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Cultural Identity, Acculturation, and Academic Performance among Ethnically Diverse University Students

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ARTICLE DETAILS	ABSTRACT
<p>History: Accepted: 08 March, 2026 Available Online: 20 March, 2026</p> <hr/> <p>Keywords: <i>Cultural Identity, Acculturation, Academic Performance, Ethnic Diversity, Multicultural Integration, Student Adaptation.</i></p>	<p>Purpose: The aim of the study is to examine how cultural identity and acculturation affect Pakistani university students from a various ethnic backgrounds' academic achievement.</p> <p>Design/ Methodology / Approach: 207 students from university of Sargodha participated in a quantitative cross-sectional survey, applying structured questionnaires. The data was analyzed through SPSS, by applying Pearson correlation and aggression analysis.</p> <p>Findings: There are strong positive correlations between academic achievement and cultural identification ($r = 0.62$) and acculturation ($r = 0.59$). Motivation is predicted by cultural identification ($\beta = 0.41$), however involvement is negatively impacted by acculturation challenges ($\beta = -0.33$)</p> <p>Implications/Originality/Value: The study highlights culturally inclusive policies to improve academic achievements in varied educational contexts and presents empirical data from Pakistan.</p>



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1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Problem Statement

University of Sargodha holds students across Pakistan with different cultural backgrounds. They face acculturation problems since they encounter different cultural identities. Therefore, this study seeks to understand the underlying factors for mal-acculturation. The nation of Pakistan can be characterized by a high level of diversity in the society, culture, and language (Aziz, 2024). The nation has experienced a wide range of ethnic communities since its inception such as Pashtuns, Balochs, Sindhis, Kashmiris, and residents of Gilgit-Baltistan, each on its own part bringing different cultural practices and values (Shah, 2025). The students enrolled in the institutions of higher-learning, especially those who are based in the areas that are considered less developed like those in the Punjab, bring with them special cultural habits, practices, and sets of values into the school setting (Tanveer & Malik, 2025). The process of internal migration caused by the access of higher education is thus on an increase and therefore makes the process of cultural adaptation crucial towards academic success and well-being (Ali et al., 2021).

The main issue addressed in the study is that ethnically diverse students faces challenges in order to cope with the prevailing institutional (Adamu, 2023) and regional values of the university environment, all the time aiming to maintain their cultural identities of their native cultures (Zheng, 2024). Their contact with the host culture, which in the case of the University of Sargodha is either Punjabi, or mainstream culture, is a complicated process of acculturation (Waqar et al., 2025). What is required is to look at the ways in which students deal with cultural differences (Ladson-Billings, 2021), and the issues that they face and whether the cultural identity they have survives or changes in the process (Sutrisno, 2023). An absence of empirically proven expertise surrounding adjustment along with identity in culture hindered Pakistani universities from developing inclusive initiatives which promote educational integration for outside students. This knowledge is essential in the development of inclusive settings where youth of diverse ethnic groups can prosper.

With increasing multiculturalism in Pakistani educational institutions, institutional structures that handle adjustment activities while encouraging learners' distinctive cultures are inadequate that little analyzed (Safdar et al., 2024). Non-local students frequently face implicit institutional pressures to adhere to prevailing regional standards, especially in Punjabi-speaking schools, potentially impacting educational drive, involvement, and productivity (Liao, 2023). The lack of experimentally substantiated knowledge about the interaction of cultural belonging that cultural adaptation in university contexts leads to inconsistent integration into academia and hinders the establishment of accessible educational settings (Sruthi & KP, 2024). In order to comprehend the learning environments that students have from varied ethnic backgrounds and to develop educational procedures that are respectful of culture, it is imperative that this void be filled (Guberina, 2023).

1.2 Rationale and Objectives

Little academic focus has been given to the cultural disparities and acculturation to the local context of Pakistani universities (Shah et al., 2022), which has left a significant gap in the understanding of local experiences of cross-cultural adjustment (Walsh & Cooney, 2023). The study can thus be regarded as important, as it presents a poorly explored relationship with cultural identity, processes of adaptation, and student well-being, integration and academic performance in the Pakistani higher-level education (Hugur & Alajlan).

