

THE ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES IN PROMOTING COLLECTIVISM, INCLUSIVITY, AND SOCIAL HARMONY AMONG YOUTH IN PAKISTAN

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of universities in fostering collectivism, inclusivity, and social harmony among youth in Pakistan, a country defined by significant ethnic, religious, linguistic, and cultural diversity. Drawing on a qualitative design integrating systematic literature review, institutional policy analysis, and semi-structured interview data, the study investigates how higher education institutions serve as platforms for intercultural dialogue, peacebuilding, and the cultivation of shared civic values. The analysis covers curricular innovations, student engagement practices, administrative frameworks, and faculty roles across six Pakistani universities, each representing a distinct provincial or federal context: the University of Punjab (Punjab), Lahore University of Management Sciences (Punjab), Quaid-i-Azam University (Islamabad Capital Territory), University of Sindh (Sindh), University of Peshawar (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa), and University of Balochistan (Balochistan). While considerable promise exists, entrenched structural inequalities, political pressures, and a historically fragmented curriculum constrain the transformative potential of Pakistani higher education. The study concludes with recommendations for policy reform and pedagogical innovation.

INTRODUCTION

Pakistan is a country of extraordinary cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and religious complexity. Its population of more than 225 million, distributed across four provinces and Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan, speaks dozens of languages, adheres to multiple religious traditions and sectarian affiliations, and carries the deep imprints of colonial partition, regional conflict, and inter-communal tension (Government of Pakistan, 2023). The persistence of social fragmentation, which is rooted in uneven development, political exclusion, and the instrumental mobilisation of identity, constitutes one of the most pressing governance challenges confronting the state. In this context, the question of how institutions can cultivate shared values, mutual respect, and a sense of collective responsibility and citizenship among

the younger generation acquires particular urgency.

Universities occupy a distinctive position in this landscape. Unlike schools, whose catchment areas tend to be locally homogeneous, universities draw students from geographically, economically, and culturally disparate backgrounds into shared residential and intellectual spaces. In principle, they are sites where the encounter with difference can be structured and made productive. The potential of higher education to act as an engine of social cohesion is widely recognised (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Giroux, 2014; UNESCO, 2021), and Pakistani scholars have increasingly interrogated the specific conditions under which this potential is realised or frustrated (Durrani & Halai, 2018; Rind & Malin, 2023; Meer et al., 2025).

This paper contributes to that body of work by examining the mechanisms through which Pakistani universities promote collectivism, inclusivity, and social harmony among youth. It proceeds through four interlocking lenses including, i) the theoretical foundations of collectivism and social cohesion in higher education; ii) the policy and institutional frameworks governing Pakistani universities; iii) the curricular, co-curricular, and pastoral practices through which social integration is pursued; and iv) the structural challenges that impede this work. Empirical grounding is provided by case studies of six institutions selected to represent each of Pakistan's four provinces, the federal capital, and a private sector exemplar. The paper situates these findings within South Asian regional scholarship and a wider comparative literature and concludes with recommendations for policy and practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Collectivism, Social Cohesion, and Higher Education

Collectivism, understood as the prioritisation of group solidarity, interdependence, and the common good over narrow self-interest, has a long theoretical lineage in social psychology and cultural studies (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005; Triandis, 1995). Cross-cultural research consistently ranks Pakistan among highly collectivist societies, a disposition shaped by Islamic ethical frameworks emphasising communal responsibility, extended kinship networks, and the moral salience of *jama'at* (collective belonging). Yet collectivist cultural norms do not automatically translate into inclusive civic behaviour. Group loyalty can be bounded by caste, sect, tribe, or ethnicity in ways that deepen rather than bridge social divisions (Dragolov et al., 2016; Chan et al., 2006).

Social cohesion, as employed here, refers to the quality of social cooperation within a collectivity, expressed through resilient social relationships, positive emotional connectedness, and shared orientation toward the common good (Dragolov et al., 2016). Its core dimensions include interpersonal trust, tolerance of difference, civic participation, and the absence of institutionalised

discrimination (Chan et al., 2006; Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017). The relationship between education and social cohesion is not linear, researchers argue that poorly designed institutions can reinforce prejudice and stratification (Durrani & Halai, 2018; Davies, 2010). However, when deliberately structured to promote intercultural encounter, critical dialogue, and equitable participation, universities function as laboratories for social integration (Banks, 2004; Bringle & Hatcher, 1996).

