



Implementation of Human Rights Education Elements in Higher Education Institutes among Teachers Educators: A Semi Systematic Desk Review (2021-2025)

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Submission: August 29, 2026 Revised: September 10, 2026 Accepted: September 26, 2026 Available Online: October 06, 2026 Keywords: Human Rights Education, Teacher Educators, Peace Education, Global Citizenship, Respect, Unity, Higher education, Pakistan Corresponding author: Zainab Noorani Email: Zainabnoorani66@gmail.com	Human Rights Education (HRE) is now recognized as an innovative educational approach with the power to foster and empower democratic participation, social cohesion and global responsibility. The study aims to critically explore the practices of HRE among teacher educators in higher education using a semi-systematic approach to the desk review of literature between 2021 and 2025. The study examines four thematic dimensions, namely peace, unity, global citizenship and respect, in the light of international and Pakistani context by keeping PICO framework in mind. Research shows that, overall HRE is conceptually included in policy- and curricular documents but its use is very ad hoc, unevenly distributed and mainly linked to the initiative of individual teachers. While peace and respect are relatively dominant practices, it is found that unity and global citizenship are underdeveloped due to a lack of coherent policy integration, pedagogical training and institutional constraints. The research discovers that there is a theory-practice gap and recommends reforms in a systemic way by restructuring the curriculum, improving teachers' professional education, and coordinating policies. The study brings some new insight into the increasingly debated issue on HRE and provides a critically synthesized, thematic and comparative knowledge about the practice of HRE in higher education.

Introduction

HRE has grown into a key and fundamental pillar of the current education systems in the aim to build awareness, values and behaviours towards dignity, equality and justice. Based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), HRE highlights the importance of education in fostering and respecting, tolerance and peaceful living in different societies. Within the context of higher education, teacher educators have a vital role in implementing these principles into pedagogical practices impacting future generations.

HRE has recently been described as a transformative pedagogical approach, as well as content based, where cognition, affect and behaviour are integrated (Osler & Starkey, 2010). Within the context of the developed world, however, the institutionalization of HRE is weakening, and the implementation of HRE in the contexts of developing countries and Pakistan is still inconsistent.

Research has shown that teacher trainers do not have an organized training programme or institutional support to support effective implementation of HRE (IFMSA 2022). In addition, there is reliance on implicit methods, with uncoordinated practices. This article aims to respond to these gaps by critically exploring HRE practices with regard to four thematic lenses.

Statement of the Problem

HRE is currently widely acknowledged as an essential element of higher education, for the promotion of democratic values, social justice and peaceful co-existence. International bodies like UNESCO place a significant focus on the importance of incorporating principles of human rights within education as it can contribute to building citizens who are responsible and aware of the world. Given

this recognition worldwide, it is still evident that there is a huge gap between policy and practice in the classroom, especially in universities.

Teacher education programs, in theory, should be expected to create teachers for the future who can inspire and encourage similar values as peace, unity, global citizenship and respect. In fact, current studies have shown that these values are largely discussed at a cursory level and are not integrated at a comprehensive level in pedagogy (Bajaj, 2022). Teacher educators often teach about HR implicitly, such as in general discussions or by providing moral guidance rather than in clear, measurable, and built-out HRE practices. This can lead to different interpretations and practices of HRE in institutions.

The issue which is one of the major problems is absence of pedagogical training to teachers with professional guidance. It has been observed that the incorporation of HR principles in their practical and meaningful work is not suitable, as many educators are not equipped to work with human rights in their lessons or curriculum in this way (Osler & Starkey, 2010). This leads to the neglect or limited development of important concepts like global citizenship and unity, and to the practice of more general values without further critical exploration, such as respect.

This becomes even more a matter of urgency in Pakistan's parlance. While in national policies education issues of tolerance, peace, and social cohesion are identified, these are only partially and inconsistently applied at the university level (Rashid et al., 2023). Limited evidence of curriculum frameworks or institutional strategies to promote Human Rights Education. This leads to a failure to align policy with teaching practice in Higher Education.

