

Cultural Identity and Integration of Baloch Students in Pakistan Higher Education: A Case Study of the University of Sargodha

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ABSTRACT

The social integration and cultural identity of students is an important part of the higher education experience, especially when students have ethnically different backgrounds. This qualitative case study explores the cultural identity and integration experience of Baloch students at the Institute of Education, University of Sargodha, focusing on how they negotiate their cultural heritage within a predominantly Punjabi academic environment. The population comprised Baloch students enrolled during the 2025 academic year, from which ten male students were selected through purposive sampling to provide information rich insights. Data were collected through semi structured interviews, audio recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis, following Braun and Clark's framework was used to identify recurring patterns and meanings related to cultural identity, linguistic challenges, adaptation strategies, and institutional support. Findings indicate that participant's maintain a strong sense of cultural identity shaped by distinct traditions, values, and linguistic diversity, including Balochi, Pashto, and Brahvi. However, they encounter significant challenges such as language barriers, cultural marginalization, and experiences of discrimination. Educational disparities and gender inequality in their home regions further shape their academic journeys. Despite these obstacles, participants demonstrate resilience and adaptability while preserving cultural pride. Peer mentorship and institutional support emerge as critical facilitators of successful integration. The findings underscore the need for inclusive university policies, including enhanced language support services, culturally responsive counseling and co-curricular initiatives that promote intercultural engagement. These insights contribute to broader discussion on ethnic minority student's experiences in higher education and inform strategies to strengthen both academic and social integration.

Keywords: Cultural identity, Higher education, Social integration, Linguistic barriers, Educational challenges, Diversity, Inclusion.

INTRODUCTION

Pakistan, a nation characterized by its rich ethnic and linguistic diversity, comprises numerous communities that collectively contribute to its intricate cultural landscape. The Baloch is one such community that is mentioned as a predominant resident of the province of Balochistan and has its own cultural identity that has been shaped through historical, linguistic, and socio-economic aspects (Khan and Laoutides, 2024).

Historically, the Baloch, a transnational community in Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan has experienced tension and clashes of identities in society because of ethnic differences in Pakistan (Khan and Laoutides, 2024). With the increase in Pakistani youths seeking higher education, universities have become important institutions of intellectual and social inclusion. But in the case of ethnically different students, such as the Baloch, higher education entails a lot of difficulty, especially preserving their own culture and integrating it into a wider and more predominant academic culture (Zhong and Chen, 2021).

Higher education in Pakistan is a very important socio-economic development engine. It, however, has issues with access and quality disparity and especially in such areas as Balochistan, the education sector suffers due to poor infrastructure, insufficient funding, and high dropout rates (Çoşkun, 2023; Khan et al., 2023). The students of Baloch origin who transfer to other universities like the University of Sargodha not only have to adjust to the academic environment but also a complicated process of the cultural adjustment and identity negotiation. Although university diversity is on the rise, they may at times reinforce social inequalities instead of resolving them (Wahid et al., 2025). In the case of ethnic minority students, acculturation provokes cultural difficulties as they enter heterogeneous university environments, and they experience the sensation of marginalization and acculturation (Zhong and Chen, 2021). Student well-being, academic retention, and success are largely dependent on strong sense of belonging, particularly when a student has a minority background (Gao and Liu, 2021). The lack of inclusive environments may contribute to alienation and may impede integration, which adversely affects the achievement of students (Gao and Liu, 2021). In addition, minority students tend to assimilate into mainstream culture because of their survival tactics to excel in their studies (Zhong and Chen, 2021).

Pakistan usually discriminates and discriminates ethnic minority students in terms of race, religion, gender, and language, especially in education (Haider et al., 2024). In one of the studies on the intercultural adaptation of Pakistani students in Chinese universities, typical problems, including the difficulty in interacting socially, homesickness, and cultural adjustment, were identified (Shah et al., 2021). These social-cultural restraints are widespread in different settings in which students are finding their way to new settings (Shah et al., 2021). Religion-based national narrative is the practice in Pakistan that usually endeavors to form a cohesive identity, something that may suppress the acknowledgment of different ethnic, provincial, gender, and racial identities (Niaz & Anand, 2021). This becomes an issue to Baloch students as they haggle their own cultural background in a university setting where a cultural identity might exist either openly or subtly.

