN Expert, October 27, 2025.

requires, and universities don't provide reasonable accommodations, reflect how disability is still perceived as an individual burden rather than a collective social responsibility.

Thus, by raising awareness and creating deeper understanding on SEN, AKU-IED can help schools move beyond superficial notions of inclusion.

"...When my daughter was diagnosed, there were very few available resources, and awareness was extremely low. For schools, inclusion simply meant allowing your child to sit in a classroom, and that was the extent of their effort. They would assign a resource teacher, what I call a glorified nanny, because even they had no idea how to support the child. Their only focus was to make sure the child stayed safe, unharmed, and present in the classroom without disrupting the teacher or the class environment."²²⁰

Such engagement can guide schools and HEIs in developing concrete structural mechanisms, such as institute-wide accommodation plans, differentiated instructional practices, referral systems, and collaborative support models, that ensure meaningful participation of students with disabilities. In doing so, AKU-IED can strengthen the ecosystem of inclusive education while simultaneously expanding professional pathways for SEN-trained graduates.

"First of all, you have to create awareness among the public to make it inclusive. You have to create awareness among the teachers. You have to motivate them and increase their acceptance level. The teacher gets worried just by thinking how they can handle these children. They don't know how to care for them, how to teach them, or how to love them. Giving training to these teachers can be very good."²²¹

Moreover, awareness efforts should also target parents,²²² especially in rural areas, highlighting the importance of understanding disability and sensitization around it, promoting education for PWDs, and encouraging their enrollment in mainstream inclusive schools.

A comprehensive advocacy approach, operating at the political, economic, and social levels, engaging schools, colleges, universities, communities, and government, is essential for transforming the landscape of SEN in Pakistan. Such advocacy can do more than raise awareness

²²⁰ Research Interview with a Disability Expert, October 1, 2025.

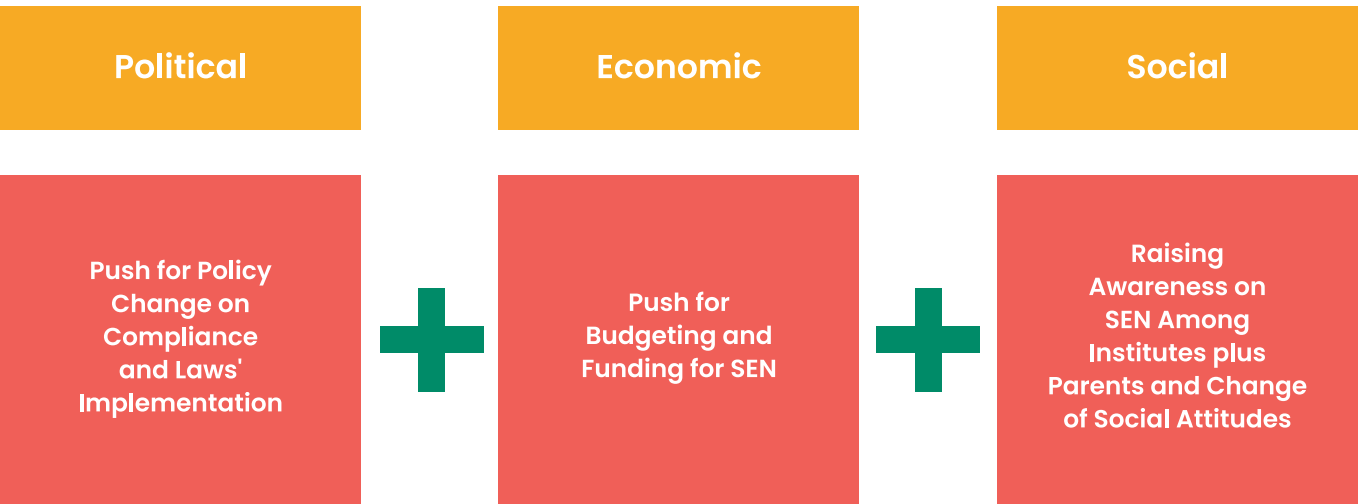
²²¹ Research Interview with an Educator, October 2, 2025.

²²² Research Interview with a SEN Expert and Senior Researcher from the UK, February 25, 2026.

about the needs of students and PWDs; it can gradually reshape the social and educational fabric to favor inclusion rather than exclusion. Through sustained engagement, educational institutes can become more receptive to inclusive practices, and students with disabilities can gain greater access to meaningful learning opportunities. Simultaneously, advocacy exerts pressure on the government to implement policies effectively, recognizing that awareness alone is insufficient to ensure the integration of SEN into mainstream education. Mandatory policy enforcement, backed by institutional commitment, is necessary to translate awareness into concrete action.

