

Cross-Cultural Education in South Punjab: Barriers, Benefits, and Future Directions

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ABSTRACT

This study explored departmental chairpersons' perspectives on cross-cultural education in public sector universities of South Punjab. The research focused on understanding the challenges universities face while implementing cross-cultural educational practices along with the possible benefits associated with such initiatives. Fifteen chairpersons from the three public universities in Multan participated in the study through purposive sampling. Data were collected through interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis, supported by NVivo 15 software. Participants identified several barriers affecting the implementation of cross-cultural education, including limited resources, language differences, inadequate institutional support, and resistance to change within academic settings. At the same time, many participants believed that cross-cultural education could promote diversity, improve students' understanding of different cultures, and encourage an inclusive learning environment. The findings also suggest that the universities need stronger institutional support, faculty training opportunities, and practical strategies to strengthen cross-cultural practices in higher education.

Keywords: cross-cultural education, higher education, qualitative study, departmental heads.

INTRODUCTION

Recent studies in Pakistani universities show that cross-cultural education is becoming increasingly important in higher education. Researchers have reported that culturally diverse learning environments can improve teaching practices, research collaboration, and students' global understanding when universities provide proper institutional support and inclusive policies (Anam et al., 2025).

At the same time, several challenges still affect the implementation of cross-cultural education in public sector universities. Previous studies identified issues such as limited resources, weak infrastructure, language barriers, and lack of faculty training related to diversity and inclusion (Ahmed et al., 2025). Researchers also observed that students often interact within their own cultural groups, which may reduce opportunities for intercultural learning and communication (Khurram et al., 2025).

Recent leadership studies further suggest that university administrators and department heads play an important role in promoting inclusive educational practices and supporting cultural diversity within academic environments (Nasreen et al., 2026).

Students in cross-cultural programs often develop analytical skills while working on their assignments. Moreover, critics argue that such learning is inspired by exposure to different modes of thinking, as it provides students with an opportunity to think beyond a chosen paradigm (Gallagher & Savage, 2020).

In particular, students who come from other countries, or diverse regions have opportunities to exchange ideas, collaborate, and study as a team. Thus, cross-cultural education is not only an academic process but also a socio-cultural and experiential interaction (Wang et al., 2022).

Furthermore, teachers who are aware of cultural and ethnic diversity are often better able to create respectful classrooms and support learning environments for students (Ndiangui et al., 2024). The opportunity for cross-cultural learning can therefore be viewed as system-produced rather than individually reproduced in society (Chan, 2023). However, such challenges can only be effectively addressed through cultural change, which requires the active involvement of educators, policymakers, and other stakeholders. Consequently, an essential component of this transformation includes an understanding of diversity and the imperative to construct teaching programs that reflect the present-day diversity of the global society (Chan & Hu, 2023). As a result, the increasing cultural interchange enhances individuals' life experiences and contributes to the development of a more tolerant global society (Sjøen, 2023).

Cross-cultural teaching can help students develop respect for different cultures, improve tolerance, and increase awareness of global diversity. However, implementing these ideas in the classroom is not always easy, especially in developing educational settings (Hunduma & Mekuria, 2024). Researchers have suggested different teaching approaches to improve cross-cultural learning, including the group activities, peer interaction, practical classroom tasks, and the use of technology for communication and collaboration. For example, online discussion can allow students from different regions or backgrounds to interact and learn from each other directly (Makar et al., 2023).

Despite these benefits, many universities still face difficulties in providing the resources and facilities needed to support cross-cultural education effectively. Limited infrastructure, lack of funding, and the unequal access of technology often create a barrier for both teachers and students (Sayegh et al., 2022). Keeping these challenges in view, the present study explores how departmental chairpersons perceive the implementation of cross-cultural education in public sector universities. The study also examines some of the practical difficulties universities face while introducing cross-cultural education practice within the higher education setting (Cairney & Kippin, 2022). Despite growing awareness about cross-cultural education, many Pakistani universities still face difficulties in implementing these practices effectively because of institutional and structural limitations.

Statement of the Problem

Cross-cultural education is becoming increasingly important in higher education because universities now interact with students from different cultural, linguistic, and social backgrounds. However, many educational institutions still face difficulties in implementing cross-cultural educational practices effectively limited resources, lack of institutional support, and resistance to change often create challenges for both teachers and students in some universities, traditional teaching approaches and limited awareness about cultural diversity also affect the development of inclusive learning environments. Therefore, there is a need to better understand how cross-cultural education is experienced and perceived within the universities, particularly in public sector universities in Pakistani region south Punjab.

