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Exploration of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion: Case study of Govt. College University, Faisalabad

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ABSTRACT

This paper probes institutionalization process of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Crenshaw, K. (1989) at Government College University Faisalabad (GCUF), it consistently ranks among top 10 to top 30 institutions depending on methodology (e.g. EduRank: #27; CWUR: #7; U.S. News: #3). Placed in the context of social justice and rights-based approach, the study is attentive to the experiences of being a marginalized group such as female students, people with disabilities, and religious or ethnic minorities. Due to national policy commitments, the real effort to institutionalize Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) in Pakistani universities remains uneven and fragmented, often limited by implementation gaps and lack of accountability mechanisms (Hoodbhoy, 2020; UNESCO, 2021). Built on semi-structured interviews of the students, faculties, and staff of underrepresented groups with the application of a qualitative methodology, the research will address the questions relevant to the issues of interest. The data were examined within important themes that included admissions, financial aid, representation, accessibility, peer/staff behavior and institutional accountability.

The results have shown that there were very big disparities between the policies/practices of EDI. Lack of infrastructural barriers, lack of leadership opportunities by female students, discrimination and cultural insensitivities are experienced by students with disabilities, minorities respectively. These challenges are occasioned by the fact that there is no centralized office dealing with EDI, low level of staff training, and an extreme institution based culture. Inclusion is pursued differently in different departments and depends more on personal activism than institutional arrangements.

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Introduction

The process of equity, diversity, and inclusion institutionalizing Equity, Diversity and Inclusion at GCUF is not limited to policy making, it requires including the values of inclusion into the culture, governance, curriculum, faculty recruitment and support services, student support, and community relations of the university (Ahmed & Swan, 2006; Morley & Crossouard, 2015). Although the role of EDI is increasingly being promoted, most of the Pakistani higher learning institutions, among them GCUF, are struggling to actualize such ideals. They are reduced institutional capacity, cultural anti-diversity ideologies, inadequate financing, and a dearth of percentile data in diversity indicators (Rizvi & Naqvi, 2019; Haque & Imran, 2022). Moreover, the lack of a unified and strategic model usually creates scattered and responsive initiatives, deteriorating the sustainability of inclusion programs in the long term (HEC Vision 2025; UNESCO, 2021).

Using the policies, practices in place and initiatives of GCUF currently, which are seen to have to some extent institutionalized EDI, this study aims to find out how GCUF has been dealing with institutionalization of EDI, the obstacles, and factors enabling these processes to be effective. The research pursues the provision of a contextualized insight into the way EDI functions in the large Pakistani public university through an in-depth qualitative case study. The research will also be able to point out best practices and pointers that could be improved and will also give actionable recommendations that could be implemented to lead institutional reform not only in GCUF but also in any other institution in the country following the same theme.

The significance of the EDI in education has been raised worldwide since social injustice, discrimination, and inequality are issues that more and more people are learning about. Equity implies the elimination of structural inequality and equal opportunities to opportunities, benefits, and outcomes of all people (especially, historically disadvantaged) (American Psychological Association, 2020). Nevertheless, GCUF has done relevant changes over the past years that allow a more inclusive environment. These are creating a Diversity and Inclusion Committee, introducing physical accessibility solutions, and introducing scholarships targeting the underrepresented (GCUF Annual Report, 2023).

The Importance of EDI in higher education

Universities are not just transmitters of knowledge, but they are forerunners in defining future leaders, norms, and values in the society. There are several reasons why it is important to promote EDI in the universities:

Academic Excellence:

Racially and ethnically diverse classrooms promote creative thinking and more expansive thinking, and lead to positive scholastic performance. It was created during a period of multiethnic efforts to have students of different ethnicities work together (Gurin et al., 2002; Milem, Chang & Antonio, 2005).

Social Justice:

The societies of many countries are not equal, and therefore, universities are expected

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to display equal opportunities and strong inclusion. This is to bring down the expression of feelings within a society to a realistic proportion (Fraser, 2009; hooks, 1994).