Research in social psychology further links collectivist cultural orientations to prosocial behaviours including forgiveness and restorative conflict resolution. Karremans and Aarts (2007) demonstrated that collectivist dispositions are associated with a stronger inclination to repair damaged social relationships, suggesting that universities in collectivist societies can leverage existing value orientations toward reconciliation. This points to the potential of culturally grounded pedagogy, such as drawing on Islamic ethical frameworks and indigenous traditions of community solidarity, to reinforce rather than displace local values of collective responsibility (Firdaus & Suwendi, 2025).

The South Asian Regional Context

South Asia presents an instructive regional context for these dynamics. India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Pakistan share legacies of colonial partition, ethno-religious conflict, and educational inequalities that have complicated universities' social integration mission (Halai & Durrani, 2018). Research from India documents the reproduction of caste-based exclusions within university spaces despite constitutional affirmative action provisions (Deshpande, 2013). In Sri Lanka, the militarisation of higher education during the civil war eroded inter-ethnic trust on campuses (Bush & Saltarelli, 2000). In Pakistan, ethno-nationalist tensions, particularly in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), have periodically transformed university campuses into arenas of contestation. A Punjabi-dominated distribution of resources in curriculum, faculty hiring, and institutional funding has historically generated institutional alienation among students

from smaller provinces (Naseer, 2015; Meer et al., 2025). Studies on KP following the conflict in the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (now merged districts) found that while universities provided crucial post-conflict stability, their contribution to peacebuilding was constrained by chronic underfunding and the subordination of educational policy to security imperatives (Naveed, 2018; Siddiqui et al., 2021). These findings underscore that the social integration function of universities is not automatic but is heavily conditioned by the macro-political environment in which they operate (Halai & Durrani, 2018).

Inclusive Curricula and Peace Education

Harris and Morrison (2003) argue that effective peace education requires not merely conveying information about tolerance but creating learning environments in which students practise dialogue, empathy, and non-violent conflict resolution. The United States Institute of Peace's review of nine peace education initiatives in Pakistan found that while several programmes achieved behavioural change, their sustainability was undermined by reliance on foreign funding and the absence of systemic policy support (USIP, 2017). Comparative scholarship from Saudi Arabia (Alzahrani, 2023), Jordan (Al-Makhamreh, 2020), and Indonesia (Firdaus & Suwendi, 2025) documents the positive effects of embedding moderation and pluralism within university curricula on students' tolerance and civic engagement, design principles with clear transferability to the Pakistani context. In Pakistan itself, Durrani and Halai (2018) found that curricular reforms ostensibly aimed at social cohesion were frequently undercut by content that continued to privilege particular religious and ethnic narratives, reproducing the divisions the reforms were intended to dissolve.

Institutional Policy, Student Engagement, and Faculty Roles

Research consistently highlights the centrality of institutional policy to the social integration mission of universities. Anti-discrimination codes, grievance mechanisms, targeted scholarships, and psychological support services create the structural

conditions under which meaningful inter-group engagement becomes possible (Rind & Malin, 2023; Hinduja & Fakir, 2023). The HEC Vision 2025 framework commits to increasing enrollment through inclusiveness and targeting historically underprivileged groups, providing a normative basis for institutional action (HEC, 2017). Beyond policy, co-curricular engagement is equally significant. Cultural festivals, debate clubs, community service, and sports have been shown to build bridging social capital. These are considered as the bonds that connect individuals across social boundaries (Putnam, 2000; Thomas, 2019). The Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies' stakeholder consultations at Shah Abdul Latif University, Khairpur, identified universities as central to empowering youth and promoting multidimensional social engagement (PIPS, 2025). Faculty roles are equally critical. Research finds that training in inclusive pedagogy and conflict sensitivity significantly improves classroom environments for cross-cultural dialogue, and that institutional culture is shaped most powerfully by the visible commitments of senior leadership (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Siddiqui et al., 2021).

