



# Policy Brief

## INCLUSION OF NEURO-DIVERSE YOUNG ADULTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION IMPROVING PREPAREDNESS OF UNIVERSITY FACULTY FOR STUDENTS WITH AUTISM THROUGH COMPULSORY TRAINING & FACILITATE INCLUSION THROUGH APEX MODEL

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### INTRODUCTION

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition characterized by challenges in social communication and restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior. There is a rapid increase in number of Autistic youth entering adulthood and seeking higher education, with global prevalence of ASD estimated to be 1 in 100 children. For social integration and career development, higher education plays an important role. But, stigma along with lack of support and institutional barriers often make it difficult for autistic students to adjust to and complete their studies. The aim of inclusive education is to ensure that every student can access and engage in learning, regardless of their individual needs. To achieve this, universities require to adjust teaching methods, attitudes and policies to become more inclusive and supportive. The main problem lies in that university faculty are not adequately prepared, showing the need for a top down policy change.

### METHODOLOGY

The presented policy brief is informed by findings of a quantitative, cross-sectional survey conducted among the university teachers in the twin cities of Rawalpindi and Islamabad, and qualitative study from young adults diagnosed with autism.

For quantitative study, a total of 800 university teachers were approached from different public, private and semi-government universities of twin cities, out of which 393 filled out the survey. The response rate for the survey was 49.1%. Data was collected using a structured demographic information sheet and self-report questionnaire to assess the knowledge of characteristics and implications of Autism Spectrum Disorder. The questionnaire uses a standardized scoring framework that produced a composite score of Autism knowledge ranging from 0 to 1. Descriptive statistical analysis was conducted to determine the overall knowledge levels and the distribution of



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weak, moderate and strong knowledge levels among the university teachers. The findings presented in this brief are based on aggregated analysis and are used to inform system level policy recommendations.

For qualitative study, only those participants were recruited who were diagnosed with autism from professionals. A detailed interview was conducted by our experts who are clinical psychologists and got training in conducting interview with sensitive population.

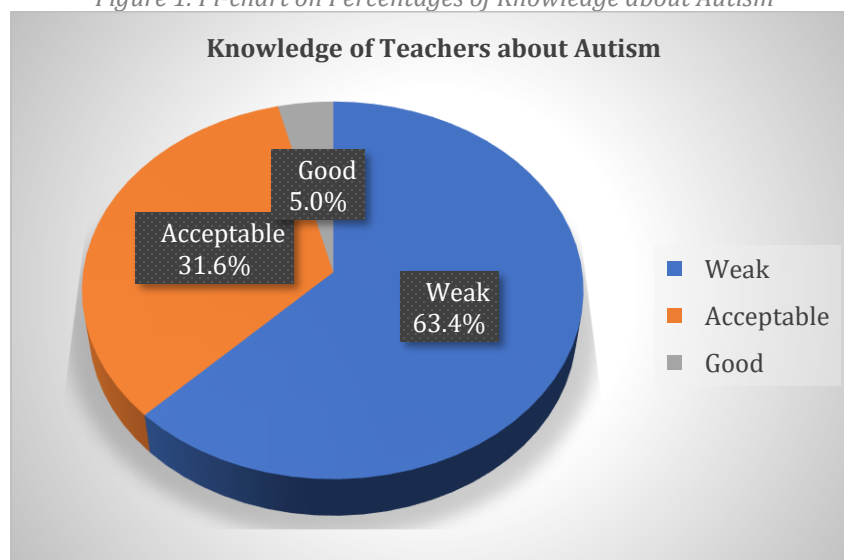
### FINDINGS

Core Research Evidence: The Knowledge Deficit

A quantitative cross-sectional survey conducted among N=393 university teachers in Islamabad and Rawalpindi confirmed a severe knowledge deficit:

- **Low Overall Knowledge:** The descriptive analysis of the knowledge scores showed a mean of 0.39(SD = 0.21) on a scale of 0 to 1, indicating a critically low overall knowledge of ASD among university faculty.
- **Weak Preparedness:** Most of the participants, 63.4 demonstrated **weak knowledge**, confirming that the current voluntary professional development model has failed to equip teachers with acceptable foundational skills.