1.3 Research Questions

RQ1: What are the conceptualizations and maintenance of cultural identity among university students in different parts of Pakistan in a multicultural academic environment?

RQ2: What strategies of acculturation are used by non-local students when they become a part of the mainstream institutional culture of the university?

RQ3: How does the cultural identity relate to the acculturation process in heterogeneous ethnic structures of university students?

RQ4: How does cultural identity and acculturation affect the academic motivation, engagement and performance among students?

1.4 Research Hypotheses

H1: The higher the attachment to provincial cultural heritage, the higher is the level of cultural identity of students.

H2: The more the students are adapted to the prevailing institutional culture, the better the academic performance of students will be related.

H3: The higher the cultural identity, the more the academic motivation and engagement.

H4: The academic engagement and performance of students will be negatively correlated with the high level of acculturative stress.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Cultural identity in Higher Education

Cultural identity refers to the subjective group belonging to a particular ethnic or cultural community, being a construction that is led by language, traditions, principles, and historic accounts (Faiz, 2024). In the multi-ethnic educational environment, academic achievements, psychological health, and attitude towards the study of the subject matter are greatly affected by cultural identity (Herdian et al., 2025). The model of cultural identity developed by Phinney (1990) assumes the cultural identity as a dynamic process that covers the exploration, commitment, and affirmation stages, and this approach is especially relevant when applied to the students who have to negotiate culturally heterogeneous settings (Meca et al., 2023). Empirical studies on Western and Asian settings show that students who have strong cultural identities tend to develop high self-esteem, strength, and academic motivation (Baumert et al., 2024). Therefore, cultural identity might also be used as a resource in psychology especially when the cultural individuals are faced with discontinuities like when they are moved to regions where the dominant cultural norms are dissimilar to their own. In the Pakistani scene, the cultural identity is strongly connected with the regional belonging, language, and custom (Khan et al., 2025). Students who study in Punjab who have Balochistan, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Gilgit-Baltistan origins often complain of increased self-awareness of their difference (Siddiqui et al., 2025). However, the research has not been done extensively, which highlights a need to approach the issue of cultural identity effects on academic performance empirically.

2.2 Cultural Diverse and Internal Migration

The multi ethnically based society in Pakistan combined with the rise of higher education has increased the internal migration thus exposing students of various backgrounds to increased interpersonal interaction (Murtaza & Hui, 2021). Although diversity enhances the learning process, it may also create issues, such as communication obstacles, challenges in social integration, and identity negotiating (Oluwatosin & Rojak, 2023). Managing linguistic barriers, stereotyping, social exclusion, and difficulties with establishing networks with peers may be facing by non-local students at institutions predominantly attended by Punjabis and this can erode academic confidence and sense of belonging. Such students are under institutional support and fewer empirical studies are carried out on academic implications of internal migration (Weber & Van Mol, 2023).

2.3 Acculturation and Adaptation

Acculturation can be described as psychological and social adaptations made to occur when people mix with a host culture (Cormoş, 2022). Four acculturation strategies, including integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization are identified by Berry (1997) with the first being the most positively correlated with positive academic and psychological performances, i.e. integration that entails continuing to practice one's heritage culture and at the same time interact with the host culture (van der Zee & van Oudenhoven, 2022). The acculturation of Pakistani universities is defined by the elements of the language and proficiency level, the classroom environment, peer relationships, and prescriptions of the institutions (Malik et al., 2025). Adaptation takes place through social acceptance and intercultural opportunities and hinders through forced assimilation or exclusion (Cormoş, 2022).

2.4 Acculturative Stress and Academic Results

Some of the issues that lead to acculturative stress include language differences, discrimination, social isolation, and cultural misinterpretation (Kadir, 2024). This stress has a negative impact on academic motivation, engagement and performance. It can be particularly vulnerable to students in underrepresented or remote areas of Pakistan since the cultural representation and support systems are less abundant (Ahmed et al., 2024). There is little empirical research on the stress of acculturation in Pakistani higher education (Fatima & Niazi, 2024).

