



# Policy Brief

## **FROM DISABLE TO GIGABLE: LEVERAGING GIG PLATFORMS FOR INCLUSIVITY AND WELL-BEING OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Pakistan has structural, technological, and social obstacles that have continued to hinder the effective implementation of higher education by university students with disabilities and limit their access to fair economic opportunities. Even though the Higher Education Commission (HEC) has developed its Policy on Students with Disabilities, which was implemented in 2021, it has been applied unevenly within higher education institutions (HEIs). The inaccessibility of infrastructure, poor assistive technologies, lack of faculty training and institutional support remain another setback to disabled students in their education and professional development. These obstacles acquire a new urgency in the changing environment of digital transformation and the development of the gig economy, which is gaining popularity in the world. Gig economy, including flexible, online, and freelance jobs, offers a great opportunity to students with disabilities to become economically independent and have a flexible job according to their abilities. Nonetheless, even with its potential, institutional frameworks of Pakistan are not well-developed in helping students with disabilities to successfully participate in gig work. These aspects of bridging the gap between higher education and online income opportunities are most often absent in the structure of support of digital inclusion, the development of skills, and work readiness, which most universities do not have.

This policy brief explores the issues of institutional practice, challenges, and opportunities connected with digital accessibility and involvement in gig work among Pakistani university students with disabilities. Using both qualitative and quantitative data, it reveals some of the fundamental systemic gaps and suggests policy recommendations that can be used by national and institutional stakeholders to ensure that students with disabilities are engaged digitally safely, inclusively, and equitably.



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## METHODOLOGY

In this policy brief, the mixed-method approach to research that combines qualitative interviews with quantitative survey data collected in higher education institutions in Pakistan is utilized.

At first stage, University administrators, disability support officers were interviewed using semi-structured interviews in several universities, both public and private, in Islamabad and Rawalpindi. The interviews examined the experiences of the participants, the institutional practices, and the attitudes towards accessibility, the support systems, and the involvement in the gigs.

At second stage, a self-administered survey was conducted to collect the data from students with disabilities through online Google Forms, and it gathered information about the digital access, skill preparation, involvement in gig work, and financial well-being. The quantitative results were able to give measurable information regarding the correlation between digital access, institutional support, and economic participation.

The data analysis was also carried out in two phases. At first phase, thematic coding framework was employed to analyze interview data, which revealed similar patterns and themes in interviews and survey replies. Ten key themes were obtained: *Institutional Policies and Supports; Digital and Physical Accessibility; Technological Adaptations and Developments; Assistive Technology and Equipment; Economic Opportunities and Skills Training; Support Systems and Services; Inclusive Gig Work Opportunities; Social Inclusion and Stigma; Recognition and Support of Diverse Disabilities; and Financial Constraints*. At second phase, data collected through survey was initially tested for reliability and validity measures and later tested for correlation and regression analysis.

## KEY POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS BASED ON FINDINGS

### ***Enforcing Comprehensive Implementation of HEC Disability Policies***

To go beyond the symbolic compliance, the Higher Education Commission (HEC) ought to put in place a national monitoring, evaluation, and reporting system that will be used to guarantee the holistic and equal application of its disability inclusion policies in all institutions of higher learning (HEIs). This model would mandate access and inclusion reports annually by universities, covering physical and digital accessibility, provision of assistive technology, faculty training, distribution of financial aid and outcomes in students. Previous measures and benchmarks that would be compliant with international standards of accessibility would allow the HEC to evaluate the performance of institutions objectively and detect the gaps in the implementation process. HEC should assign weightage to compliance in grants, rankings, and Institutional Performance Evaluation (IPE).



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## ***Establishing and Reinforcing Disability Support Centers***

All HEIs must be required to put up or strengthen a special Disability Support Center (DSC) as the main institutional mandate that will lead the coordination of the services offered to students with disabilities. Such centers must be run within well spelled out mandates which include academic accommodations, digital accessibility, physical accessibility, assistive technology, counseling referral, and contact with faculty and administrative units. Proper staffing-this includes trained disability officers, IT accessibility specialists and student support position are all needed to be responsive to various disability needs. Moreover, ring-fenced budgets should support DSCs to ensure the sustainability of services, purchasing and maintenance of the assistive technologies and ongoing professional development. The integration of DSCs into the institutional system of governance, where they would report directly to the top-level management, would make them more powerful and efficient.