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design suited to the interpretive complexity of its research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Three data sources are drawn upon. First, a systematic review of peer-reviewed literature on universities, social cohesion, and peace education, with particular focus on Pakistan and South Asia, was conducted across JSTOR, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. Second, institutional policy documents, including the HEC Vision 2025 framework and publicly available programme descriptions from selected universities, were analysed to identify formal commitments relevant to social harmony. Third, semi-structured interviews with faculty members and student representatives from six selected institutions provided primary data on implementation and impact.

Institutions were selected through purposive sampling to ensure geographic, institutional, and socio-political diversity. The University of Punjab

and LUMS represent Punjab, Quaid-i-Azam University (QAU) is the premier federal research institution, the University of Sindh represents Pakistan's second most populous province, the University of Peshawar represents KP, and the University of Balochistan represents a conflict-affected periphery. Data were subjected to thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006), with iterative coding to identify patterns related to intercultural dialogue, inclusive education, community engagement, and structural challenges. Triangulation across data sources and member-checking with interview participants strengthened interpretive credibility. The analysis was further informed by Lederach's (1997) 4Rs framework, redistribution, recognition, representation, and reconciliation, as applied to the Pakistani context by Halai and Durrani (2018).

CASE STUDIES OF SELECTED PAKISTANI UNIVERSITIES

Quaid-i-Azam University (Islamabad, ICT)

QAU in Islamabad draws students from all four provinces, Azad Kashmir, and Gilgit-Baltistan, giving it a uniquely national character. Community service and volunteerism are the primary vehicles for social cohesion: interdisciplinary student groups design and implement outreach projects addressing education access, health awareness, and environmental issues, requiring collaboration across ethnic and disciplinary boundaries. The institution's policy framework includes provisions for equal participation of marginalised groups in student governance. It is a feature credited with giving political voice to students from Balochistan and KP who might otherwise remain invisible in campus life. Faculty investment in inclusive leadership and conflict sensitivity training reflects an understanding that institutional culture requires deliberate cultivation rather than passive emergence. However, resource constraints create a structural gap between policy commitments and programmatic capacity, and the dependence of community engagement on individual faculty initiative rather than institutional mandate creates fragility.

University of Punjab (Lahore, Punjab)

The University of Punjab, founded in 1882, is one of the oldest and largest institutions in Pakistan, reflecting the social heterogeneity of Lahore. Annual events such as Unity Week bring together students from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds to share traditions, music, and cuisine, providing structured occasions for inter-group contact. Student organisations convene intercultural dialogue sessions incorporating conflict resolution and role-playing exercises, while faculty-led mentorship programmes pair students across regional and ethnic lines for sustained cross-cultural engagement. The university's administrative response to inter-ethnic tensions includes mediation committees and conflict resolution protocols, institutionalising grievance management and signalling zero tolerance for discriminatory conduct. Collaborative community service, from literacy campaigns to environmental conservation, strengthens interpersonal bonds through common purpose, consistent with contact theory conditions (Allport, 1954; Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). A persistent limitation is that co-curricular activities tend to attract a self-selecting minority, while the integration of social harmony themes into formal curricula remains uneven and faculty-dependent.

Lahore University of Management Sciences (Lahore, Punjab)

LUMS occupies a distinctive position by virtue of its private character, selective admissions, and explicit institutional commitment to liberal education and social justice. Themes of human rights, pluralism, and civic responsibility are embedded across multiple academic disciplines, meaning engagement with Pakistan's social complexities is curricular rather than merely extracurricular. Regular panel discussions, debate forums, and international student exchange programmes create a layered environment for intercultural learning. Robust support services, including well-staffed counselling centres and effective grievance mechanisms, create a campus climate in which difficult conversations across lines of difference are possible. Faculty development programmes emphasising conflict

resolution and diversity management enable proactive responses to campus tensions (Meer et al., 2025). The principal limitation is compositional. The LUMS student body tends to be economically privileged and urban, raising questions about the institution's reach and the transferability of its model to less-resourced contexts.

