



**SDPI**  
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# **Role of Students' Societies/Unions in Creating Peace, Harmony and Tolerance in Universities in Punjab**

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## Abstract

This study aims to shed light on the critical aspect of promoting peaceful coexistence within university campuses, with a particular focus on the interactions between student societies/unions and the university administration. While considerable attention has been directed towards promoting harmony in broader societal contexts, there has been a relative lack of emphasis on understanding and addressing issues within campuses. By exploring various factors that influence campus relations, this paper seeks to provide valuable insights that can pave the way for a harmonious and inclusive campus environment. Universities are unique melting pots of diverse ethnicities, cultures, and interests. This diversity can enrich the learning experience and foster personal growth of youth. The implications of this research for university administrations are manifold. Policy recommendations, institutional support for initiatives, and the importance of strong leadership and engagement are essential considerations for fostering a conducive and inclusive campus environment. Ultimately, by understanding and addressing the root causes of intolerance and implementing effective strategies, universities can create an atmosphere that promotes academic excellence, personal growth, and the holistic development of all students. A peaceful campus not only benefits individual students but also contributes to building a more harmonious society beyond the university walls.

**Keywords:** Students' Societies/Union, Administration, peaceful co-existence, Higher Education

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Universities are supposed to serve as vibrant hubs of learning and personal growth, bringing together students from diverse backgrounds, ethnicities, cultures, and interests. This diversity creates a unique melting pot, fostering an enriched and transformative educational experience. However, with such diversity comes the challenge of ensuring peaceful coexistence among students, particularly in interactions between students' societies/unions and university administration.

While the promotion of peace, harmony and tolerance in broader societal contexts has been a subject of significant attention, relatively less emphasis is given on the redressal of such issues within the microcosm of university campuses. That's why conflicts, misunderstandings, and intolerance emerge among various student groups, hindering academic progress and personal growth.

This study focuses on the interaction between students' societies/unions and the university administration. By exploring the diverse factors influencing campus relations, the study seeks to provide valuable insights that can pave the way for a harmonious and inclusive campus environment. As we delve into the dynamics of interactions and potential sources of conflicts within universities, we acknowledge the importance of recognizing these issues as opportunities for growth and positive change. Our research aims to offer a comprehensive analysis of successful conflict resolution strategies and highlight the implications of fostering peaceful coexistence for university administrations.

By understanding and addressing the root causes of intolerance and implementing effective strategies, universities can create an atmosphere that promotes academic excellence, personal growth, and the overall well-being of all students. The significance of this endeavour extends beyond the confines of the campus, as a peaceful and inclusive educational environment lays the foundation for building a more harmonious and understanding society at large.

### History of Students' Unions in Pakistan

Students' unions have been functioning in colleges and universities since 1947. Muslim Students Federation (MSF) existed even before the emergence of Pakistan that played an active role in the Pakistan Movement. Later, Democratic Students' Federation (DSF) and Islami Jamiat Talaba (IJT) – the two pro-left and pro-right students' organizations respectively, were also formed. Initially students' problems were the main focus of these bodies, but with the passage of time these organization had evolved their ideological and political role within the campuses.

Looking at the students' unions in Pakistan, we realize that most of them are supported by the mainstream political parties or influenced by their ideological foundations. Some of the students' organizations operate at national level whereas some are limited to the provincial or local level.

These are: Democratic Students Federation, Islami Jamiat Talaba, Jamiat Talaba Pakistan, Anjuman Talaba-i-Islam, People's Students Federation, Muslim Students Federation, Baloch Students Federation, Muhajir Students Organization, Pakhtun Students Federation, National Students Federation, and others.

Unfortunately, as the importance and influence of students' unions increased over the years, political parties' interference in their like-minded student wings also increased and became more direct in many cases. Elections, especially in big universities, became more expensive and money started flowing from sources outside the campuses in a bid to influence the union elections. Violence ran into campuses that damaged the study environment.

Making it an excuse, ban on students' unions was originally imposed through Martial Law Orders in 1984 during the rule of the then chief martial law administrator cum president of Pakistan, Gen. Ziaul Haq. Discussion on students' unions can be divided into four aspects.

- Period before the establishment of student unions,
- Era of students' unions,
- Ban on students' organizations and resulting problems,
- Government intervention in universities

The debate will remain meaningless unless there is a threadbare discussion on these four aspects. Regarding an active role of students in politics, there are strong arguments for and against it on both sides. The first side believes that ban on students' unions had helped promote the quality of education, so there is no need for students' unions. On the contrary, some people say that in the absence of students' unions, acts of violence have increased and universities are unable to produce a leadership which might contribute to national level politics.