AKU-IED’s comprehensive advocacy efforts, therefore, can serve a dual purpose. On one hand, they can push to protect the fundamental right to education for PWDs, ensuring that they are not marginalized or deprived of opportunities. On the other hand, these efforts create viable employment pathways for a specialized SEN workforce, increasing the relevance and sustainability of SEN programs at the university level. Practical considerations such as economic incentives and professional rewards are critical for sustaining this niche sector; without these supports, both the development of SEN as a field and the success of AKU-IED’s courses, diplomas, and master’s programs can be affected.

Moreover, advocacy complements the development of higher education programs in SEN by addressing gaps in the broader ecosystem. While some tertiary institutions in Pakistan offer SEN programs, many face systemic challenges or lack alignment with practical needs, leaving significant loopholes in professional preparation and sector-wide capacity. AKU-IED’s dual strategy, building strong SEN academic programs while actively advocating for systemic reforms, can ensure that both the supply of skilled professionals and the demand for their expertise grow in tandem. This integrated approach not only strengthens the university’s programs but also promotes a sustainable, inclusive educational ecosystem in which SEN professionals are adequately trained, valued, and supported.



Overarching Advocacy on SEN in Collaboration with Civil Society

Figure 6.2. Advocacy Model for Effectiveness of SEN Program

RESOURCE REQUIREMENTS: FACULTY AND CURRICULUM

One of the essential considerations when establishing any new course, diploma, CPD offering, or full academic program within a university is ensuring that the necessary resources are firmly in place. Institutions must meet a set of foundational resource requirements before initiating any new academic offering. International standards and practices provide guidance on how such a resource framework should be structured, outlining the academic, administrative, financial, and infrastructural elements required for sustainable program development. For instance, according to Howard University, program development requires a comprehensive framework of resources spanning multiple dimensions.²²³ Academically, it involves curriculum design, instructional strategies, assessment mechanisms, and accreditation processes. Human resources include qualified faculty, administrative staff, advisors, and technical personnel, while administrative capacities cover admissions, governance, program review, and strategic planning. Economic and financial considerations encompass budgeting, funding, salaries, and marketing expenses. Technological infrastructure involves learning management systems, hardware, software, and web development, complemented by physical infrastructure such as offices, classrooms, laboratories, and facility renovations. Equally important are social resources, including partnerships, employer networks, and broader stakeholder engagement, along with targeted marketing and recruitment strategies based on market research, outreach, and the development of feeder systems.

In addition, AKU-IED has its own internal policy and procedures for launching new programs, which specify a set of prerequisites that can be fulfilled to ensure quality, feasibility, and alignment with institutional priorities.²²⁴

1. Faculty

Furthermore, the mechanism for ensuring adequate faculty availability is a critical component when planning to introduce a new course, CPD offering, or diploma in SEN at AKU-IED. In this regard, three primary faculty pathways can be considered. The first involves utilizing existing national expertise in special education. Pakistan currently has qualified faculty with doctorates in special education teaching at institutions such as the University of Karachi²²⁵ and the University of the Punjab (mapping

²²³ "Feasibility Study Proposal Requirements," Howard University, <https://provost.howard.edu/sites/provost.howard.edu/files/2021-06/HU%20Feasibility%20Study%20Proposal.pdf>

²²⁴ "Checklist for Submitting New Academic Programme Proposals to Academic Senate," The Aga Khan University, November, 2023, <https://www.aku.edu/admissions/Documents/policy-checklist-for-submitting-new-academic-programme-proposals-ug-004.pdf>

²²⁵ "Faculty, Department of Special Education," University of Karachi, <https://www.uok.edu.pk/faculties/specialeducation/faculty.php>.

of faculty in Annexure 1). These experts may be engaged, particularly for short courses, diploma, or CPD offerings, to provide immediate instructional support.

The second option aligns with international best practices and focuses on building AKU-IED's internal faculty capacity through formal academic preparation. This pathway may involve sponsoring selected faculty members to pursue full degree programs, such as a master's or PhD in SEN and Disability Studies, at reputable universities abroad. Alternatively, faculty may enroll in internationally accredited programs offered through online or blended modalities, allowing them to study while remaining in Pakistan, supplemented by short study visits or exposure trips to partner universities overseas. Such arrangements not only provide rigorous academic grounding but also offer global exposure to contemporary practices in special education. Upon completing their studies, these faculty members can return to lead (along with Pakistani professors) course delivery and contribute to institutional sustainability by training colleagues and shaping a long-term faculty development pipeline. However, this option may require additional time and investment before courses' or CPD's launch to ensure that appropriately qualified faculty are fully prepared.

The third option is to recruit international faculty, which would bring high-level expertise but also entail significant financial investment.

“I think universities can take a cross-country approach. They can have international teams come in and train their faculty. They can share their practices and design a curriculum or training sessions that are inclusive, both locally and internationally aligned, so their faculty can be trained holistically.”²²⁶

To mitigate costs, AKU-IED may also explore international collaborations, including potential pro bono arrangements with partner universities. Additionally, partnerships with civil society organizations and disability and SEN-focused experts within Pakistan, many of whom possess advanced qualifications in special education from both local and international universities, could serve as a complementary strategy. Their involvement in specific courses or specialized sessions would enrich the courses' content while diversifying the pool of instructional resources.