Moreover, most previous studies either analyze the policy or offer general address to value education, paying less attention to teacher educators' actual classroom practices. Moreover, there are no recent, well-argued reviews to provide an overview of how HRE is being implemented, both globally and nationally, with a focus on core concepts of HRE strived for, like 'peace' and 'respect'. This leaves a gap in knowledge about how deep, consistent, and effective HRE is/lies in higher education. HRE as something theoretical, not a pedagogy. If experiential and participatory pedagogies are excluded, students might not acquire skills and attitudes that allow them to transfer the concepts learned to practical scenarios. These constraints the transformative potential of HRE and makes it a passive learning experience.

Hence the need to critically look into the practice of HRE by teacher educators in Higher Education Institutions. Gap analysis about what has been done and might still be done in each of the key thematic areas are peace, unity, global citizenship and respect can help to inform curriculum design, teacher training and policy implementation.

This study is significant in highlighting the lack between theory and practice as well as the need for more effective and structured pedagogical approaches in HRE. The study also emphasizes the importance of teacher education in addressing the future generations of teachers in promoting HR values in society, as it is the responsibility of teacher educators.

Research Objective

- To analyse the HRE practices among university teachers at higher education

Research Question

- What are the HRE practices among university teachers at higher education?

Theoretical Framework

For this study, these three theoretical frameworks were adopted:

1. Transformative Learning Theory

The theory of transformative learning is based on a critical reflection and perspective change that aligns with HRE's aim on social justice and sensitizing to better ethical awareness.

2. Critical Pedagogy

Paulo Freire's Critical Pedagogy establishes the role of education as a way of empowerment and social change; thus, Freire's pedagogy is in alignment with the concepts of equity and human dignity that are represented in HRE.

3. Global Citizenship Education Framework

Human rights, sustainability and intercultural understanding are part of the UNESCO GCE framework identified as relevant skills for the 21st century.

Peace as HRE Element International Perspective

Based on the latest studies globally (2021–2025), it became evident that higher education campuses are increasingly framing peace as an alternative model of HRE, as a pedagogical practice that is transformative and participatory, and emphasizes empathy, critical thinking, and civic engagement. According to systematic reviews, universities have frameworks for incorporating the dimension of peace education into the curriculum through interdisciplinary education and dialogue pedagogy, but there is still a need to make efforts to implement peace education that are both cohesive and dependent on the commitment of institutions and the capacity and competence of teachers (Heretape & Escarlos, 2026; UNESCO, 2023). Empirical evidence also reveals these positive attitudes and awareness of peace education among students, and indicates that there is a high correlation between awareness and participation in peace building practices (Camarista, 2025). But the theory-practice gap remains as an impediment to peace education as an action and lived practice rather than a theoretical discussion of HR, on a conceptual level.

Peace as HRE Element in Pakistan (National Perspective)

Recent studies indicate that peace as an element of HRE is policy supported but under operationalization in classroom practice and may simply be a hidden agenda of moral/civic education in the Pakistani context of higher education. Studies show that teacher training programmes focus on values such as tolerance and coexistence; approaches based on systematic peace education, experiential learning and critical discussion, however, are largely lacking. Thus, the achieved results are only related to awareness in the surface and not to transformative and peace building skills, revealing a gap between national educational goals and institutional action. These results are a representation of the general problems faced in terms of aligning the curriculum, teacher training, and contextualization of the practices of HRE in Pakistani Universities (UNESCO-aligned frameworks, Rashid et. al., 2023).

The Unity as HRE Element International Perspective

The recent literature (2021-2025) in the field of HRE defines unity as a practice that will help foster social cohesion, inclusion and intercultural understanding in a context of higher education where diversity is becoming increasingly complex. There is evidence that such unity is symbolic and non-transformative; strategies that elevate unity like collaboration during learning, engaging in inclusive curriculum and multicultural engagement practices can be non-critical and non-critical thinking attempts to work with structural inequalities and diversity challenges (Banks, 2022; UNESCO, 2023). Given the empirical results, one might conclude that the pupils understand unity and belonging though the absence of this two-fold sense of collective identity and social engagement, resulting from both institutional and pedagogical limitations, points to difference between theory and practice.