In such circumstances universities started setting up societies to take students on board on the basis of their technical skills, so that they might strengthen their skills and improve knowledge. The different societies such as dramatic, debate and literature, sports, art & culture, etc. are functioning in the universities where students are playing their part to maintain peace as per their skills and knowledge.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

The global literature on terrorism consolidates the fact that religious community and madrassas have been the focus of broader educational reforms in Pakistan and other regions in the world (Rehman 2020). As these reforms are happening, the conundrum seems to become complex and challenging as the extremist organizations attract highly educated youth of secular and liberal arts universities to its recruitment and engage them in their divisive narrative (Basit 2021). Post-2010, a

more significant number of students and faculty recruitment cases registered that alarmed the bell for policymakers, civil society, and donors (Yusuf 2013). Saad Aziz, who killed Sabeen Mehmood, is a graduate of Institute of Business Administration (IBA) Karachi (Nadim 2015). Two other attackers involved in the Safoora Goth incident were graduates: one from the University of Karachi, and another from Sir Syed University. Naureen Leghari, a second-year medical student of the Liaquat University of Medical and Health Sciences (LUMHS), was arrested during an operation in Lahore (Cheema 2017). The incident was one of its first in Sindh (interior) that reflects the recruitment of educated youth by the extremist groups. She was reported to have visited Syria and wanted to join a foreign-based extremist group. Prof. Mushtaq, a former Karachi University teacher, joined a terrorist group affiliated with Al-Qaeda (Majeed 2017).

Most of the intelligentsia claimed an absence of student unions as a biggest reason of VE group penetration on the campuses. The student unions were phenomenal in grooming most local and national politicians. Besides, the unions were also democratically elected bodies that instilled a culture of pluralism, diversity and critical thinking. However, protests during the 1980s against the military dictator were termed violent, and between 1982 and 1988, almost 80 student leaders lost their lives (Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency [PILDAT] 2008). This led to a ban on the student unions in Pakistan. Pakistan Peoples' Party (PPP) and left-wing political parties advocated for lifting the ban to work for student rights, but in vain. Academics and administration of educational institutions termed the violent incidents on the campuses a significant reason for political patronage, using students for their political gains, instilling gang violence and erupting protests. The murder of Mashal Khan, a student at Wali Khan University Mardan and a professor's killing by his student in Bahawalpur indicate towards increasing extremism of the educated youth in Pakistan. Moreover, the Counter Terrorism Department (CTD) has also arrested numerous students and teachers from the Punjab University for their alleged links with banned outfits.

It is said that extremist groups exploited the vacuum left by the student unions. They accessed the vulnerable students, influenced them and recruited them by providing them support mechanisms through in-person or virtual peer groups. They usually play upon cultural, social, religious, or economic divides among the targeted youth, fueling hate and intolerance (Farmer 2019). By that time, the student unions remain banned, there was a need for alternate platforms and functional student societies and clubs that can provide such platforms, giving students opportunities to engage in positive peer activities to win over other vulnerable youth. To this effect, the Higher Education Commission (HEC) issued instructions to the university administration to curtail increasing radicalization on the campuses. In 2017, the then Interior Minister chaired a conference of 70 universities and stressed taking up measures to step up anti-radicalization measures, including strengthening of students' societies and clubs (Majeed 2017).



In 2016, the Punjab Higher Education Commission (PHEC) convened a conference of Vice-Chancellors to discuss VE issues and suggested ways to design and implement peacebuilding programmes on the campuses. The conference came up with a set of 34 recommendations to help curtail issues of VE. One of the recommendations was to strengthen the students' societies and clubs to sustain their constructive engagement to desist students from extremist narratives (Rehman 2019). By strengthening these to help organize activities such as cultural festivals, performing arts competitions, poetry recitals, sports leagues, and debates to promote mutual understanding and help to establish peace and tolerance on the campus. Since then, many students' societies strengthening initiatives have been taken at various public and private sector universities in the Punjab (University of the Punjab 2020). The National Security Policy 2021 also emphasized the role of youths as a future of the country. The 2018 NACTA CVE guidelines also stressed engaging youths in various settings to desist the extremist narrative.

### **Current Situation of Student Unions**

In 2008, former prime minister Syed Yousaf Raza Gillani announced the restoration of students' unions while spelling out his government's agenda after receiving a unanimous vote of confidence from the National Assembly, but no further steps were taken in this regard. Later, in 2022, the Sindh government announced the restoration of students' unions, but they also did not develop any way forward as to how these students' unions would function. The main hurdles are the universities regulations, made after the banning of unions in 1984, that prohibit students from taking part in any political activity and the opposition of university administrations to the restoration of students' unions.