According to the proposed model for introducing master's programs, a deliberate buffer period will exist between the rollout of CPD offerings, diplomas, or courses and the launch of a full master's program. This interim phase provides the necessary time for faculty development and capacity strengthening. To ensure that the proposed SEN program and its academic standards remain aligned

²²⁶ Research Interview with a Scholar Leading Research Institute in KP, October 3, 2025.

with global advancements, and that AKU-IED's policies and practices continue to evolve accordingly, it is essential to invest in faculty who have been trained at reputable international universities.

Thus, the second pathway, which involves sponsoring AKU-IED faculty to pursue advanced degrees abroad or through international programs, is recommended. This approach can be complemented by engaging Pakistan-based professors with expertise in special education to support teaching during the early stages. In parallel, international collaboration may also include the involvement of foreign faculty; however, given the associated costs, time commitments, and logistical considerations, comparable expertise gained by AKU-IED faculty through international qualifications may serve as an effective alternative. Further, till the time bachelor or doctoral programs will be introduced, there may be enough faculty available in the institution to start and sustain the programs. It is important to note that while AKU-IED can leverage international resources to advance its SEN framework in higher education, the primary objective should be to strengthen internal capacity. This can be achieved by developing and training its own faculty while simultaneously utilizing available local and international expertise, creating a blended approach. This perspective was also highlighted by one of the key informants interviewed during this research.

“It is...sad that we don't trust each other's expertise and rely more on foreign institutions, even though local expertise is often more affordable and contextually relevant. Even when a university tries to start something locally, it still looks for foreign accreditation. That's the unfortunate reality.”²²⁷

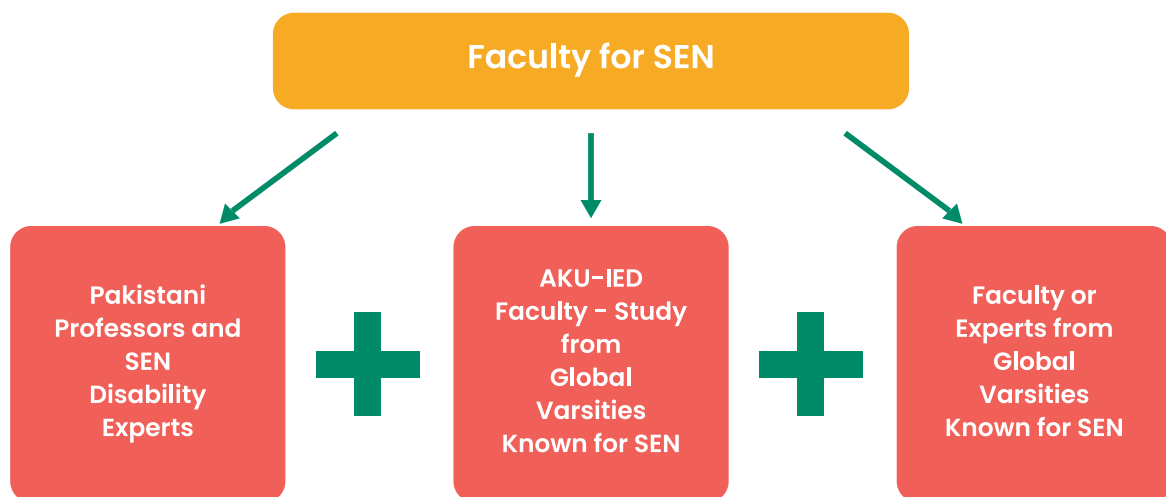


Figure 6.3. Three-Pronged Approach for Generation of SEN Faculty

²²⁷ Research Interview with a SEN Expert, October 27, 2025.

EXPERTISE ON SEN

Moreover, to determine the type of faculty expertise required, a thorough analysis was conducted of several universities offering SEN degrees in the US, UK, Canada, Finland, and Australia (mapping of faculty in Annexure 1). Faculty in these developed countries usually have a doctoral degree and demonstrate an advanced level of expertise, reflecting the longer evolution and institutionalization of special education in these contexts. Their areas of specialization, for instance, include language development and oral communication, psychology of special needs, cognitive and neurodevelopmental foundations, high-incidence disabilities, reading, literacy, and dyslexia, early childhood special education, the intersection of special education with learning sciences and developmental and educational psychology, inclusive education and classroom practices, behavior intervention and social-emotional support, family, advocacy, and disability policy, technology, innovation and UDL, and self-determination interventions etc.

In contrast, faculty expertise in Pakistan (mapping of faculty in Annexure 1), while significant, tends to be narrower and more disability-specific. Current qualifications include Master's and PhD programs in Special Education with specializations such as Visual Impairment, Hearing Impairment, Intellectual Disabilities/Learning Disabilities, Inclusion, Communication Disorders and Augmentative and Alternative Communication Systems, Physical Disabilities, and both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies.

