

## **MAGNA CHARTA OBSERVATORY**

# **2024 Student's Essay Competition**

“What would you change about your higher education experience or environment to make it more inclusive for all who have the ability to benefit from it?”

**Fatima Masood**

**COMSATS University Islamabad,  
Pakistan**

### **A COMPREHENSIVE REPORT ON STRATEGIES FOR ENHANCING DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSIVITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN PAKISTAN**

Inclusivity is the practice of including and accommodating all types of people, especially those who have been historically marginalized due to their race, gender, sexual orientation or creed. During the 1960s Civil Rights movement in North America, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion programs were established to eliminate discrimination based on race, religion, sex and color. This movement influenced equitable practices in arts, education, sports, businesses and politics worldwide including in Africa, Asia, Europe and the Middle East. However, various reports from research groups indicate that the concept of “inclusivity” remains inadequate in the contemporary Pakistani education system. This essay aims to present strategies to enhance inclusivity and equality in the higher education system in Pakistan.

Following are the steps which can be taken to ensure diversity in higher education systems in Pakistan.

#### **Inclusive Structural Architectures for Pakistani universities:**

The architectural designs of the majority of Pakistani universities fail to accommodate physically disabled students. Many campuses lack ramps and elevators. Classrooms, Libraries and Laboratories are located in buildings without accessibility features, thus creating a dilemma for students with mobility impairments. According to a student at NUST in Islamabad campus, the Physics department is located at a distance of approximately 17 minutes from the parking lot and the Psychology department is located about 20 minutes away. In addition, the path from the parking lot to the various departments is laden with a cobblestone path and stairs, making it impossible for wheelchairs to cover the distance.

In light of this, it is important for the Higher Education Commission to take steps to ensure that the structural architecture of the universities should be made accessible for physically disabled students, allowing them to attain an education without any trouble.

### **Opportunities for Students from Diverse Ethnicities and Religious Backgrounds:**

Pakistan is an ethnically diverse country with many religious minorities who are not given enough opportunities to attain an education. According to the Pakistan Human Development 2017 report, the ethnic group with the least access to higher education is the Baloch. Due to the geographical isolation, economic disparities, social and political marginalization and security concerns, Baloch face barriers that hinder their access to higher education.

Additionally, the rise of far-right parties over the years has led to an increase in radical student organizations, making the political atmosphere of universities very sensitive. This has resulted in an unsafe environment for students from religious minority backgrounds. Over the past few years, there have been numerous reports of radical mobs harassing Ahmedis, Christians and Hindu students. In 2017, a student at Abdul Wali Khan University was lynched by a mob of students and faculty members after being falsely accused of blasphemy. Furthermore, students from religious minority backgrounds also face social isolation as many hostels refuse to accommodate Ahmedi students, cafeterias fail to cater to the dietary requirements of Hindu students and university faculties do not create a safe space for Christian students.

This is a very grave situation that requires immediate cooperation of the Higher Education Department and Human Rights Ministry of Pakistan. Universities should take quota-based steps, where a designated percentage of admission seats are reserved for students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds. Universities should also ban student organizations that generate hate and division among the students. Additionally, the Higher Education Commission should take steps to generate cohesive programs and sessions to ensure the safety of students from minority religious and ethnic backgrounds.

### **Access to Various Disciplines for Students from Marginalized Backgrounds:**

To create inclusivity in the higher education system, it is not enough to simply provide students from disadvantaged backgrounds with opportunities for university admissions, it is equally important to ensure that these students are encouraged to explore and excel in a wide range of academic disciplines and fields of study.

Male students interested in arts and humanities should be encouraged to pursue their interests without a stigma and the value of contemporary research and development in these fields should be highlighted. Conversely, female students should be encouraged to enter STEM fields, challenging the misogynistic notion that femininity is incompatible with scientific

and technical studies.

In cases when merit-based systems fall short of promoting access and participation for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, affirmative actions should be implemented to affirm their involvement in various disciplines.

### **Establishment of Student Support Systems and Remote Learning:**

Many students face stigma due to their sexuality, gender and mental health. As Pakistan is a socially conservative country, the discourse regarding sexual orientation, gender and mental health is often discouraged on public platforms. Furthermore, lecturers and student-body members often lack comprehension regarding the needs of students facing mental health issues. To address these issues, it is necessary to develop student support systems that provide assistance and guidance for students dealing with sexual assault, mental health issues, transphobia and homophobia in their daily lives.

There is also a need for a functional remote learning system for students who may need to take a sabbatical to manage mental health concerns. At present, there is no university in Pakistan that offers a choice between in-person and remote learning options. The Higher Education Commission of Pakistan should take progressive steps to facilitate students with remote-learning opportunities in every university, ensuring that all students have access to flexible and equitable education.

### **RESOURCES**

*Barriers and Enablers to Participation in Higher Education: An Exploratory Study EJ1266721.pdf (ed.gov)*

*Higher Education Policy & Research in Pakistan: Challenges in Transformation of the Society and the Way Forward [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/343045077\\_Higher\\_Education\\_Policy\\_Research\\_in\\_Pakistan\\_Challenges\\_in\\_Transformation\\_of\\_the\\_Society\\_and\\_the\\_Way\\_Forward](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/343045077_Higher_Education_Policy_Research_in_Pakistan_Challenges_in_Transformation_of_the_Society_and_the_Way_Forward)*