Most universities and colleges now have students' societies that cater to extracurricular activities such as debates, art, culture, sports, and drama. Only a few universities and some women colleges have their elected students' unions. There are successful examples of students' societies functioning in Government College University Lahore and Kinnaird College for Women University where they are playing an active part in engaging students in healthy activities.

During the admissions process, most universities require students to agree not to participate in political activities. Some private universities also require students or their parents to sign an affidavit in this regard. It apparently legally binds students not to participate in any such activity. In case of violation, the university warns students of serious consequences such as rustication from the institution.

## **3. METHODOLOGY**

The study adopted a mixed-method approach to conduct research. brief. For this purpose five Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) having 8 participants in each group were held and then 22 experts interviews were conducted (Annexure 1). The participants of FGDs and interviews were the office-bearers of the existing students' societies, students, university officials, media persons and legislators.

Four following questions were prepared for interviews with all stakeholders;

What is your basic understanding about the students' unions and why are they important?

Is there any need to revive the students' unions/societies?

What challenges are being faced by students' societies on the premises of campuses?

How do students' societies play their part to improve the university environment?

## 4. DISCUSSIONS & ANALYSIS

Participants shared their views in response to the questions as given below.

### **Q 1. What is your basic understanding about the students' unions and why are they important?**

Students' unions are typically perceived as representative bodies that voice the concerns, opinions, and interests of the students. They serve as a bridge between students and university administration, advocating for student rights and demands.

Students' societies/unions are often organized hierarchically, with elected student leaders at various levels, such as class representatives, department representatives, and university level. This structure allows for effective communication and decision-making within the student body.

Students' societies/unions organize a wide range of social, cultural, and recreational activities, including festivals, sports, and academic competitions. These activities contribute to a vibrant campus life and promote a sense of community among students.

Students' unions are politically active and engage in broader societal issues under the leadership of political parties. They may participate in demonstrations, rallies, and campaigns, advocating for social and political causes that affect both the university and the wider community.

Students' unions often provide essential services to students, such as organizing student clubs, offering academic support, and facilitating extracurricular activities.

Students' societies/unions provide a platform for students to have their voices heard within the university. They can advocate for improved academic conditions, campus facilities, and student services.

Serving in societies/union allows students to develop leadership skills, learn about governance, and gain practical experience in organizing events and managing resources.

## **Q 2. Is there any need to revive the students' unions/societies?**

Revival of students' unions or societies in our universities is a complex and debatable issue. Moreover, the existence of students' unions is always disliked by the university and city administration due to certain political factors. Students' unions can provide a platform for students to engage in the democratic process. They allow students to elect their representatives, voice their concerns, and participate in decision-making within their educational institutions.

Such platforms offer opportunities for students to develop leadership skills, organizational abilities, and a sense of responsibility. These skills can be valuable for their future careers and civic engagement.

By organizing cultural events, sports competitions, and extracurricular activities, students' unions enhance campus life, fostering a comprehensive educational experience. The representatives of students' societies/unions can advocate for student rights and welfare, including issues related to academic policies, and student services

In the past, students' unions in Pakistan have been associated with political violence, disruption of academic activities, and factionalism. The revival may exacerbate these problems. The alternate structure like student societies can address student concerns without the potential drawbacks associated with traditional students' unions.

The revival of student union should involve stakeholders from the education sector, government, and civil society to create a framework that meets the needs of students while addressing potential challenges

## **Q 3. How do students' societies play their part to improve the university environment?**

Students' societies play a crucial role in improving the university environment by contributing to a vibrant and inclusive campus community. The Punjab is a region known for its rich cultural diversity. Student societies often focus on celebrating this diversity. They can organize cultural events, festivals, and exhibitions that showcase the vibrant traditions, languages, and heritage of the Punjab. These activities will promote cross-cultural understanding and create a congenial environment for students from various backgrounds.

Academic-focused societies in universities can organize seminars, workshops, and study groups to support students in their studies. They provide a platform for intellectual discussions, allowing students to deepen their knowledge and engage in critical thinking.

Students' societies can participate in local initiatives, organize blood drives, and volunteer at

orphanages and shelters. This not only benefits the community but also instills a sense of social responsibility among students.

Student societies often address important social issues relevant to the region, such as gender equality, healthcare, and education. They raise awareness about these issues through campaigns, awareness sessions, and advocacy efforts.

Societies offer students opportunities to develop essential skills such as leadership, teamwork, communication, and event management. These skills are valuable for personal growth and future career prospects.

