

## **FIRST INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON HIGHER EDUCATION FOR THE DEAF IN PAKISTAN**

Ida Rieu Schools & Colleges for the blind and deaf in collaboration with NED University of Engineering and Technology organized an international conference on September 19, 2022 at the Karachi campus of Ida Rieu. The conference aimed to develop a strategy for the higher education of the deaf and hard of hearing individuals and providing them with greater opportunities of participation in the economic growth and development of Pakistan. This academic initiative reflects the determination and commitment of all stakeholders in expanding learning opportunities for the deaf community and resolving problems in this area.

The Conference was inaugurated by the Chief Minister of Sindh, Syed Murad Ali Shah. He pledged his government's full support for the education and training of blind and deaf students and to this end offered an enduring and meaningful partnership with the Ida Rieu Welfare Association for establishing a network of special education units throughout the province of Sindh. He paid tribute to the services of Ida Rieu Schools and ranked it as the topmost institution for Special Education in the country.

Ms Nadira Panjwani, President Ida Rieu Welfare Association spoke about the importance of encouraging and facilitating Special students in pursuit of higher education. She pointed out the lack of higher education opportunities for the deaf community and stressed the need to offer modified programs keeping in mind their limitations.

Vice-Chancellor of NED University of Engineering & Technology, Dr. Sarosh Hashmat Lodi said that NED University has always been at the forefront of educational development for the betterment of the country and its people. NED is keen to develop computer science education for the visually impaired community as this will increase their employment opportunities. Similarly, the university will consider developing a bachelor's program for the deaf and hard of hearing students for the promotion of inclusiveness in the workplace.

In his keynote address, Professor Lampros K. Stergioulas, the UNESCO chair in Artificial Intelligence and Data Science, emphasized the difficulties and limitations of developing higher educational institutions for individuals with impairments. According to the World Federation of the Deaf, nearly 70 million individuals worldwide are deaf. Children with hearing and sight impairments do not receive a basic education and consequently employment rate for them is very low. He added that the United Nations has established strategic development objectives for a prosperous and inclusive society. He stressed the need for outreach programs, bridging programs, retention programs and appropriate admission programs.

Technical sessions that were held concurrently with the inauguration event at the Ida Rieu campus attracted a sizable audience from all walks of life. There were 10 technical talks in 4 sessions, including topics such as Career opportunities for deaf people, Higher Education counselling for the deaf & hard of hearing students, Optimization of pedagogical methods for deaf learners in Computer Science, Making Higher Education inclusive - Interpretation & imperatives, Unmet need of higher educational facilities for differently abled persons, Empowerment of PwDs for social integration & economic self-reliance, Role of Computer Technology, Video Perception Study, Benchmarking Higher education for deaf in Pakistan and Interpersonal & Technological challenges.

Subject experts such as Khaula Rizwan (International Educational Consultant), Richard Geary (Founder/Director DEAF REACH) Zaigham Mahmood Rizvi (Consultant Housing Finance), Dr. Shagufta Shahzadi (Sheikh Zayed Islamic Center), Amima Sayeed (Director Continuing Education Programme Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture), Dr. Saman Hina (Associate Professor at NEDUET) and Dr. Raheela (Associate Professor at NEDUET) spoke at this conference and presented their thoughts. The sessions were chaired by Dr Muhammad Mubashir Khan (NED), Murtaza Jafri (IRWA), Dr Sadia Muniza (NED), Nazia Kamal (IRWA), Dr Hashim Raza Khan (NED), Dr Maria Waqas (NED) and Muzna Masood (IRWA). Accepted abstracts and papers are being published in MDPI proceedings.

Conference deliberations led to generation of many ideas. Career opportunities for deaf people were discussed. Jobs like social media manager, IT sector posts, audiology practitioners and trained guides for the visually impaired were recommended. It has been observed that computer related jobs are most suitable for deaf people due to minimal human interaction involved.

A counselling session for the deaf / hard of hearing students was held. Optimization of pedagogical methods for deaf learners in Computer Science, such as speech recognition, system design, specific technology choices and implementation approaches were discussed. A two phase, in-class evaluation was conducted to identify most effective approaches. Topics for student research projects, possibility of printing 3D textbooks, use of smart glasses for the blind and translating higher education contents into sign language were proposed. Use of various learning channels like Active Student Responding (Siri, Okay Google etc.) graphical models, pictures and diagrams were recommended.

Enabling work environment and workspaces were held essential for providing the required comfort level for workers with disabilities. Importance of training parents of deaf children was highlighted as they are the primary mentors to their children. Offering higher education to all special persons on free/subsidized basis was underscored as cost is often a major deterrent. Lack of facilities like sign language experts in higher learning institutions and the limited lexicon of PSL were held as major impediments in providing higher education to the deaf community in Pakistan.

In conclusion, the importance of hope and optimism at every stage of life was stressed by speakers.

Conference participants decided to form an Action Committee to follow up with the recommendations for promotion of higher education for the deaf that emerged from the deliberations of this conference and to actively engage with the decision makers to facilitate these objectives. Members of the Action Committee are:

- 1- Nadira Panjwani (IRWA)
- 2- Dr Saad Ahmed Qazi (NED)
- 3- Dr Majda Kazmi (NED)
- 4- Richard Geary (DEAF REACH)
- 5- Zaigham Rizvi (BOLTAY HUROOF)
- 6- Rubica Raza (IRWA)

The committee may be expanded by coopting subject experts as required.

At the closing session of the conference, Dr. Majida Kazmi (Associate Professor NED University) gave the closing speech. Ms. Rubica Raza spoke on behalf of Ida Rieu Welfare Association. Special Assistant to CM on Empowerment of persons with Disabilities, Mr. Sadiq Memon, presented shields and certificates to the authors, presenters and participants, and warmly acknowledged the long standing services of the Ida Rieu Schools & colleges for the special people of Pakistan.

Ms.Nadira Panjwani, President IRWA, Ms Rubica Raza, Member MC IRWA, Ms Muzna Masood, Principal Ida Rieu, Dr. Saad Ahmed Qazi, Dean, Faculty of Electrical & Computer Engineering, NED University and Dr. Majida Kazmi, Associate Professor of CISD, NED University, were the conference organizers. At 7:00 p.m., the conference was successfully closed. The conference link is [www.neduet.edu.pk/hedp2022](http://www.neduet.edu.pk/hedp2022)