Significance of the Study

This study may be useful for university educators and policymakers interested in improving cross-cultural education practices in higher education institutions. The research highlights some of the challenges and opportunities associated with cross-cultural education from the perspective of departmental heads. Understanding these experiences may help in introducing and developing a more inclusive learning environment and improve awareness regarding the cross-cultural diversity within the academic setting. The study may also contribute to existing literature related to cross-cultural education in Pakistani universities where limited qualitative research has been conducted on this topic.

Objectives of the Study

- To explore departmental heads' experience and perspective regarding cross-cultural education in universities.
- To explore the challenges and possible benefits associated with cross-cultural education practices in public sector universities.

Research Questions

The following questions will guide this research:

- How do departmental heads perceive and experience cross-cultural education in universities?
- What challenges and possible benefits are associated with cross-cultural educational practice in public sector universities in South Punjab?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent studies from 2025 show that cross-cultural education can improve teaching practices and students' skills in Pakistani universities when institutions provide proper support and inclusive policies (Anam et al., 2025). A study conducted across 15 universities reported benefits such as improved research collaboration and greater global understanding among students. However, challenges including language barriers, limited resources, and weak institutional planning were also identified (Anam et al., 2025). Another study involving students and teachers found generally positive attitudes toward cross-cultural learning, although students often interacted within their own cultural groups and teachers did not always receive adequate support or training (Khurram et al., 2025). Research on culturally diverse students in Pakistan further highlighted gaps in student support services and faculty training related to diversity and inclusion (Ahmed et al., 2025). Overall, these studies suggest that stronger institutional support and faculty development may help universities create more inclusive learning environments.

As globalization continues to influence education systems around the world, universities are increasingly expected to prepare students for interaction with people from different cultural backgrounds. (Malik, 2018) noted that cross-cultural competencies are becoming important not only for individuals but also for educational institutions and organizations. In higher education, intercultural learning is now considered an important part of preparing students for both professional and social life. (Salam, 2019) explained that globalization has changed the role of higher education institutions, making intercultural understanding more necessary in academic environments. Similarly, (Parkhouse, 2019) discussed how intercultural education can support communication and understanding among people from diverse cultures.

Several researchers have also highlighted the growing importance of cross-cultural education in universities worldwide. (Boussebaa, 2021) described it as an important element of modern higher education and professional training. However, implementing cross-cultural educational practices is not always straightforward. Some universities face challenges in adapting these practices according to their institutional environment and available resources (Vespestad & Smørvik, 2020). (Ennis, 2020) further pointed out that disagreements still exist regarding the best ways to apply and evaluate cross-cultural educational strategies.

At the same time, the international movement of students and academic staff has increased intercultural interaction within universities. (Oleksiyenko et al., 2021) observed that globalization and academic mobility have made cultural diversity a common feature of higher education institutions. (Wit & Altbach, 2021) also reported a significant rise in international student mobility in recent years, creating both opportunities and challenges for universities in managing cultural diversity effectively.

Qualitative researchers have argued that interviews and discussions are useful for understanding participants' experiences in cross-cultural educational settings. (Heath et al., 2009) explained that qualitative methods help researchers explore feelings, experiences, and perspectives in greater depth. Similarly, (Wang et al., 2018) found that interviews provide detailed insight into how students and educators experience cross-cultural programs. More recently, (Butler, 2023) emphasized that qualitative approaches are particularly valuable for understanding how cultural learning develops within specific educational contexts.

Although previous studies provide useful information about cross-cultural education, much of the existing research has mainly focused on students or Western higher education institutions. Limited attention has been given to the perspectives of departmental heads in public-sector universities in developing countries such as Pakistan. Since academic leaders often influence educational policies and institutional practices, understanding their experiences may provide useful insight into the implementation of cross-cultural education in universities.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research design

This study employed a qualitative research approach to explore departmental chairpersons' perspectives on cross-cultural education in public-sector universities in Multan. A qualitative method was considered suitable because it helps the researcher understand the participant's experience of their views in detail. The study mainly focused on how chairpersons perceive the implementation of cross-cultural education and challenges related to it within the universities.

Population and Sample

The population of the study consisted of departmental heads from three public-sector universities in Multan.