University of Sindh (Jamshoro, Sindh)

The University of Sindh, established in 1947, serves a province of immense linguistic and ethnic diversity, being home to Sindhis, Urdu-speaking muhajir communities, Baloch, and various other minority groups, in addition to bearing the social imprints of rural-urban migration, feudal land structures, and periodic inter-ethnic tension. The university has pursued intercultural cohesion through a Sindhi cultural studies curriculum that situates the province's diversity as a resource rather than a problem, and through an active annual cultural festival circuit that draws student participation across ethnic lines. Community engagement programmes, including legal awareness campaigns and rural literacy initiatives, have created cross-community partnerships, while student societies devoted to Sufi traditions, which historically carry an inclusivist, syncretic ethos, have offered an indigenous platform for interfaith dialogue. Research on civic engagement in Pakistani public universities identified Sindh as among the provinces where cultural festivals and artistic initiatives are relatively more active than in security-affected regions (Siddiqui et al., 2021). Challenges include a governance environment characterised by political interference in university administration, significant gender disparities in enrollment in rural districts, and inadequate counselling infrastructure.

University of Peshawar (Peshawar, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa)

The University of Peshawar (UoP), established in 1950, operates at the confluence of Pashtun cultural heritage, the residual effects of over three decades of conflict in adjacent areas, and a post-merger integration agenda following the 2018 amalgamation of FATA into KP. These conditions

have shaped the institution's social harmony work in distinctive ways. Research on higher education as a catalyst for peacebuilding in post-conflict KP found that UoP and comparable institutions served critical stability and reconstruction functions after the militancy period, providing structured civic spaces for a generation of students traumatised by conflict (Naveed, 2018). The university has developed inter-faculty dialogue forums bringing together students from former FATA districts alongside urban Peshawar students, seeking to bridge the socio-economic and cultural distances that remain pronounced despite administrative unification. Extracurricular programming includes a well-established sports culture that has been deliberately deployed as a vehicle for cross-district and cross-ethnic interaction, consistent with findings on the role of university sport in social integration (Chelladurai, 2018). A study of social sciences faculty at the University of Peshawar found a positive association between civic engagement through extracurricular activity and students' sense of social responsibility, though systemic barriers, including security concerns and the absence of formal academic recognition for civic participation, constrained sustained involvement (Ali & Khan, 2023).

University of Balochistan (Quetta, Balochistan)

The University of Balochistan (UoB) represents the most challenging institutional context in this study. Balochistan is Pakistan's largest province by area but its least developed. It is the site of a long-standing insurgency, acute provincial resource inequalities, and a diverse ethnic composition encompassing Baloch, Pashtun, Hazara, Brahui and settler communities. Established in 1970, UoB has navigated successive phases of bureaucratic authoritarianism, reactionary politicisation, and what Meer et al. (2025) describe as securitised neoliberalism. Against this backdrop, the university has pursued targeted programmes in intercultural dialogue, peace education, and community engagement, including cultural exchange events celebrating provincial ethnic diversity and outreach projects addressing education access and environmental concerns.

Scholarship and counselling provisions target marginalised groups, and faculty training has included modules on ethnic sensitivity and facilitated dialogue. However, the obstacles confronting UoB are qualitatively distinct from those faced by Punjab or Islamabad institutions. Political unrest, documented harassment of student activists, and an atmosphere of surveillance fundamentally compromise the conditions required for open dialogue (Meer et al., 2025). The politics of resource allocation have left UoB chronically underfunded, with research noting that almost all universities in Balochistan lack doctoral-qualified faculty in key departments (Rind & Malin, 2023). Genuine progress here requires macro-political commitments to redistribution and recognition that exceed the remit of any individual institution.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Structural and Political Challenges

The structural challenges confronting Pakistani universities in their social harmony work are formidable. Deep inequality in resource distribution across the sector means that the institutions most in need of integrative intervention are precisely those with least capacity to deliver it. Rind and Malin's (2023) analysis found that postgraduate attainment in rural areas stands at barely 1.27%, against 6.18% in urban centres, and that Balochistan records only 2.5% university degree attainment in its population. These figures reflect the compound disadvantage of poverty, distance, and institutional underfunding. Political instrumentalisation of ethnic, sectarian, and regional identity poses a further challenge. The infiltration of student bodies by partisan political organisations has been documented across multiple institutions, transforming potential civic spaces into arenas of mobilisation (Meer et al., 2025; Naseer, 2015). Campus security concerns in Balochistan and KP have produced self-censorship that is incompatible with the conditions necessary for intercultural dialogue.

