



Socioeconomic Status and Academic Achievement among University Students: The Moderating Role of Institutional Support

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ABSTRACT

Academic achievement among university students is shaped by numerous social, economic, and institutional factors. Among these, socioeconomic status (SES) has consistently emerged as a significant predictor of educational outcomes. However, the extent to which institutional support can mitigate the adverse effects of socioeconomic disadvantages remains an important area of investigation. This study examined the relationship between socioeconomic status and academic achievement among university students while investigating the moderating role of institutional support. A quantitative cross-sectional research design was employed using survey data collected from 250 undergraduate and postgraduate students enrolled in public and private universities. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, Pearson correlation, multiple regression, and moderation analysis. The findings revealed that socioeconomic status significantly and positively influenced academic achievement. Institutional support also demonstrated a significant positive relationship with academic performance. Furthermore, moderation analysis indicated that institutional support significantly strengthened the positive association between socioeconomic status and academic achievement by reducing educational disparities among students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. The study highlights the importance of financial assistance, academic advising, mentoring, counseling services, technological resources, and learning support programs in promoting equitable educational outcomes. The findings provide practical implications for university administrators, policymakers, and higher education institutions seeking to improve student success through targeted institutional interventions. Strengthening institutional support systems may serve as an effective strategy for narrowing academic achievement gaps and promoting inclusive higher education environments.



Introduction

Academic achievement has long been recognized as one of the primary indicators of educational success and human capital development. Universities play a fundamental role in preparing students for professional careers and contributing to national socioeconomic development. Consequently, understanding the determinants of academic achievement has become an important area of educational research (Bean & Eaton, 2001).

Among the numerous determinants of educational success, socioeconomic status (SES) remains one of the most influential predictors of students' academic outcomes. Socioeconomic status generally encompasses family income, parental education, occupational status, and access to educational resources (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). Students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds often enjoy greater educational opportunities, improved learning environments, enhanced access to technology, private tutoring, and stronger parental support, all of which contribute positively to academic achievement (Sirin, 2005).

Conversely, students from economically disadvantaged families frequently encounter multiple barriers to educational success. Financial hardships may limit access to textbooks, internet facilities, technological devices, transportation, and adequate study environments. These challenges can negatively influence motivation, learning engagement, and ultimately academic performance (Duncan & Magnuson, 2012). The widening educational inequalities between students from different socioeconomic backgrounds remain a major concern for higher education institutions worldwide.

Despite the influence of socioeconomic status, universities increasingly provide institutional support mechanisms intended to promote equal educational opportunities. Institutional support refers to the academic, financial, psychological, technological, and administrative services offered by universities to facilitate students' academic success (Tinto, 2012). Examples include scholarships, financial aid, mentoring, academic advising, counseling services, digital learning platforms, career guidance, library resources, and student development programs.

Recent educational theories suggest that institutional support may reduce the disadvantages experienced by students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds by providing compensatory educational resources (Astin, 1993). Universities capable of offering effective academic support systems may reduce performance gaps among students regardless of their family income or social background.

In developing countries, including Pakistan, socioeconomic inequalities continue to influence educational attainment. Although governments and universities have expanded access to higher education, disparities in educational quality and resource availability persist. Students from rural and low-income families often face greater financial constraints compared to their urban counterparts, limiting their educational opportunities (World Bank, 2022). Consequently, examining the role of institutional support within higher education institutions has become increasingly important.

Previous empirical studies have largely focused on the direct relationship between socioeconomic status and academic performance (Sirin, 2005; Duncan & Magnuson, 2012). However, comparatively fewer studies have investigated whether institutional support can

moderate this relationship, particularly within university settings in developing economies. Understanding this moderating mechanism may help educational policymakers develop interventions that reduce educational inequalities and improve student outcomes.

The present study therefore investigates the influence of socioeconomic status on academic achievement among university students while examining whether institutional support strengthens or weakens this relationship. The findings are expected to contribute to educational policy, institutional management, and student development strategies by providing evidence-based recommendations for enhancing academic success through supportive university environments.

Literature Review

Socioeconomic Status

Socioeconomic status refers to an individual's or family's social and economic standing relative to others within society and is commonly measured through parental income, educational attainment, and occupational status (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). Educational researchers consider SES one of the strongest predictors of academic achievement because it influences children's cognitive development, educational resources, and learning opportunities.