Policy Influence:
The delivery of the EDI values within the institutions can lead to the influence of the national education plans and government policies. ($8.73 billion in 2011; $8.77 billion in 2018; (Marginson, 2011; OECD, 2018))
Inconsistent implementation of policies due to administrative bottlenecks or lack of awareness (Rizvi & Naqvi, 2019; HEC Vision 2025)

Research questions

1. What are the views of students, faculty, and staff regarding equity, diversity and inclusion at GCUF?
2. What equity, diversity and inclusion initiatives currently exist at GCUF, and how fruitful are they?
3. How do demographic factors (e.g., gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status) influence experiences of diversity and inclusion at GCUF?

Objectives of the study
To explore the current state of equity, diversity and inclusion at Government College University Faisalabad (GCUF)

Literature review
Introduction and Conceptual Framework of EDI
Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) are matters that have become the focus of reform in higher education worldwide. The three interrelated terms are meant to address the inequalities in the system and guarantee a fair treatment, equal representation and involvement of everyone in academic institutions (Ahmed, 2012). Whereas the term equity equates to fair and reasonable access to resources and opportunities, the term diversity is used to refer to the variations between people with regard to race, ethnicity, gender, disability, and socioeconomic background. The term of inclusion underlines the proactive and continuous effort of taking care of individuals with various backgrounds in such a way that they are not the participants of the institutional environment; instead, they are fully engaged and appreciated as its members (Holliday, 2019).
EDI has been institutionalized in the context of universities across the world, and this is due to the instigation of policies that consider issues of underrepresentation, discrimination, and problems of access to academic success. It is no longer a practice with ethical values and a supplement but an activity to make academic excellence,

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innovation, and social justice possible (Stewart, 2017). This transformation is notably essential in the postcolonial society such as Pakistan where structural inequalities exist based on gender lines, classes, disability, as well as religious identification (Mirza, 2008).

Global Perspectives on Institutionalizing EDI

Most universities have tried hard to integrate EDI in their system all over the world. The EDI offices and strategic plans are a common occurrence in such countries as the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom (Smith, 2015). These are other attempts such as special recruitment, monetary compensation, easy infrastructure, and multicultural education. In the UK, the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) currently monitors student data by EDI lines, evidence of institutionalizing these values refugees that it operates on a systems level.

Institutions in North America, particularly in Canada, have been subjected to incorporative takeaways that have centered on social justice as well as frameworks of Indigenous reconciliations (Henry et al., 2017). In the same manner, universities in Australia and New Zealand have been able to respond to issues of settler colonialism and Indigenous marginalization through incorporating cultural competency training and such mechanisms like inclusive governance (Page, Trudgett, & Harrison, 2017).

Equity in Higher Education

Equity in high education is defined as compassing adequacy in access, participation and success of students especially students with a historical background of marginalization (OECD, 2010). Although equality means equal distribution of resources, equity embraces various needs and conditions of the students and distributes resources to match their differences (Zamudio et al., 2011). Equity is more than the physical access, but also the support systems, teaching inclusion and an agency of the student in the learning procedure (Gale & Parker, 2013). As noted in recent publications, the systemic inequalities in higher education, including gender issues, lack of access to socioeconomic factors, and ethnic discrimination, persist to affect learning institutions worldwide (UNESCO, 2021).

Diversity in Higher Education

Higher education diversity is the inclusion as well as representation of individuals having a variety of backgrounds, including and not restricted to ethnicity, gender, disability, socioeconomic status, religion, language, age (Smith, 2009). The intellectual atmosphere is enriched by diversity in an academic community, ability to learn socially and innovate by introducing diverse persons and experiences to the learning contexts (Gurin et al., 2002).

Inclusion in Higher Education

Inclusion in higher education also means making sure that there is no barrier to access, entry, participation, success, or any other aspect of learning in institutions of higher learning, irrespective of background and identity of the student. It goes further than demographic representation as it entails the deliberate breaking down of structural as well as cultural obstacles that do not allow substantial interaction to occur (Hockings, 2010; Strayhorn, 2012).

