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Challenges Faced by Special Needs Students in Inclusive Classrooms: A Case Study of Karakoram International University, Gilgit

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the challenges faced by students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms at Karakoram International University (KIU), Gilgit, within the framework of Pakistan's Higher Education Commission (HEC) Policy Guidelines for Inclusive Education (2021). Using a quantitative survey of 50 students, data were analyzed through descriptive statistics, t-tests, and ANOVA to examine academic accommodations, social integration, accessibility of infrastructure, and institutional support. Findings reveal major gaps in course material accessibility, faculty preparedness, infrastructural facilities, and institutional services, while peer and faculty interpersonal support emerged as relative strengths. No significant gender differences were identified, though female students reported slightly greater social challenges. Departmental differences were significant in academic challenges and approached significance in institutional support. The results underscore the gap between inclusive education policy and its practical implementation in Gilgit-Baltistan, highlighting the urgent need for faculty training, infrastructural upgrades, resource centers, and awareness initiatives.

Keywords: *Inclusive Education, Students with Disabilities, Higher Education, Karakoram International University, HEC policy, Accessibility, Institutional Support*

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education is a global movement aimed at providing equal educational opportunities for all students, regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, or other abilities. It emphasizes the importance of integrating students with special needs into mainstream classrooms, fostering a sense of belonging and promoting academic and social development (Brown, L. & White, 2019). At the university level, inclusive education involves creating environments where students with disabilities or special needs can fully engage academically and socially alongside their peers without segregation.

Promoting inclusive education requires systemic efforts, including faculty training on inclusive pedagogies, accessible infrastructure (e.g., ramps, assistive technologies), and curriculum flexibility through Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles, which accommodate varied learning styles. Universities must also foster partnerships with disability support services and involve students in policy-making to address their unique needs (Hidayat, 2022). Workshops on Universal Design for Learning

(UDL), assistive technologies, and disability awareness are critical for advancing inclusive education by equipping educators, policymakers, and communities with the knowledge and skills to address diverse learning needs. UDL workshops focus on curriculum design that accommodates variability among learners by providing multiple means of engagement, representation, and action/expression (Rose, A. & Meyer, 2002).

Inclusive classrooms foster collaborative learning by creating environments where students with and without disabilities engage in shared educational experiences, leveraging peer interactions to enhance academic and social growth. Peer tutoring, a cornerstone of this approach, allows students to support one another through shared teaching and learning (Szumski, Smogorzewska, & J., 2017).

The benefits of inclusive education are well-documented. For students with special needs, it enhances academic achievement, social integration, and self-esteem by providing equitable opportunities to participate in higher education (Loreman, & Sharma, 2014). Nero typical students also gain empathy, cultural competence, and collaborative skills through interactions with diverse peers, preparing them for inclusive workplaces. Institutions benefit from enriched campus diversity, innovation in teaching practices, and compliance with legal and ethical mandates for equity. Diverse perspectives in inclusive classrooms enrich problem-solving and critical thinking. When students with varying abilities collaborate on group projects, they bring unique approaches shaped by their experiences. For instance, during a science experiment, a student with special needs who relies on tactile or auditory methods might inspire peers to explore alternative data collection techniques, thereby increasing the group's methodological toolkit. These interactions cultivate empathy, as students learn to appreciate different ways of thinking and adapt their communication styles to include everyone (Carter, 2016).

A significant issue is the lack of faculty preparedness to address diverse learning needs. Many instructors lack training in adaptive teaching strategies or disability awareness, leading to inadequate accommodations (Hidayat, Spector, & K., 2022). For example, lectures may not be modified for students with sensory impairments, and assessment methods may fail to account for cognitive differences, disadvantaging students with disabilities (Kettrey & Emory, 2021). Institutional barriers, such as limited funding for assistive technologies or insufficient staff in disability support offices, further hinder accessibility. Physical infrastructure, like inaccessible classrooms or libraries, also remains a problem in older campuses.

Social difficulties involve stigma and exclusion. Disabled students report feeling stereotyped as inferior or excluded by peers, which affects their academic achievements and mental well-being (Aquino & J., 2023). Large class sizes in the university also minimize one-on-one attention, hindering the ability of teachers to respond to diverse needs efficiently. Invisible disabled students, including those with autism or mental illness, might remain uncertain when asking for accommodations, isolating them further.

Inclusive education creates the conditions where students with varying abilities are educated together, breaking societal stigmas by placing people with disabilities within the mainstream classroom. This inclusion solidifies diversity as the "new norm" by providing everyday opportunities for engagement, teamwork, and learning together. Studies have shown that routine interaction with peers who have disabilities lowers prejudice and misconceptions, since students learn empathy and understanding from direct contact.