According to Sirin (2005), socioeconomic status consistently demonstrates a moderate to strong positive relationship with students' educational performance across different educational levels. Students from higher-income families generally possess greater educational advantages due to improved learning environments, access to educational technology, and parental involvement. Eccles (2005) further argued that socioeconomic inequalities influence students' educational expectations and motivation, ultimately shaping academic outcomes throughout higher education.

Academic Achievement

Academic achievement represents students' educational performance measured through grade point average (GPA), examination scores, course completion, and overall learning outcomes (York et al., 2015). Academic success reflects not only students' intellectual abilities but also their learning environment, psychological well-being, motivation, and institutional experiences. Astin (1993) proposed that academic achievement is influenced by student involvement, institutional characteristics, and educational engagement. Students actively participating in academic activities generally demonstrate higher achievement levels. Similarly, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) argued that higher education institutions significantly contribute to students' cognitive and intellectual development beyond pre-existing socioeconomic characteristics.

Socioeconomic Status and Academic Achievement

The relationship between socioeconomic status and academic achievement has been extensively documented across educational research. Sirin (2005), through a comprehensive meta-analysis of 74 independent studies, found a significant positive relationship between SES and academic performance. Students from affluent families consistently outperformed those from economically disadvantaged households. Likewise, Duncan and Magnuson (2012) reported that financial stability enables families to invest in educational resources, extracurricular activities, private

tutoring, and technology that promote better academic outcomes. Bradley and Corwyn (2002) suggested that higher socioeconomic status improves children's educational experiences by creating supportive home environments characterized by parental involvement and academic encouragement. These findings collectively suggest that socioeconomic status remains one of the strongest predictors of educational success.

Institutional Support

Institutional support encompasses the educational, psychological, financial, and administrative services provided by universities to facilitate student learning and persistence (Tinto, 2012).

These services include:

- Academic advising
- Financial assistance
- Scholarships
- Counseling services
- Career guidance
- Library facilities
- Digital learning resources
- Mentoring programs
- Faculty support
- Student engagement initiatives

According to Tinto (2012), effective institutional support significantly improves student retention and academic success by enhancing students' sense of belonging and educational engagement. Bean and Eaton (2001) similarly found that institutional support positively influences students' motivation, satisfaction, and academic persistence.

Institutional Support and Academic Achievement

Several studies have demonstrated that supportive institutional environments positively affect academic achievement. Astin (1993) argued that universities investing in student development programs produce higher graduation rates and improved academic performance. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) reported that students receiving mentoring, advising, and counseling services generally achieve higher GPAs and demonstrate stronger academic engagement. Furthermore, Kuh et al. (2008) concluded that institutional engagement initiatives significantly enhance learning outcomes regardless of students' socioeconomic backgrounds.

Institutional Support as a Moderator

Contemporary educational theories suggest that institutional support may moderate the influence of socioeconomic status on academic achievement. Students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds often lack educational resources at home. However, universities providing strong institutional support can compensate for these deficiencies through scholarships, learning centers, academic mentoring, and psychological counseling (Tinto, 2012). Social Capital Theory suggests that institutional networks provide valuable educational resources capable of reducing inequalities associated with socioeconomic disadvantage (Coleman, 1988). Similarly, Astin's (1993) Theory of Student Involvement emphasizes that institutional engagement enhances academic success by increasing students' participation in educational activities regardless of family background. These perspectives suggest that institutional support may reduce the negative effects of socioeconomic disadvantage on academic performance.

Research Gap

Although extensive research has established the positive relationship between socioeconomic status and academic achievement (Sirin, 2005; Bradley & Corwyn, 2002), relatively few studies have investigated the moderating role of institutional support within higher education, particularly in developing countries. Existing literature primarily focuses on direct effects while overlooking how universities can reduce socioeconomic inequalities through academic support systems. Furthermore, empirical evidence from South Asian university contexts remains limited. This study addresses this gap by examining whether institutional support strengthens the relationship between socioeconomic status and academic achievement among university students using a quantitative moderation model.

Research Objectives

The study aims to:

1. Examine the effect of socioeconomic status on academic achievement among university students.
2. Investigate the effect of institutional support on academic achievement.
3. Examine the relationship between socioeconomic status and institutional support.
4. Determine whether institutional support moderates the relationship between socioeconomic status and academic achievement.

Research Questions

1. Does socioeconomic status significantly influence academic achievement?
2. Does institutional support significantly influence academic achievement?
3. Is there a significant relationship between socioeconomic status and institutional support?
4. Does institutional support moderate the relationship between socioeconomic status and academic achievement?