This study seeks to discuss the intricate relationship of cultural identity and social assimilation of Baloch students in the University of Sargodha. In particular, it pays attention to the way in which Baloch students preserve their culture and adjust to the prevailing Punjabian culture. It also focuses on the language barriers, adaptation strategies, and mechanisms of institutional support offering information of the point of intersection between the cultural heritage and the academic integration. The results will aim at addressing a large gap in the literature as the research will help generate information on ethnic minority integration of students in Pakistan, particularly amongst the Baloch population. This study will impact the policies and practices that will be based on the establishment of inclusive academic settings that can embrace cultural diversity and promote academic success.

The study is justified by the fact that there is no research on how exactly Baloch students study in the non-home provincial universities. Although there are studies about the educational issues in the Pakistani country and sociocultural restrictions of Baloch female education (Manzoor et al., 2025; Wahid et al., 2025), there is not much in the form of investigating the cultural identity and assimilation of Baloch students in universities, such as the University of Sargodha. This paper fills this gap by targeting the experience of the Baloch students specifically and this offers empirical evidence that further informs us in the processes of academic and social integration of these students.

The cultural identity is a vital determinant of the wellbeing of a person and is a major factor in academic persistence (Fonseca-Bolorin, 2022; Peifer et al., 2023). Among students of Baloch descent, as their cultural background is a part of their identity, the task of preserving cultural heritage and at the same time adapting can sometimes be complicated and tricky (Khan et al., 2023; Zhong and Chen, 2021). The process of ethnic identity development can be influenced in the course of the higher education process (Peifer et al., 2023), and the manner in which students handle this negotiation process has a considerable effect on their feeling of belonging and academic experience (Gao and Liu, 2021). Lack of an inclusive environment may result in feeling of alienation which influences retention and academic performance. Through these dynamics, the study illuminates lived experiences of Baloch students and provides a clue on how their cultural identity is not only maintained, but also confronted in a Punjabi-dominated academic environment.

Minority students experience specific obstacles and modes of discrimination in institutions of higher learning (Haider et al., 2024). Despite the fact that universities are supposed to be platforms of upward mobility, they can reinforce the status quo in the face of social inequalities when they are not able to cater to the needs of the heterogeneous students (Wahid et al., 2025). The academic development and social integration may be obstructed because of the language barrier, sociocultural disparities, and absence of institutional support (Haider et al., 2024; Shah et al., 2021). Learning the particular difficulties Baloch students experience in the University of Sargodha is important to find a more efficient system of support and institutional practices that would consider the cultural specificities. The results will give practical recommendations to the university administrators, policymakers and student support services that will eventually lead to a more inclusive and equitable higher education institution in Pakistan.

This study is to explore how Baloch students of the University of Sargodha maintain their cultural identity while adapting to the dominant Punjabi culture. The study also aims to determine the challenges, coping strategies and institutional supports that shape their academic and social assimilation.

Theoretical Framework

The study is founded on Cultural Identity Theory and the Acculturation Models to interpret the Baloch students within the academic context in respect of how they cope with their cultural identity. The Cultural Identity Theory views identity as dynamic since it is constructed through the continuous interaction with various social environments (Ting-Toomey, 2015). Acculturation Model by Berry provides a perspective of the process through which an ethnic minority student will be able to adjust to a new cultural environment using the strategies of integration, assimilation, separation or marginalization (Dwyer, 2012). Applying this framework, the Baloch students who have acculturated to the Punjabi culture will be able to understand how they have been able to maintain touch with their origins at the same time.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative case study design has been applied in this paper to explore the experiences of the Baloch students who attend the Institute of Education, University of Sargodha in the detailed manner concerning the cultural identity and social integration. The qualitative approach was chosen in a strategic fashion to assist in comprehending the personal testimonies and viewpoints of students and their experiences in a multicultural college environment in more detail (Dost and Smith, 2023; Saunders et al., 2021). Particularly, a case study design was appropriate to take into account this phenomenon in its practical and real context (Sabharwal et al., 2021). The population of the research was all the Baloch students studying in the Institute of Education during the 2025 academic year. Using the purposive sampling technique, the most suitable solution in the context of the need to concentrate on information-rich cases in relation to the research questions, ten active Baloch students (male) enrolled at a university became the sample of

participants (Haider et al., 2024; Manzoor et al., 2025). These respondents were chosen on the basis of willingness to participate in the research and take part in academic and social life in the university that ensured the availability of plenty of information to analyze. Semi-structured interviews would be conducted in order to collect some in-depth data on various aspects of cultural identity, the potential language barriers, how the students adjusted and how they comprehended the existence of support mechanisms that the institution offered (Haque and Khan, 2025). Each of the interviews was tape recorded and transcribed word-to-word with the advance consent of the research subjects. The thematic analysis formulated by Braun and Clarke was subsequently used to critically process the qualitative data in the form of the collected information. This rational approach to analysis enabled the identification of similar themes, patterns, and meanings in the responses of the participants which ensured credibility of the findings, their depth and situational depth to understand the process of negotiation of cultural identity of the Baloch students in their acculturation to dominant academic atmosphere of Punjab.

