

A CROSS-COMPARISON OF PUBLIC AND PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES PERCEIVED UNIVERSITY FAIRNESS, RESILIENCE AND ACADEMIC ENGAGEMENT AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS OF KARACHI

Batool Naqvi ^{a*}, Sadia Arif ^b, Noor Ul Ain ^c, Abeeha Irfan Syed ^d, & Sarah Muhammad Aamir ^e

^{a,b,d,e} Graduate, Institute of Professional Psychology, Bahria University, Karachi, Pakistan

^c Senior Lecturer, Institute of Professional Psychology, Bahria University, Karachi, Pakistan

*Correspondence to: Ms. Batool Naqvi, Institute of Professional Psychology, Bahria University, Karachi, Pakistan. E-mail: bn30716@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The main aim of this study was to find the connection between perceived university fairness, resilience and academic engagement among university students in Karachi, Pakistan. The cross-sectional correlational design was used, 500 young adults (males = 121, female = 376, other = 3) aged 18 to 26 and above were selected from public, private and federally chartered universities through convenience sampling. The participants answered the University Fairness Questionnaire, Brief Resilience scale and Academic Engagement scale having 3 sub-scales including behavioral, cognitive and anxious engagement. The results via statistical analysis demonstrated that perceived university fairness has a significant negative correlation with behavioral engagement, and cognitive engagement, whereas it positively correlates with anxious engagement. Resilience showed positive correlation with cognitive engagement, a significant negative correlation with anxious engagement and no significant relationship with behavioral engagement. A significant negative correlation was found between perceived university fairness and resilience. The outcomes suggest that higher perceptions of university unfairness are linked to lower resilience and academic engagement, also increasing anxious engagement among higher education students. The research highlights the value of encouraging fairness, boosting resilience and improving student engagement alongside psychological well-being in university settings.

I. INTRODUCTION

Academic engagement is recognized by the inclusion, interest, and attention into studies (Meng et al., 2023) predicting success in higher education. In Pakistani context, it plays a huge role in socioeconomic progress and national development. According to Higher Education Commission (HEC) Pakistan 2024 report, Karachi alone hosts majority of public and private universities with 30.4% enrolled students from across the country, making it excellent site for addressing structural differences between both sectors that shape student's perception on distinctive sectors. Pakistan Institute of Developed Economics (PIDE) states that, despite many reforms by HEC to improve quality of higher education, budget constraints and hurdles have resulted in unmet objectives (Ahsan. 2025). Empirically, psychological constructs on institutional level such as justice and individual level like resilience that impact on higher education are not studied on broad level in localized context.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Perceived university fairness measures student's judgement on three components in university: distributive (grades, rewards and results), procedural (academic rules and processes), and interactive (treatment from faculty) (Herr et al., 2024). Organizational justice theory (Greenberg, 1987) explains willingness to make effort and commitment is the result of fair treatment by institution. Resilience described as positively adjusting and overcoming obstacles (Wu et al., 2020), academically, a flexible quality of dealing with situations like academic struggles through self-regulation (Moskal and Senyk, 2025) and coping strategies (Fullerton et al., 2021). Psychological Capital theory (PsyCap) (Youssef-Morgan & Luthans, 2013) and Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory (Hobfoll, 1989) explain that resilience is a psychological resource helping students in academics to feel less burnout and motivated to gain and protect their valued grades, stressed when lost or compromised (Pham et al., 2025). Students having trust and social identification with universities, build more positive qualities like motivation and resilience to engage in academics (Rasooli et al. 2019; Guo et al. 2025). Hence, better participation (Tian et al., 2025) and higher satisfaction with lower drop-outs (Bittmann, 2021).

Previous literature shows in-depth understanding of student engagement into 3 components: behavioral (student's overall participation), emotional (affective interactions with institution) and cognitive engagement (curiosity and use of learning strategies). These impact progress, motivation and achievement (Xu et al. 2023), factors like freedom, social assistance (Wong et al., 2021) plus gender and academic program types (Abbas et al. 2025) play fundamental part in learning. Although, hardship inspires young adults from different backgrounds to dream of securing better futures, proving personal willingness and ability to overcome stressors (Bukhari et al., 2025; Pérez et al., 2025) regardless of economic constraints, however needing institutional guidance (Naudè et al., 2024). In local contexts, only a few qualitative and quantitative studies on perceived university fairness, finding that teacher's biases (Saleem et al., 2025) and illicit behavior (Ali et al., 2023) have negative effects in academic atmosphere and student outcomes. Overall, there is no systematic research measuring perceived university fairness as psychological construct. Moreover, internationally resilience is studied extensively for better educational outputs (Fletcher et al., 2023) but remains insufficient in Pakistani universities (Wang et al., 2026).