Research Hypotheses

H1: Socioeconomic status has a significant positive effect on academic achievement.

H2: Institutional support has a significant positive effect on academic achievement.

H3: Socioeconomic status is positively associated with institutional support.

H4: Institutional support significantly moderates the relationship between socioeconomic status and academic achievement.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in **Social Capital Theory** (James S. Coleman, 1988) and the **Theory of Student Involvement** (Alexander Astin, 1993).

Social Capital Theory posits that students benefit from supportive relationships and institutional networks that provide access to academic resources, information, and opportunities. Institutional support enhances students' social capital by connecting them with faculty, mentors, financial aid, and learning resources, thereby improving academic outcomes (Coleman, 1988).

The Theory of Student Involvement argues that students' academic success depends on the quality and quantity of their involvement in educational activities. Universities that provide strong institutional support encourage greater student engagement, resulting in improved academic performance (Astin, 1993).

Methodology and Data Analysis

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional survey research design to investigate the relationship between socioeconomic status (SES) and academic achievement (AA) among university students and to examine the moderating role of institutional support (IS). A quantitative approach was appropriate because it enabled the statistical examination of relationships among variables using standardized measures (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Population and Sample

The target population comprised undergraduate and postgraduate students enrolled in public and private universities. A sample of **250 respondents** was selected using **simple random sampling**, ensuring that every student had an equal probability of participation. This sample size exceeds the minimum recommended for multiple regression and moderation analyses (Hair et al., 2022).

Instrumentation

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire consisting of four sections:

- **Section A:** Demographic information (Gender, Age, University Type, Academic Level)

- **Section B:** Socioeconomic Status (10 items)
- **Section C:** Institutional Support (12 items)
- **Section D:** Academic Achievement (8 items)

Responses were measured using a five-point Likert scale, where:

1 = Strongly Disagree

2 = Disagree

3 = Neutral

4 = Agree

5 = Strongly Agree

Higher scores indicated higher socioeconomic status, stronger institutional support, and better academic achievement.

Data Collection Procedure

After obtaining institutional permission, questionnaires were distributed both physically and electronically. Participation was voluntary, anonymous, and confidential. Respondents were informed about the objectives of the study, and informed consent was obtained before participation.

Data Analysis Techniques

The collected data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Version 27.

The following statistical techniques were employed:

- Frequency and Percentage
- Reliability Analysis (Cronbach's Alpha)
- Descriptive Statistics
- Pearson Correlation
- Multiple Linear Regression
- Moderation Analysis using Hierarchical Regression

The significance level was set at 0.05.

Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 250)**Table 1**

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	138	55.2
	Female	112	44.8
Age	18–21 years	86	34.4
	22–25 years	124	49.6
	Above 25 years	40	16.0
University Type	Public	132	52.8
	Private	118	47.2
Academic Level	Undergraduate	176	70.4
	Postgraduate	74	29.6
Family Monthly Income	Below PKR 50,000	63	25.2
	PKR 50,001–100,000	94	37.6
	PKR 100,001–150,000	57	22.8
	Above PKR 150,000	36	14.4

Among the 250 respondents, 55.2% were male and 44.8% were female. Nearly half (49.6%) were aged 22–25 years. Students from public universities represented 52.8% of the sample, while 47.2% were enrolled in private universities. Undergraduate students constituted 70.4% of participants. Regarding family income, the largest group (37.6%) reported a monthly household income between PKR 50,001 and 100,000.

Reliability Analysis

Cronbach's Alpha was employed to assess the internal consistency of the measurement scales.

Table 2. Reliability Analysis

Construct	Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Socioeconomic Status	10	0.887
Institutional Support	12	0.914
Academic Achievement	8	0.873
Overall Questionnaire	30	0.903

Cronbach's Alpha values ranged from 0.873 to 0.914, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Hair et al., 2022). Therefore, all constructs demonstrated excellent internal consistency and reliability.

Descriptive Statistics

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Socioeconomic Status	3.64	0.71	1.80	5.00
Institutional Support	3.82	0.67	2.00	5.00
Academic Achievement	3.75	0.63	2.10	5.00

The average socioeconomic status score was 3.64, indicating a moderately favorable socioeconomic background among respondents. Institutional support recorded the highest mean ($M = 3.82$), suggesting that students generally perceived their universities as providing adequate academic support. Academic achievement also demonstrated a relatively high average score ($M = 3.75$), indicating satisfactory educational performance among participants.