2.5 The association of Cultural Identity, Acculturation, and Academic Performance

Studies have shown that there is a reciprocal relationship between the cultural identity and acculturation (Meca et al., 2023). By maintaining a high level of cultural identity when adjusting to the host culture the student is likely to experience a high level of academic and psychosocial performances (Baumert et al., 2024). Conversely, when one assimilates at the cost of identity or having an encounter with marginalization, academic risks increase. In Pakistan, little studies have been conducted to investigate the combination of these processes with academic motivation, engagement, and performance thus justifying the need to conduct quantitative and theory-based research works (Kawsar, 2022).

2.6 Theoretical Framework

This study examines Phinney Ethnic Identity Theory (1990) (Сәдуақасова, 2024) and Berry Acculturation Model (1997) (van der Zee & van Oudenhoven, 2022) in order to examine the role of cultural identity and acculturation on academic performance of Pakistani ethnically diverse students in a university. The cultural identity is measured according to the framework presented by Phinney, and the analysis of acculturation strategies and acculturative stress is provided with the help of the model offered by Berry (Phinney et al., 2022). Empirical testing is used to fill the gaps in Pakistani higher education scholarship, go beyond a descriptive account, and offer insights valuable in informing culturally responsive institutional policy, as well as add value to the larger literature on multicultural education in non-Western settings (RASHID, 2025).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Population

The current study was based on the quantitative, cross-sectional survey. The chosen methodology has allowed obtaining numerical data, which represents a large, heterogeneous and cohort respondents at one point in time, which is why it was possible to conduct a rigorous study. Students with various ethnic backgrounds at the University of Sargodha formed the target population. The study sample was dominated by non-local students, therefore, purposive sampling was used to make sure that the sample was representative of the ethnically diverse, non-local student population that was of interest to the study. Moreover, a structured questionnaire was used to gather data by asking the respondents to rate statements based on a 5-point Likert scale to determine the level of agreement with regards to cultural identity and acculturation aspects.

In addition, IBM SPSS software was used in analyzing the data. To question the relation between the variables and test the hypotheses, which were created, descriptive statistics (frequency distributions, means, standard deviations), Pearson correlation coefficients, and linear regression models were used. Instrument reliability was also checked through Cronbach Alpha which gave the coefficient of 0.774 which was taken to mean sufficient internal consistency.

4. Results

The discussion gives strong support as regards to the correlation between culture identity, acculturation strategies and academic performance.

4.1 Bivariate Findings

The results obtained through the use of the correlational analysis method were as follows: 4.1 Correlational Analysis (Bivariate Findings).

The most important correlational results are that there is a strong significant relation:

Connection and Strength of Identity: There is a strong positive relationship between the connection of the students with their provincial culture and the strength of their cultural identity ($r = .62, p < .01$). This observation compliments Hypothesis H1.

Acculturation and Academic Performance: Academic performance is positively related to adaptation to mainstream Punjabi culture ($r = .59, p < .01$), which presents a very good argument to support Hypothesis H2.

4.2 Regression Analysis (Predictive Findings)

The regression analysis was used to establish the predictive role of the independent variables on academic results:

4.3 Particular Regression Results of Motivation and Engagement

Table 1

Particular Regression Results of Motivation and Engagement

Predictor Variable	Standardized Beta (β)	Significance (p)	Interpretation
Cultural Identity (CI)	0.514	$p < 0.01$	CI is a strong, significant positive predictor of academic outcomes.
Connection to Provincial Culture (CPC)	0.232	$p = 0.000$	CPC is a significant positive predictor of academic outcomes.
Connection to Mainstream Culture (CMC)	0.072	$p = 0.223$	CMC is not a statistically significant predictor of academic outcomes in this model.

4.4 Cultural Identity and Academic Motivation

Cultural identity is a significant factor predicting academic motivation ($\beta = 0.41, p = .01$), which confirms Hypothesis H3.

Acculturation Problems and Academic Performance: Hypothesis H4 is supported because, according to the findings, acculturation problems adversely impact academic performance ($\beta = -.33, p = .05$).

In a model used to discuss the direct impact of variables on academic results:

A unit change in cultural identity (CI) is linked to a change in academic outcomes of 0.292 units ($B = .292$).

One-unit change related to provincial culture (CPC) is related to a 0.182 change in academic outcomes ($B = .182$).

