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## The Role of Extracurricular Activities in Fostering Diversity and Inclusion in Higher Education: A Systematic Review

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### Abstract

*This paper has been designed to investigate the role of extracurricular activities in fostering diversity and inclusion in higher education using a systematic review. Portraying a comprehensive analysis of published research documents from diverse academic contexts, the study synthesizes several findings from the past few decades to explore how participation in extracurricular engagements including sports, volunteer initiatives, cultural events, academic clubs, and student organizations contributes to inclusive campus environments in higher education. The review highlights that these activities provide critical platforms for cross-cultural dialogue, social interaction, and community building among students from different cultural, socio-economic, and geographical residential backgrounds. This study has been based on the published research documents extracted from digital databases including Google Scholar, Web of Science, Sage, Tylor & Francis, Springer Nature, Emerald Insights, etc. Researchers continued to extract data on the subject till reaching the point of saturation (135 published research documents). Thematic analysis has been done to present the qualitative data. The findings emphasize that extracurricular participation diminishes social exclusion, enhances students' sense of belonging, and empowers diminished groups by supporting mutual respect and equity. Through an intersectional lens, the review also studies how factors such as social class, gender of the student, residential background of students, and cultural differences interact with extracurricular activities to shape students' experiences of inclusion.*

**Keywords:** Extracurricular Activity, Social Class, Diversity, Inclusivity, Higher Education.

### Introduction

It has been observed that along with extracurricular activities religious affiliation has also been found very significant among students in higher education. Students have strong belief systems as per their religiosity (Shoaib, 2021). Universities provide spaces for students to perform their religious practices such as masjid. Students feel free to express their religious beliefs and identities. Students are treated equally regardless of their religious beliefs. Universities play an important role in promoting a peaceful environment and engaging in meaningful religious discussions (Aldrin, 2024; Baratta & Smith, 2019; Rymarz, 2024). It is stated that the intersectionality of class highlights in university the way socioeconomic status

intersects with others. Universities support low-class students with a variety of programs and resources such as merit and need-based scholarships (Shoaib, 2024d). Students learn skills that help them to break down the cycle of poverty. Teachers tried their level best to avoid favouritism based on social class among students (Shoaib, Ali, Anwar, et al., 2021). All students have equal rights and enjoy benefits regardless of their social class. The university promotes equality and ensures that all students have equal facilities (Bubar, Karina, & Bundy-Fazioli, 2016; Goode, Jelena, & Bose, 2022; Martin & Hartmann, 2022).

It has been observed that residential areas are less important in universities (Arshad, Anwar, & Shoaib, 2024a). Universities offer programs that help the students to adjust to this environment such as orientation programs. Universities encouraged the rural area students and involved in different activities. New policies are made by addressing the student's issues and needs. Higher education plays an important role in a brighter and equitable future for all residential background students (Chu et al., 2019; Devlin et al., 2023; Hui & Min, 2017). Students from diverse cultural backgrounds are welcome at the university. Cultural events break the barriers among different ethnic groups of students (Shoaib, 2024b). University starts different programs to reduce the language barriers. Students from disadvantaged groups have equal access to resources and equal representation in universities. It is found that higher education promotes the diversity of culture, understanding, and respect among students (Ali, Zaman, & Shoaib, 2024; Singer & Cunningham, 2012; Strachan et al., 2020; Walker, & Deng, 2007).

### **Study Context**

Several studies have been conducted in developed countries to examine extracurricular activities, academic performance, student engagement, and social inclusion (Mowen & Manierre, 2017; Tan, Liangliang, & Bodovski, 2022; Watson, 2011). These countries have well-established programs and policies for extracurricular activities and promote diversity (Bunn, 2023). However, only a few studies have been conducted in developing countries the policies, infrastructure, and support systems are limited and Pakistan has no extension (Darling, L., & Smith, 2005; Polivanova, & Sivak, 2016; Zhang & Veacock, 2023). Pakistani universities face challenges in creating inclusive environments among students to find diversity (Ferrer-Aracil, & Aragonés-González, 2024; Shoaib & Zaman, 2025). Hence, this study has been designed to evaluate the effects of extracurricular activities on diversity and inclusion among higher education students. Hence, this study has been designed to investigate the role of extracurricular activities in fostering diversity and inclusion in higher education using a systematic review.