This research is significant as it looks at how well Karakoram International University (KIU) accommodates students with disabilities, in accordance with Pakistan's Higher Education Commission

(HEC) 2021 policy that requires accessibility, accommodation, and inclusion in higher education that frequently isn't completely implemented across universities. It also addresses a gap by researching Gilgit-Baltistan, an area where few resources and remoteness can make inclusive education even harder. Through academic, social, physical, and institutional support dimensions, the research provides insight into actual student experiences, and it informs KIU and other institutions—of the areas that require improvement. Finally, the research provides pragmatic suggestions toward improving equity and access for students with disabilities within a university environment based on national policy and local context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic Challenges Faced by Students with Disabilities in Inclusive Classrooms

Inclusive education (IE) in the higher education system is greatly challenged, even though it has been accepted as a human right. A key challenge is a lack of teacher training. Educators are often not prepared in inclusive teaching methodologies or Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and this keeps perpetuating exclusion (Davies, Schelly, & L., 2013). Students with disabilities tend to face inflexible policies, inapt assessment, and the absence of UDL models, which impede access and academic success (Strnadová, Hájková, & Květoňová, 2015). Post-secondary education transition from secondary education is also challenging as a result of insufficient preparation and poor self-advocacy skills, with increased dropout rates (Wessel et al., 2009).

Rapp and Arndt (2012) also underscore the significance of adaptive pedagogy, formative evaluation, and assistive technology. Their research identifies that without curriculum adaptability and multisensory pedagogy, disabled students can find it difficult to study.

Social Integration Challenges Faced by Students with Disabilities

Social integration is one of the most urgent issues in inclusive classrooms. Students with disabilities commonly mention negative attitudes from faculty and peers, such as doubts regarding their abilities and social stigma (Strnadová, Hájková, & Květoňová, 2015).Disclosure difficulties also create barriers: students with invisible disabilities, such as mental health concerns, often refrain from revealing their conditions due to stigma, which limits access to necessary support (Wessel et al., 2009).

Research also shows that negative attitudes and stigma-related barriers extend beyond faculty to peers and community members. For instance, teachers may unconsciously set lower expectations, and peers may isolate students with disabilities, thereby limiting social interaction and integration (McDonald & Tufue-Dolgoy, 2013).

Accessibility of University Facilities (Classrooms, Libraries, and Digital Platforms)

Access barriers remain a critical issue in higher education. Students encounter physical limitations such as inaccessible classrooms, libraries, and sanitation facilities, which hinder their participation in academic life (Sharma & Michael, 2017). In addition, the lack of appropriate assistive technologies and learning materials further exacerbates accessibility issues (Sharma et al., 2018).

Digital accessibility is equally significant. The absence of multiple formats of instructional materials restricts learning opportunities. For example, offering lecture materials in various formats (text, audio,

captions) minimizes the need for personalized accommodations and supports equal access for all learners (Hitch, Macfarlane, & Nihill, 2015).

Effectiveness of Institutional Support Services

While many universities provide disability support offices, their efficiency often varies, leaving students dependent on personal strength or peer networks for survival in academic spaces (Gibson, 2012). Institutional barriers also include limited funding for assistive technologies and insufficient staff in disability support services (Sharma et al., 2018).

Policy and structural reforms are critical. Adherence to international frameworks such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) requires not only policy adoption but also cultural shifts in institutions (European Commission, 2010). Programs such as Scotland's Teachability Project demonstrate that faculty training enhances both perceptions and inclusive teaching methods (Debrand, Salzberg, & L., 2005).

Mentoring programs and peer networks have also been shown to improve retention and social belonging for students with disabilities (Patrick & R., 2013). Moreover, the use of supportive technologies (e.g., screen readers, captions, digital platforms) is highlighted as essential for institutional support (Seale, 2015).

