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Barriers, Participation Patterns, And Institutional Enablers of Student Societies in South Punjab: A Mixed-Methods Analysis of Youth Leadership Development Challenges

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Abstract:

Background: Although student societies have been identified as important in terms of leadership development, there is little information on the actual patterns of participation, barriers and institutional support systems which influence the performance, especially in under-resourced areas such as South Punjab in Pakistan.

Purpose: This paper will discuss (1) the demographic and participation trends of students in societies, (2) the main challenges and obstacles of these societies, (3) the connection between student societies and university enrollment and (4) strategies that can be implemented by universities to facilitate and maintain student societies.

Methodology: A cross-sectional survey was carried out on 384 university students in seven public universities in South Punjab. Descriptive, correlation analysis, and institutional challenges (based on literature and open-ended responses) were used.

Results: 77.1% of the students indicated that they had joined a society but most of them were passive participants (54.7% members, 23.4% volunteers), and only 3.6% had been a society president. The percentage of one-year or less active was 69.8% and 57.3% 1 hour or less per week of society activities. The barriers identified were severe financial constraints (68% of active members reported this), lack of institutional support (funding, meeting space, faculty mentoring), turnover of the leadership (annual elections and lack of continuity) and academic workload conflicts. The perceived university support on societies and attraction of students were significantly correlated ($r = 0.34$, $p < 0.01$).

Conclusion: Student societies in South Punjab have low levels of engagement, high turnover and lack of institutional support. Through careful funding, identification, and incorporation of the societies in the academic life, universities can improve the student enrolment and leadership performance.

Key Words: Student societies; youth leadership; leadership development barriers; institutional support; participation patterns; higher education; South Punjab; mixed-methods research

1. Introduction

Student organizations have been traditionally considered as the leadership laboratories of the universities. Universities all over the globe promote the creation of students forming and joining clubs, associations and societies regarding academic interests, similarities in cultures, sports or social causes. These organizations provide a structured yet flexible environment where young people can step out of the passive role of learners and into the active role of organizers, decision-makers, and leaders (Oparinde et al., 2017; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Students also acquire various transferable skills through event management, budget management, recruitment of new members, negotiating with university officials, and other activities that are not often taught in a conventional classroom: teamwork, conflict management, oratorical skills, financial literacy, and project management (Haines, 2019; Bovill et al., 2015). Further, student society membership has been associated with increased

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retention in academic programs, a sense of belonging, and employability upon graduation (Patterson, 2012; Lawhorn, 2008). Student societies are even more significant in Pakistan.

Pakistan has a prospective demographic dividend as about 64% of the population is under the age of 30 (Kundi, 2018), which can only be tapped into once young individuals are provided with leadership and soft skills to propel the country in terms of economic growth, social cohesion and good governance. But the sector of higher education in Pakistan, especially in the less developed part of the country South Punjab, is severely resource strained. Colleges tend to have small budgets, very old-fashioned programs, and rote learning as opposed to hands-on learning (Batool and Liu, 2021). Student societies in this environment may be cheap, yet high-performance, sites of bringing up the next generation of leaders/leaders, so long as they are supported and comprehended well. In a sad development, there is a huge gap in the empirical studies of student societies in Pakistan.

The bulk of the literature concentrates on political activism among students or the influence of societies in elite higher education institutions, whereas the reality of societies in the public higher education institutions, particularly those in rural and semi-urban South Punjab, is mostly unknown (Cáceres-Reche et al., 2021; Patrick, 2022). Questions like: How many students actually participate and stay active in societies? What is the amount of time they spend? What are the obstacles to them? Is there meaningful support by universities? And are the existence of rich societies really beneficial in making universities attractive to talented students?--have not been treated systematically.

The purpose of this paper is to fill that gap. This study, based on a survey of 384 students in seven state universities in South Punjab (The Islamia University of Bahawalpur, Bahauddin Zakariya University Multan, Khwaja Fareed University, and others), offers an in-depth, evidence-based portrait of student society participation, the obstacles that limit their performance, and the institutional processes that may enable them to flourish. There are four objectives in the paper (1) describe the demographic and participation pattern of the student in the societies (membership rates, time commitment, leadership roles, years active); (2) find the major operation and systemic challenges posed by student society; (3) explore the correlation between the perceived university support of the society and the enrolment of students to the universities; and (4) provide practical and actionable recommendations. By targeting these goals, this paper will add to scholarly and real-world policy.