This comparison indicates that while Pakistan has faculty with expertise in specific areas of SEN, with a focus on specific disability, there is comparatively less emphasis on interdisciplinary approaches, inclusive pedagogy, technology integration, and broader developmental and policy-oriented perspectives that characterize faculty in more developed contexts.

Thus, the comparison highlights the gap in holistic, interdisciplinary, and applied faculty expertise between Pakistan and more developed contexts, emphasizing the need for strategic faculty development to strengthen SEN programs locally.

Findings from KIIs with global SEN experts, drawing on experience and knowledge from the US and UK contexts, reveal differing views on whether curriculum design or faculty selection should come first, with perspectives indicating that both processes are interdependent and can progress in tandem. One of the experts noted that informed decision-making, to collectively define both faculty expertise and curriculum direction, requires structured consultation from relevant experts in the field to reflect local context.²²⁸

²²⁸ Research Interview with a SEN Expert and Senior Researcher from the UK, February 25, 2026.

Moreover, one expert highlighted that faculty selection must precede and guide curriculum design, as faculty will ultimately take the ownership and responsibility for shaping and delivering the content.²²⁹ According to respondents, faculty should possess interdisciplinary expertise, including knowledge of disability and its types, pedagogy, inclusive education and its challenges, and accessibility. They should also be well-versed in class and gender dynamics in relation to disability, curriculum design, and policy and advocacy. In addition, faculty should demonstrate a strong understanding of teachers' challenges, the support systems required, and the diverse needs of students with disabilities.²³⁰ Practical, on-the-ground experience and information across low-, middle-, and high-income community settings was also considered essential.²³¹

2. Curriculum

For curriculum development, the 2011 HEC curriculum on SEN, designed for four-year BS or B.Ed. programs, is available and can serve as a foundational guideline for structuring SEN courses and programs.²³² However, the revised 2016 draft curriculum is more closely aligned with global practices and contemporary trends in special education.²³³ As discussed in earlier chapters, international universities, based on their modules and course offerings, provide a more holistic and interdisciplinary approach to SEN education. Therefore, AKU-IED can draw upon both local expertise and global insights and expertise to design a curriculum that is contextually relevant, comprehensive, and in line with international standards. Further, AKU-IED has its own curriculum development policy that should be followed while designing the curriculum.²³⁴

POLICY ALIGNMENT

The HEC has established policies for introducing programs at both undergraduate and graduate levels, which can provide clear guidelines to AKU-IED while introducing the relevant programs. While high-ranking universities generally enjoy a degree of autonomy, these policies provide a regulatory framework to ensure quality and consistency. The HEC 2023 policy for launching graduate programs is detailed across three components, viz., Minimum Standards and Guidelines for Launching a Program and Awarding Degrees, Governance of Doctoral Research System, and Quality Assurance.²³⁵

The policy states that to initiate a new graduate program, a university must first ensure that its Act or Charter permits offering the proposed program. A clear rationale is required, assessing the need,

²²⁹ Research Interview with a SEN Expert with US-based experience, February 24, 2026.

²³⁰ Research interview with a SEN expert with UK-based experience and expertise, February 19, 2026.

²³¹ Research Interview with a SEN Expert with US-based experience, February 24, 2026.

²³² "Curriculum of Special Education (4-Year) BS/BEd," Higher Education Commission Pakistan.

²³³ Curriculum of Special Education: BS (4-Years) Program," Higher Education Commission Pakistan.

²³⁴ "Curriculum Development and Review Policy," The Aga Khan University, October 16, 2022,

<https://www.aku.edu/admissions/Documents/policy-curriculum-development-review-ke-001.pdf>.

²³⁵ "Graduate Education Policy," Higher Education Commission Pakistan, 2023,

<https://www.hec.gov.pk/english/services/faculty/Plagiarism/Documents/Graduate-Education-Policy.pdf>.

scope, objectives, and availability of resources, while considering market demand, societal challenges, and graduate employability. This rationale must be approved by all relevant statutory bodies and aligned with the national research agenda and Sustainable Development Goals. Additionally, the program title must comply with the Criteria for Use of Titles/Nomenclature for Degrees as specified in the National Qualifications Framework. Also, the curriculum should adhere to HEC guidelines and incorporate international best practices to ensure both academic rigor and relevance.

Moreover, the HEC 2023 Undergraduate Education Policy aims to promote student success by promoting conceptual understanding, professional skills, and strong civic and ethical values such as tolerance and inclusiveness.²³⁶ Its objectives focus on competency-based learning, emphasizing knowledge acquisition, skill development, professional behavior, and interpersonal attributes. The policy encourages a balance between depth in the main field of specialization and breadth across interdisciplinary areas, promotes the practical application of academic knowledge, and emphasizes creativity, problem-solving, and reflective thinking. This also aligns with global SEN higher education practices. Also, the undergraduate degrees are designed as terminal programs to prepare graduates for the job market, though further education remains an option. The policy recognizes five types of undergraduate or equivalent programs: four- and five-year degrees without licensure, four- and five-year degrees requiring licensure, and two-year associate degrees, which provide foundational academic and professional knowledge for early workforce entry.