Theoretical framework

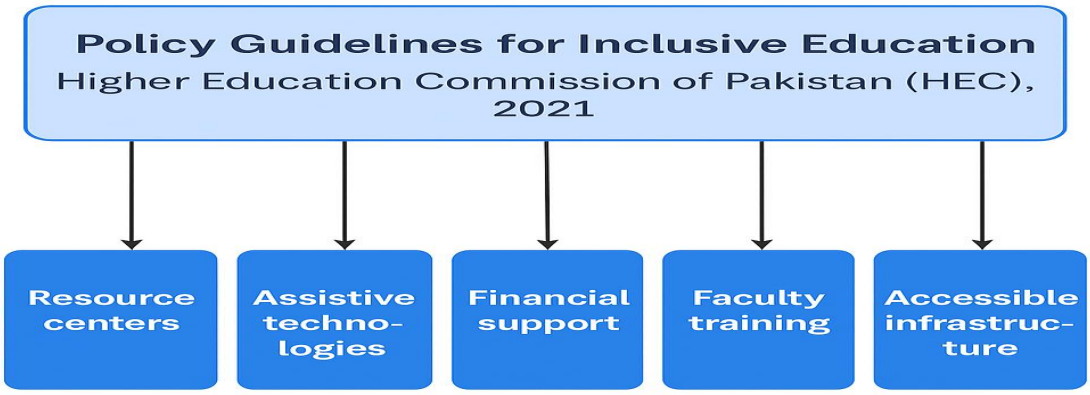

Figure 2.1: HEC Policy Guidelines for Inclusive Education (2021)

Objectives of the Study

1. To identify the academic challenges faced by students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms at Karakoram International University, Gilgit.

2. To examine the social integration challenges experienced by students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms at Karakoram International University, Gilgit.
3. To evaluate the accessibility of university facilities, including classrooms, libraries, and digital platforms for students with disabilities at Karakoram International University, Gilgit.
4. To assess the effectiveness of institutional support services provided to students with disabilities at Karakoram International University, Gilgit.

Methodology

This study employed a quantitative design to examine the challenges faced by special needs students in inclusive classrooms at Karakoram International University (KIU), Gilgit. Data was collected using Likert scale-based questionnaires, addressing academic challenges, social integration, accessibility, and institutional support. A purposive sample of 50 students was selected from a population of 83. The 24-item questionnaire, developed and validated by a special education expert, was administered through direct interaction with students across KIU departments. The data was analyzed using SPSS, employing both descriptive statistics and inferential tests such as t-tests and ANOVA to assess significant differences based on gender, department, and disability severity.

RESULTS

Table 1: Analysis at the Basis of Demographic

Sr.	Variables	Group	Frequency	Percentage
1	Gender	Male	29	58.0%
		Female	21	42.0%
2	Age	18-20	26	52.0%
		21-22	11	22.0%
		23-25	10	20.0%
		25 above	3	6.0%
3	Year of Study	1st	10	20.0%
		2nd	13	26.0%
		3rd	15	30.0%
		4th	12	24.0%
4	Degree Program	BS	27	54.0%
		BSc	15	30.0%
		B.Ed	5	10.0%
		MPhil	2	4.0%
		PhD	1	2.0%
5	Department / Faculty	Faculty of Social Science	11	22.0%
		Faculty of Arts and Humanities	9	18.0%
		Faculty of Life Science	12	24.0%

Sr.	Variables	Group	Frequency	Percentage
		Faculty of Natural Science & Technology	10	20.0%
		School of Computing & Emerging Technologies	8	16.0%
6	Severity of Disability	Mild	17	34.0%
		Moderate	22	44.0%
		Severe	11	22.0%
7	Type of Disability	Vic	9	18.0%
		Hic	4	8.0%
		Phc	12	24.0%
		Others	25	50.0%
8	Use of Assistive Devices in University	Yes	12	24.0%
		No	38	76.0%

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the 50 university students who participated in the study. The sample consisted of 29 males (58%) and 21 females (42%). Most respondents were aged 18–20 years (52%), followed by 21–22 years (22%) and 23–25 years (20%). In terms of year of study, 30% were in their third year, 26% in the second year, 24% in the fourth year, and 20% in the first year. With respect to academic background, the largest group was enrolled in BS programs (54%), followed by BSc (30%), B.Ed. (10%), MPhil (4%), and PhD (2%). Department-wise, 24% of students were from the Faculty of Life Sciences, 22% from the Faculty of Social Sciences, 20% from the Faculty of Natural Science & Technology, 18% from the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, and 16% from the School of Computing & Emerging Technologies. Regarding disability status, 44% reported having a moderate disability, 34% a mild disability, and 22% a severe disability. In terms of type, half of the respondents (50%) fell under "other" disabilities, while 24% reported physical challenges (PhC), 18% visual impairment (ViC), and 8% hearing impairment (HiC). Only 24% of respondents reported using assistive devices at the university, compared with 76% who did not.