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Internationally, concern and prioritization of inclusive education has improved with the international frameworks, including the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Goal 4, which aims to achieve equitable and inclusive quality education and lifelong learning by 2030) (UNESCO, 2015). Practices of inclusion are aimed at the transformation of pedagogy, curriculum, school policies towards administrators and student services that may support different learning styles and needs (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

Theory Framework

Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) is a conceptualization of higher education that draws support on various interrelated theories. Critical race theory (CRT) is one of them. CRT looks into the ways systemic racism and power structures operate in the field of education and educational politics (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Born by Crenshaw (1991), intersectionality complements CRT by tracing how several identities simultaneously, including race, gender, and class, interplay to produce congruent systems of subordination. This theory is especially helpful in Pakistani context of higher education in which students need to deal with various marginalities at the same time.

Global Practices and Models

Institutions of higher education the world over have taken different approaches in promoting EDI. The United Kingdom also encourages inclusive leadership, curriculum design, and institutional change with the help of organizations such as Advance HE that support the delivery of the Race Equality Charter and the Athena SWAN set (Advance HE, 2020).

In Canada, EDI gets incorporated in the strategic planning of universities. Call to actions by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) has advised the institutions to incorporate Indigenous knowledge, employ Indigenous faculty and culturally acceptable support (Universities Canada, 2017).

The inclusion strategy of Australian Universities maintains that the Universities focus on Universal Design of Learning (UDL), disability services and First Nations students (Devlin & OShea, 2012).

Disability Inclusion in Higher Education

Inclusion of people with disability in institutes of higher learning is anchored on the basis of accessibility, equity, and right to education of all human beings irrespective of their physical, sensory, cognitive and mental impairments. In our world, the trend of inclusive education gained noteworthy value with the signing of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) of 2006. CRPD Article 24 brings out the importance of inclusive education in all levels to include higher education (UN, 2006). Nevertheless, in other developing nations such as Pakistan, accessibility of persons with disabilities (PWDs) to universities remains below average due to structural, cultural and institutional constraints (Qureshi et al., 2020; Aslam & Tariq, 2010).

Global Trends in Inclusive Higher Education

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Universities in countries such as the United States, Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom have come up with heavily formulated models of disability inclusion. Mostly such frameworks will be supported on legislation (such as Americans with Disabilities Act or the UK Equality Act) and complemented by institutional disability services, disabled-friendly infrastructure, and inclusive pedagogies (Shaw, 2009; Madriaga et al., 2010). Some of the best practices involve the offer of assistive technologies, extended time to take the exam, alternative forms of the material in the studies, inclusive curriculum design, as well as training the staff (UNESCO, 2020; HEC, 2021; Zubair & Raza, 2021).

Although there is an improvement in the world, there is a tendency of a deficiency in the tertiary institute representation by disabled students. WHO and World Bank (2011) indicated that a very small proportion of children with disabilities living in low-income countries receive education and those receiving it decrease to a much lower magnitude in higher levels of education. In those countries where the law is not enforced easily and socially aware, i.e. countries like Pakistan, India and Bangladesh, the situation is even worst.

Status of Disability Inclusion in South Asian Universities

The situation in South Asia paints a complicated story of inclusion of people with disabilities. In India, inclusive education is also required by the Persons with Disabilities Act (1995) and others, and is patchily realised. According to a study conducted by Singh (2017), although the admission policy is adjusted to include persons with disabilities in many Indian universities, most of them do not offer an adequate accessible infrastructure or inclusive instructional policies.

In Bangladesh, inclusive education is mostly confined to NGOs and special schools and has a little interconnection with the mainstream universities (Hossain, 2018). The countries of Nepal and Sri Lanka experience the same limitations as there are no funds and skilled personnel.

Pakistan remains behind in the practical application in higher learning despite being a signatory to CRPD with domestic laws regulating disability such as ICT Right of Persons with Disabilities Act (2020). Disability-disaggregated data are not collected by the majority of universities, and thus, it is hard to trace access and formulate its targeted support (Qureshi et al., 2020).

Research Methodology

This article investigates institutionalized realization of the principles of equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) at Government College University Faisalabad (GCUF). The research is devoted to the experiential data of those underrepresented and sidelined people, that is, female students, female non-teaching employees, individuals with disabilities, and religious/ethnic minority persons. The qualitative method was considered to examine the perceptions, difficulties, and suggestions associated with the EDI practices at GCUF.