MODELS ON THE INTRODUCTION OF NEW ACADEMIC INTERVENTIONS

Before initiating any new academic offering, it is essential to understand how the process of introduction and implementation will unfold. This requires following established models and frameworks that organizations commonly use to guide new interventions and manage institutional change. Several such models can serve as a compass for AKU-IED when it plans to introduce a new SEN course, diploma, CPD offering, or master's program.

1. Ecological Model

One holistic framework that can provide guidance when introducing the SEN course or program is the ecological model, discussed earlier. **This model helps identify key factors to consider, understand how different elements interact, and anticipate the potential impacts of various decisions.**

Bronfenbrenner's ecological model is also among the most influential frameworks in the study of human development. Its application to higher education began with Renn and Arnold, who adapted the ecological perspective to examine college student development,²³⁷ and it has since become

²³⁶ "Undergraduate Education Policy," Higher Education Commission Pakistan, 2023, <https://www.hec.gov.pk/english/services/students/UEP/Documents/UGE-Policy.pdf>.

²³⁷ Kristen A. Renn and Brandon R.G. Smith, "Ecological models in higher education research: overview and synthesis," *New Directions for Higher Education* 2023, no. 204 (2024): 11–22, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/he.20491>.

widely used in this area of research. Beyond student development, the model has been applied to studies of organizations, teaching and learning practices, faculty experiences, and policy analysis. Over the years, Bronfenbrenner refined his framework, and higher education researchers often use slightly modified versions to suit their specific contexts. Despite these variations, the core principles of the model remain consistent.

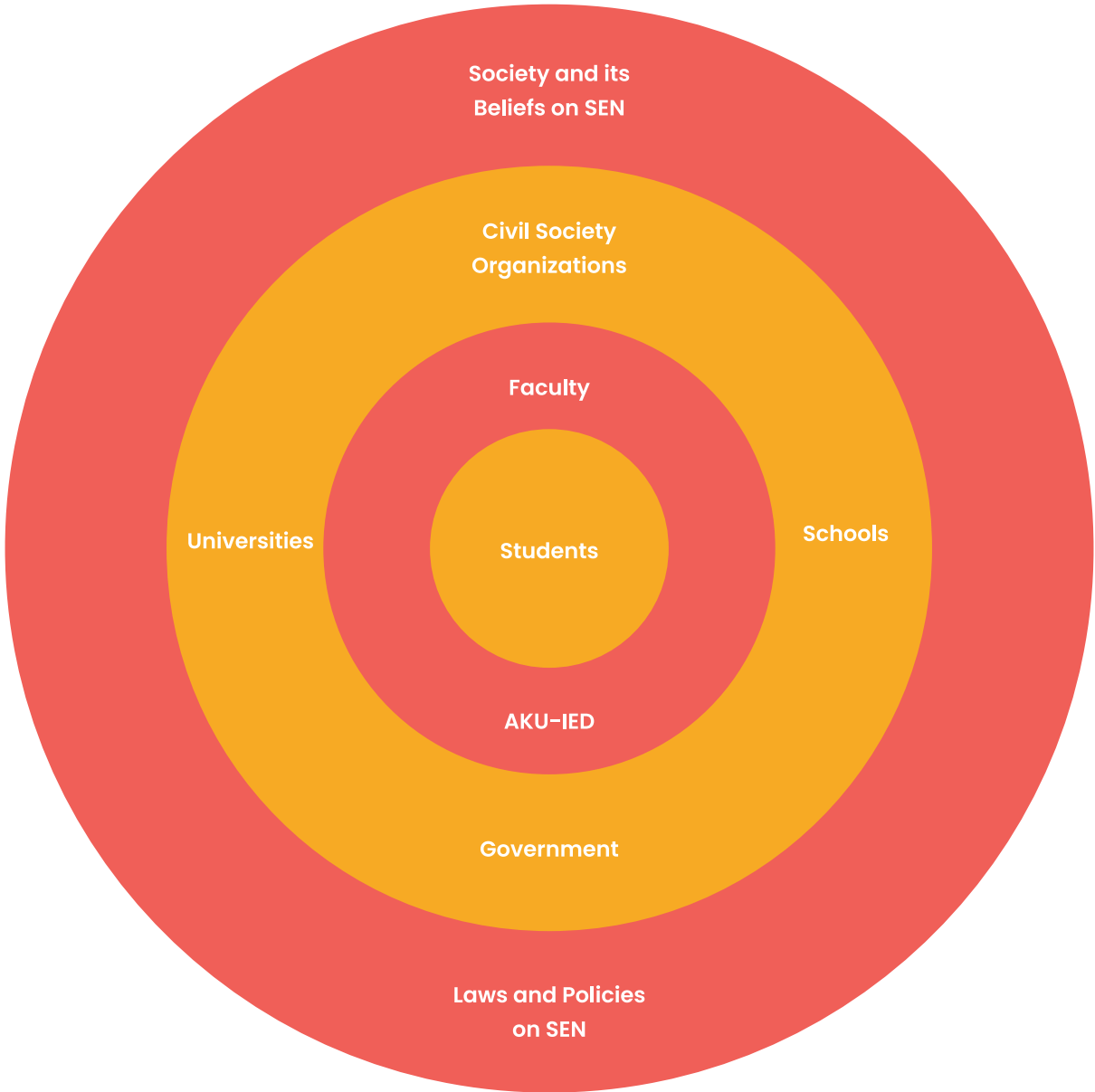
In the context of SEN at AKU-IED, the ecological model²³⁸ has been modified (as shown in figure below) as it can provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the holistic dynamics involved in introducing or implementing a SEN course or program. **The model enables the institution to consider multiple interrelated factors, including student enrollment patterns, engagement in the program, and the influence of faculty and curriculum on student outcomes, as well as the overall structural readiness of AKU-IED to support such initiatives.** It also facilitates reflection on faculty integration and collaboration, highlighting how these internal dynamics contribute to the program's effectiveness and ultimately affecting the potential students. Beyond the institution, the model helps analyze the role of various stakeholders in shaping the program's success and its impact on students. Additionally, it provides insight into the potential labor market and career prospects for SEN graduates. Finally, at the societal level, the model emphasizes the influence of social attitudes, cultural beliefs, biases regarding disability and SEN, and the prevailing policy environment, hence allowing AKU-IED to anticipate how these broader factors may affect both the program and its graduates.