On the whole, the results suggest that students who are able to preserve the strong cultural identity and adjust to the mainstream academic setting achieve better academic results. It is worth noting that 71 per cent of the students surveyed were highly culturally proud and wanted to maintain their culture and traditions even in the face of external influence.

5. Discussion

5.1 Interpretation of Key Findings

According to the empirical evidence, in cases of ethnically heterogeneous students, integration as the simultaneous practice of preserving the culture of my home country and the experience of the one active in the host country turns out to be the most effective strategy of acculturation to academic success (Karim, 2021). The positive correlation between the membership to the provincial culture and cultural identity was significant ($r = 0.62$), and it highlighted the continuity of the ethnic background as one of the focal points of the self-concept among students. Additionally, the acculturation to the dominating Punjabi far culture was positively correlated with academic outcomes ($r = 0.59$) thus highlighting the practical role of acculturation as a key factor to social integration and academic achievement at the university level.

Cultural identity is a strong and has significant statistical significance predictor of both academic outcomes ($\beta = 0.514, p = 0.01$) and academic motivation ($\beta = 0.41, p = 0.01$). This observation contradicts the conceptualizations of deficit and affirms that the firm and well-established sense of self based on heritage is an asset and not a hindrance to academic success. The fact that 71 percent of the students indicated that they were extremely proud

of their cultures is an indication that they carry the cultural pride into resilience, perseverance, and academic concentration.

5.2 Acculturation Problems and Academic Risk

The adverse relationship between acculturation problems and academic participation ($\beta -0.33$, $p -0.05$) testifies to the dangers of cultural dissonance. Learners facing strong obstacles, such as language barriers, social marginalization, or alienation, have recorded a lack of academic self-confidence and poor performance (Green-Johnson, 2025). This fact corresponds to the concept of marginalization introduced by Berry, where people do not preserve their originality, and they are not absorbed into the mainstream, as a result alienated (Haque, 2024). These results, therefore, demonstrate the critical importance of the institutional environments in either supporting or hindering the student adjustment and success.

5.3 Contextual Relevance

The study widens the scope of literature on cultural identity and acculturation in higher education system in Pakistan which has been an area that has never had a lot of emphasis in the past. The results shed light on a complex, dynamic identity formation in national multicultural environments showing that students gain more by maintaining their identity and interacting with people who are culturally diverse. The results also confirm the fact that cultural diversity, despite its drawbacks, also offers numerous practices, views, and resources that can make the general life in the country better.

5.4 Conclusion

This study finds that cultural identity and acculturation have a strong impact on university students living in different ethnic regions of Pakistan in terms of academic achievement and social acceptance. Those students who maintained a close relationship with their own culture and managed to adjust to the dominant culture of the university, primarily, the integration strategy, showed increased academic motivation, academic engagement, and achievement. On the other hand, the problems of acculturation had a negative effect on academic activity. The results highlight the significance of nurturing inclusive institutional conditions that foster bicultural competence, in such a way that will empower students to succeed in their own cultural environment, as well as in the host environment, without sacrificing one. The learned experience and expertise of the Pakistani youth in cross-country cultural identity negotiation will be indispensable to the social fabric of the country.

5.5 Recommendations and Policy Implications

Encourage Culturally Responsive Counseling: university counseling services should include culturally responsive modalities that would respond to the acculturation stress, social isolation, and linguistic barrier which were empirically associated with low academic engagement.

5.5.1 Create Cultural Exchange Opportunities

Institutions must take the initiative of exposing students to the cultural realities of other students, diversity discussions and campus-wide events that allow students the positive experience of being exposed to the dominant culture without domestically forcing them to adopt Assimilation.

5.5.2 Integrate Diversity into Curricula

Diversity and inclusion need to be integrated into academic programs and support services to inculcate positive acculturation and foster long-term intercultural competence and overcome the constraints of interventions of short-term nature.

5.5.3 Encourage the Ethnic Societies

Universities need to actively support regional student groups and cultural societies as places that encourage pluralism and create safe areas where students can express their creativity and subculture, thus enhancing the high cultural affiliation with academic achievement.

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Disclaimer

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