Figure 1. Pi-chart on Percentages of Knowledge about Autism



Source: Authors' computations.



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## *Findings from Qualitative Data*

The IPA data explicitly identifies stigmatization and discrimination as a fundamental barrier, manifesting as fear of disclosure, social rejection, and the perpetuation of harmful “neuromyths.” The lack of policy-driven awareness and training among faculty leads to misunderstanding of autistic traits, often misinterpreted as behavioral or motivational issues. It is recommended by the participants that most foundational policy response must be to target this social environment directly. Additionally, they said that the prejudicial attitudes fuel discrimination and force individuals into concealment, most of the times these attitudes come from a place of lack of knowledge rather than intolerance or ill-will.

The IPA findings also reported that unmet needs that create “disablement” in daily life. These include academic needs like requiring extra time, clear written instructions, and sensory-friendly classrooms, as well as social needs like structured support for forming friendships and managing rejection sensitivity. The findings also revealed that having a supportive environment, engaging in self-work leading to self-acceptance, and reframing one’s neurodivergence as an integral part of their identity.

The barriers documented in IPA results shows that healthcare inaccessibility, silent exclusion, lack of any inclusion policy, and absence of structural inclusion are frequently not the result of malicious intent, but rather the inevitable outcome of systems designed by and for a neurotypical majority. This creates a form of embedded epistemic injustice and exclusion, where the very structure of institutions disregards neurodivergent ways of being, thinking, and communicating by simply not acknowledging them.

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: STRENGTHENING EXISTING FRAMEWORKS**

### *The Pakistani Policy Implementation Gap*

At the Policy level, Pakistan follows the global mandate such as UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Sustainable Development Goals, specifically SDG 4 and SDG 10, both of which calls for inclusive education. The challenge, however, rests entirely in the implementation aspect.

*Table 1: Policy Framework*

<b>Policy Framework</b>	<b>Current Provision</b>	<b>How to Make it Better (The Policy Gap)</b>
<b>HEC Policy on Students with Disabilities (HEC, 2021)</b>	Officially recognizes the right of students with disabilities to higher education and mandates accessibility in some forms.	Fails to define instructional accessibility. It focuses on physical access and admission criteria but is silent on faculty responsibility for inclusive pedagogy and curriculum design
<b>Faculty Professional Development</b>	Universities have general requirements for faculty training and quality assurance	These training modules are generic. They lack dedicated, in-depth content on neurodiversity, reasonable accommodation, and evidence-based strategies for supporting students with ASD.



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<b>Disability Rights Laws</b>	Legal frameworks like the ICT Rights of Persons with Disability Act, 2020, mandate inclusion and non-discrimination.	These laws lack clear enforcement mechanisms and specific implementation directives for autonomous university bodies. They need clear HEC policies to translate legal rights into instructional practice.
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Source: Authors computations.

Following are the recommendations that will help Higher Education Commission to bridge the University faculty knowledge gap for inclusive education.

### **Recommendation 1: Amend and Enforce HEC Policy on Disabilities**

**Action:** Revise the existing National Policy, HEC 2021, including a specific section on Faculty Competency Mandate.

**Implementation:** The mandate will require all faculties, both new hires and existing, to complete a certified module on Neurodiversity and Inclusive teaching within one year of policy adoption.

**Strengthening of Current Policy:** It changes the policy from merely a passive statement of rights to an active responsibility of institutions as it gives legal mandate realistic enforceability.

### **Recommendation 2: Standardize and Certify the Training Curriculum**

**Action:** Create an HEC led working group that consists of ASD advocates, representatives of university faculty and neurodiversity experts to develop a standardized evidence-based curriculum and collaborative processes for shared responsibility in developing educational practices that are inclusive

**Implementation:** The curriculum designed should be skills oriented, applying the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) Principles, and participatory teaching methods. To address and overcome regional sociocultural barriers, training needs to be culturally competent.