RESULTS

The cultural identity and integration of the University of Sargodha among Baloch students (P1-P10) was examined in ten semi-structured interviews. The thematic analysis generated five themes that narrated (a) how students defined Baloch identity, (b) how they were introduced to an environment that was predominantly Punjabi, (c) and how language shaped participation, (d) how students fitted into an environment without losing identity and (e) what supports students believed would improve inclusion.

Table-1

Summary of Themes and Interpretive Focus

Theme	Key subthemes	Interpretive focus
1. Baloch identity as lived heritage and moral code	Traditions; language diversity; educational constraints; values; pride/resilience	Identity expressed through practices, ethics, language, and endurance
2. Entering a Punjabi-dominant university as cultural exposure	Adjustment; marginalization/bias; identity awareness	Belonging shaped by cultural visibility and dominant norms
3. Language and academic communication as gatekeeper	Fear of speaking; isolation; support; self-learning; confidence growth	Participation shaped by communication competence
4. Coping and integration without “losing” identity	Private preservation; flexibility; dual identity; representation	Selective adaptation supports coexistence and pride
5. Supports students say would improve inclusion	Counseling; language/skills support; activities; mentorship; representation; classroom voice	Inclusion linked to wellbeing, equity, visibility, and participation

P1–P10 refers to participant identifiers.

Theme 1: Baloch Identity as Lived Heritage and Moral Code

Respondents explained that the basis of Baloch identity is rooted in practices that are identifiable culturally, multilingual, social moral and endurance that are built by ancient struggles.

Traditions and practices

Students highlighted peculiarities related to customs to be identified with. In her description of the Baloch culture, P1 noted that it is unique in a variety of ways, especially in the dress code, marriage and way of life. The aspect of traditional leadership was also brought out as an ongoing aspect of life in the community; P2 expressed that leadership is characterized as mostly hereditary where the father-son are the ones who take over leadership. These narratives placed identity as publicly present and socially organized by the traditional practices and power forms.

Language Diversity

Language has been explained as a unifying as well as a regionally diverse one. According to P4, the language spoken is Balochi, however, Pashto and Brahvi are also used. P5 emphasized regional differences and remarked that there is a solid literary culture in Makran, where book fetes are held. All these descriptions imply that the linguistic diversity exists along with the similar sense of Baloch cultural belonging.

Educational Constraints and Gender Inequality

The interviewees associated educational experiences with structural disadvantage especially among women. P1 said that female education is quite insufficient because of the presence of uneducated parents and religion. Simultaneously, out-of-province education was represented as potentially transformative; P3 noted that Baloch students who study outside came back with a more enlightened point of view. This indicates the shaping of identity as well as disparate educational chance and the desires of movement.

Values and Social Ethics

The students defined identity in terms of moral code that stressed on hospitality and respect. P6 mentioned, P7 emphasized, Baloch people are hospitable, respectful and well-mannered, P6 mentioned family honor, P7 emphasized loyalty to the tribe. These results show that the participants conceptualize identity as experienced in social behavior and relational commitments.

Resilience and Pride

It was endurance and affirmation narrating identity over and over. P9 mentioned resilience and patience as the primary attribute of Baloch culture because of the years of challenges, and P10 defined identity as a mixture of culture pride and struggle. On the whole, participants illustrated the identity as proud of the culture yet influenced by unremitting limitations.

Theme 2: Entering a Punjabi Dominant University as Cultural and Social Exposure

According to the responses provided by the participants, the university was characterized as the place where the Baloch identity became more prominent and negotiable, with the experiences being both positive (growth and adaptation) and negative (marginalization and cultural invisibility).

Adjustment and Adaptation

Students indicated initial problems with adapting to communication norms and school schedule. P1 said, I had a weak Urdu and my presentation skills in English were not very strong, but the university gave me a chance to become better in my studies and social life. P3 outlined a progression of struggling to getting confident: “It was challenging at the beginning to get adjusted, but with time I got more confident to express myself. These narratives put adjustment as a process of development in perspective.