- Women University, Multan
- Bahaudin Zakriya University, Multan
- Emerson University, Multan

The sample of the study consisted of 15 departmental chairpersons selected from three public sector universities in South Punjab, Pakistan. Both male and female chairpersons from different departments within the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences were included in the study.

Sampling Technique

Convenience sampling was used to select the participants for this study. A total of 15 departmental heads were chosen from the selected universities. Participants were selected based on certain criteria, including their position as chairpersons, their experience in university administration, and their availability to participate in the interviews. Both male and female chairpersons were included to obtain different perspectives related to cross-cultural education.

Research Tool

Semi-structured interviews were used as the main research tool to collect data from the participants. This method helped the researcher gather detailed information about the experiences, opinions, and perspectives of departmental heads regarding cross-cultural education. The interview questions were prepared after reviewing related literature on cross-cultural education and higher education practices.

Before data collection, the interview questions were reviewed by experts to improve clarity and relevance.

Data Collection

For data collection, the researcher contacted departmental chairpersons and arranged interviews at suitable times. The interviews were conducted in a comfortable environment so participants could share their opinions openly. During the interviews, the researcher asked prepared questions and also used additional questions when further explanation was needed. Each interview lasted approximately 20 to 25 minutes. With participants' permission, the interviews were audio-recorded to support accurate data analysis. The researcher ensured participants' privacy and respected their willingness to participate throughout the research process.

Ethical Considerations

The ethical considerations for this research study are described below:

1. **Informed consent:** Participants in the in-depth interviews will be provided with the consent forms.
2. **Confidentiality:** The identity of the participants in interviews will be protected to safeguard their right to privacy and confidentiality.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed through thematic analysis to identify common themes and patterns in participants' responses. After conducting the interviews, the recordings were transcribed carefully for analysis. NVivo 15 software was used to organize, code, and interpret the qualitative data more effectively.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

NVivo 15 software was used during the analysis of qualitative data because it helped in organizing interview responses and identifying important themes. The recorded interviews were transcribed and examined carefully to identify recurring ideas and patterns in participants' responses. Participants were also re-contacted when clarification was needed to ensure the accuracy of the collected information. The transcriptions were subsequently analyzed, and the themes were identified and classified based on four key aspects:

1. The perspective of the heads regarding cross-cultural education enhances the learning experience
2. The obstacles encountered in implementing cross-cultural education
3. Cross-cultural education strategies fostering inclusivity among diverse students
4. The impact of cross-cultural education on students' measurable outcomes



Figure 1: Effectiveness of cross-cultural education

This cloud map query explored cross-cultural education, examining its effectiveness and implementation at a higher education institution through different types of training. Further, it presents the suggestions from HODs for integrating it into the curriculum in higher education institutions. The more frequently used words are in bold and make a cloud around the term 'cultural'. These words are: inclusive education, global, learning, skill, etc. Some of the responses are presented here. One of the respondents said, "Cross-cultural education enhances learning experiences by promoting diversity, understanding, and empathy, allowing students to gain new perspectives, challenge assumptions, and develop global awareness and competence."

