



## Research Paper: The Relationship Between Multicultural Education and Academic Engagement in University Students



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### Abstract

**Objective:** Interaction with classmates is a vital element that contributes to completing tasks and acquiring social skills in education. On the other hand, education, learning, and development are closely and reciprocally linked with culture in every society. Given Iran's multicultural and multiethnic context, multicultural education can help reduce discrimination and enhance students' engagement and in-group interaction. This study aimed to investigate the relationship between multicultural education and academic engagement among students at Hakim Sabzevari University.

**Methods:** The research method was descriptive-correlational. The statistical population included 8,199 students at Hakim Sabzevari University. Using random sampling and Morgan's table, 390 students were selected as the sample. The Multicultural Education Questionnaire and the Academic Engagement Scale (AES) were administered. Data were analyzed using correlation methods and SPSS version 27 at a significance level of 0.05.

**Results:** Findings indicated a significant relationship between multicultural education and academic engagement ( $p = 0.05$ ).

**Conclusion:** The results suggested that applying cooperative and participatory teaching methods and emphasizing social justice in multicultural education leads students to be more inclined toward group work, ultimately fostering educational and cultural development.

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## 1. Introduction

In the present era, due to extensive physical and virtual interactions among individuals and cultures, and the dissolution of traditional boundaries, inescapable links have been formed between people and cultures. The presence of cultures side by side and their convergence increases the likelihood of challenges and tensions among individuals and cultures. Therefore, an appropriate mechanism is needed to bring cultures closer and create understanding and interaction among them for peaceful coexistence (Heidarabadi, 2010). Iran is composed of diverse cultural, ethnic, and linguistic groups, each of which differs from others in culture, customs, language, religion, and beliefs. These diverse cultural and ethnic groups, in order to live peacefully alongside each other, need to move away from ethnocentrism and ethnic favoritism, and towards cultural relativism. Therefore, they must recognize their differences and similarities and work towards the growth of intercultural and interethnic relations (Vafaei & Sobhaninejad, 2015). On the other hand, education, learning, and development in any society are closely and reciprocally linked to culture. This means that, on the one hand, culture is considered a product of education, and on the other hand, the process of education is influenced by the existing meanings, values, and norms within a society (Shahablavasani et al., 2020). Therefore, the existence of racial, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity in different countries obligates their educational systems to provide a fitting and appropriate response to the phenomenon of diversity and pluralism in their society, and

to appropriately address it in educational programs. Multicultural education is an approach adopted in response to the cultural diversity in a society and its educational system (Mostafazadeh et al., 2019). Multicultural education involves intellectual curiosity, self-criticism, the ability to form an independent opinion by evaluating arguments and evidence, respect for others, sensitivity to different ways of thinking and living, and activities aimed at moving away from ethnic mindsets (Demir & Ozden, 2014). Multicultural education aims to prepare learners for a diverse world and enhance their capacity to communicate with others by creating active participation in the learning process and supporting their experiences in a safe classroom environment (Havas Bigi et al., 2023).

The term academic participation refers to the extent of student activity that moves them along a spectrum from lack of awareness, understanding, and skill about various subjects to achieving comprehension, skills, and academic achievements (Reeve & Tseng, 2011). One of the prominent features of students is their ability to manage learning and engage actively, which ultimately leads to an increase in motivation (Phillips, 2005). Theorists view academic participation as a multidimensional construct, encompassing behavioral, cognitive, motivational, and emotional aspects (Fredericks et al., 2016). In fact, participation in the context of education and learning refers to both the quantity (amount) and quality (type) of active engagement of learners in an activity, such that the learner is actively engaged in their learning and is committed to it (Hiver et al.,

2021). The participation theory is one of the educational theories introduced by American technologists, Carsley and Schneiderman (Hall, 2015). The main idea of this theory is that learner participation in learning activities is significantly shaped through interaction with others and engaging in useful and meaningful tasks (Shekarey, 2012).

Numerous studies have been conducted examining the relationship between cultural education and academic participation. Hosseini zarrabi et al. (2021) in their study showed that 9 methods for creating interaction (creating a problem-based learning environment, creating space for personal reflection and discussion, providing feedback, rewarding based on intrinsic motivators, involving students in educational design and implementation, using multimedia tools, self-assessment, collaborative learning techniques, peer evaluation, and designing and facilitating group activities) and 13 features of effective interaction in the learning process result in a dynamic and active learning environment when applied in practice. Wong and Chapman (2023) conducted a study on student satisfaction and interaction in higher education, which presented the results of an in-depth analysis of 8 aspects of student satisfaction (satisfaction with the program, teaching staff, institution, university facilities, support provided to students, personal learning, overall university experience, and life as a student in general) and suggested that various aspects of student satisfaction are linked to 3 types of interaction: student-student (formal), student-student (informal), and student-

teacher. Demir and Yurdakul (2015) conducted a study entitled "Examining the Required Features of Multicultural Education in Curriculum Design," which found that a curriculum has multicultural characteristics if its goals reflect learner-oriented features such as understanding human rights and recognizing diverse viewpoints, the content includes topics like human rights and citizenship, and learning situations are provided for various groups. Bias-free implementations and evaluation processes focus on reflective thinking skills.

The position of multicultural education in higher education can be examined from various dimensions, and one of these dimensions is the school-based learning experiences that university students have gained from their general education prior to entering university. The premise of this research is that school-based learning in the area of multiculturalism influences higher education and students' academic participation, and as they transition from their final general education into university, their type of learning in a culturally compatible and agreed-upon environment will impact their academic participation or create challenges in this regard (Araghiyeh & Fathi Vajargah, 2012). Therefore, the aim of this research is to examine the relationship between multicultural education and academic participation among students at Hakim Sabzevari University.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Research Design and Participants

The present study was a descriptive-correlational research. The statistical

population consisted of all students at Hakim Sabzevari University during the 2023–2024 academic year, totaling 8,199 individuals. Based on Morgan’s table, a sample size of 367 was determined. However, questionnaires were randomly distributed among 400 students from the target population in the second semester, all of which were returned. After reviewing the responses, 390 questionnaires were included in the analysis. To measure the variable of multicultural education, the “Identification of Multicultural Curriculum Components” questionnaire was used, and to assess the variable of academic engagement, Reeve’s Academic Engagement Scale (AES, 2013) was employed.

## 2.2. Instruments

### Multicultural Education Questionnaire:

This instrument was developed by Dourfard et al. (2021) and initially included 60 items across five dimensions. However, based on the research purpose, the following items were excluded from the analysis: 2, 6–10, 12–14, 16, 19–23, 25–30, 32–35, 38, 39, 42, 45–47, and 50–60. The items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale. The five subscales include: foundations of multicultural curriculum (Items 1–12), goals of the curriculum (Items 13–27), content (Items 28–39), instructional activities (Items 40–53), and assessment methods (Items 54–60). Cronbach’s alpha coefficients for all subscales were above 0.70, indicating acceptable reliability (Dourfard et al., 2021).

**Academic Engagement Scale (AES):** This revised scale was developed by Reeve et al. in 2013 and includes 17 items across four subscales: behavioral engagement (Items 1–

4), emotional engagement (Items 5–8), cognitive engagement (Items 9–13), and agentic engagement (Items 14–17). The items are scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The original study confirmed construct validity through confirmatory factor analysis, and Cronbach’s alpha coefficients for the subscales ranged from 0.72 to 0.86. In Iran, Ramazani and khamesan (2017) reported satisfactory face, content, and criterion validity for the Persian version, with Cronbach’s alpha coefficients exceeding 0.70.