The ecological model positions SEN graduates at the center of the planning and implementation of the program, recognizing that these individuals are the ultimate agents through whom the program's impact is realized. Understanding the economic, social, and political trajectories of these graduates is critical, as their success directly influences the effectiveness and sustainability of the program. By ensuring that graduates are well-prepared, supported, and able to thrive professionally, the program can not only strengthen higher education and research in the field of SEN but also maximizes its broader societal impact.

Ultimately, the core objective of introducing such programs extends beyond academic advancement; it is to enhance opportunities and outcomes for children and students with disabilities across primary, secondary, and tertiary levels.

Thus, by equipping SEN professionals to effectively support these populations, the program can contribute meaningfully to improving educational access, inclusion, and quality of life for PWDs, hence fulfilling its fundamental purpose.

²³⁸ "Social-Ecological Model," Transportation Research Board,
<https://crp.trb.org/btscrpwebresource2/mitigation-tools/socioecological-levels/>.



Interrelated and Interdependent Components in SEN Program's Implementation and Effectiveness

Figure 6.4. Modified Ecological Model for Introducing SEN at AKU-IED

2. SWOT Analysis

Apart from the ecological model, another useful framework in this regard is the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) Analysis, which provides a structured way to examine the foundational elements, strengths, potential risks, and overall viability of a new initiative. For HEIs, SWOT analysis serves as a diagnostic tool to identify internal strengths and weaknesses, as well as external opportunities and threats that may influence program development.²³⁹