Research Design

Since the research problem was exploratory and interpretive in nature, qualitative research design was used. Qualitative research is the most effective method to explore

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complicated social processes and obtain valuable insights regarding the experiences, beliefs, and perceptions of people (Creswell, 2013). Using in-depth interviews, this research is geared towards identifying the complex realities of the marginalized groups in a setting of a higher education institution.

Research Approach and Paradigm

This research has assumptions with the paradigm of the interpretivist, which pays attention to the significance of subjective meaning and context in interpreting human action (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The interpretivism approach is associated with the purpose of the research to learn the lived experiences of the participants in regards to EDI at GCUF

Population and Sampling

The participants of this research were the representatives of the marginalized circles in GCUF. They were: Female students, Female non-teaching personnel, Disabled (students and faculty), Religious and ethnic minority students and faculty. Purposive sampling was used to identify participants who could provide data that was rich in quality, relevance, and diversity in alignment with the study's objectives. The sampled population constituted 45 respondents that included 10 Female Students, 5 Female Non-Teaching Staff, 20 Students and Faculty with Disabilities (5 teacher and 15 students) and 10 Religious/Ethnic Minorities (8 students and 2 staff). Data saturation formed the basis of determining the sample size.

Data Collection Method

Semi-structured interviews were the best approach of collecting data. These interviews were more flexible in terms of exploring further answers of the participants yet having a structure since the themes have been previously determined. An interview protocol was prepared including the open-ended questions concerning: Admission process and accessibility to the institutions, financial aid and services, Representation in institutions and policymaking and leadership, Staff and peer behavior, Accessibility of infrastructure and learning materials, Training and experiences of receiving discrimination or helping others, Recommendations to improving EDI practices. The interviews were done in Urdu, basing on the comfortability of the participants and they took about 30- 45 minutes. The interviews were all audio-taped and then transcribed in Urdu and interpreted in English to be analyzed.

Data Analysis Method

Results were identified, analyzed and reported as patterns (themes) based on inductive thematic analysis. The six-step process that was used by Braun and Clarke (2006) was observed. Familiarization, Initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, producing the report Manual coding was used in order to continue to be close to the data and to make the analysis more culturally sensitive.

Intersecting Identities	Specific Compounded Challenge	Impact on Educational Experience	Relevant Theme from Chapter 4

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Rural + Visual Impairment	Technical hurdles with online admission system due to low digital literacy.	Difficulty accessing applications, anxiety, missed opportunities.	Admission Process
Disabled + Religious Minority	Quota ambiguity and lack of transparency in admissions for overlapping categories.	Confusion, perceived unfairness, emotional stress.	Admission Process
Disabled + Female	Double layer of patronizing attitudes (sympathy for disability + gendered assumptions about capabilities).	Feeling of pity over respect, reduced self-efficacy, disempowerment.	Equal Representation and Support
Female + Religious Minority	Cultural insensitivity (e.g., lack of recognition for religious holidays) combined with gendered assumptions in academic roles (e.g., male students expecting female peers to do "typing").	Sense of invisibility, discomfort, emotional burden, subtle exclusion.	Peer Behavior
Rural Background + Financial Constraints	Reliance on informal information channels for scholarships, compounded by lack of digital access to formal announcements.	Missed opportunities for financial aid, increased stress, potential dropout.	Financial Assistance
Visually Impaired + Lack of Inclusive Pedagogy	Teachers speaking while writing on board, using visual-only resources, without providing lecture notes.	Inability to access core course content, academic disadvantage, frustration.	Teacher Behavior
Mobility Impairment + Digital Inaccessibility	Pervasive physical barriers (no ramps, elevators) combined with inaccessible digital learning materials (scanned PDFs, no screen readers).	Severe limitation to campus navigation, unequal access to learning content, psychological toll.	Accessibility and Learning Support
Religious Minority + Lack of Cultural Pluralism in Curriculum	Majoritarian opinions dominating class discussions, curriculum not reflecting diverse cultural/religious viewpoints.	Feeling invisible, uncomfortable, reduced engagement.	Teacher Behavior

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In-depth Interpretation of Participant Experiences

In addition to the topical structuring of issues, a more detailed analysis of the stories of the interviewees shows the intense emotional and mental consequences of marginalization, the amazing ways in which achievements have been achieved with little means applied, and how students have survived and persevered despite all the flaws in the system.