Unity as HRE Element in Pakistan (National Perspective)

National integration, social harmony and cultural cohesion have emerged as key markers of unity in the discourse of policy and curricular intentions within the Pakistan context. But there is evidence that at the university level, unity can be discussed via generic narratives, thus its impact is not actually manifested in critical and inclusive pedagogy (Rashid et al., 2023). Teacher educators focus not so much on the unity from a participatory or dialogic approach but rather from a moral approach, which leaves students with a superficial level of understanding. This points towards the need for such integrated approaches which combine unity with diversity, equity and human rights practices in higher education.

Global Citizenship HRE Element International Perspective

One of the most central themes of human rights education (HRE) today is the notion of global citizenship, which links it to sustainable development (SD) and globalization. As a result, recent research (2021-2025) underlines how critical pedagogy, interdisciplinary studies, and experiential learning are increasingly practiced in higher education institutions to raise awareness and promote action for global citizenship; although its use is still uneven and, in some cases, depoliticized (Andreotti, 2021; UNESCO, 2023). The findings of the research indicate that there is a gap between the theories and the practice of education for global citizenship, while students acquire knowledge about issues around the globe, but limited opportunities for critical engagement and transformative learning do not offer the chance for active global citizenship skills.

Global Citizenship as HRE Element in Pakistan (National perspective)

Global citizenship in HRE within the framework of Pakistan is relatively new and underdeveloped concept in the field of higher education. Research shows that some components of global consciousness and civic involvement exist in curricula, but they are not explicitly articulated in the context of the concept of global citizenship (Rashid et al., 2023). Teacher educators may not have the background or the teaching materials in hand to relate local realities with the issues of human rights in the global context and thus may not be able to provide much exposure of their students into critical global perspectives. Therefore, what is referred to as global citizenship education is principally theoretical, lacking in any type of accountability or engagement with initiatives to foster international responsibility.

Respect as HRE Element International Perspective

Respect is regarded as one of the basic values of HRE and it is the basis of dignity, equality and mutual understanding. Current international studies (2021-2025) point to respect as a value that is often implicitly taught in higher education through the sense of classroom norms, in ethical discussions, and by means of inclusive practices (Osler & Starkey, 2010). The transformative power of respect as an HRE element is provided as limited, given that students are shown to have a respectful attitude, but lack in critical thinking on issues of discrimination, power relations and human rights violations.

Engaging with Respect as HRE Element in Pakistan (National Perspective)

In Pakistan, respect is a constant factor of HRE and often related to cultural, religious and social respect. But its teaching tends to be mostly normative and behaviorist in nature with limited connections to wider frames of human rights (Rashid et al., 2023). Teacher educators value discipline and encourage students to have respect, but there is little discussion about rights, equality and social justice, which limits students' understanding. This shows that although practiced, it still misses the important aspect of respect being an important aspect for meaningful HRE.

Research Methodology

This investigation was conducted by using semi-systematic desk review method in order to scrutinize the practices of HRE among the teacher educators in higher education in the themes of peace, unity, global citizenship and respect. Because of its flexibility in synthesizing literature from different fields and bodies of work, and of maintaining analytical thoroughness, the semi-systematic review was deemed appropriate in, for example, emerging and/or interdisciplinary fields such as HRE. Studies published from 2021 to 2025 were selected and reviewed to identify the latest trends, practices and gaps. One caveat of this approach is that it relies on what is already published, and this may exclude local/ unpublished practices and/or local institutional contexts.

Population and Sampling

The population of the study consisted of published research articles, policy documents and empirical research on Human Rights Education in higher education settings globally as well as Pakistan. For the selection of relevant studies that would explicitly consider HRE practices or its thematic elements, a purposive sampling technique was used. Exclusion criteria are studies published outside the period of interest and studies not directly related to the topics related to higher education and HRE; inclusion criteria are peer-reviewed articles, reports and studies published from 2021 to 2025. Purposive sampling was used to ensure that the sample would provide findings that were relevant, in-depth and this may have led to selection bias and limits the generalizability of the findings to all higher education settings.