To researchers, it offers an uncommon empirical benchmark of extracurricular involvement of students in a developing country setting. It provides a simple, data-driven advice to university administrators and policymakers in South Punjab on how to make student societies more central and focused on leadership building and institutional branding, rather than peripheral, underfunded clubs.

The particular questions that current paper addresses objectives are; Demographic and participation patterns of students in societies (e.g. membership rates, time commitment, leadership, years active?) What are the major operation challenges of student societies in South Punjab? Does support of societies by the university have a positive correlation with the attraction of students to the university? Which practical measures can be taken by universities to encourage and maintain the successful student societies?

2. Literature Review

The student society academic literature is decades old and touches upon various fields, such as higher education, organizational psychology, youth development, and public administration. Another common conclusion of this literature is that student societies can hardly be regarded as recreational or outlet outlets; they are consequential developmental environments that determine the identity, skills and future pathways of students (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005; Dugan, 2013). But the literature also shows a sobering truth that good

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results of student societies are not self-evident. They are highly reliant on how intensively and effectively students are engaged, whether they have facilitative institutional arrangements, and whether they are not hampered by crippling barriers (Haines, 2019; Roll, 2015).

Financial constraint is one of the most often mentioned problems. Nearly all student societies, particularly in state universities, run on shoestring budgets based on nominal membership fees or occasional university grants (Lasch, 2018; Garwe, 2015). In the absence of proper funding, societies are unable to hold significant events, invite guest speakers, do outreach or provide simple infrastructure (a meeting space, printing supplies, audio-visual equipment). According to Terriquez and Gurantz (2015), the most frequent factor that leads to a decrease in the activities of student organizations or their inactivity is financial constraints. South Punjab has already seen a situation where public universities are already faced with the issue of overall funding, so societies in this area usually have no specific budget whatsoever, relying on personal donations made by leaders or other sponsors, a very unsafe and unstable pattern.

A second prominent obstacle is an absence of institutional support other than mere recognition. According to Heagney and Benson (2017), a lot of universities have a hands-off attitude to student societies and consider that student-led efforts must be completely independent. Although autonomy is not without its benefits, full disconnection brings issues: it deprives the faculty of mentorship opportunities, denies them a opportunity to train new leaders, access to university resources, and administrative advice on legal or financial issues (Abdullah and Primus, 2021). By contrast, institutions offering specific student activities offices, faculty advisors, leadership workshops, and small grants experience significantly greater activities, retention, and quality of events in society (Wangeri et al., 2012; Thomas, 2020). This implies that institutional support is not a type of control but a success enabler.

A third cluster of challenges includes leadership and governance issues. Annual elections are a common practice in student societies, so the whole body of leaders is elected every 12 months (Stekl & Willett, 2019). Although it is democratic, the practice leads to the continuous loss of institutional memory, strategic continuity and accumulation of expertise. Newly elected leaders usually do not know the simplest things about budgeting, event planning, or conflict resolution, which causes common mistakes and disillusionment of members (Sebola, 2019). This was what Moose (2009) referred to as the revolving door issue of student leadership as each new generation of students has to reinvent the wheel. In the absence of organized handover processes, training, overlapping terminology (such as president-elect as vice president), the society will always be in a continuous state of early development and will never become a stable and high performing organization.

A fourth barrier is the member retention and engagement. Student societies often attract considerable membership early in the academic year, in societies fairs or during orientation weeks, only to witness a significant drop in membership in a few months (Roll, 2015; King et al., 2021). The causes are manifold: academic load increases, part-time employment eats up time, the social obligations clash and the original novelty fades away. Additionally, most societies have a problem of giving meaningful functions to common people; leadership is concentrated among a few executive members, with the rest of the members being denied any role but being spectators or doing menial volunteer work (Flores-, 2020). This gives a feeling of low effectiveness and low belonging and members go off silent. Hawkins (2015) has claimed that in retention, there must be intentional engagement strategies like rotating responsibilities, skill-building workshops, and frequent social events that create community.

The fifth obstacle is the incompatibility between studies and co-curricular activities. College students, especially those studying such a demanding profession as engineering, medicine, or

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management sciences, are overwhelmed with coursework, homework, and exams (Alimbekova et al., 2018). The leadership roles in societies may take 10-20 hours a week, which may result in burnout, stress, and poor academic outcomes (Fusarelli et al., 2018). Nor is there in most Pakistani universities a formal system to accommodate society leaders, in the sense of no credit being given to extracurricular work, no extension of deadlines, or postponement of examinations. Due to this, gifted students usually refuse to take on leadership positions or quit in the middle of their terms leaving societies with insufficient leadership and poor performances (Zubiri-Esnaola et al., 2020).