This research examines the relation between all three variables in a single framework, highlighting the importance of perceived university fairness which develops resilience by giving supportive and positive environment to students, encouraging them to participate in higher education. It also fills the gap of cross-comparison on public and private sector universities in Karachi, considering specific cultural and organizational settings. This research will be useful for policymakers and educational setups in Pakistan to create fair and transparent conditions for university students.

Hypotheses

1. There is a significant relationship between perceived university fairness and academic engagement in university students.
2. There is a significant relationship between resilience and academic engagement in university students.
3. There is a significant relationship between perceived university fairness and resilience in university students.

III. METHOD

Participants

A quantitative cross-sectional survey design and was utilized to examine the relation among perceived university fairness, resilience and academic engagement. A total of 500 university students including all genders from public, private and federally chartered universities were recruited with the help of convenience and snowball sampling. The inclusive criteria targeted university enrolled students in Karachi with the age bracket of 18 to 26 and above, and being able to read and write English properly. Meanwhile, participants were excluded if they were below 18, not enrolled in a university, enrolled in universities outside Pakistan and recently diagnosed with major physical or mental health condition.

Measures

A custom-designed demographic form was used to collect participant's age, gender, university name and type, current education level, semester, degree program, mode of study, perceptions on fairness in academic grading, treatment by teachers, motivation towards academic tasks and any recent physical or mental health conditions diagnosed. All materials and scales were administered in the English version. **[I]** University Fairness Questionnaire (UFair). A 20-item scale, developed with a strong reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .9$) (Herr et al., 2022, 2024) and 5-point Likert scale rating from (1 = does not apply at all) to (5 = fully applies), to measure student's perceptions on university grading, procedures, policies and faculty interactions. Higher totals indicate high perceived unfairness. The scale indicated an excellent reliability during survey (Cronbach's $\alpha = .91$). **[II]** Brief Resilience Scale (BRS). A 6-item self-assessment tool formulated by Smith et al. (2008) to measure individual's ability to bounce back or recover from adversity. The scale has a Cronbach's alpha be .8 and .91 with a consistent internal reliability. It used for clinical and non-clinical populations has 6 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale, 1 representing "Strongly Disagree" to 5 representing "Strongly Agree". The three items (1, 3, 5) are positively worded and the other three (2, 4, 6) are negatively worded with reverse scoring to get total score, high meaning greater resilience. **[III]** Academic Engagement Scale (AES). A 15-item scale designed by Rovin et al. (2016) to measure student involvement in academic settings. Each 5 items divided into three sub-scales: Behavioral (participation, effort, persistence), Cognitive (deep learning, capacity building) and engagement (negative emotional reactions). The 5-point point Likert scale rates (1 = strongly disagree) to (5 = strongly agree) and high scores show greater engagement. Each sub-scale had internal consistency throughout the research with Cronbach's alpha ranging between 0.7 and 0.75 and strong validity in relation to academic achievement, motivation, and classroom engagement.

Procedure

The data was collected in-person, from each university and survey forms were circulated to potential respondents. First, an informed consent form was given to each part student, explaining the purpose and nature of study, and respondents had a right to withdraw from the research at any moment, ensuring participants' confidentiality and anonymity. Second, demographic information was obtained using demographic form, after which the three questionnaires were completed by each student in the sequence starting from University Fairness (UFair), Brief Resilience scale (BRS) and Academic Engagement Scale (AES). The time taken to complete each survey was 10-15 minutes. After completion of responses, statistical analysis was run using SPSS to compile the results.

IV.RESULTS

Table I: Demographics of University Students (N = 500)

Variables	Categories	<i>f</i>	%
Gender	Male	121	24.2
	Female	376	75.2
	Others	3	0.6
Age (years)	18-20	229	45.8
	21-22	199	39.8
	23-25	61	12.2
	26 and above	11	2.2
University Name	IBA	75	15.0
	UoK	74	14.8
	BUKC	200	40.0
	BUHSC	38	7.6
	SHU	32	6.4
	NEDUET	71	14.2
	IoBM	1	0.2
	SU	6	1.2
	IU	2	0.4
	KASBIT	1	0.2
University Type	Public	220	44.0

	Private	42	8.4
	Federally Chartered	238	47.6
Education Level	BS (Undergrad)	498	99.6
	MS/MPhil	1	0.2
	Other	1	0.2
Semester	1	57	11.4
	2	71	14.2
	3	31	6.2
	4	102	20.4
	5	89	17.8
	6	44	8.8
	7	34	6.8
	8	66	13.2
	9	5	1.0
	10	1	0.2
Degree Program	Medical & Health Sciences	71	14.2
	Arts, Architecture & Design	36	7.2
	Computer Science	30	6.0
	Social Sciences	109	21.8
	Humanities & Liberal Arts	6	1.2
	Business and Economics	51	10.2
	Engineering	63	12.6
	Media & Communication	1	0.2
	Other	133	26.6
Mode of Study	Online	4	0.8
	In-person	191	38.2
	Hybrid	305	61.0

Note. IBA = Institute of Business Administration; UoK = University of Karachi; BUKC = Bahria University Karachi Campus; BUHSC = Bahria University Health Sciences Campus; SHU = Salim Habib University; NED = NED University of Engineering and Technology; IoBM = Institute of Business Management; SU = Sohail University; IU = Iqra University; KASBIT = Kadim Ali Shah Bukhari Institute of Technology

The demographics of respondents shown in table 1 were majorly consisting of females (75.2%) and males (24.2). A large sample was taken from students aged 18 to 20 years (45.8), followed by 21 to 23 years (39.8), majority enrolled in Bahria University (BUKC) (40%), Institute of Business Administration (IBA) (15%) and University of Karachi (UoK) (14.8), university type being federally chartered (47.6%) and public (44%). Many students had current education level of Bachelors (99.6%) in 4th semester (20.4%), registered in Other (26.6%) and Social Sciences (21.8%) degree programs with hybrid mode of study (61%).

Table II: Demographics of Student's perceptions on Fairness and Motivation (N = 500)

Variables	Response	<i>f</i>	%
Graded fairly	No	178	35.6
	Yes	322	64.4
Teachers treat fairly in academic settings	No	241	48.2
	Yes	259	51.8
Motivated to engage in academic tasks	No	178	35.6
	Yes	322	64.4

**** $p < .01$**

Further demographics of student's responses are described in table 2, 64.4% reported yes for being graded fairly, 51.8% perceived fairness from teachers in academic settings and 64.4% answered yes for feeling motivated to engage in academic tasks.

Table III: Descriptive Statistics and Alpha Reliability Coefficients, Uni-variate Normality of Study Variables (N=500)

Scales	Items	α	M	SD
University Fairness Questionnaire	20	0.91	2.66	0.77
Academic Engagement scale (total)				
Behavioral Engagement subscale	7	0.75	3.07	0.76
Anxious Engagement subscale	4	0.71	2.52	0.87
Cognitive Engagement subscale	4	0.71	3.47	0.83
Brief Resilience scale	6	0.5	18.43	3.75

Table IV: Pearson Product Moment Correlation between Perceived University fairness and Academic Engagement Sub-scales (N=500)

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Perceived University Fairness	—			
2. Behavioral Engagement	-.300**	—		
3. Anxious Engagement	.244**	-.107*	—	
4. Cognitive Engagement	-.112*	.368**	-.036*	—

Note. Perceived University Fairness (high score = more unfairness) * $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$

Table 4 shows that perceived university fairness is significant and negatively correlates with behavioral engagement $r = -.300$, $p < .01$ and cognitive engagement, $r = -.112$, $p < .05$, indicating that higher levels of perceived university unfairness were associated with lower behavioral and cognitive engagement. Perceived university fairness is significant and positively correlates with anxious engagement, $r = .244$, $p < .01$ suggesting that students perceiving greater unfairness experiences higher anxious engagement. Behavioral engagement also demonstrates a significant positive relationship with cognitive engagement $r = .368$, $p < .01$ and a significant negative relationship with anxious engagement $r = -.107$, $p < .05$.

Table V: Pearson Correlation between Resilience and Academic Engagement Subscales (N=500)

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Resilience	—			
2. Behavioral Engagement	.021**	—		
3. Anxious Engagement	-.286**	-.107*	—	
4. Cognitive Engagement	.138**	.368**	-.036	—

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$

Table 5 indicates that resilience was significantly negatively correlated with anxious engagement $r = -.286$, $p < .01$, that indicates the student with higher resilience reported lower anxious engagement. Resilience is also significant and positively correlates with cognitive engagement $r = .138$, $p < .01$ that suggests that resilient students demonstrate greater cognitive engagement. Resilience did not show a significant relationship with behaviour engagement, $r = .021$, $p > .05$. Behavioral engagement positively associates with cognitive engagement $r = .368$, $p < .01$ and negatively associates with anxious engagement $r = -.107$, $p < .05$.

Table VI: Pearson Correlation between Perceived University Fairness and Resilience (N=500)

Variables	1	2
1. Resilience	—	
2. Perceived University Fairness	.021**	—

* $p < 0.05$

Table 6 demonstrates a significant negative correlation between perceived university fairness and resilience, $r = -.102$, $p < .05$, indicating that students who perceive greater university unfairness tend to report lower levels of resilience.