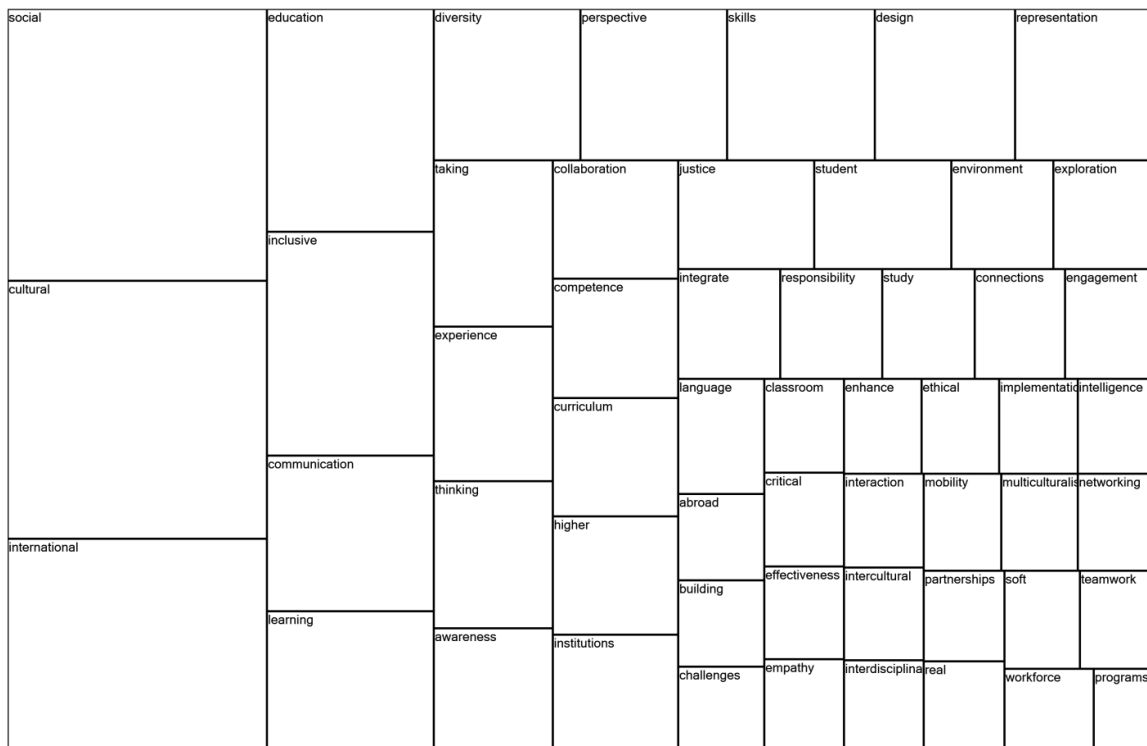


Figure 2: Word tree map illustrating frequently used words for curriculum integration

This word tree map illustrates the most frequently used words for integrating into the curriculum in higher education institutions, as described by the heads of higher education institutions. Major words

are awareness, learning, higher, language, effectiveness, and teamwork. Some responses about the implementation of cross-cultural education are presented here. The word roots presented concepts related to providing teachers with the ability to implement cross-cultural education.



Figure 3: Challenges in implementing cross-cultural education

The word tree figure reveals the theme of challenges heads have faced in implementing cross-cultural education. The most frequently used words are in bold, forming a cloud around the word cultural. These words are: faculty, challenges, students, peer lack, and expectations. The theme that emerged from this word cloud indicates that respondents highlighted challenges in implementing cross-cultural education.

cultural	student	curriculum	attitudes	training	engagement	inclusive
		support	cross	evaluation	expectations	institutional
	community	peer				
		addressed	resistance	concerns	external	faced
influence					fatigue	financial
	faculty	administrative	comfort	assumptions	geographical	integration
challenges					lack	logistical
		barriers	methods	balancing	global	miscommunication
	diversity				priorities	services
limitations		constraints	teaching	collaboration	implementing	misunderstand
						stereotypes
						technology
						traditions
						unfamiliar
						zones

Figure 4: Challenges faced in the implementation of cross-cultural education

This figure of a word tree map depicts the most frequently used words related to challenges faced in the implementation of cross-cultural education, as described by the heads. Key words include faculty, influence, diversity, and teaching. Some of the responses of the respondents are presented here. One head expressed his opinion in the following remarks: "Challenges implementing cross-cultural

fostering empathy, understanding, and appreciation of diverse cultures, backgrounds, and perspectives, creating a welcoming and inclusive learning environment”.



Figure 7. Impact of cross-cultural education on students' development

This figure presents the impact of cross-cultural education on students' development. The more frequently used words are in bold and form a cloud around the word cultural evaluation. These words are: skills, outcomes, development, and reflection.

community	global	learning	engagement	taking	diverse		
	inclusive	language	responsibility	awareness	collaboration	perspective	
social		competence	skills	effective	among	building	citizenship
	student	interaction	thinking	critical	environment	immersion	integration
cultural	acceptance	shared	backgrounds	development	intelligence	interdisciplinary	mindedness
				empathy	intercultural	peer	strategies

Figure 8: The impact of cross-cultural education on students' measurable outcomes

The word tree map presents the most frequently rated and important words used concerning measures and suggestions regarding the impact of cross-cultural education on students' measurable outcomes. Major words are thinking, shared, peer, cultural, and acceptance. This tree map highlights words emphasized by departmental heads concerning the impact of cross-cultural education on students' measurable outcomes. In this context, this section presents some of the respondents' quotations regarding suggestions for measurable outcomes. One of the respondents stated, "*Cross-cultural education enhances students' development by promoting global awareness, cultural competence, critical thinking, and empathy, preparing them to thrive in diverse environments and become active global citizens*".