### **The Data and Methods**

This study adopts a systematic review research methodology to synthesize existing literature (published research documents) on the role of extracurricular activities in promoting diversity and inclusion among students in higher education. It has been observed that a systematic review is an established method for identifying, integrating, and evaluating findings from relevant studies to generate evidence-based conclusions. The study follows a qualitative systematic review design. The review of literature has been structured around extracurricular activities and diversity among students in higher education. The inclusion criteria have been based on peer-reviewed journal research articles, published in previous recent years, English language, and higher education context. However, grey literature, studies outside the higher education context, and not focusing on diversity or inclusion have been excluded from this study. The published research documents have been extracted from different databases including Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, Google Scholar, JSTOR, and PsycINFO. Different search terms with different combinations have been used to extract the data. Screen and selection process has also been done based on inclusion criteria. Qualitative content analysis has been employed to identify recurring themes and patterns in the data. The data analysis has been completed based on the thematic analysis of 135 published research documents till

reaching point of saturation. It is important to mention here that this study has not involved data collection from humans directly. Hence, this study has not affected humans, animals, and the environment.

### **Results and Discussion**

Several studies have been conducted and reported that age and gender influenced the participation of students in extracurricular activities in higher education (Wingrove, Anderson, Hannah, Bailey, & Pearce, 2024). Similarly, the study findings outlined that age beliefs and gender practices affected the student's participation in sports festivals at higher education levels (Neves, Ariana, & Borges, 2024; Shoaib, Shehzadi, & Abbas, 2024b). Likewise, the research revealed that age, gender, and work status act as a barrier and are removed through extracurricular activities (Nam, Deniz, & Horzum, 2024). Further, the crux of the study indicated that university campuses removed facts like age and gender by supporting students get together (Flesler & Spataro, 2024; Shoaib, Shehzadi, & Abbas, 2024a). Moreover, the study asserted that the role of age, gender, and academic level reflected the student's interest in extracurricular activities in higher education (Aqadoh & Trimasse, 2024; Shoaib, Ali, & Abbas, 2024). In the same way, the search findings argued that gender roles, attitudes, and university experiences affected the participation environment of extracurricular activities at a high education level (Andrew, Tom, & Haney, 2024; Shoaib, 2024c). As mentioned in the study analysis reported that awareness of gender equality and diversity on university campuses affects the actions towards extracurricular activities (Alfonso-Benlliure & Alonso-Sanz, 2024). However, the study findings articulated that gender diversity inclusively affected equity, access to resources, and representation of leadership positions in extracurricular activities among students at the tertiary level (Shoaib, Zaman, & Abbas, 2024; Yohannes, Deborah, & Binagwaho, 2022).

The study pointed out that age friendly university environment promoted inclusive learning (Simon, Sarah, & Zakrajsek, 2022). Similarly, the study findings outlined that students' perceptions about age and gender impacted engagement and collaboration in outdoor non-academic activities in higher education (Kitta & Cardona-Moltó, 2022). Likewise, the research revealed that gender and age intersected with students' motivation and engagement in academic clubs at higher education (Joshi & Och, 2021). Further, the study indicated that social positions, age, and gender expectations affected confidence in quizzes and debate competitions (Shoaib, 2024a; Villa Lever, 2020). Moreover, the study asserted that gender nonconformity and Peer groups influence participation in student get-togethers in higher education (van Beusekom, & Overbeek, 2020). In the same way, the search findings argued that age, gender, and student success discouraged barriers to enrolling in extracurricular activities at the tertiary level (de Coninck-Smith, 2020). As mentioned in the study analysis reported that racing against age and gender affects students' mixed-gender extracurricular activities (Shoaib & Ullah, 2021; Woube, 2018). However, the study findings articulated that age and gender supported social mobility and social learning among students in high education through involvement in extracurricular activities (Walsh & Gerrard, 2018).