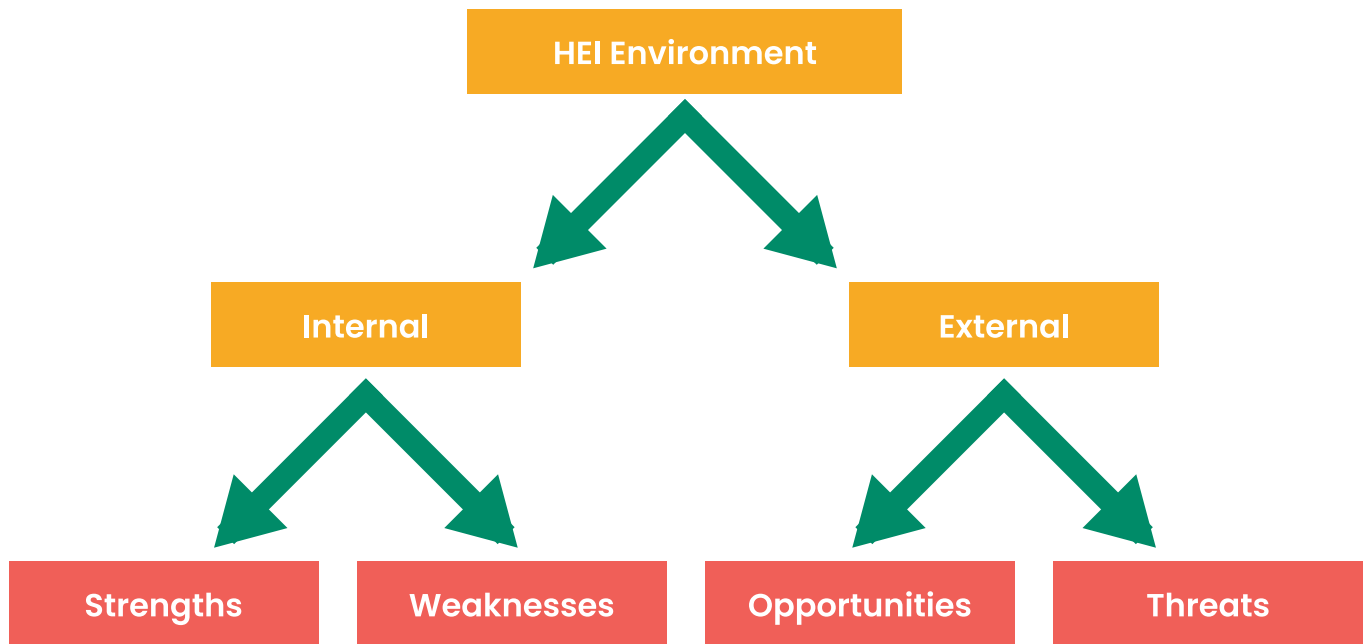


Figure 6.5. SWOT Analysis for HEIs²⁴⁰

While strengths and weaknesses reflect the institution’s internal environment, including its resources, capacity, and limitations, opportunities and threats capture external forces such as policy shifts, market demand, technological changes, and socio-economic conditions. Interpreting the outcomes of a SWOT analysis helps institutions recognize areas for growth, anticipate challenges, and strategically plan responses. This makes SWOT particularly valuable during the early decision-making and program-planning stages, ensuring that new academic offerings are grounded in evidence and aligned with both institutional capabilities and external realities.

SWOT analysis can help AKU-IED prioritize its focus by positioning the institution at the center of strategic decision-making, complementing the ecological model, which emphasizes graduates and

²³⁹ Charalambos Vrasidas, SWOT analysis to support the development of an e-learning strategy in an HEI, https://www.ub.edu/mielesproject/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/SWOT_Analysis_Guide_Final-1.pdf.

²⁴⁰ Charalambos Vrasidas, SWOT analysis.

broader contextual factors. By integrating both models, AKU-IED can achieve a balanced and comprehensive approach to planning and implementing SEN programs. The university can utilize this model during the initial decision-making and planning stages for introducing a SEN program or courses. For instance, based on the findings of this study, AKU-IED's SWOT Analysis for SEN program can be;

Table 6.1 SWOT Analysis – SEN at AKU-IED

INTERNAL		EXTERNAL	
STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES	OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
Strong institutional structure, reputation, and credibility Established experience in Education Partnerships with schools, civil society organizations, and government to some extent Strong research culture Set policies and guidelines for introducing new programs and curriculum design	Limited SEN-specialized faculty and expertise Lack of SEN-specific infrastructure and labs Limited experience integrating multidisciplinary SEN services	Overall shortage of trained SEN professionals Supportive legal and policy frameworks Presence of therapy centers, non-profit organizations, and private SEN services and them offering good remuneration Gaps in quality SEN higher education, giving AKU-IED a leadership edge Increasing parental awareness and demand for inclusive education Presence of SEN professors in Pakistan Public and private schools along with universities' Disability Offices requiring SEN professionals Interest of students in studying SEN programs HEC's curriculum and efforts to integrate SEN into higher education	Weak enforcement of disability laws and no mandatory hiring of SEN professionals Low salaries and poor financial incentives in education and SEN sectors SEN as an underdeveloped sector and competition with low-cost, low-quality SEN providers Scarcity of qualified SEN faculty nationally Economic instability and lack of funding for Education Lack of Awareness of SEN, School-level resistance, and negative social attitudes Lack of public special schools Hesitancy of students to enroll in SEN programs due to lack of good economic prospects Misconceptions around SEN at higher education level

Moreover, conducting an effective SWOT analysis requires careful planning, adequate time, and collaborative effort. It is essential to engage relevant stakeholders to create a team dynamic and ensure a range of perspectives are considered.²⁴¹ Sufficient time should be allocated for discussion and reflection to capture insights comprehensively. The process should begin by identifying internal institutional concerns (weaknesses), followed by an assessment of strengths, and conclude with an evaluation of external threats, considering both their seriousness and likelihood. Also, a set of several questions can be drafted and asked for each category to get the real and authentic insights guiding the ultimate decision. This structured approach ensures that the analysis is both meaningful and actionable.