Data Collection Instrument

The main instrument for data collection was the structured data extraction sheet/review matrix which was designed to structure and maximally utilize the selected studies. Important elements of the matrix were author(s), study context (global/local), research design (PICO elements), HRE themes peace, unity, global citizenship and respect. This is a tool used for comparative analysis and thematic synthesis among the studies. The use of secondary data and interpretation by the researcher may, however, affect the analysis, and caution is needed to have a well validated data and to reflect the findings critically to ensure credibility and consistency in results.

Data Analysis

Data analysis of the selected studies included in the semi-systematic desk review was done using thematic analysis type of analysis. Comprehensive targeted search of relevant literature (2021-2025) with four predefined themes of Human Rights Education – peace, unity, global citizenship, and respect, has been done, and the literature was coded accordingly. The information manifested from different studies was extracted and organized on a structured review matrix to be compared between global and Pakistani studies. The analysis aimed to derive generalizations on specific trends, gaps and practices observed in HRE in higher education. However, in so doing, the analysis was based on secondary data and can be limited by interpretation and potential bias which must be critically considered during synthesis.

Findings of the Study

The results showed that peace as an element of the HRE is acknowledged in the area of higher education, but is not practiced in many cases, and it is largely theoretical. International research indicates that support for peace education is encouraged through dialogue-based learning and participatory approaches, but the extent of peace education seems to rely significantly on institutional support and teacher capacity (UNESCO, 2023; Bajaj, 2022). Peace, primarily, is talked of in general terms of tolerance and harmony in Pakistan, and is not usually structured in pedagogic practice, so it is difficult to see how it could become a transformative human rights skill (Rashid et al., 2023).

The findings show that unity is widely highlighted in the global and local context in terms of social cohesion and inclusion. But, it is usually given in a superficial manner and by connecting to moral learning instead of engaging with issues of diversity and equity. Banks (2022) emphasizes global studies under multicultural education foster unity, but do not focus on the issue of structural inequalities. In the same manner, in Pakistan there is a relationship of unity with national integration though the teaching method is not inclusive and participatory and therefore the students have limited understanding of unity (Rashid et al., 2023).

The findings indicate an uneven global citizenship, which is not yet sufficiently developed and implemented as an element of HRE. Internationally, it is integrated via interdisciplinary curricula and critical pedagogy and still too often, its impact in local contexts is limited to raising awareness only (Andreotti, 2021; UNESCO, 2023). There was no discussion about global citizenship and teacher educators have difficulties to focus globally on human rights while addressing issues of local contexts in Pakistan. This leads to low involvement of the students with the responsibility of the globe and critical thinking (Rashid et al., 2023).

The findings reveal respect as the most integral component of Human Rights Education in both settings. It works often without being noticed in classroom, ethics and culture values (Osler & Starkey, 2010). But respect is frequently considered as a simple moral virtue and not a key human rights consideration about equality, dignity and justice. In Pakistan, the concept of respect is primarily imparted through traditional and discipline-centred approaches, limiting students' ability to grasp its importance in the advocacy of human rights in the country (Rashid, et al., 2023).

The findings show that relating to HRE practices in higher education, they are not systematically applied in all of the chosen themes. At the global level, universities show relatively high level of integration of HRE, in terms of interactive pedagogy, interdisciplinary approach, policy alignment, especially in respect of peace and global citizenship. But it was noticed the gap between theory and practice was constant limiting the consequences of a transformative HRE.

By contrast, the Pakistani context is implicit and fragmented, with aspects of respect and unity tacitly upheld, with less structured HRE programming and more traditional/moral approaches to teaching. Themes such as 'global citizenship' and 'peace' are still underdeveloped and have little practical dimension, largely through inadequate teacher training and lacking concrete implementation in the curriculum.

The study states that on the global and local platform, HRE is often understood more as value-based knowledge and not as a knowing through experience or skill-oriented process. Consequently, in the classroom students are aware but not necessarily trained to participate in the real world of human rights. The overall findings, it has been concluded that knowledge in higher education and overall HRE needs to be improved through structured pedagogical approaches, teacher development and a congruence between policy and practice.