**Strengthening of Current Policy:** This settles the quality gap in general professional development programs through the provision of compulsory and specialized modules that all institutions are required to adopt.

### **Recommendation 3: Tie Funding and Accreditation to Compliance**

**Action:** Embed accordance with the faculty training requirement into HEC’s accreditation framework and quality assurance of institutions.

**Implementation:** Universities will report faculty completion rates annually. Sanctions like reductions in discretionary funding or policy audits should be imposed for failure to meet minimum thresholds, such as 90 percent completion within three years.

**Strengthening of Current Policy:** It provides an enforcement mechanism that is currently lacking in existing quality assurance policies and existing disability right laws.



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## ***Recommendation 4: APEX Model (Access, Participation, Empowerment, and Systems-Change)***

We propose a model called the APEX Model (Access, Participation, Empowerment, and Systems-Change), for neurodiversity inclusion. Its structure is direct and logical extension of the core themes identified through an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) of neurodivergent individuals' experiences through the lens of Social Disability Model.

*Table 2: APEX Model*

<b>APEX component</b>	<b>Program Initiative /</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Short description (how it maps to the component)</b>
<b>Awareness &amp; Cultural Shift</b>	<i>UK: National Strategy for Autistic Children, Young People and Adults (2021–2026)</i>	United Kingdom	National strategy includes public-awareness, workforce training, and guidance to reduce stigma and improve professional understanding across services. Maps to Awareness by mandating training and public engagement.
	<i>Australian National Autism Strategy (2024)</i>	Australia	Federal strategy with national awareness campaigns and public education components aimed at reframing autism in strength-based terms.
<b>Participatory Inclusion (Higher Ed &amp; Adult Services)</b>	<i>Think College / Inclusive Postsecondary Education (IPSE) network</i>	United States	National coordinating center and IPSE programs support inclusive campus programs, UDL implementation, campus supports, and structured transition-to-college services. Maps to Participatory Inclusion by embedding accommodations and universal design in postsecondary settings.
	<i>UDL on Campus / CAST UDL examples (College STAR, UDL implementations)</i>	United States (examples apply broadly)	Demonstrates UDL implementations in higher education (curriculum design, alternative assessment methods) that reduce barriers for neurodivergent students.
	<i>College Internship Program (CIP) — transition &amp; college supports</i>	United States	Full-year transition and college programs offering academic coaching, social supports, and sensory-aware campus living. Maps to participatory inclusion by providing structured supports on campus.
<b>Empowerment</b>	<i>Enabling Good Lives (EGL) — self-directed supports</i>	New Zealand	Person-centred approach giving disabled people choice/control over supports, enabling autonomy and peer/community connections directly supports empowerment and self-determination.
	<i>Scotland: “Keys to Life” &amp; community advocacy / peer supports</i>	Scotland	Policy framework that funds local advocacy, peer supports and community capacity-building advances empowerment and peer-led initiatives.
<b>Systems-Change</b>	<i>Accessible Canada Act (2019)</i>	Canada	Federal law requiring barrier identification/removal and co-design with disabled stakeholders institutionalizes “nothing about us without us” and systems-level accessibility planning.

*Source: Authors computations.*



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## CONCLUSION

Evidence presented in this brief shows that limited faculty knowledge about ASD is not peripheral challenge but a central institutional barrier to the inclusion of the Autistic Students in Higher Education system of Pakistan. Unless there is compulsory, enforceable and standardized faculty training, legal commitment to inclusive education will remain largely symbolic. By introducing the policy recommendations, HEC can fulfill its obligation under SDG 4. Investment in faculty capacity is not a legal and moral obligation but also a strategic policy decision that determines whether Pakistan's higher education system can equitably serve all learners in the future. Moreover, intervention and trainings is required at different levels and as mentioned above policy and implementation plan is required at different sections to make education for every one and make higher education institutes as inclusive.