Table 2: **Descriptive Statistics of Student *Perceptions of Academic Accommodations***

Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA	M	SD
The university provides sufficient academic accommodations for students with disabilities.	16 (32.0%)	18 (36.0%)	8 (16.0%)	7 (14.0%)	1 (2.0%)	2.18	1.10
Course materials are accessible in alternative formats (e.g., braille, audio, large print, digital versions).	25 (50.0%)	16 (32.0%)	2 (4.0%)	3 (6.0%)	4 (8.0%)	1.90	1.23
Professors modify teaching methods to accommodate students with disabilities.	22 (44.0%)	12 (24.0%)	5 (10.0%)	9 (18.0%)	2 (4.0%)	2.14	1.28
Exams and assessments are adjusted to meet the needs of students with disabilities.	8 (16.0%)	6 (12.0%)	5 (10.0%)	20 (40.0%)	11 (22.0%)	3.40	1.39

Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA	M	SD
The university provides tailored academic advising or tutoring for students with disabilities.	6 (12.0%)	21 (42.0%)	15 (30.0%)	3 (6.0%)	5 (10.0%)	2.60	1.11
The university ensures timely communication about academic accommodations to students with disabilities.	15 (30.0%)	24 (48.0%)	3 (6.0%)	5 (10.0%)	3 (6.0%)	2.14	1.14

Table 1 shows the results of student perceptions regarding academic accommodations for students with disabilities. The findings reveal mixed views across the six statements. A majority disagreed that the university provides sufficient accommodations (M = 2.18, SD = 1.10), showing dissatisfaction with overall support. Similarly, most students reported that course materials are not accessible in alternative formats such as braille or audio (M = 1.90, SD = 1.23), making this the weakest area. Perceptions about whether professors modify teaching methods were also largely negative (M = 2.14, SD = 1.28), reflecting limited instructional flexibility. In contrast, students expressed stronger agreement that exams and assessments are adjusted for their needs (M = 3.40, SD = 1.39), marking this as the most positively rated area. Views on tailored academic advising or tutoring were more balanced (M = 2.60, SD = 1.11), showing moderate satisfaction but also considerable disagreement. Finally, timely communication about accommodations was rated low (M = 2.14, SD = 1.14), pointing to gaps in institutional responsiveness. Overall, the results indicate that while exam adjustments are appreciated, students remain critical of broader supports such as material accessibility, teaching adaptations, and timely communication.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics of Student *Perceptions of Social Inclusion and Campus Support.*

Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA	M	SD
I feel included in class discussions and group activities.	1 (2.0%)	5 (10.0%)	5 (10.0%)	27 (54.0%)	12 (24.0%)	3.88	0.96
My peers treat me with respect and support my inclusion in social activities.	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	6 (12.0%)	28 (56.0%)	16 (32.0%)	4.20	0.64
I experience discrimination or bias from fellow students.	14 (28.0%)	23 (46.0%)	9 (18.0%)	2 (4.0%)	2 (4.0%)	2.10	1.00
I feel comfortable seeking help from university staff when facing social challenges.	1 (2.0%)	1 (2.0%)	5 (10.0%)	26 (52.0%)	17 (34.0%)	4.14	0.83
The university promotes awareness about disability rights and inclusion.	21 (42.0%)	18 (36.0%)	4 (8.0%)	4 (8.0%)	3 (6.0%)	2.00	1.18
I receive adequate academic support from faculty members.	1 (2.0%)	4 (8.0%)	10 (20.0%)	23 (46.0%)	12 (24.0%)	3.82	0.96
I have opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities (e.g., clubs, sports, events) that are accessible to students with disabilities.	14 (28.0%)	14 (28.0%)	12 (24.0%)	4 (8.0%)	6 (12.0%)	2.48	1.31
The university organizes events or campaigns to foster peer understanding of disability inclusion.	21 (42.0%)	20 (40.0%)	5 (10.0%)	1 (2.0%)	3 (6.0%)	1.90	1.07

Table 3 shows the results of student perceptions regarding social inclusion and campus support. Overall, responses reflect a mix of positive peer support and inclusion in class activities, contrasted with concerns about institutional efforts and extracurricular accessibility. Most students agreed that they feel included in class discussions and group activities (M = 3.88, SD = 0.96) and that peers treat them with respect and support their inclusion in social activities (M = 4.20, SD = 0.64), indicating strong peer-based inclusion. Similarly, students expressed comfort in seeking help from university staff (M = 4.14, SD = 0.83), highlighting staff as approachable sources of social support. Academic support from faculty was also rated positively (M = 3.82, SD = 0.96). In contrast, negative perceptions emerged in other areas. Many students reported experiencing some level of discrimination or bias from fellow students (M = 2.10, SD = 1.00). Institutional initiatives were viewed more critically, with low scores for promoting awareness about disability rights and inclusion (M = 2.00, SD = 1.18) and organizing events to foster peer understanding (M = 1.90, SD = 1.07). Students also reported dissatisfaction with accessible extracurricular opportunities (M = 2.48, SD = 1.31), suggesting limited participation beyond the classroom.

Taken together, the findings show that while peer and staff support are strong enablers of social inclusion, institutional actions such as awareness campaigns, events, and accessibility in extracurricular activities remain underdeveloped.

Table 4: **Descriptive Statistics of Student *Perceptions of Accessibility and Infrastructure.***

Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA	M	SD
Classrooms, libraries, and university buildings are physically accessible to me.	26 (52.0%)	10 (20.0%)	7 (14.0%)	6 (12.0%)	1 (2.0%)	1.92	1.16
The university provides assistive technologies (e.g., screen readers, mobility aids) for students with disabilities.	22 (44.0%)	18 (36.0%)	9 (18.0%)	1 (2.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1.78	0.82
Online learning platforms and digital resources are accessible for students with disabilities.	24 (48.0%)	18 (36.0%)	4 (8.0%)	3 (6.0%)	1 (2.0%)	1.78	0.98
Transportation facilities within the university are disability-friendly.	24 (48.0%)	25 (50.0%)	1 (2.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1.72	1.57
Restrooms and other essential facilities are accessible to students with disabilities.	25 (50.0%)	15 (30.0%)	4 (8.0%)	3 (6.0%)	3 (6.0%)	1.88	1.17
The university has accessible emergency evacuation plans for students with disabilities.	13 (26.0%)	17 (34.0%)	20 (40.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	2.14	0.81
Signage and navigation aids (e.g., tactile paths, braille signs) are available and adequate for students with disabilities.	19 (38.0%)	17 (34.0%)	10 (20.0%)	3 (6.0%)	1 (2.0%)	2.00	1.01

Table 4 shows the results of student perceptions regarding accessibility and infrastructure. The overall findings indicate significant dissatisfaction, with consistently low mean scores across items, reflecting inadequate physical and technological accessibility at the university. Most students disagreed that classrooms, libraries, and university buildings are physically accessible (M = 1.92, SD = 1.16), while

similarly low ratings were given for the availability of assistive technologies (M = 1.78, SD = 0.82) and the accessibility of online learning platforms and digital resources (M = 1.78, SD = 0.98). The most critical issue reported was with transportation facilities, which received the lowest score (M = 1.72, SD = 1.57), with nearly all students indicating they were not disability-friendly. Other essential services were also perceived negatively. Students rated restrooms and essential facilities as largely inaccessible (M = 1.88, SD = 1.17), while emergency evacuation plans received slightly higher but still unsatisfactory scores (M = 2.14, SD = 0.81). Similarly, signage and navigation aids such as tactile paths or braille signs were considered inadequate (M = 2.00, SD = 1.01). Overall, the results suggest that accessibility and infrastructure represent one of the weakest areas of inclusion, with students identifying widespread barriers across physical spaces, facilities, digital resources, and emergency systems. These findings highlight the urgent need for infrastructural improvements and better provision of assistive supports.

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics of Student *Perceptions of Institutional Support for Students with Disabilities*

Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA	M	SD
The university has a dedicated support center for students with disabilities.	27 (54.0%)	18 (36.0%)	2 (4.0%)	3 (6.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1.62	0.83
Counseling and psychological support services are available for students with disabilities.	28 (56.0%)	17 (34.0%)	3 (6.0%)	2 (4.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1.58	0.79
Faculty and staff are trained in inclusive education practices.	21 (42.0%)	12 (24.0%)	7 (14.0%)	8 (16.0%)	2 (4.0%)	2.16	1.25
The university provides financial support or scholarships for students with disabilities.	19 (38.0%)	9 (18.0%)	10 (20.0%)	6 (12.0%)	6 (12.0%)	2.42	1.42
I feel that the university administration takes my concerns seriously and works to address them.	10 (20.0%)	9 (18.0%)	6 (12.0%)	12 (24.0%)	13 (26.0%)	3.18	1.51
The university has a clear and accessible grievance mechanism for addressing disability-related concerns.	11 (22.0%)	15 (30.0%)	22 (44.0%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (4.0%)	2.34	0.96
The university regularly evaluates and updates its disability inclusion policies based on student feedback.	15 (30.0%)	10 (20.0%)	3 (6.0%)	11 (22.0%)	11 (22.0%)	2.86	1.59

Table 5 shows the results of student perceptions regarding institutional support for students with disabilities. The findings indicate limited satisfaction with most institutional measures, though some areas show relatively better perceptions compared to others. Students reported strong disagreement about the presence of a dedicated support center (M = 1.62, SD = 0.83) and the availability of counseling and psychological services (M = 1.58, SD = 0.79), making these the lowest-rated areas. Similarly, ratings for whether faculty and staff are trained in inclusive practices remained low (M = 2.16, SD = 1.25). Support related to resources was also seen as insufficient. Perceptions of financial support or scholarships were mixed, with some agreement but an overall low mean (M = 2.42, SD = 1.42). Students expressed uncertainty about the presence of a clear grievance mechanism (M = 2.34, SD = 0.96), indicating weak trust in formal reporting channels. In contrast, students gave slightly higher ratings for whether the

administration takes concerns seriously (M = 3.18, SD = 1.51) and whether the university regularly evaluates and updates disability inclusion policies (M = 2.86, SD = 1.59), although both remain only moderately positive. Overall, the results reveal that institutional support structures are perceived as underdeveloped, with the absence of dedicated centers, inadequate counseling, and weak staff training being critical gaps. At the same time, modestly higher ratings for administrative responsiveness and policy review suggest some institutional willingness to engage, though not consistently implemented.

Table 6: Descriptive Statistics of Student *Perceptions, Faculty and Peer Attitudes Toward Inclusion.*

Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA	M	SD
My professors are understanding and supportive of my educational needs.	3 (6.0%)	4 (8.0%)	3 (6.0%)	17 (34.0%)	23 (46.0%)	4.06	1.19
I feel comfortable discussing my challenges with faculty members.	1 (2.0%)	4 (8.0%)	3 (6.0%)	23 (46.0%)	19 (38.0%)	4.10	0.97
My peers are willing to assist me when needed.	2 (4.0%)	0 (0.0%)	6 (12.0%)	26 (52.0%)	16 (32.0%)	4.08	0.90
There is a general culture of inclusion and respect for diversity at the university.	3 (6.0%)	4 (8.0%)	6 (12.0%)	21 (42.0%)	16 (32.0%)	3.86	1.14
Faculty members demonstrate awareness of disability laws and policies (e.g., HEC Policy Guidelines for Inclusive Education).	16 (32.0%)	22 (44.0%)	7 (14.0%)	2 (4.0%)	3 (6.0%)	2.08	1.09
The university provides opportunities for peers to learn about and engage with disability inclusion initiatives.	3 (6.0%)	3 (6.0%)	3 (6.0%)	27 (54.0%)	14 (28.0%)	3.92	1.07

Table 6 shows the results of student perceptions regarding the attitudes of faculty and peers toward inclusion. The findings generally reflect strong support from faculty and peers, but also point to gaps in faculty awareness of policies and institutionalized disability education initiatives. Students rated their professors as understanding and supportive (M = 4.06, SD = 1.19), and they also reported feeling comfortable discussing challenges with faculty (M = 4.10, SD = 0.97), indicating high levels of trust and approachability. Similarly, students perceived that peers were willing to assist when needed (M = 4.08, SD = 0.90), suggesting a positive peer culture of cooperation. Broader perceptions of the university also reflected favorably, with students agreeing there is a general culture of inclusion and respect for diversity (M = 3.86, SD = 1.14). In addition, the availability of opportunities for peers to engage with disability inclusion initiatives was rated positively (M = 3.92, SD = 1.07), highlighting institutional efforts to foster awareness through peer involvement. However, a key weakness was noted in faculty knowledge of disability frameworks, as students reported low agreement that faculty demonstrate awareness of disability laws and policies such as HEC's Inclusive Education Guidelines (M = 2.08, SD = 1.09). This suggests a need for targeted professional development and training to strengthen faculty understanding of inclusion at the policy level. Overall, the results indicate a supportive peer and faculty environment, with high levels of interpersonal inclusion, but reveal institutional gaps in faculty training and policy awareness that require attention.

Table 7: Independent Samples T-Test of Gender Differences in Students with Disabilities' Perceptions of Inclusion Facilities in University Classrooms.