The study indicated that peer behavior, parental support, and the role of age and gender correlated at the tertiary level students (Goldstick et al., 2018; Shoaib & Ullah, 2019). Similarly, the study findings outlined that political affiliation encouraged students to participate in debate competitions at the university level (Malmström, 2025). Likewise, the research revealed that political affiliation and party membership enhanced students' leadership in extracurricular activities in higher education (Webb & Bale, 2023). Further, the crux of the study indicated that political affiliation modified political legitimacy, social justice, and volunteer activities (Saidin, 2023; Shoaib, Ali, & Akbar, 2021). Moreover, the study asserted that participation in political affairs positively affected student activism and reshaped political beliefs among university students (Melchiorre, 2020). In the same way, the search findings argued that students' politics and political affiliations impacted students'

critical thinking and community service involvement in higher education (Kuttig, 2019; Shoaib, Usmani, & Abdullah, 2023). As mentioned in the study analysis reported that affiliation in political matters enhanced the student's awareness of university policies related to extracurricular activities (Kamikubo, 2019; Shoaib, Iqbal, & Tahira, 2021). However, the study findings articulated that political affiliation empowered students for social change through debates and problem-solving skills (Ufen, 2018).

The study asserted that political affiliation polished university students' public speaking skills through involvement in debates and discussion activities (Hlavac, 2016). Similarly, the study findings outlined that political affiliation in higher education helped students to actively participate and policy discussions in sports festivals (Sloam, 2014). Likewise, the research revealed that political parties enhanced civics engagement and responsibilities among higher education students along with extracurricular activities (Desrues & Kirhlani, 2013). Further, the crux of the study indicated that political parties enhanced critical thinking, awareness about their rights, and employability of the students through attending seminars and workshops at the tertiary level (Stamelos, 2011). Moreover, the study asserted that independent political parties raised knowledge of university policy formation and cross-cultural awareness through student involvement in get-togethers (Boogers & Voerman, 2010). In the same way, the search findings argued that political parties engaged higher education students in outdoor non-academic activities to improve students' physical fitness and mental health (Naseer, Shoaib, & Naseer, 2022; Rudalevige et al., 2007). As mentioned in the study analysis reported that political affiliation promoted open discussions on university problems to engage students in seminars and students get together at high education level (Robideaux, 2002). However, the study findings articulated that political affiliation promoted neutrality for all students to participate in volunteer activities at the higher education level (Kamikubo, 2019).

The study revealed that religious affiliation supported volunteer activities at a high education level (Jusufo, 2025). Similarly, the study findings outlined that Islamic education, religious affiliation, and superficial implementation of Islamic teaching enhanced the ethical behavior and participation of students in extracurricular activities in higher education (Chotimah, Zuhri, & Yusuf, 2025). Likewise, the research revealed that religious ordinances and faith engaged students in teamwork and fair play in sports festivals at the higher education level (Spiegel, 2024). Further, the crux of the study indicated that religious affiliation strengthened experiences of religious acceptance with collaborated extracurricular activities among university students (Scott, Brittanie, & Walls, 2024). Moreover, the study asserted that religious affiliation minimized religious diversity among students enrolled in extracurricular activities in universities (Sapir, 2024). In the same way, the search findings argued the impact of religious and spiritual messages on students' inclusive learning and volunteer activities (Roth-Cohen, Sidharth, & La-Ferle, 2024). As mentioned in the study analysis reported that trends of religious belief and performing religious practices boost the involvement of students in religious seminars and workshops at a high education level (Sorenson & Jones, 2024). However, the study findings articulated that religious education reflected respect, charity work, and helping disadvantaged groups by involving students in volunteer activities (Rymarz, 2024).