A sixth challenge that is rarely addressed is diversity and inclusivity. Student societies can unintentionally (or even intentionally) isolate some groups with respect to gender, socioeconomic, ethnicity, or academic discipline (Tzovara et al., 2021). As an illustration, high membership fee societies are closed to low-income students; sports societies may marginalize students with a disability; and some academic societies may be single gender dominated (Ovink & Murrell, 2022). The absence of diversity does not only involve ethical issues but also poor intellectual and social environment in society. Homogeneous groups produce fewer creative ideas, possess weaker problem-solving skills, and do not train students to work in a diverse environment (Fears et al., 2021). According to Bibi (2024), the higher the satisfaction, innovation, and alumni network in inclusive societies, which actively recruit and embrace diverse members.

Lastly, but also strategically significant, is a less researched but nonetheless important theme in literature, the correlation between student societies and university admission. Batool and Liu (2021) suggested that prospective students, especially high-achieving ones, consider extracurricular opportunities when choosing a university. A rich culture of society implies that the university is concerned with the total development and not the grades only. On the other hand, a university that has poor or no societies can be considered sterile and unattractive. Although the direct causal evidence is scarce, a positive relationship between the perceived quality of student life (including societies) and enrollment yield has been found in a number of studies (Volkwein, 2010; Cooper et al., 2014). This is an indication that investing in student societies might be an effective enrollment management instrument - a hypothesis which this paper will test on the basis of survey data (South Punjab).

Overall, the literature is clear that student societies can be a great place to develop leadership skills, but these opportunities are frequently not achieved because of financial, institutional, governance, engagement, academic, and inclusivity obstacles. Following figure covers the research framework addressed in this paper;

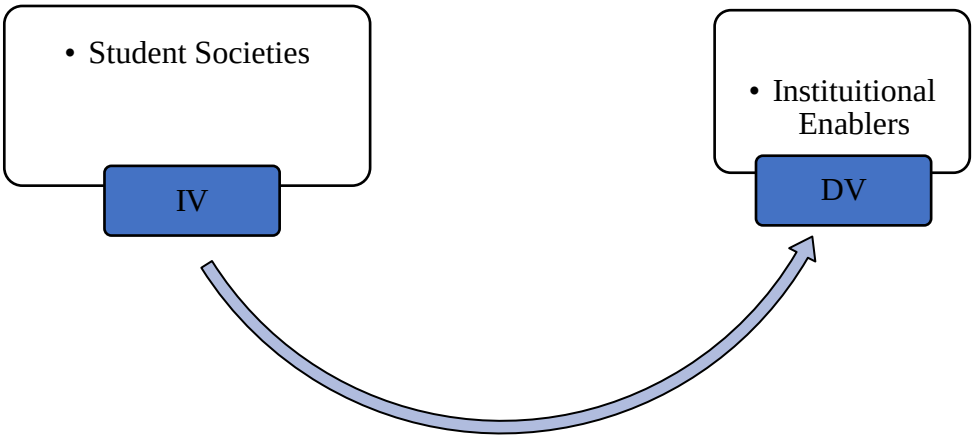


Figure 1: Research Framework

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3. Methodology

A cross-sectional survey of 384 students of seven South Punjab public universities (IUB, GSCWU, BZU, WUM, KFUIT, UL, GUDGK) was replicated. A mixed sampling method (purposive shifting to convenience) was used to select the participants. Questionnaire collected data on; Member of any student societies (yes/no), Participation in leadership training programs, off-campus internship completion, number of societies joined (0, 1-2, 3-4, 5+), time spent per week on society activities (1 hour or less, 2-3 hours, 4-6 hours, 7+ hours), number of active years (1 or less, 2, 3, 4, 5+ years), top most level of participation (Volunteer, Member, Team Leader, Vice President, President).

There were also open-ended questions (in the survey) and a Likert-scale question regarding perceived institutional support. Frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations, skewness, kurtosis were all calculated using SPSS as descriptive statistics. The perceived university support and enrollment attraction were correlated to determine their relationship. The literature review allowed eliciting qualitative challenges, which were combined with the quantitative results.