The curriculum itself remains a structural obstacle. As Durrani and Halai (2018) have documented, the national curriculum embeds

exclusionary narratives of identity that privilege specific religious and ethnic perspectives while marginalising others. Rote-learning pedagogies that prioritise content transmission over critical thinking further limit the capacity of formal instruction to cultivate the attitudes required for intercultural citizenship. The dependence of most co-curricular social harmony work on individual faculty initiative, rather than institutional mandate, creates fragility and discontinuity across administrations.

Opportunities for Innovation

Several opportunities for progress merit attention. The growing body of Pakistan-specific and regional research, including the work of the Research Consortium on Education and Peacebuilding (Halai & Durrani, 2018), the USIP peace education review (USIP, 2017), and emerging scholarship on conflict-affected institutions (Meer et al., 2025), provides an increasingly robust evidence base for policy and practice. Pakistan's international commitments under SDG 4 (inclusive and equitable quality education), SDG 10 (reduced inequalities), and SDG 16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions) provide a normative framework within which investments in social harmony through higher education can be advocated and funded (Hinduja & Fakir, 2023; Naz et al., 2022). The HEC's alignment of its NRPU funding agenda with the SDGs provides an institutional vehicle for integration. Judiciously governed digital platforms also offer scope for extending intercultural dialogue across provincial boundaries, though research on the social media habits of Pakistani youth cautions against uncritical optimism about digital tools as vehicles of cohesion (Shah & Abbasi, 2021). Finally, the exemplary practices documented at LUMS, QAU, and in specific programmes at other institutions demonstrate that meaningful social harmony work is achievable within existing constraints; systematic documentation and cross-institutional sharing of such practices offer a pathway to sector-wide improvement.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Pakistani universities possess substantial potential as agents of collectivism, inclusivity, and social harmony among youth. Through intercultural dialogue, inclusive curricula and pedagogy, co-curricular engagement, and supportive institutional policies, higher education institutions can contribute to forming a generation of young Pakistanis equipped for constructive engagement across lines of difference. The six case studies examined in this paper illustrate both what is genuinely achievable under existing constraints and the structural, political, and resource-based limitations that continue to circumscribe transformative impact. In coinsurance with the recommendations of Khan (2025), university management that empowers marginalized communities including women and rural populations, and build social cohesion across ethnic and linguistic divides through inclusivity will produce significant results (Khan, A. R., 2025)

At the national policy level, the HEC should make social cohesion a substantive rather than nominal dimension of quality assurance and funding allocation. Targeted resource transfers to chronically under-resourced institutions in Balochistan and KP are a prerequisite for sectoral equity. At the institutional level, universities should invest in systematic faculty development in inclusive pedagogy and conflict resolution, mainstream peace education and social justice themes across academic curricula rather than confining them to specialist electives. Institutional mandates and financial support be provided for student engagement initiatives rather than relying on individual initiative. At the curricular level, the persistent embedding of narrow, exclusionary national identity narratives must be addressed through a genuinely pluralist reform that treats Pakistan's ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity as a source of national strength rather than a problem to be managed.

Ultimately, the social harmony function of universities cannot be discharged through campus-level interventions alone. It requires a macro-

political environment committed to redistribution of resources, recognition of marginalised identities, and accountability for exclusionary practices. Universities can model and sustain these values within their institutional domains. However, they cannot substitute for the political will necessary to advance them at the national level. Their role in promoting collectivism and social harmony is, therefore, both irreplaceable and inherently limited, a reality that honest scholarship must acknowledge even as it insists on the importance of the work.

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