Marginalization and Bias

Other students were reported to have experiences that diminished their feeling of belonging. P2 modeled that some of the teachers challenged my presence and that Baloch students could not adapt. P4 made exclusion related to campus norms: “Most activities and norms were attributed to Punjabi culture and this made it more difficult to feel included. These words imply that belonging is a process that is determined not only on the level of personal adaptation to the new environment, but also on the recognition of minority identity in the university environment.

Identity Awareness in Diversity

Exposure enhanced cultural self-awareness to some participants. P5 noted that studying with other students helped me in terms of awareness of my own culture and identity, whereas P8 said that being out of my own community helped me portray my culture in a positive light. These results show that cultural exposure may generate vulnerability and identity affirmation.

Theme 3: Language and Academic Communication as the Main Gatekeeper to Participation

The barriers to language were explained as the key to academic activity and social integration, which influence confidence, classroom engagement, and peer relations.

Early Communication Anxiety

Students reported perplexity and apprehension when presenting and discussing in classrooms. P1 wrote, when speaking with presentations, I used Balochi and English a lot... it was confusing. P6 said that he was reluctant to attend: I was afraid to speak up in the classroom. This is evidenced by these experiences that reveal language barriers as emotional and interactional barriers and not just the technical difficulties..

Social Impact and Reduced Interaction

The participants associated language constraints with slow social integration. P7 said, “Language barrier-I was not able to communicate with other students with diverse backgrounds, and P9 said, Social-It was difficult to be friendly initially. Language competence consequently had an impact on classroom engagement and wider membership.

Support, Practice, and Improvement

Students reported improvement due to teacher prompting, classroom activities, peer guidance and self-strategies. P2 said, teachers completed classroom activities that led to the development of communication skills, and P3 said, Senior Baloch students helped me realize my weaknesses. Other independent practices employed by the participants included practice routines and technology: P1 stated, “I practiced in front of a mirror and used AI tools such as ChatGPT and Gemini, and P8 said, I watched English lectures, and

practiced taking notes. In the long-run, the participants linked these attempts to developing confidence: P6 said, “Slowly being able to take part in the discussions have enabled me to gain confidence, and P10 said, the practice and guidance of teachers helped me to become better.

Theme 4: Coping and Integration Without “Losing” Identity

Respondents referred to continuing Baloch identity and adapting selectively to the university life, private cultural knowledge and preservation, mutual respect, and dual identity as the methods used.

Private preservation and public adaptation

One of the standard tactics was to preserve Baloch traditions in secret and to change publicly to conform to the majority standards. P2 said, I keep my Baloch thing a secret and still adjust to Punjabi, and P4 continued, at home, I do Baloch friends. The strategies are indicative of conflict minimization and cultural continuity..

Cultural flexibility and mutual respect

Students referred to integration as achievable in a mutual respect as opposed to assimilation. According to P6, mutual respect is used to serve as a balancing factor... I admire the Punjabi culture but demand that other people respect my culture. P7 also talked about learning without losing heritage as the prevalent culture did: “I also learned to adopt a balanced identity by learning Punjab culture without losing my own.

Pride, awareness, and dual identity

Respondents stressed that adaptation did not amount to identity loss. P3 said, You do not adjust forthcoming, you still keep your identity... I am also proud of my Baloch culture, and P10, whose statement indicated, “Being exposed to other cultures has made me more aware of myself. The interviewees also described the process of coexistence as one that necessitates compromise: P9, said that there has to be a compromise between the two cultures, P8 highlighted that one must stay in touch with his/her community and at the same time advance academically: I stay in touch with my community, and I continue my academic progress.

Theme 5: Supports Students Say Would Make Integration Easier

Respondents listed resources that they thought would enhance wellbeing, academic engagement, cultural presence, and connectedness.

Counseling and wellbeing support

Students associated the problems of adjustment with the necessity of the psychological assistance. P1 explained that the university needs to put up a counseling center to aid in academic stress and cultural adaptation.

Academic and Language Support

The participants stressed equality in education and systematic skill acquisition. According to P3, teachers are expected to treat students equally and help the disadvantaged educational backgrounds, and P8 proposed, The language support, and academic skills workshops would assist in enhancing communication.

Co-curricular Inclusion, Mentorship, And Representation

Students identified inclusion with classroom-based opportunities. P2 pointed out, the inclusion of more co-curricular activities would be recommended to enable Baloch students to gain confidence, whereas P5 focused on representation: Be included in student societies to facilitate representation. The concept of mentorship was defined as a practical advice: P7 said, mentorship programs with teachers and senior students are necessary. Another aspect that participants mentioned was the safe and inclusive climate and representation in planning: P9 said, “An inclusive and safe campus culture should be continued, and P10 said, “Baloch students should be included in the planning of the student welfare activities at the university.