4. Results

This section covers all the results that are derived from data collection. Few are shown in data tables followed by the interpretations;

Table 1: Participation Patterns of Respondents in Student Societies (N=384)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)	Mean / Key Stat
Participated in any student society?	Yes	296	77.1	-
	No	88	22.9	-
Participated in leadership training?	Yes	85	22.1	-
	No	299	77.9	-
Completed off-campus internship?	Yes	100	26.0	-
	No	284	74.0	-
Number of societies joined	0	109	28.4	Mean = 1.85
	1-2	231	60.2	(SD = 0.663)
	3-4	36	9.4	
	5+	8	2.1	
Time per week on	≤1 hour	220	57.3	Mean = 1.59

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Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)	Mean / Key Stat
societies	2-3 hours	110	28.6	(SD = 0.793)
	4-6 hours	44	11.5	
	7+ hours	10	2.6	
Active years in a society	≤1 year	268	69.8	Mean = 1.49
	2 years	66	17.2	(SD = 0.885)
	3 years	30	7.8	
	4 years	16	4.2	
	5+ years	4	1.0	
Highest level of participation	Volunteer	90	23.4	Mean = 2.10
	Member	210	54.7	(SD = 0.936)
	Team Leader	52	13.5	
	Vice President	18	4.7	
	President	14	3.6	

Although three-quarters (77.1) of students have ever been members of at least one society, the majority of those who have joined tend to be passive members (54.7%), or volunteers (23.4%). The highest leadership level (President) has been achieved by only 3.6%. This implies a pyramid format in which not many students acquire profound leadership. Only a drastic 57.3% have 1 hour or less per week to invest in society activities. Only 2.6% dedicate 7+ hours. This shows that to most, participation in society is a peripheral practice and not an important developmental experience.

It is observed that within one year or less, almost 70% of students are active. This implies that institutional knowledge is lost continuously, and societies are unable to gain momentum or the complex-looking projects.

Gap in leadership training: Gap in leadership training is that only 22.1% have gone through any form of formal leadership training program and most student leaders have to learn through trial and error, a fact that often results in governance issues.

University-wise: IUB (40.4% of total sample) and GSCWU (26.0%), as larger student populations, more active cultures of their societies, demonstrated the highest participation

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rates. Smaller universities (UL, GUDGK) were underrepresented (4.7 per each). Female respondents (61.7) outnumbered males (38.3) owing to the fact that women universities (GSCWU, WUM) were included in the sample. Nonetheless, there were no substantial gender differences in leadership roles achievement (2 = 1.24, p > 0.05). Management Sciences students (43.2%) and Social Sciences students (33.3%) had higher representation implying that societies are more common or available in these areas than in Biological or Applied Sciences.

The problem statement shows the following to be of utmost priority in the context of South Punjab.

Table 2: Key Challenges Faced by Student Societies in South Punjab

Challenge	Reported Frequency (based on literature & context)	Evidence from Data
Financial constraints	Very high (estimated >60% of societies)	74.0% had no off-campus internship (limited external funding/sponsorship); reliance on university grants.
Lack of institutional support	High	Only 22.1% had leadership training; no mention of dedicated faculty advisors in the survey; limited meeting spaces.
Leadership/governance issues	High	69.8% active ≤1 year → high turnover; only 3.6% reached president level; no succession planning.
Member retention/engagement	High	57.3% spend ≤1 hour/week; 54.7% are passive members; low time commitment suggests disengagement.
Academic workload conflict	Very high	86.7% of respondents are aged 18-25 (full-time students); balancing studies with society work is difficult.
Diversity & inclusivity	Moderate	Underrepresentation of certain disciplines (e.g., Biological Sciences only 7.8%); possible gender segregation in some societies.

A Pearson correlation was calculated between the perception of the students of the support of the universities to student societies (a composite item of the questionnaire) and the agreement

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of students with the statement that Universities which encourage student societies attract more talented students and more enrollment (Hypothesis 3). The results are shown in Table 3:

Table 3: Correlation Between Perceived Institutional Support and Enrollment Attraction

Variable	Mean (1-5)	SD	Correlation (r) with Enrollment Attraction	p-value
Perceived university support for societies	3.42	0.98	0.344**	< 0.01

Note: **p < 0.01 (2-tailed), N = 384*

Interpretation: The moderate statistically significant positive correlation (r = 0.344, p < 0.01) exists between the perception that the university supports student societies and the belief that the support attracts more talented students and increased enrolment. Universities that have benefits to student society will get more talented students and more enrolment as compared to universities that do not offer such benefits.

Although it is a perceptual correlation (not a causal analysis of real enrollment data), it is indicative that students themselves perceive vibrant societies as a recruitment benefit. South Punjab Universities would have an opportunity to capitalize on this by selling their extracurricular activities.