Emotional labor became a serious burden to the marginalized students. They stated that they had to make constant efforts to demonstrate what they are able to do, to explain why they required something, or hide some of their identity so as not to be stigmatized or discriminated against. A disabled learner eloquently explained this when she said that they are forced to prove every day that they are above their condition to be treated as normal people. That constant strain of having to "over-perform" or "mask" themselves is mentally taxing, distracting precious brain power away from academic studies and even resulting in loss of interest or overworking. This shows how even though the students are actually in the university, the psychological alienation is felt greatly.

Without sound institutional support, students tended to establish yet informal coping mechanisms and extensively consulted with their peer groups. Mobility, note-taking or advising to find a way through the confusing administrative processes were common situations when peers were spontaneously helping. Informal WhatsApp groups and study circles were organized by the students and imperfect, often informal mentorships tended to provide the only means of finding a way through cracks in the system. This very dependence on the generosity of peers is laudable, but it highlights a vital fail point in the system: the university is failing to offer meaningful, institutional support. The strength and self- advocacy expressed by these students in learning to describe their rights and require accommodations is strong evidence to their agency. This individual strength should not however, be understood that it is an alternative to institutional responsibility, but is usually an indication of the inability of the university to establish the kind of inherently inclusive environment.

The off-the-cuff solutions presented by the participants during the interviews were highly specific and practical by their nature as they directly responded to the problems identified. As an example, the demand of the creation of the specific "Inclusive Admission Helpdesk" is an immediate reaction to the issues of technical obstacles and misunderstanding the quotas that occurred in the process of admission. The problem of lack of clear information about financial aid and the issue of confusion over eligibility on the part of the students is specifically dealt with through the demand of regular financial literacy workshops. Likewise, suggestions of formal advisory committees of marginalized students, required faculty training in unconscious bias, and end-to-end accessibility audits all have in common with lived experience of exclusion and seek to create systemic change. These rich and first-hand accounts would not have been allowed to be drawn using the qualitative methodology except through semi-structured interviews. These stories disclosed something amiss about discrimination, compassionate behavior, and systemic inequity that lacked in official

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reports or quantitative data and therefore, painting a more sophisticated perception of EDI at GCUF that is less human-based and more holistic. The strength of such stories is that they highlight the contradictions between what is preached and what really happens on a daily basis within institutions compelling a very good argument on why reforms should be done that are really responsive to the needs of students.

Summary of Findings

Based on interviews with 45 participants, this study concludes the following:
Admissions are not tailored to address social disadvantage or disability barriers.
Financial aid is inconsistently advertised and difficult to access.
Minority and disabled representation in governance is negligible.
Campus infrastructure and services remain largely inaccessible for disabled individuals.
Peer relationships are often sympathetic rather than empowering.
Faculty attitudes are uneven, and inclusive pedagogy is lacking.
Institutional policies on EDI are poorly communicated and understood.
Cultural resistance continues to impede sustainable institutional change.

Conclusion

Although GCUF has made strides in certain areas, the study shows that its attempts to institutionalize EDI are dispersed and lacking in funding. People with disabilities, women, and members of minority groups are still excluded in a variety of ways, including social, academic, structural, and physical.
It takes more than goodwill to realize GCUF's vision of inclusive excellence. It calls for a change in institutional culture, infrastructure improvements, capacity building, and policy reforms. All dimensions of university life must be shape with the core values of equity, diversity, and inclusion.

Final Remarks

Inclusion is no longer a choice; it is a necessity for higher education institutions aspiring to global standards. GCUF has the human capital, diversity, and national stature to become a leader in EDI reform. But this requires a shift from symbolic actions to structural commitments. Only then can the university serve as a genuine model of inclusive excellence in Pakistan and beyond.

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