Discussion

Based on the results of this research, the conclusion is that there is a gap in the conceptualization and application of HRE in higher education institutions especially regarding the four key themes namely peace, unity, global citizenship and respect. This is in line with world literature showing that HRE has a tendency to be clearly defined in policy documents, while not being demonstrated or practiced on the ground level in the classroom (Bajaj, 2022; UNESCO, 2023).

The study shows that peace education is recognized internationally, yet, it involves a degree of unevenness on its implementation. International literature indicates that participatory, dialogic and experiential pedagogies fostering critical reflection and conflict transformation skills are the most effective ways of conducting peace education in an effective manner (Andreotti, 2021). In practice, however, it is often limited to awareness raising and doesn't get to the point of transformative learning. This addresses the current findings that peace is frequently taught indirectly – if it is taught at all in higher education institutions even if there is no formal structure of HRE. In Pakistan, it is even more apparent, as peace education comes into the vocabulary of the Pakistani society mostly under the umbrella of moral education than critical pedagogy, indicating the weak institutionalization of HRE in Pakistan (Rashid et al., 2023).

The idea of unity as an HRE element is a prevalent concept in the field of global education, especially under the umbrella of multicultural and inclusive education programmes (Banks, 2022). But the literature points that interestingly, although unity is a key factor in the education space it is treated as a desirable norm and not as an issue that directs research and study. This stands in contrast to the conclusions of this study, indicating that unity is usually expressed in terms of social harmony with a failure to account for structural inequalities or pedagogies that take diversity into consideration. The orientation towards national cohesion is further strengthened in Pakistan, where there is not enough critical response to difference and inclusion (Rashid et al., 2023). Thus, the unity remains a concept, and not transformative one.

The importance of GCE as part of HRE in the 21st century is increasingly recognized in terms of sustainability, and awareness of human rights and global interdependency (Andreotti, 2021; UNESCO, 2023). But critical readings highlight that GCE is frequently

superficial with a focus on knowledge acquisition, but not critical global engagement. This research's results resonate well with this critique as the study shows that there is a lack of global citizenship in both global and Pakistani higher education (HEIs). It is still largely not included in formal learning curriculum in Pakistan, and there is a lack of strategies for teacher educators to link human rights issues at the international level with these at the local level so that learners can also develop their sense of responsibility in this context and critical consciousness (Rashid et al., 2023).

Respect was the highest number of HRE elements practiced consistently in both contexts. There is international literature attesting that respect can often be woven into the classroom norms, ethics and interpersonal behavior of higher learning institutions. (Osler & Starkey, 2010). But there is a scholarly debate that it is often used more as a broad moral attribute and not a critical human rights concept related to equality, dignity and justice. The findings of this study corroborate this view and indicate that in the context of respect, there is a lack of linkage to larger human rights structures. But in Pakistan, respect is mostly taught via the traditional didactic ways that in turn reduce the chances of it as part of HRE (Rashid et al., 2023).

This trend is common to all of the four themes: while being conceptually robust, HRE in higher education is pedagogically weak. International educational systems stress transformative learning, critical thinking and participatory pedagogics; however, empirical teaching practice looks more like traditional classroom teaching with the teacher as a prime actor. In fact, a recent study states that there is disconnect between the effectiveness of HRE and higher education curriculum content and that impactful teacher preparation, institutional supports and pedagogical innovation are also necessary (Bajaj, 2022; UNESCO, 2023).

The situation of HRE in higher education seems to be still transitional. It is shifting from a values discourse to a competency one, however, the latter is still limited in its scope, and no effective implementation is possible in the developing world like Pakistan due to structural and institutional restrictions.

Conclusion

This research focused on critical examination of practices of HRE among teacher educators in higher education with the emphasis on four key issues; peace, unity, global citizenship and respect. The overall research shows that the recognition of HRE in the policy and theoretical aspects is well recognized yet the implementation in higher education is still disjointed, inconsistent and superficial. It is found that in both the international and Pakistani scenarios that HRE is more apparent in terms of values and less in terms of a defined, competency-based, pedagogical approach.