Art, music, and drama societies provide platforms for students to express their creativity. They organize exhibitions, musical performances, and theater productions that allow students to showcase their artistic talents.

Student societies can facilitate networking among students and professionals. They can organize career fairs, workshops, and industry-specific events to help students connect with potential employers and mentors.

Student societies may advocate for student rights and represent student interests to university administrations. They often work on issues such as peaceful co-existence, campus facilities, and academic policies.

Students' involvement in societies encourages their personal growth and self-discovery. It pushes students to take on leadership roles, manage responsibilities, and learn from their experiences.

In the Punjab, as in other regions, the role of student societies in improving the university environment is vital. They contribute to a more inclusive, engaging, and culturally enriched academic atmosphere that can enhance the overall educational experience for students in the region.

## 5. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- University leadership should acknowledge the services of student societies by publishing the stories of student engagement in their newsletters/annual reports.
- Student societies need to be linked with educational credit hours.
- Universities need to reserve funds for the formation, activation and strengthening of student societies.
- Civic education content should be ensured through active engagement of students' societies.
- Interaction between student societies and university administration should be made on a regular basis to discuss inter university affairs.

- Stakeholders needs to be engaged in an informed and structured discussion about the orderly revival and strengthening of student societies/unions for peaceful campuses.
- Effort should be made to learn from other countries' experiences.
- To address the issue of intolerance and extremism, there is a need to educate the youth on National Action Plan, Paigham-e-Pakistan through students' societies.
- Social Incubation Centers should be set up to promote entrepreneurial skills and approaches to building tested models of student engagement.
- Punjab Higher Education Department should play its role in promoting the formation and growth of students; societies in universities. Also it should provide resources, training, recognition, and collaboration opportunities. Moreover, universities will have to create a vibrant and diverse campus culture that supports student engagement, personal growth, and social development.
- No formal mechanism exists to engage parliamentary committee in addressing academic issues. It's time to engage standing committee on Higher Education of the Punjab Assembly to resolve the universities issues elating to students societies/unions.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The formulation of a safe, civilized, just and tolerant society is not possible in isolation. Political activity is essential for a vibrant society. The main problem is to lead the new generation to believe that they are the ambassadors of the state in the process of peace and tolerance by engaging them in healthy extracurricular activities at department and institutional level to promote and polish their leadership skills. This will help establish a vibrant and diverse campus culture, promoting diversity, tolerance, and social harmony.

Policymakers have to provide an out-of-the-box solution of revival and functioning of student societies and unions in the colleges and universities. This can be achieved by providing resources, funding, training, and guidance. Overall, the universities that foster a strong and dynamic culture of student societies are better able to prepare their students to become responsible and trusted members of the society.

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## ANNEXURE 1

No	Name	Designation	Organization
1	Prof. Dr Sajid Rashid Ahmad	Principal	College of Earth and Environmental Sciences, University of the Punjab
2	Prof. Dr Uzma Ashiq Awan	Chairperson	Department of Social Work, University of the Punjab, Lahore
3	Muhammad Arshad	Assistant Professor	Department of Social Work, University of the Punjab, Lahore
4	Prof. Dr Ra'ana Malik	Chairperson	Department of Gender Studies, University of the Punjab, Lahore
5	Dr Maqbool Hussain	Assistant Professor	Department of History, University of the Punjab, Lahore
6	Zeeshan Ahmad Joiya	Lecturer	University of Okara
7	Dr Shahzad Farid	Assistant Professor	University of Okara
8	Dr Muhammad Azhar,	Associate Professor	Government College University, Faisalabad
9	Dr Aqib Shahzad	Lecturer	Department of Social Work, University of Sargodha
10	Dr Muhammad Abubakar	Director ORIC	University of Sargodha
11	Wajiha Ishaq	Lecturer	Department of Social Work, Lahore College for Women University
12	Urwa Iftikhar	Lecturer	Department of Mass Communication, Lahore College for Women University
13	Mumtaz Hussain	Executive Director	Center for Health and Gender Equality, CHANGE
14	Mian Shahid Nadeem	Executive Director	Social Development Initiatives
15	Saba Hakeem	Project Coordinator	Community World Services Asia
16	Sher Ali Khali	Reporter	The News
17	Tanvir Shahzad	Journalist	DW Germany
18	Sadia Sohail Rana	Ex-MPA	Punjab
19	Prof. Dr Ashgar Ali Zaidi	Vice Chancellor	Government College University, Lahore
20	Muhammad Shahid Saleem		Punjab Higher Education Department
21	Imran Saleem	Programme Officer	Institute for Democratic Education and Advocacy (IDEA0)
22	Feroza Batool	Project Manager	Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP)