



*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 – Summary

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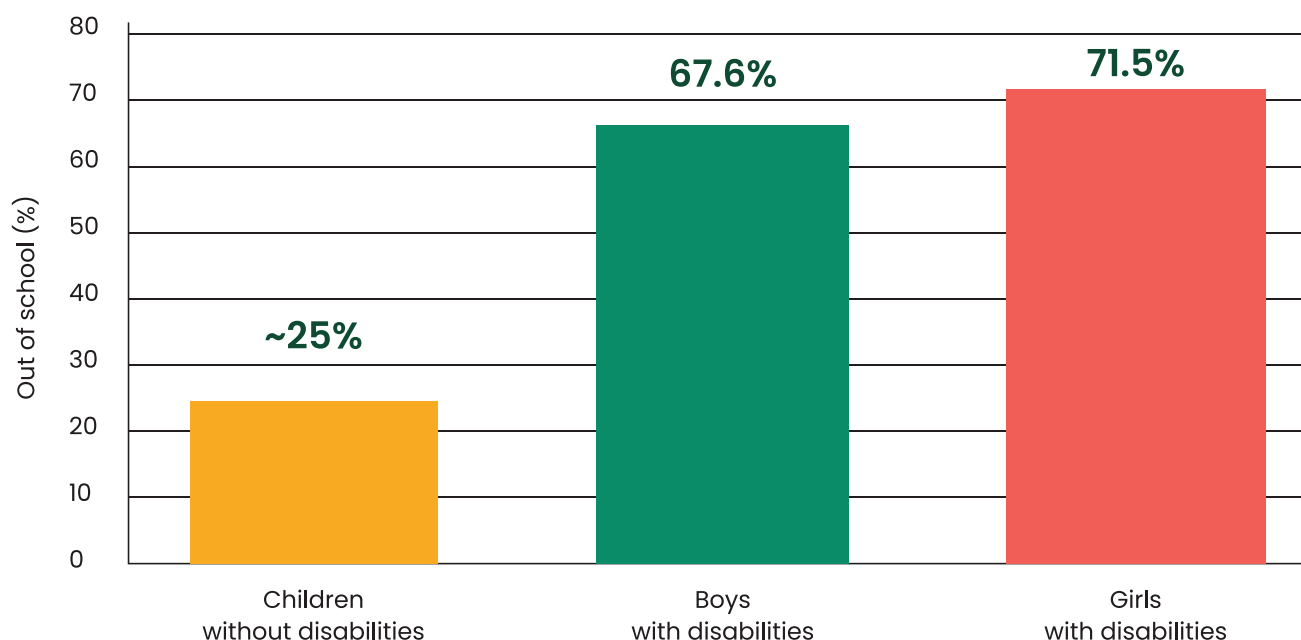
Higher Education as a Catalyst for Addressing Educational Challenges of Persons with Disabilities in Pakistan – Summary

Educating Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) in Pakistan is held back less by an absence of laws than by how little those laws change everyday life. Behind the gap sits a mindset that treats disability as a private burden to be accommodated rather than a shared responsibility. That view takes hold early and compounds as children with disabilities are far less likely to reach a classroom at all, and the few who do rarely make it to higher education.

Exclusion Starts Early, and Runs Deep

The scale of the problem is hard to miss. Only 31% of PWDs aged 15 to 29 have ever attended school, and children with disabilities are about a third less likely than their peers to have ever enrolled. Among primary-school-age children, they are more than twice as likely to be out of school, and girls carry the highest cost.

Children out of school in Pakistan: the disability gap



Children with disabilities are more than twice as likely to be out of school as their peers.

Figure 1. Out-of-school rates among children (approx. ages 6–11), Pakistan.

Source: PSLM 2019–20, as cited in the study.

Reason for Exclusion: A Vicious Cycle

Three forces keep the system stuck. Socially, awareness of disability and Special Educational Needs (SEN) is low, so inclusion often means a child sits in a classroom without real support. Teachers are untrained, special educators are absent, and students with disabilities experience discrimination and lack of accessibility. Many schools still turn these children away outright.

Economically, SEN is an unappealing career due to low salaries, limited university investment, and low hiring by schools; so few students train for it. With a lack of awareness and compliance, schools do not offer SEN roles, and families who cannot afford private shadow teachers go without. Universities, unaware of SEN and wary of programs' rewards in the job market, fear they will not fill and hesitate to launch them. This contributes to the absence of SEN professionals, as universities do not produce enough and schools do not hire enough, reinforcing each other.

Thus, legally on paper, the right to education is well protected in Pakistan through provincial disability laws, except for Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, each with a section on Equity in Education: Balochistan (2017), Sindh (2018), Gilgit-Baltistan (2019), Islamabad Capital Territory (2020), and Punjab (2022), alongside the Higher Education Commission's 2021 policy for universities. In practice, these protections rarely exist. Enforcement is thin, so adherence stays low across both government and private institutions, and the guarantees remain largely symbolic.

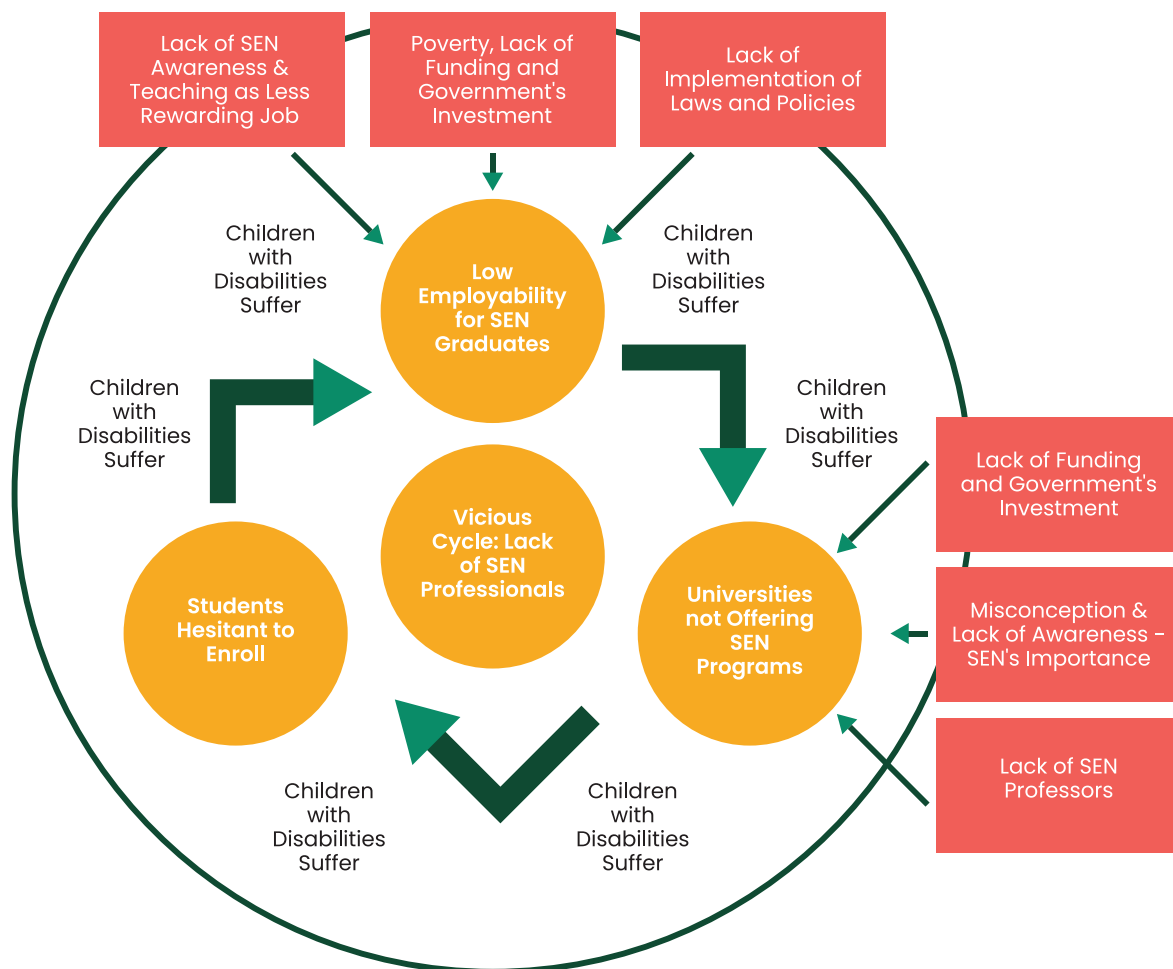


Figure 2. Vicious Cycle Explaining SEN Dynamics in Pakistan

But the patterns are shifting

The study’s more hopeful finding is that this cycle is not fixed. Demand for SEN roles is real and often unmet: Senior Special Education Teacher (SSET) posts sit vacant for want of qualified candidates, while rehabilitation centres, non-profits, and disability offices in universities all need trained staff.

Sindh’s 2024 School Education and Literacy Department and Department for Empowerment of People with Disabilities Joint Policy, which ties private-school registration to inclusive-education compliance, hands advocates real leverage for the first time. And student interest in the field is beginning to grow. These openings fall into the same three advantage points where a deliberate push can break the cycle.

Higher Education Institutes as Cycle Breakers for Inclusion

The report recommends a two-track response, with the Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) well placed to lead.

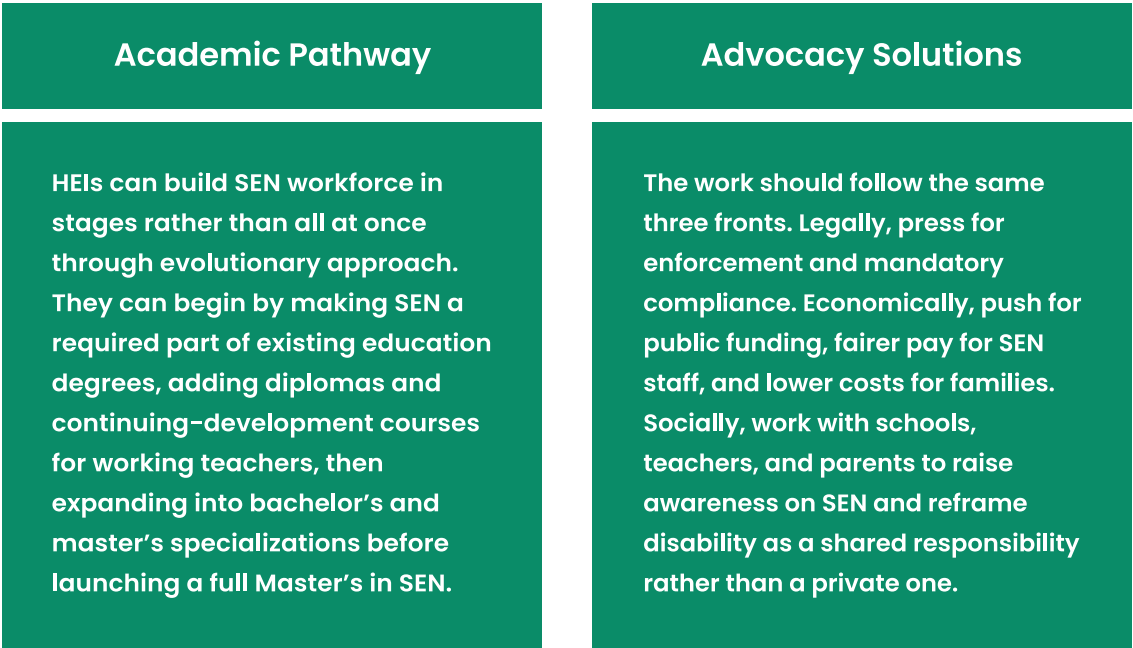


Figure 3. Pathway for HEIs to Resolve the Problem of Exclusion for PWDs in Education

Meaningful inclusion will not follow automatically from the laws that already exist. It requires institutions that train the right professionals, governments that enforce their own commitments, and a society that stops treating disability as a personal misfortune. All three shifts are possible. None will happen without deliberate effort.



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