In addition to SWOT analysis, other supportive frameworks can also guide AKU-IED in the decision-making, planning, and implementation of SEN programs. Kotter's Change Management Theory, for example, can help manage institutional dynamics, secure faculty buy-in, and optimize resource allocation during the introduction of new programs.²⁴² Rogers' Diffusion of Innovation²⁴³ provides insights into how a new field,²⁴⁴ such as SEN, can be successfully introduced within a university context, illustrating how innovations are adopted and spread among faculty and students. Stakeholder Theory emphasizes the identification and engagement of key stakeholders, ensuring their interests and perspectives are considered throughout program development and implementation.²⁴⁵ Together, these frameworks complement SWOT analysis by offering structured approaches to change management, innovation adoption, and stakeholder engagement, thereby enhancing the effectiveness and sustainability of SEN initiatives.

CENTRE OF DISABILITY AND INCLUSION

Limiting inclusion efforts to the establishment of SEN programs at the higher education level is insufficient for achieving comprehensive and meaningful inclusion. True disability inclusion requires not only the development of specialized programs but also a concerted institutional commitment to ensuring that AKU-IED's physical spaces, infrastructure, and curriculum are fully accessible to PWDs. This includes implementing reasonable accommodations across all aspects of university life, academic, administrative, and social, to let PWDs to enroll, participate, and thrive within the institution.

²⁴¹ Charalambos Vrasidas, SWOT analysis.

²⁴² Trang D. T. Thu and Hang T. T. Thu, "Change management in higher education by kotter's model: a case study in Vietnam private university," *Journal of International Business and Management* 5, no. 1 (2022): 01-12, <https://rpajournals.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/JIBM-2021-12-2097.pdf>.

²⁴³ Everett M. Rogers, *Diffusion of innovations*, 3rd Edition, (A Division of Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1983), <https://teddykw2.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/everett-m-rogers-diffusion-of-innovations.pdf>

²⁴⁴ Sanjana Bué and Blazenka Divjak, "Innovation diffusion model in higher education: case study of e-learning diffusion," *University of Zagreb*, 2015, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED562467.pdf>.

²⁴⁵ Taiguara de F. Langrafe, et al., "A stakeholder theory approach to creating value in higher education institutions," *The Bottom Line*, (2020), https://repub.eur.nl/pub/128859/Repub_128859_O-A.pdf.

By addressing both programmatic and systemic accessibility, AKU-IED can demonstrate the genuine essence of inclusion through a centre of disability and inclusion.

However, further research and feasibility study is required to establish this centre. Also, the centre can serve as the knowledge hub and research unit for disability studies, combating the scarcity of research on the area in Pakistan. Further, the centre can in the long term also oversee the sustainable implementation of the SEN programs. Last, since for the success of the program, advocacy is also critical, hence, AKU-IED can make the centre as the focal point for leading the advocacy efforts around SEN.



Chapter 7:

Conclusion

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Conclusion

Pakistan has complex SEN dynamics involving multiple stakeholders, affecting the entire landscape around the diverse educational needs of PWDs. The country has enacted multiple laws aimed at promoting the inclusion of PWDs across all levels of education, primary, secondary, and tertiary. For example, Section 9 of the Equity in Education from the Disability Acts explicitly emphasizes the inclusion of PWDs in education, while the HEC's 2021 policy further mandates the inclusion of students with disabilities in universities. However, the implementation of these laws and policies remains weak.

Socially, schools at both primary and secondary levels often lack awareness and understanding of SEN. In some cases, children with disabilities have been outright rejected from enrollment, reflecting a broader societal perception of disability as a burden rather than a shared social responsibility. Economically, inadequate funding exacerbates these challenges. Government resources allocated for inclusive education are insufficient, while the not-for-profit sector, which plays a critical role in providing special and inclusive education, also faces financial limitations. Even at the tertiary level, universities frequently lack the resources required to ensure accessibility and meaningful inclusion for PWDs.

At the policy level, there are no mandatory frameworks to guarantee that children with diverse learning needs are fully supported, leaving PWDs underserved across primary, secondary, and tertiary education. In contrast, global frameworks on special education provide robust models that Pakistan could adapt to establish systematic and comprehensive approaches for catering to learners with diverse educational needs.

However, one major consequence of the complex SEN landscape is the shortage of trained SEN professionals in Pakistan. The limited economic viability of this profession due to lack of social, economic, and political investment from diverse stakeholders discourages universities from introducing SEN programs, while students remain hesitant to pursue careers in this field. Addressing these challenges requires an integrated approach, combining both academic initiatives and advocacy efforts.

Thus, in this context, AKU-IED can play a transformative role by adopting an evolutionary or phased approach to launching SEN programs. Advocacy initiatives, in collaboration with civil society, are essential to promote the implementation of existing laws, shift societal attitudes, and raise awareness about SEN among schools, policymakers, and other relevant stakeholders. Furthermore, to institutionalize disability inclusion within its own operations, AKU-IED could establish a dedicated Centre for Disability and Inclusion, ensuring accessible infrastructure, reasonable accommodations, and an inclusive environment across all its activities. Last, the system around SEN is broken in Pakistan, yet, a single decisive step from one stakeholder within the system can begin to mend it and ensure that PWDs receive their basic right to education.

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