Factors	t	df	p (2-tailed)	MD	95% CI (Lower, Upper)
Academic Challenges	-0.92	48	.365	-0.14	-0.46, 0.17
Social Challenges	-1.89	48	.064	-0.18	-0.36, 0.01
Accessibility of Infrastructure	1.22	48	.227	0.17	-0.11, 0.45
Institutional Support	1.07	48	.288	0.14	-0.13, 0.42
Faculty and Peer Attitudes	-0.20	48	.843	-0.03	-0.29, 0.24

Table 7 shows that the independent-samples *t*-test was conducted to compare male and female students' perceptions of academic and social inclusion factors. For academic challenges, no significant difference was found between males (M = 2.33) and females (M = 2.48), $t(48) = -0.92$, $p = .365$. In terms of social challenges, gender differences approached significance, with females (M = 3.17) reporting slightly more challenges than males (M = 2.99), $t\ (48) = -1.89$, $p = .064$. Regarding accessibility of infrastructure, no significant differences were found, $t\ (48) = 1.22$, $p = .227$. Similarly, institutional support revealed no gender difference, $t(48) = 1.07$, $p = .288$. Faculty and peer attitudes were nearly identical across genders, $t(48) = -0.20$, $p = .843$. Overall, the results indicate no statistically significant gender-based differences across the studied domains, although social challenges showed a near-significant trend, suggesting that females may experience slightly greater social challenges.

Table.8: One-Way ANOVA of Department-Wise Differences in Students with Disabilities' Perceptions of Inclusion Facilities in University Classrooms.

Variable	Source	SS	df	MS	F	p
Academic Challenges	Between Groups	4.234	4	1.058	4.65	.003
	Within Groups	10.253	45	0.228		
	Total	14.487	49			
Social Challenges	Between Groups	0.926	4	0.232	2.34	.070
	Within Groups	4.456	45	0.099		
	Total	5.383	49			
Accessibility of Infrastructure	Between Groups	0.687	4	0.172	0.69	.601
	Within Groups	11.162	45	0.248		
	Total	11.849	49			
Institutional Support	Between Groups	1.733	4	0.433	2.12	.093
	Within Groups	9.180	45	0.204		
	Total	10.913	49			
Faculty and Peer Attitudes	Between Groups	0.811	4	0.203	1.00	.419
	Within Groups	9.147	45	0.203		
	Total	9.958	49			

Table 8 shows the one-way ANOVA results for departmental differences in students' perceptions of academic and social inclusion factors. A significant effect was found for academic challenges**,** $F(4, 45) = 4.65$, $p = .003$, with post hoc tests indicating higher scores for the Faculty of Natural Science compared to Social Science and Life Science, and higher scores for Arts and Humanities compared to Life Science and Engineering & Technology. For social challenges, the effect approached significance, $F(4, 45) = 2.34$, $p = .070$, with Arts and Humanities and Life Science reporting more challenges than Social Science, and Arts and Humanities scoring higher than Engineering & Technology. No significant differences emerged for accessibility of infrastructure**,** $F(4, 45) = 0.69$, $p = .601$, or faculty and peer attitudes, $F(4, 45) = 1.00$, $p = .419$. For institutional support**,** results approached significance, $F(4, 45) = 2.12$, $p = .093$, with Social Science scoring higher than both Life Science and Natural Science.

Summary

This study investigated the challenges faced by students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms at Karakoram International University (KIU), Gilgit, within the framework of the HEC Policy Guidelines for Inclusive Education (2021). The findings reveal persistent barriers in academic accommodations, social integration, accessibility of infrastructure, and institutional support. Although peer and faculty support were viewed positively, students reported dissatisfaction with limited accommodations, inaccessible course materials, and inadequate faculty preparedness for inclusive teaching. Findings of the t-test indicated no gender-based differences in inclusion factors that are significant, although females reported slightly higher social challenges. The one-way ANOVA identified departmental differences in academic challenges as significant, with Natural Science and Arts and Humanities students reporting higher challenges compared to other faculties. Departmental differences in social challenges and institutional support were close to significance. These results imply that although the HEC framework is forward-thinking, its application at KIU is still constrained and calls for immediate investment in training the faculty, infrastructure, institutional services, and awareness campaigns to provide fair inclusion.

DISCUSSION

The Higher Education Commission of Pakistan (HEC) launched its Policy Guidelines for Inclusive Education in 2021 with the objective of providing fair access and involvement for students with disabilities in higher education. The policy prioritizes five main areas: the establishment of resource centers, the delivery of assistive technologies, the provision of financial assistance, the training of faculty, and making infrastructure accessible.The evidence of this research points out progress and gaps in translating these policy promises into action at Karakoram International University (KIU).

Academic Challenges.