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study show that cross-cultural education is viewed positively by many departmental heads in public sector universities. Participants shared that interaction among students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds can improve understanding, communication, and respect for diversity within academic settings. Furthermore, some chairpersons believed that cross-cultural educational activities encourage students to become more confident when interacting with people from different backgrounds.

At the same time, participants discussed several difficulties linked with the implementation of cross-cultural education in universities. Many departmental heads explained that limited resources, weak institutional support, and insufficient training create challenges for educators and departments. Language barriers were also mentioned repeatedly during the interviews, especially in classrooms where students came from different regions and academic backgrounds. Some participants felt that students often remain within their own social or cultural groups, which reduces opportunities for meaningful intercultural interaction.

These findings are similar to previous studies conducted in higher education settings. Earlier researchers also reported that universities face challenges such as limited infrastructure, insufficient faculty preparation, and inconsistent institutional policies while implementing cross-cultural educational practices (Ahmed et al., 2025; Khurram et al., 2025). The present study further indicates that departmental heads play a crucial role in supporting inclusive educational practices within universities.

Another important point discussed by participants was the need for stronger institutional attention toward cultural inclusion. Several chairpersons believed that universities should provide more workshops, faculty training opportunities, and student activities related to diversity and intercultural learning. Participants also emphasized that cross-cultural education cannot become effective without cooperation from university administration, teachers, and students.

Overall, the findings suggest that cross-cultural education offers important opportunities for improving inclusion and communication in higher education institutions. However, practical challenges related to resources, institutional support, and classroom implementation still affect its effectiveness in public sector universities.

CONCLUSION

This study explored departmental chairpersons' perspectives regarding cross-cultural education in public sector universities in Multan. The findings showed that participants generally viewed cross-cultural education as beneficial for promoting cultural understanding, communication, and inclusive learning environments among students. Many chairpersons believed that interaction among students from different backgrounds can support personal learning and social awareness within universities.

However, participants also discussed several challenges that affect the implementation of cross-cultural education in higher education institutions. Limited resources, language differences, lack of training, and

weak institutional support were identified as common barriers. Some chairpersons also explained that traditional teaching practices and limited awareness about cultural diversity may reduce the effectiveness of cross-cultural educational activities.

The study further highlights the important role of departmental leadership in supporting inclusive educational practices. Participants believed that universities should provide better institutional support, faculty training, and opportunities for intercultural interaction among students. Creating supportive and respectful educational environments may help universities improve cross-cultural learning experiences in the future.

Although this study focused on a small number of public sector universities in Multan, it provides useful insight into the experiences and perspectives of departmental chairpersons regarding cross-cultural education in Pakistani higher education settings.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE STUDY

- Cross-cultural education should be systematically integrated into all disciplines to ensure broad-based exposure.
- Professional development programs must prepare educators with intercultural teaching strategies and inclusive pedagogies.
- Institutions should establish frameworks to measure the effectiveness of cross-cultural initiatives.
- Policymakers and administrators should prioritize funding for training, technology, and infrastructure to support intercultural learning.
- Students' and faculty voices should be included in designing and adapting cross-cultural programs.

PRACTICAL AND THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

This study also supports constructivist learning theory, which explains that students learn more effectively through interaction, shared experiences, and collaboration with others. The findings suggest that cross-cultural learning may help students develop understanding, empathy, and respect for different cultural perspectives. In addition, the study aligns with Hofstede's cultural dimensions framework, particularly in understanding how cultural differences can influence communication and interaction within higher education institutions.

The findings may also be useful for university administrators, educators, and policymakers interested in improving cross-cultural educational practices in higher education. Participants highlighted the need for inclusive teaching practices, faculty support, and better institutional planning related to cultural diversity. Strengthening cross-cultural initiatives may help universities create more supportive and inclusive learning environments for students from different backgrounds.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

- Future studies may explore cross-cultural education in other public and private universities across different regions of Pakistan to provide broader understanding of the issue.
- Researchers may also conduct comparative studies between Pakistan and other developing countries to examine similarities and differences in the implementation of cross-cultural education.

- Future qualitative studies could include perspectives from students, teachers, and university administrators together to provide a more detailed understanding of cross-cultural educational practices.
- Longitudinal research may also help examine how cross-cultural educational practices develop over time and influence students' experiences in higher education institutions.

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