Classroom Voice And Inclusion

Lastly, the participants associated membership in freedom of academic expression. P4 indicated that, students ought to be given freedom to debate on any aspects of academic issues on a classroom.

DISCUSSION

This qualitative case study illuminates complex workings, by which Baloch students go about making sense of their cultural identities and fitting in a dominant Punjab academic milieu at the University of Sargodha. The results indicate that the said students are mobile in negotiating the need to conform to a new mainstream culture and a firm belief to hold on to their unique set of traditions and values. The first experiences are usually accompanied by severe cultural adjustment problems such as language barriers and cases of cultural marginalization where students felt that they were attacked by their new dressing and ways of doing things. Respondents, in turn, mentioned practices of private cultural retention by preserving their Baloch identity by using traditions and language at home among each other. At the same time, they were extremely culturally flexible and underwent a process of integration where they showed respect towards each other and wanted to coexist. This negotiation consequently boosted their cultural pride and awareness and the result was the creation of a dual identity that will not conflict between their Baloch identity and their emerging academic identities.

The paper highlights the urgency of universities to improve institutional support systems so as to create a truly inclusive atmosphere to ethnic minority students. The participants specifically demanded the creation of psychological and emotional support mechanisms including counseling services to assist manage academic pressures and cultural adaptation. School support, such as language classes and fair treatment by the educators, was also mentioned as the key to skill acquisition and the elimination of language barriers. In addition to formal support, students also highlighted the importance of co-curricular and extra-curricular inclusion, mentorship systems amongst senior students and faculty, and development of an inclusive campus atmosphere (in general) that truly reflects and represents the diverse student population. Moreover, the creation of an environment of free discussion and involvement in classes was also considered essential to allow the freedom of speech and greater involvement.

Being one of the first studies that explicitly examine the experiences of minority students in South Asian universities, this research can make a substantial contribution to the current literature on the subject, particularly in demonstrating the qualitative approach to the topic due to the lack of such specific research in Pakistan (Atif et al., 2019; Rind and Malin, 2024; Shah and Saeed, 2022). Our results are in line with the bigger literature about acculturation problems and identity negotiation of ethnic minority students in higher education (Orbe, 2008; Qumseya, 2018). The experiences of Baloch students are reflective of other minority groups that face cultural discrepancy, language challenges, and sense of isolation, but they also have shown the strength of survival and agency by experiencing other cultures (Makeleni, 2024;

Sengkhammee et al., 2017; Zhong and Chen, 2021). This study contributes to the significance of culturally responsive institutional practices in enhancing the sense of belonging and academic achievement of minority students by explaining the exact difficulties encountered and the types of support they would like to receive, e.g., mentorship and events with a focus on the group culture (Kroeper et al., 2025; Michalski et al., 2017; Velden et al., 2023).

It should be noted that this study is limited in some way. Being performed as a case study in one university, the results might not be completely reflective of what all Baloch students go through in the whole of Pakistan. The generalizability of these results can be affected by the particular institutional situation, dynamics in the region, and the nature of the participants (e.g., male students only). Future studies can be carried to various institutions, involve a wide range of students, and use mixed-method designs to give a wider definition of cultural identity and assimilation among high-end educational institutions in Pakistan among heirs of Pakistani Baloch.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Conclusively, the Baloch students in the University of Sargodha are on a complicated process of identity negotiation between cultures, social adjustment, and integration into the mainstream educational setting which is predominantly Punjab. In spite of all these challenges that include language barrier, cases of discrimination, cultural marginalization, etc., these students have shown resilience and strong cultural pride. Their experiences are characterized by the continuous process of adapting between the need to maintain their cultural traditions and adjust to the academic and social needs of studying life in universities. The results of this paper show how support systems (peer guidance, teacher encouragement, and self-motivated learning) can assist Baloch students in overcoming these deficiencies and acquiring a dual identity that would combine their cultural heritage and academic success.

According to these findings, universities are advised to exercise proactive measures in ensuring that Baloch and other minority students feel more at home. These involve setting up counseling centers that help to nurture the emotional status, offering special language classes that help overcome language obstacles, and co-curricular programs that foster cultural interaction and self-confidence. Mentorship programs are also important in helping students through the academic and social problems that they have. Furthermore, the instillation of diversity and open communication culture of the campus will contribute to the establishment of the environment where Baloch students feel respected, included, and capable of conveying their cultural-specific identities.

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