The analysis of the study clinched that religious affiliation encouraged university students for outdoor non-academic activities, food distribution, and community engagement (Nrenzah, 2024). Similarly, the study findings outlined the relationships between religious affiliation, diverse religious communities, and public university students' ratio of participating in extracurricular activities (Nielsen & Sanford, 2024). Likewise, the research revealed relationships between religiosity and controlled deviant behavior of higher education students by participating in seminars and workshops (Nguyen, John, & Opatrny Pease, 2024; Shoaib, Abdullah, Naqvi, & Ditta, 2024). Further, the crux of the study indicated that religious

affiliation positively affected students' community engagement, social work, and volunteer activities at a high education level (Ferrer-Aracil et al., 2024). Moreover, the study asserted that religious affiliation decreased the risk of suicide, anxiety, drinking alcohol, and depression by participating students in religious students get together discussions (El-Oumary et al., 2024; Shoaib, 2023). In the same way, the search findings argued that religious affiliation breaks down the barriers and social norms among university students involved in debates and discussions on different religions (Howie, & Marszalek, 2024). As mentioned in the study analysis reported that religious affiliation and religious education enhanced the respect of diverse faiths, beliefs, and religious rituals among university students to take part in festivals and workshops (Marshall, 2024; Shoaib, Naseer, & Naseer, 2023). However, the study findings articulated that religious affiliation builds sustainable peace through multicultural students together participation at the tertiary level (Arshad, Anwar, & Shoaib, 2024b; Mashuri et al., 2024).

The study outlined that the intersectionality of class promoted diverse experiences and skills among students through extracurricular activities in higher education (Stuber, 2011). Similarly, the study findings outlined that the intersectionality of class, race, position, and social status explored social issues and social connections among students to participate in debates and workshop activities at the university level (Song, Lising, & Lo, 2025). Likewise, the research revealed that the intersectionality of class reduced social barriers and misconceptions among higher education students by collaborating in extracurricular activities (Kausar, Manaf, & Shoaib, 2022; Relles & Duncheon, 2025). Further, the crux of the study indicated that the intersectionality of class enhanced communication skills, social integration, and unity among tertiary-level students being involved in sports festivals (Oseghale, Chinedu, & Oyelere Michael Nyantakyiwa, 2025). Moreover, the study asserted that intersectionality, neoliberal, and meritocracy supported low-class students through reward quizzes and debate competitions in higher education (Mkhize & Idahosa, 2025). In the same way, the search findings argued that the role of race and intersectionality of class helped students to exchange their points of view and experience to take part in debate competitions at a high education level (Browne, CalvinJohn, & Battle, 2025). As mentioned in the study analysis reported that intersectionality of class encouraged inclusive academic learning and mutual aims by participating university students in seminars and workshops (Shoaib, Mehmood, & Butt, 2022; Tripathy et al., 2024). However, the study findings articulated that the intersectionality of class examined social identity, gender role, and social mobility by joining outdoor non-academic activities at the tertiary level (Sorkhou, Tayyab, Jessica, & Uliaszek, 2024).

The crux of the study argued that the intersectionality of class supported equality in resources and opportunities among university students through involvement in sports activities and festivals in higher education (Masutha, Rajani, & Enders, 2024). Similarly, the study findings outlined that intersectionality in relationships and class valued poor students' opinions and highlighted their interest at the university level with debates and seminar activities (Heino, Hanna, Laura, & Tapola-Haapala, 2024). Likewise, the research revealed that decolonization and intersectionality of the class affected students' diversity of thoughts and changed opinions by interacting with extracurricular activities (Daniel & Platzky Miller, 2024). Further, the crux of the study indicated that intersectionality of class promoted a sense of belonging and harmony on university campuses among students by coordinating students get together (Wang & Gorman-Murray, 2023). Moreover, the study asserted that teaching intersectionality in class enhanced students' understanding, and avoided favouritism by participating in sports and cultural festivals at the university level (Simon & Joseph, 2023). In the same way, the search findings argued that the intersectionality of class enhanced the participation of students in student activism and volunteer activities in higher education (Ozbay & Candan, 2023). As mentioned in the study analysis reported that ethno-racial,

gender, and class interaction collaborated with volunteer activities and strengthened career development opportunities and support networks among university students (Jha & Wharton, 2023). However, the study findings articulated that using the intersectionality matrix as a tool to develop student's critical thinking and expand knowledge of their rights in university through involvement in quiz and debate competitions (Stockdale, Rowan, & McCluskey Dean, 2022).

