

## Embracing Diverse Learners: Making Higher Education Inclusive and Effective

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The primary purpose of higher education is to prepare graduates who can excel in real-world settings. Traditionally, academic success has been viewed as the key metric for determining a student's future potential. However, in 2015 and 2016, three of the UK's biggest employers of graduates, Price Waterhouse Coopers, Ernst & Young, and Penguin Random House, challenged this assumption by dropping the requirement for specific university performance when hiring graduates.<sup>1</sup> They realised that university academic performance is not a good indicator of how graduates would perform in real life, reflecting contemporary higher education methods' (in)effectiveness.

This editorial is about the paradox in the delivery of higher education, where academic performance may not always correlate with future professional success. It discusses the differences in students' learning abilities and the limitations of higher education in supporting atypical learners from a neuropsychology perspective. It advocates for an inclusive educational approach in Pakistan to embrace diverse learners who often struggle due to their atypical learning abilities.

### Effect of Neurodiversity on Learning in Higher Education:

Neurodiversity is a concept that addresses human neurocognitive variations to promote acceptance of individuals with different perception and communication styles (e.g., learning disabilities, attention disorders, psychiatric disorders, and more) in contemporary society.<sup>2</sup> About one in five individuals in the world population are considered neurodivergent, who perceive processes and interact with the world differently.<sup>3</sup> In the educational arena, neurodiverse learners with natural variations in cognitive abilities present not only challenges but also unique strengths.<sup>4</sup> They may struggle with traditional academic errands, such as task organisation, time management, rapid reading and writing, or verbal and non-verbal communication. Some may have heightened sensitivities to sensory input (e.g.,

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bright lights, loud noises), making classroom environments overwhelming and distracting for them. However, many neurodiverse learners also exhibit exceptional abilities and strengths in specific areas with diversity of thought that can lead to innovative ideas and contributions in academic and professional settings. They often possess enhanced creative thinking, problem-solving, and pattern recognition talents.<sup>5</sup>

Despite these strengths, neurodiverse learners often face significant challenges in higher education.<sup>6</sup> A notable lack of tools and educational frameworks for identifying and supporting neurodiversity within educational settings leaves many learners struggling in environments that do not accommodate their needs. As a result, learners with atypical abilities struggle to keep up with the pace and structure of higher education, leading to underperformance that does not reflect their true potential, intelligence and creativity.<sup>7</sup>

### Need for Inclusive Educational Reforms in Pakistan

Contemporary higher education methods are usually designed for a certain type of student, informally referred to as neurotypical learners. Their learning methods and brain functions are considered usual or as expected by society and the educational system. In contrast, some students approach learning tasks, problems, designs, etc., in different or atypical ways, referred to as Neurodivergent or Neurodiverse learners. These individuals use atypical ways of processing information and interacting with the world. They find the contemporary methods of teaching and learning challenging, not only struggling themselves but also making it difficult for their educators.<sup>1</sup>

Higher education institutions and faculty in Pakistan have limited understanding or recognition of neurodiversity, leading to insufficient support and accommodations for teaching or mentoring neurodiverse students effectively.<sup>8</sup> In addition, neurodiverse students can face stigma or be misunderstood, which may affect their self-esteem and academic achievements.<sup>9</sup> By understanding their needs and ensuring inclusive educational practices in university classrooms, the educational system in Pakistan can enhance such learners' educational experience and engagement, ensuring that nobody is left behind.

### The Way Forward:

While evidence from the Global North advocates for creating flexible and accessible learning environments that cater to all individuals, regardless of their learning styles and abilities,<sup>10</sup> data from developing countries is limited. Research on the prevalence of diverse learning abilities among Pakistani university students is lacking, hindering resource allocation and policy development in this important area. A few available studies indicate a lack of effective support systems and trained educators equipped to address the needs of neurodiverse students in Pakistan.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, the existing frameworks on inclusive practices may not directly apply to Pakistan's unique socio-cultural context, which demands culturally sensitive adaptations.

To provide a conducive learning environment to all, the educational system in Pakistan must move away from its reliance on the conventional, one-size-fits-all approach to teaching and assessment and adopt a more inclusive approach to learning. Traditional lecture-based teaching, timed exams, and run-of-the-mill assessment methods may not align with the diverse learning needs of neurodiverse learners.<sup>2</sup> Addressing their diverse needs using specific accommodations, such as offering information in various formats (e.g., text, audio, visuals) to cater to different learning styles, providing diverse options for interaction and engagement (e.g., digital tools, group work, individual projects), extending flexible time on assessments and alternative testing methods can benefit neurodiverse learners.

However, before embarking on any major change, it is imperative to identify the magnitude of the issue by identifying the prevalence and abilities of the neurodiverse population in higher education. Once the diverse cognitive abilities of learners are identified, an inclusive educational system can be developed with adaptive methods to address their strengths and shortcomings. Such alternative learning and assessment methods can help learners achieve their full academic and professional potential.

### Towards a More Equitable Higher Education:

The goal of higher education should not be to privilege certain types of learners over others. Instead, it should aim

to develop all students into successful professionals, regardless of their learning abilities.<sup>7</sup> To achieve this in Pakistan, higher education must embrace neurodiversity as a valuable asset, raise awareness among the academic communities and implement reforms that allow all students to succeed. Such reforms are not just ethical but also pragmatic. By identifying and supporting neurodiverse learners and providing them with a conducive learning environment, universities can create a more inclusive and effective educational system, ensuring their graduates are academically competent and equipped with the diverse skills necessary for their future professional endeavours.

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