## 2.3. Implementation Method

After obtaining the necessary permissions from relevant authorities, the researcher employed simple random sampling to select a specific number of students from Hakim Sabzevari University. The Multicultural Education and Academic Engagement questionnaires were administered to these students. Upon completion, the questionnaires were collected and analyzed using Pearson correlation and SPSS software version 27. Participants were assured of the confidentiality of their responses, and informed consent was obtained prior to participation.

## 3. Results

Based on the demographic information of the sample, out of the 400 individuals selected for the present study, 390 participants completed the questionnaires. Among them, 48.2% were male and 51.8% were female. In terms of age, the majority of students were between 18 and 22 years old, accounting for 34.1% of the sample, while the smallest proportion, 17.9%, were over 30 years old.

Table 1  
*Descriptive Statistics of Research Variables*

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Multicultural Education	43.80	6.35
Academic Engagement	38.90	5.10

Table 1 presents the mean and standard deviation of the research variables.

Before analyzing the research variables, the normality of data distribution was assessed using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. The results showed that the z-values for multicultural education, academic engagement, and student interaction were

0.099, 0.131, and 0.103, respectively, none of which were significant at the 0.01 level, indicating normal distribution.

To examine the relationship between the study variables, Spearman's correlation coefficient was used, and the results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2.  
*Correlation matrix between study variables*

Variable	Multicultural Education	Academic Engagement
Multicultural Education	1.000 (p = .000)	.123* (p = .000)
Academic Engagement	.123* (p = .000)	1.000 (p = .000)

According to the results in Table 2, the correlation coefficient between multicultural education and academic engagement was 0.123 with a significance level of 0.001. This indicates a positive, direct, and statistically significant relationship between the two variables.

#### 4. Discussion

This study was conducted with the aim of examining the relationship between multicultural education and students' academic engagement. The findings obtained from analyzing the relationships between the research variables highlighted important points relevant to the study's objectives.

The results are consistent with the studies of Hosseini zarrabi (2021), Araghiyeh and

Fathi Vajargah (2012), Wong and Chapman (2023), and Demir and yurdakul (2015). In explaining these findings, it can be stated that given Iran's rich diversity of ethnicities and cultures—and its global rank as the 24th most ethnically diverse country—greater attention to multicultural education in educational institutions, especially higher education centers, is necessary.

Embracing ethnic and racial diversity, responding to various ethnic, linguistic, and cultural identities, being sensitive and responsive to students' cultural backgrounds, and using cooperative learning methods, problem-solving instruction, and critical thinking can help students listen attentively in class, enjoy being present, take pleasure in

learning new things, and feel encouraged to ask questions for better understanding (Araghiyeh & Fathi Vajargah, 2012).

Emphasis on social justice, respect for one's own and others' languages, religions, customs, and cultural values, as well as presenting individual and group projects enriched by a diversity of content exchanged in the classroom, alongside a supportive classroom environment and an instructor who encourages group work, can help students complete their tasks effectively and create a lively and cheerful class atmosphere (Hosseini Zarrabi et al, 2021).

If students work on topics they are interested in, express their preferences and opinions, and receive clear, quality feedback, the content exchanged in class will not seem confusing or ambiguous. Moreover, lack of technological skills will not disrupt classroom communication (Demir & Yurdakul, 2015).

This study faced certain limitations, such as being conducted only among students at Hakim Sabzevari University; therefore, caution should be exercised in generalizing the results to other populations. Additionally, the study relied on self-report data, which may have influenced the findings. Future research is recommended to use alternative data collection methods, such as interviews, for more comprehensive insights.

## 5. Conclusion

Considering that the research findings indicate a relationship between multicultural education and academic engagement among students, focusing on multicultural education in higher education institutions in Iran could

help improve students' academic participation. To succeed in this regard, it is essential to use participatory and collaborative teaching methods, enhance communication among students, and respect diverse cultural values.

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## Conflict of Interest

The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest with any organization. Also, this research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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