The analysis of the study pointed out that residential background developed a network of belongingness among urban and rural students by participating in extracurricular activities at the university level (Mireku, 2024). Similarly, the study findings outlined that residential background is a stimulus to promote unity and respect diversity among higher education students by taking part in seminars and students together (Ling, Jia, & Wong, 2024). Likewise, the research revealed that residential background helped students highlight their cultural backgrounds by participating in festivals and debate competitions at the tertiary level (Zasina & Antczak, 2023). Further, the crux of the study indicated that the residential environment affected inclusive literacy and minimized stereotypes between rural and urban students involved in outdoor non-academic activities in higher education (Frensley, & Sorice, 2022). Moreover, the study asserted that residential backgrounds enhanced the personal growth and confidence of rural area students by participating in debates and workshop activities at the tertiary level (Daliri Dizaj & Hatami Khanghahi, 2022). In the same way, the search findings argued that socioeconomic background and residential background had changed the perspective of rural students about coeducation and gender roles collaborating with seminars and workshops in higher education (Somers et al., 2021). As mentioned in the study analysis reported that classroom climate and residential background played a role in the adopted campus environment and minimized barriers to language among diverse higher education students (Beld et al., 2021). However, the study findings articulated that there was an association between residential arrangements, academic performance, and outdoor non-academic activities among students at the university level (Webb & Turner, 2020).

The study pointed out that diversity among residential backgrounds affected the open-mindedness and level of participation in volunteer activities of the students in higher education (Garvey, Elsa, Samantha, Rachel, & Sanders, 2020). Similarly, the study findings outlined that residential areas contributed to holistic education and inclusive learning among university students by involving them in extracurricular activities (Cheng & Chan, 2020). Likewise, the research revealed that urban and rural students, their family background, and their participation in student organizations and get together influenced by their residential background in higher education (Hui & Min, 2017). Further, the crux of the study indicated that the impact of outdoor residential experience and background affected participation in volunteer activities at the tertiary level (Fuller, Daisy, & Fox, 2017). Moreover, the study asserted that home-spaced and residential backgrounds promoted the local culture, tradition, and language through students' participation in festivals and debate competitions at the university level (Janning & Volk, 2017). In the same way, the search findings argued that residential areas supported the professional skills and development among university students by involving them in volunteer activities at university and community level (Seaman et al., 2017). As mentioned in the study analysis reported that residential background links urban and rural students and supports an eco-friendly environment through students together (Naidoo, 2015). However, the study findings articulated that a residential background encouraged students to work in teams and enhanced social interaction at a high education level (Zhou, 2016).

The study argues that cultural differences and identities promote equal rights and respect for all ethnic groups by engaging students in extracurricular activities at a high education level (Tang & Calafato, 2024). Similarly, the study findings outlined that cultural diversity supported cross-culture or eco-friendly culture at the university level by involving students in

sports festivals (Luo & Chen, 2024). Likewise, the research revealed that cultural diversity encouraged students to participate in cultural festivals, and students get together for strong social relationships and connections among diverse students at the tertiary level (Hà & Nguyễn, 2024). Further, the crux of the study indicated that cultural practices, intercultural communication, and cultural differences played a role in participating students get together among university students (Sinno, & Numer, 2023). Moreover, the study asserted that cultural differences improved mutual relationships and collective identities among university students by participating in outdoor non-academic activities at higher education levels (Lukowski, Lauren, & Bohanek, 2022). In the same way, the search findings argued that cross-cultural and cultural differences supported the representation of ethnic groups through participating in debates and student dialogues at the tertiary level (Lotfi, Hossein, & Saleh, 2019). As mentioned in the study analysis reported that identities in cultural context and cultural differences influence campus mixed culture and reduce the biases among university students to enrol in extracurricular activities (Jia, Tobias, & Li, 2019). However, the study findings articulated that cultural similarities and differences affected the campus unity and knowledge of unique and diverse cultures among students at high education levels (Ito, Ondrej, & Liu, 2019).

### **Theoretical Insights**

This study uses the social learning theory (Albert, 1977). The main idea of this theory is that students learn behavior, attitude, and skills by observing others. In higher education, students participate in extracurricular activities influenced by peer groups. The theory highlights that social learning experiences shape students' engagement in extracurricular activities. Students learn inclusive behavior, teamwork, and cultural sensitivity by participating in extracurricular activities. These inclusive behaviors help the students to accept the differences, share their perspectives, and show mutual respect for all social classes. Moreover, the university welcomes all students, supports diverse participation, and provides equal opportunities regardless of their gender, age, religion, and cultural backgrounds.

Social capital theory supports this study (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). The core idea of this theory is how individuals gain benefits from their social relationships, connections, and networks. In universities, students engage in extracurricular activities like debate competitions, student get-togethers, and cultural events, and build social relationships. These relationships help students access information, support cross-cultural friendships, and reduce discrimination. Extracurricular activities break down the barriers related to class, gender, residential area, and religious affiliation. These activities connect students socially, develop trust networks, and promote belongingness among students.

Gender Role Theory is used in this study (Eagly, 1987). This theory focuses on how society shapes behavior and assigns specific roles according to gender. Boys and girls are socialized in different ways. They learn their roles from family members, school, the media, and society. These expectations shape their decisions and behaviors. Gender role theory helps to understand how these roles and expectations limit students' participation in extracurricular activities. Universities analyze the needs of each gender, provide equal access to resources for all genders, and promote an inclusive environment. This inclusive environment challenges traditional roles, welcomes all genders, and reduces discrimination in higher education.

Psychological theories provide valuable insights that examine students' behaviors, emotions, motivations, and cognitive development. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943) is commonly used in education and motivation studies that suggest people join activities when their basic needs, such as love, safety, and respect, are fulfilled. Students participate in extracurricular activities when they feel safe, respected, and accepted at the university. Students from different classes, cultures, and religions feel free to participate in extracurricular activities. Students participate in quiz competitions, volunteer activities, and non-academic activities. These activities support students in building confidence, teamwork,

and leadership skills. This theory suggests that when students feel good mentally and emotionally, they actively take part in extracurricular activities regardless of their religion, culture, and social backgrounds.

### Conclusion

This study has been conducted purely on a systematic review of literature on the main idea including extracurricular activities in fostering diversity and inclusion in higher education. The study findings conclude that extracurricular activities serve as a crucial platform for social integration, intercultural engagement, and identity development, offering students from different backgrounds opportunities to link beyond the boundaries of academic settings. Participation in different service learning, student groups, cultural organizations, sports, and leadership creativities not only enhances personal and social skills but also fosters responsiveness, cross-cultural understanding, and a sense of belonging as a key component of inclusive campus environments in higher education. Further, the review of published research documents also concludes that well-structured and intentionally inclusive extracurricular activities alleviate social ranking by bridging gaps among students from different ethnic, socioeconomic, and cultural backgrounds. However, the effectiveness of these activities largely rests on inclusive program design, institutional commitment, and the availability of support mechanisms to ensure equitable access and participation of students in higher education.

### Future Research

Future research may be focused on the role of digital or hybrid extracurricular platforms, the experiences of marginalized student groups, and longitudinal outcomes.

### Policy Implications

This review stresses the need for higher education policymakers and administrators to recognize extracurricular activities not merely as co-curricular supplements but as strategic tools for educating inclusive and equitable learning communities through different sociological lenses.

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