The HEC policy places a strong emphasis on faculty training in inclusive pedagogies and the accessibility of course materials. But at KIU, students were dissatisfied with accommodations and material accessibility. Though individualized advising was partially provided, instructional preparedness to modify pedagogy was scant. This is a clear demarcation between policy intention (training and adaptive learning) and floor practice, in accordance with international evidence highlighting Universal Design for Learning (Rapp & Arndt, 2012; Strnadová et al., 2015). Social Challenges. The HEC framework mandates that universities enhance inclusion through extracurricular activities and awareness campaigns.

Students at KIU described supportive peers and approachable staff, reflecting strength in informal social support. However, they also reported a lack of institutional-level initiatives such as awareness drives or

inclusive extracurricular opportunities. This represents another gap, as policy expectations for systematic awareness and social integration activities are not being met.

Accessibility of Infrastructure.

Ensuring accessible facilities and digital platforms is central to the HEC guidelines. At KIU, students highlighted inaccessible classrooms, restrooms, transportation, and inadequate assistive technologies. These barriers directly contradict HEC's mandate, pointing to a major gap in infrastructural compliance. Only marginally better ratings for signage and emergency plans show limited partial progress, but overall this remains the weakest area of policy implementation (Sharma & Michael, 2017).

Institutional Support.

The HEC policy requires establishment of Disability Resource Centers and provision of counseling, financial aid, and grievance mechanisms. At KIU, students reported the absence of a dedicated support center, limited counseling, and weak financial assistance. Although some students felt that the administration considered their concerns, satisfaction remained low. ANOVA results further showed departmental variation, with Social Science students perceiving higher institutional support. This highlights a significant gap where policy provisions for resource centers and comprehensive support systems remain underdeveloped.

Faculty and Peer Attitudes.

HEC emphasizes faculty development programs to improve awareness of disability rights and inclusive education. Students characterized peers as friendly and professors as accessible, demonstrating strength in interpersonal inclusion. Nevertheless, low scores in faculty awareness of disability policies indicate a deficit in professional development and policy sharing. Peer culture is a relative strength, although faculty readiness is uneven (Debrand et al., 2005; Davies et al., 2013).

Overall, the research finds that whereas the HEC Policy Guidelines for Inclusive Education (2021) present a strong framework for inclusive higher education, the actual application of these policies in the case of KIU is limited. Students remain challenged on issues of academic accommodation, facilities, institutional support, and faculty involvement. These results reflect larger trends in higher education, wherein lack of proper faculty training, weak funding, and poor institutional commitment hold back the effective mainstreaming of students with disabilities (Sharma & Michael, 2017; Strnadová et al., 2015). In the future, Pakistani universities need to give top priority to the complete enforcement of HEC guidelines through investment in faculty development, infrastructure improvements, resource centers, and public awareness campaigns to make truly inclusive educational settings.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Increased Faculty Training

Have regular and thorough training programs for faculty on inclusive education, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and disability rights to enhance their readiness in teaching students with disabilities. This will make faculty members capable of altering teaching techniques and materials to suit various learning needs.

Establishment of a Disability Resource Center

Develop a specific Disability Resource Center at KIU to offer specific academic assistance, counseling, and information on assistive technology. This center must be a hub of the students with disabilities so that they can get the resources necessary to excel.

Enhanced Accessibility of Course Materials

Ensure that all learning materials are provided in a variety of accessible formats, including braille, large print, audio, and electronic formats. This will facilitate better engagement of students who are visually impaired or have learning disabilities.

Upgrading Infrastructure for Accessibility

Invest in the physical infrastructure to make all buildings, classrooms, restrooms, and other facilities accessible to disabled students. This involves installing ramps, tactile paths, accessible signage, and disability-friendly transport.

Awareness Campaigns and Peer Support Programs

Develop awareness campaigns to sensitise students and employees on disability rights, inclusion, and the value of diversity. Peer support initiatives must be developed too to facilitate social integration as well as eliminate stigma.

Access to Assistive Technologies

Provide access to and periodic updates of assistive technologies (screen readers, voice-to-text software, mobility aids) throughout the campus to aid students with different disabilities.

Financial Assistance and Scholarships

Expand financial support programs such as scholarships, grants, or stipends for students with disabilities to alleviate the financial barriers they face in pursuing higher education.

Regular Evaluation and Feedback Mechanisms

Establish a feedback system where students with disabilities can regularly share their experiences and suggestions regarding accommodations, social integration, and institutional support. This feedback should inform the university's policies and practices.

Institutional Commitment to Disability Inclusion

Ensure that disability inclusion is a priority at every level of university administration, with well-defined roles, responsibilities, and action plans to enhance accessibility and equity for disabled students.

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