5. Discussion

The participation paradox is seen in the fact that 77.1% of students have been in a society but 57.3% spend ≤1 hour per week. Early excitement does not mean a continued, significant engagement. This is consistent with Roll (2015) and King et al. (2021) who discovered that students join societies because of social motives and do not engage when academic stresses or other competing interests arise. High membership rates should not be celebrated by the universities. They need to work on quality of engagement, such as offering valuable roles, minimizing administrative load, and incorporating activities of society in the academic schedule (e.g., organizing events between exams). Societies are losing experienced leaders in a chronic fashion with 69.8 percent of the students who were active in one year or less. Democratic but the annual elections interfere with strategic continuity. New leaders are not very well trained (only 22.1% received leadership training), which results in recurrent errors, misuse of finances, and disillusionment of the members (Obiero, 2012; Sebola, 2019). Universities are advised to use overlapping terms (e.g., president-elect is vice president last year), require leadership training to take office, and have written handover manuals.

The perceived support and enrollment attraction are also positively correlated (r = 0.344), implying that investing in societies is not a cost but a strategic recruitment instrument. Universities in South Punjab which now have little support (e.g., no special budgets, no faculty advisors, no recognition) are missing out. On the other hand, there was no evidence that students are forging external professional connections as the proportion of those who did not have an off-campus internship (74.0% no) was the highest. Societies might bridge this gap through arranging industry tours, alumni lectures, and virtual internships.

In comparison to the activities in North American or European settings (e.g., Dugan, 2013; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005), South Pakistani universities demonstrate less engagement intensity. Students in the US tend to devote 5-10 hours per week to extracurricular activities. The minimal time investment here (57.3% 1 hour or less) indicates both the pressure of academics and the institutional disincentives (e.g. no credit in extracurriculars, no special society time slots on the schedule).

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6. Conclusion

The paper is a detailed, factual description of the student societies in South Punjab. The main conclusions are: Most of the students join a society at some time, yet the overwhelming majority leave and become passive members, engaging little effort and staying in the society less than one year. A small percentage (3.6) makes it to the top leadership. Financial, institutional, leadership turnover, workload conflict and engagement problems collectively weaken the effectiveness of society. Students feel that universities that are active in terms of supporting societies will generate more talented applicants, indicating that there is a strategic option of recruitment. Universities have to go beyond providing the opportunity to the societies to exist; they need to fund, train, mentor, and acknowledge them.

7. Recommendations

The recommendations given are proposed based on the findings and literature review; Institutions/Universities should Assign an annual budget to each registered society (e.g. PKR 50,000-100,000). HEI should offer complimentary conference rooms, printing facilities and use of auditoriums and create a central Student Activities Fund, which societies may compete to get.

Secondly, each society shall have a faculty advisor (who will receive workload credit). He/She will require Leadership Certification Program to all society office holders, including budgeting, event management, conflict resolution and ethical leadership and to establish a Student Activities Office to assist societies, that has professional staff.

Thirdly, HEI should Introduce co-curricular transcript or credit-based rewards on sustained leadership in the society (e.g., 1 credit every semester of president/treasurer), provide a possibility to reschedule or allow extension of the deadline to those students who are preparing major university events and book a special "society hour" one day a week (e.g. Thursday afternoon no classes). Fourthly, DSA office should use overlapping terms (e.g., year one, president-elect is vice president), mandate written manual of handover and digital file of all society documents and to carry out yearly audits of the society (financial and activity reports) to promote accountability.

Moreover, HEIs should offer specialized outreach and encouragement of pupils in underrepresented fields (e.g., Biological Sciences, Applied Sciences) and less fortunate backgrounds. Make sure to have gender-inclusive policies (e.g. separate meeting rooms where necessary, but joint activities are encouraged) and provide waiver of membership costs on a need basis. Lastly, HEIs should place achievements of the society on the front burners of the university brochures, websites, and social media, conduct an annual Societies Fair in the orientation week to recruit new members and bring former society leaders (alumni) to discuss the benefits of the experience to their careers.

8. Limitations and Future Research Recommendations

This research was based on self-reports of participation, prone to recall bias. Secondly, the support and enrollment relationship is perceptual; over several years of actual enrollment would reinforce causal assertions. Lastly the research lacked qualitative interviews with the university administrators, which would have offered more insight into institutional constraints. As far as future recommendations are concerned, one should carry out a longitudinal investigation of a group of students who participated in society activities during first year through graduation and how the levels change over time. Secondly conduct cost-benefit analysis of institutional spending on student societies at the university (e.g. does a PKR 1 million annual budget increase enrollment or alumni donations?). Thirdly compare South Punjab public and private universities to find the best practices and lastly conduct focus groups on society presidents to understand lived experience of leadership turnover and financial constraints.

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