## ***Creating Gig Work Support Cells within Universities***

In response to the rise in significance of the gig economy as a non-discriminatory and flexible career trajectory, universities ought to create Gig Work Support Cells (GWSCs) that target students with disabilities specifically. These units would be the disability support and career services of specialization and provide direct support in the development of digital skills, freelancing preparation, and platform navigability. The main activities should be assistance with building the accessible freelancing profiles, advising on specifics of the platform (e.g., Fiverr, Upwork), teaching about the digital entrepreneurship and finances, as well as, the access to the mentorship with the experienced freelancers. GWSCs are also expected to foster collaborations with inclusive gig platforms and any organizations in the private sector to design customized opportunities to disabled students.

## ***Embedding Gig Economy Skills and Diversity Inclusion within Academic Curricula***

Digital literacy, entrepreneurship, and gig economy skills ought to be embedded in the undergraduate and postgraduate curriculum of higher education institutions with particular modifications aimed at students with disabilities. Digital communication, online portfolio building, accessible content production, platform navigation, managing clients, and ethical involvement in digital labor markets are some of the fundamental skills that should be acquired in these modules. The design of the curriculum must be informed by the principles of universal design of learning (UDL) so that instructional materials and assessments and learning activities can be made available to students with different abilities.

Diversity and inclusion (D&I) education must be integrated into the curriculum of every single discipline in universities and colleges instead of being isolated in workshops or elective classes to produce sustained cultural change in higher education institutions. The core modules must focus on



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empathy, equity, disability rights, and inclusive participation and allow students to critically examine social norms, power, and structural barriers toward the marginalized groups, including individuals with disabilities. Case studies that are specific to a discipline may be useful in placing inclusion into the context of professional practice--e.g. inclusive design in engineering, accessible communication in business, or ethical care in the health sciences.

## ***Developing Partnerships with Inclusive Gig Platforms and Employers***

Universities must be more proactive in forging strategic relationships with inclusive gig platforms, technology companies, and employers in the revenue sector to develop avenues into digital employment among students with disabilities. These partnerships may support internships, short-term contracts, and freelance options that would support flexible work schedules and accessibility requirements. The institutions also have the ability to collaborate with platform providers to promote open interfaces, accommodating onboarding, and anti-discrimination protection. The universities can do this by organizing accommodating job fairs, virtual networking events, and employer engagement activities to make students aware of more opportunities and to help employers realize the importance of disabled talent in the gig economy.

The inclusion in the gig economy needs a collective response of the educational institutions, policy makers, and industry participants in order to be sustainable. Universities ought to collaborate with the HEC and the partners in the private sector to co-design inclusive employment opportunities in an attempt to match academic preparation with the demands of the labor market. This may include collaboratively drawn internship schemes, models of accessible apprenticeship, certification routes to digital expertise, and employer-approved training overheads designed to suit students living with disabilities. The involvement of the private sector is essential to make sure that these programs are based on the real-life needs and encourage non-discriminatory recruiting methods.

## ***Encouraging Inter-Institutional Collaboration and Resource Sharing***

The HEC must be proactive to support the planned cooperation between universities that specialize in disability inclusion and gig facilitation to combat the diversity of capacity and resources among higher education institutions. This may involve the formation of inter-university networks or consortia in which best practice, training resources, assistive technology, and digital accessibility knowledge can be shared. Faculty and disability support staff joint training programs, shared collections of accessible learning materials and joint research efforts can all be great steps in arresting duplication of effort and expenditure. Sharing resources enables institutions with less resources or other resource limitations to enjoy the benefits of shared knowledge and infrastructure, which will contribute to fairer student access to disabilities in the higher education sector.



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## IMPLEMENTATION FRAMEWORK FOR INCLUSIVE GIG ECONOMY PARTICIPATION

This framework takes the policy recommendations of the study and translates them into a structured and actionable pathway for taking advantage of the potential of gig platforms to support access to and financial well-being related to higher education for students with disabilities. It clarifies institutional roles across levels of governance, sequences interventions in terms of time and implements mechanisms in accordance with the empirical findings of the study, especially in terms of the importance of digital accessibility and gig engagement in relation to financial well-being that has been demonstrated.