There is a relative presence of respect and unity in the practices of classroom teaching, but it is imparted through traditional and moral upbringing, and not primarily in critical human rights-oriented pedagogy. By contrast, peace and global citizenship have not been systematically integrated, and are instead central to international agendas like UNESCO's education agendas (UNESCO, 2023; Akram, Ahmad, & Sewani, 2024). This imbalance indicates that while some aspects of human rights education are well developed and are being successfully encouraged and disseminated in higher education, others are absent and poorly understood or have not been taken seriously in the sphere of higher education.

Further, the overall issue of a theory-practice dichotomy, flagged by both policy and literature as the need for transformative, inclusive, and participatory education, but existing as largely teacher-input-centric, content-driven is also noted. This aligns with previous studies which highlight the lack of effective implementation of HRE policies and anticipate that such good intentions would not be reflected in the classroom unless teachers received suitable training and institutional support (Bajaj, 2022; Osler & Starkey, 2010). This is exacerbated in Pakistan due to curriculum restrictions and inadequate support for teacher educators in terms of systemized teacher professional development (Rashid et al., 2023; Ramzan et al., 2025).

Overall, there is inference from this study that HRE in higher education is in a developing and transitional stage with awareness of human rights values and without meaningful pedagogical integration. For HRE to be effective, there is a need to shift from awareness towards structured, experiential and critical pedagogies enabling students to be actively involved in peace building, inclusive practices, global responsibility and human dignity (Noorani et al., 2026; Faheem et al., 2025).

To enhance HRE in higher education, systemic change is necessary as it provides the foundation for the institutionalization of human right principles in teaching and learning, the continuous training of teacher educators and curriculum redesign. But if these changes are not realized, HRE will remain conceptual and not transformative and thus its potential to produce socially responsible, globally aware graduates would continue to remain curtailed.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the researcher made recommendations, which is based on a desk review of the four core HRE themes in higher education, namely, peace, unity, global citizenship and respect.

- In this regard, universities and any higher education institution should move away from awareness and top them up with integrated programs of Peace Education where more emphasis is put on conflict resolution, dialogue and critical reflection.
- The training of teacher educators should raise them to the level of experiential and participatory pedagogies (e.g., role play, simulation or case-based learning), enabling peace to becoming a competency rather than a concept.
- Even if peace education is a tacit or alternative value, it should be made explicit in teacher education courses and incorporated into the educational program and coursework.
- There is a need to revamp the curricula of universities in order to encourage and champion inclusive and diversity responsive pedagogies, which would guarantee unity intertwined with equity and pluralism and respect for differences, and not simply with national cohesion.
- It is important that teacher educators are supported so that they can use intercultural pedagogical approaches that promote critical approaches to diversity rather than superficial or moral approaches.
- University policies need to support the creation of inclusive classrooms which respond to issues of discrimination, bias and social inclusion.
- There is a specific need to tailor teacher training with the setting up of an appropriate training module as well as on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and global human rights frameworks.
- Teacher development methods must increase teacher educators' competence in linking issues with global challenges so that teachers have a critical global awareness.
- Greater collaboration, exchange visits, and the development of digital learning platforms between higher education institutions should be encouraged to foster experiential global interactions at the HE level.
- Respect should be rethought as a critical concept of human rights which relates to dignity, equality and justice in teaching practice.
- To further explore the concept of respect, teacher educators need to incorporate critical discussion of discrimination, power relationships and human rights violations.
- The shift in classroom practices needs to be done from discipline-based practices to rights-based participatory learning environments, in which students are encouraged to voice and take actions.
- HRE must be integrated in to teacher education programs on a systematic basis as an integral part of education and certainly not as a hidden or informal part of teacher education programs.
- Continuous professional development (CPD) training programmes for teacher educators on HRE pedagogy should be created at Higher Education institutions.
- The development of national HRE framework for the institutions of higher education in Pakistan on the basis of UNESCO is needed for consistency and quality.
- The approach to teaching and learning should change from an educator-centred teaching manner to participatory, reflective and experiential learning.
- The theory and practice gap needs to be largely bridged at the level of policy makers and academic institutions and should be accompanied by effective monitoring and evaluation of HRE implementation.

There is a need for more empirical studies to examine the effect of the student outcomes and classroom effectiveness of HRE in many higher education contexts.

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