V. DISCUSSION

The results demonstrate a direct relationship of perceived university fairness with anxious engagement as unfairness increases. Meanwhile, an indirect relationship with behavioral and cognitive engagement. The pattern is supported (Główczewski & Burdziej, 2022; Majcen et al., 2025) where student's trust and recognition with institution strengthened when they perceive the administration as fair and objective, thereby exerting positive emotions integrated into higher academic engagement. Whereas, (Herr et al., 2024) anxiety arises when students have no institutional trust, therefore they do not put any physical (behavioral) or mental (cognitive) investment in studies. Further, it points out that fairness perceptions play huge role in students' behavioral, emotional and cognitive effort in their academic tasks. The findings also display a significant relationship between resilience and academic engagement within university students. It tells that resilience acts as a psychological resource to take cope on affective responses and academic pressure, having direct correlation with cognitive engagement, indirect with anxious engagement and no correlation with behavioral engagement. A combination of researches support this, as positive connections in university settings enable students not only to actively participate in education (Lobo, 2024), but also their well-being (Bugdiūnienė et al., 2025; He et al., 2025). It further aligns with Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989) as resilient students sustain and reinvest their resources under stress by engaging instead of getting consumed by anxiety.

The significant and inverse correlation between perceived university fairness and resilience. Although, defended by previous researches where an indirect relationship between variables was observed (Romano et al. 2021; Naudė et al., 2024) and supportive classrooms empower students, simultaneously increasing their resilience and engagement in education. However, there is no prior research determining a direct link between the two variables, so this research adds a new contribution to cover that literature gap. The results also show cross-comparison between public, private and federally chartered universities in Karachi. In local context, consistent pattern of positive academic resilience and engagement is associated by private university students, distinct to public university students (Hammad & Naseem, 2023) and students of private university have reported to perceive high academic quality, better treatment from teachers with positive experiences (Yaqoob & Mirza, 2025). This might be due to favorable resources, class size, and faculty support on a broad level in private universities. This systemic trend has led many students to enroll in private universities for higher education in Pakistan, which widens a gap between public and private institutions, where they perceive higher organizational justice (distributive and interactional), than public universities (Qamar et al., 2024). The majority of university students were enrolled in hybrid class mode, followed by in-person and a minority attending online classes. Research shows that a vital role is played by mode of learning on educational engagement because of motivation and teacher presence, favoring hybrid settings provide flexibility and which allow students to reflect on their learning and give better outputs (Sahni et al., 2019; Huang et al., 2022; Akpen et al., 2024).

The sample participation of female students exceeded from male students, especially those enrolled in social and behavioral science discipline, observed in many institutes. The research demonstrates high perception of university fairness and resilience by female students, different from male students. It gives a pattern of results in this research supported by Vera Gil (2024), where females connected resilience to high academic performance and males did vice versa. The age of participants, mostly emerging adults as sophomores in universities who reported high perceived unfairness compared to older students. It is a fact that, younger students who are neither familiar with university policies, nor have fully developed coping mechanisms to deal with difficult academic situations compared to seniors, makes them anxious and burnout easily, therefore perceive greater unfairness in higher educational settings (Steel et al., 2024).

Implications

The present research shows perceived university fairness, as an unforeseen variable that can have an impact on academic engagement of students. When students perceive unjust policies and procedures, it ultimately makes them feel disengaged and putting less effort in studies, feeling helpless. Therefore, it can be useful for future educational researchers, university teachers, staff members and policy makers to further investigate academic injustice, improve administration, understanding to support students and making fair and transparent policies

across all universities for everyone including students, faculty and staff members. It ensures that fairness is guaranteed by university success and resilience.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

There are some big limitations in this research such as small number of samples being taken out of a large target population due to time constraints. Secondly, there were more females than male participants. Thirdly, many students felt hesitant to answer questions sincerely about fairness due to fear of university consequences. After being reminded of confidentiality, some still had the fear about telling unfair policies of universities. There was exaggerated or undermined responding in some questionnaire items by students, due to the subjective understanding of perceived university fairness and educational policies were being viewed differently by undergraduates. Fifth and last, a small number of senior students were taken compared to junior year, showing that results mostly cover the experiences of younger students, leaving the area for future research to see views of mature and experienced ones with more exposure in university environment. Future researchers are recommended to collect the data outside universities with more sample participants from different universities and cities of Pakistan with respect to time availability. They can more male students in research and having equal participation of all genders. Also, future researchers must include more age groups such as older adults to have a better understanding and reflection of how age relates to perceiving justice and resilience in higher education.

VI. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, students with higher perception of university fairness show more behavioral and cognitive engagement, while high perception of unfairness leads to higher anxious engagement. Resilience buffers anxious engagement and improves cognitive engagement, highlighting students overcoming academic challenges and stressors. Also, differences between sectors when private university students had shown better resilience and academic engagement compared to public and federally chartered universities. Demographic findings suggest that female and older students with hybrid mode of learning show greater resilience and engagement influencing perceptions on fairness. The study contributes to the literature gap of direct relationship between resilience and academic engagement. It addresses a need for universities to create fair and supportive environments for students to enhance resilience and improve student engagement.

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