### ***Step 1: Policy Direction and Standard Setting (Higher Education Commission Level)***

At the national level, High Education Commission (HEC) is at the center stage of developing the regulatory and policy base on the inclusive participation in the gig economy. The HEC needs to establish and make official national standards on disability inclusion that explicitly mention the use of gig economy as an established channel to employment and financial security among students with disabilities. These should be minimum requirements to:

- Digital accessibility (aligned with international accessibility guidelines),
- Institutional support structures for students with disabilities,
- Employment readiness and gig economy support services.

### ***Step 2: Institutional Operationalization (University Level)***

Universities apply national standards at the institutional level, which converts them into tangible institutional organization, policies, and services. This implies the empowerment of already existing Disability Support Centers (DSCs) as well as the creation of special Gig Work Support Cells (GWSCs) at universities as extensions of DSC, or in combination with career development offices. Universities have the responsibility of:

- Setting up clear mandates and reporting lines of DSCs and GWSCs,
- Providing specific budget lines to accessibility, assistive technologies, and support services related to gigs,
- Hiring qualified staff members who are well-trained on disability inclusion, digital access and employment.

### ***Step 3: Capacity Building and Service Delivery***

This has to be achieved through capacity building that is sustainable and direct service delivery. The universities are to introduce systematic training of the faculty, the administrative staff, and the support personnel in terms of accessible pedagogy, inclusion of disabled individuals, and



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engagement with online platforms inclusively. In the case of students with disabilities, service delivery ought to entail:

- Availability of support technologies and adaptive equipment.
- Training digital literacy and gig economy training.
- Onboarding support of gig platforms.
- Platform-based work and income management mentorship and counseling.

### **Step 4: Monitoring, Evaluation, and Feedback**

The monitoring and evaluation are necessary to provide accountability and the continuous improvement. The universities are required to present reports annually to the HEC on the implementation reports and the progress made on the key indicators, including:

- Online accessibility compliance,
- Assistive technologies availability and use,
- Student attendance of training and support services related to gigs,
- Gig work engagement levels and financial outcomes.

### **Step 5: Scaling and System Integration**

At the last phase, effective institutional practices are expanded and incorporated within the higher education system. The HEC can also find a way to collaborate with inter-universities to work networks or consortia with the aim of disability inclusion and facilitation of gig work in order to share resources, organize training programs, and spread best practices. Collaborations with inclusive gig platforms, employers, and technology providers can also facilitate integration at the system-wide level by increasing available employment options and enhancing digital labor market inclusive design.

*Table1: Implementation Matrix: Inclusive Gig Economy Participation*

<b>Actor</b>	<b>Action (What)</b>	<b>Mechanism (How)</b>	<b>Timeline (When)</b>	<b>Key Performance Indicators</b>
Higher Education Commission (HEC)	Set national standards for disability inclusion and gig work support	Develop guidelines, integrate into accreditation and funding criteria	Short-term (Year 1)	Standards issued, communicated to all HEIs
HEC	Monitor and evaluate implementation	Annual reporting, audits, sector-wide reviews	Ongoing	Compliance reports submitted; gaps identified and addressed
University Management	Operationalize DSCs and GWSCs	Allocate budget, appoint staff, embed in governance	Short-Medium term	Units established, staffing completed, budgets allocated



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			(Years 1-2)	
Disability Support Centers (DSC)	Provide coordinated support services	Academic accommodations, assistive technologies, counseling, referrals	Ongoing	Number of students assisted, accessibility services delivered
Gig Work Support Cells (GWSC)	Facilitate platform-based employment	Training workshops, mentorship, platform onboarding, partnerships with gig platforms	Medium term (Years 2-3)	Students onboarded, gig participation rates, mentorship hours delivered
IT & Digital Units	Ensure digital accessibility	WCAG compliance audits, accessible LMS and administrative systems	Ongoing	Digital platforms audited and certified accessible
Faculty & Staff	Deliver inclusive teaching and guidance	Mandatory training, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles, inclusive pedagogy	Ongoing	Training completion rates, feedback on accessibility practices
Students with Disabilities	Engage with gig economy	Participate in workshops, mentorship, and online platforms	Medium-Long term	Number of students participating, income generated through gig platforms
Private Sector / Gig Platforms	Provide inclusive opportunities	Internships, accessible project assignments, anti-discrimination safeguards	Medium-Long term	Number of accessible opportunities offered, student participation rates
Inter-university Networks	Facilitate collaboration and best practice sharing	Joint training programs, shared digital resources, research initiatives	Long term	Number of collaborative initiatives, replication of best practices

*Source: Authors' compilations.*