Pearson Correlation Analysis

Table 4. Correlation Matrix

Variables	1	2	3
1. Socioeconomic Status	1		
2. Institutional Support	.481**	1	
3. Academic Achievement	.593**	.621**	1

Note. $p < .01$

The findings indicate statistically significant positive relationships among all study variables. Socioeconomic status demonstrated a moderately strong positive relationship with academic achievement ($r = .593$, $p < .01$), supporting previous studies that higher socioeconomic status contributes to better educational outcomes. Institutional support exhibited the strongest relationship with academic achievement ($r = .621$, $p < .01$), suggesting that supportive university environments substantially enhance student performance. Furthermore, socioeconomic status and institutional support were positively correlated ($r = .481$, $p < .01$), indicating that students from relatively higher socioeconomic backgrounds also tended to perceive greater institutional support.

Multiple Regression Analysis

The study examined whether socioeconomic status and institutional support significantly predict academic achievement.

Table 5. Regression Results

Dependent Variable: Academic Achievement

Predictor	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	p
Constant	1.147	.241	—	4.76	<.001
Socioeconomic Status	.341	.056	.372	6.08	<.001
Institutional Support	.429	.061	.431	7.04	<.001

Model Summary

R	R²	Adjusted R²	F	Sig.
.724	.524	.520	135.93	<.001

The regression model was statistically significant ($F = 135.93$, $p < .001$), explaining 52.4% of the variance in academic achievement. Socioeconomic status significantly predicted academic achievement ($\beta = .372$, $p < .001$), supporting H1. Institutional support also significantly predicted academic achievement ($\beta = .431$, $p < .001$), supporting H2. Institutional support demonstrated a slightly stronger standardized effect than socioeconomic status, highlighting the important role universities play in enhancing students' academic performance.

Moderation Analysis

A hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to examine whether institutional support moderates the relationship between socioeconomic status and academic achievement. The interaction term ($SES \times Institutional\ Support$) was created after mean-centering the independent variables.

Table 6. Hierarchical Moderation Analysis

Variable	Model 1 Beta	Model 2 Beta
Socioeconomic Status	.372***	.295***
Institutional Support	.431***	.387***
SES $\times$ Institutional Support	—	.187**

Model Summary

Model	R²	ΔR^2	F Change	Sig.
Model 1	.524	—	135.93	<.001
Model 2	.558	.034	19.64	.002

Note. $p < .01$, $p < .001$

The interaction term ($SES \times Institutional\ Support$) was statistically significant ($\beta = .187$, $p = .002$), indicating that institutional support significantly moderates the relationship between socioeconomic status and academic achievement. The addition of the interaction term increased the explained variance from 52.4% to 55.8%, with an R^2 increase of 3.4%, demonstrating a meaningful moderating effect. These findings support H4, suggesting that institutional support enhances the positive influence of socioeconomic status on academic achievement and helps reduce educational disparities among students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Universities offering strong academic advising, financial assistance, counseling services, and learning resources appear to buffer the negative effects associated with lower socioeconomic status.

Hypothesis	Decision
H1: Socioeconomic status positively influences academic achievement	Supported
H2: Institutional support positively influences academic achievement	Supported

H3: Socioeconomic status is positively associated with institutional support	Supported
H4: Institutional support significantly moderates the relationship between socioeconomic status and academic achievement	Supported

Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between socioeconomic status (SES) and academic achievement among university students while investigating the moderating role of institutional support. Using a quantitative research design with a sample of 250 university students, the findings demonstrate that socioeconomic status remains a significant determinant of academic performance. Students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds generally reported better academic achievement due to greater access to financial resources, educational materials, technology, and supportive learning environments. These findings are consistent with previous studies that emphasize the positive influence of socioeconomic advantages on students' educational outcomes (Sirin, 2005; Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Tan, 2024).

The study also found that institutional support has a significant positive effect on academic achievement. Students who perceived greater support from their universities through academic advising, financial assistance, mentoring, counseling services, library resources, and digital learning facilities demonstrated higher levels of academic performance. This finding reinforces the argument that universities play a critical role in fostering student success by creating supportive learning environments that encourage academic engagement and persistence (Tinto, 2012; Liu et al., 2024).

Most importantly, the moderation analysis revealed that institutional support significantly strengthens the relationship between socioeconomic status and academic achievement. The positive interaction effect indicates that institutional support can reduce the educational disadvantages associated with lower socioeconomic status by providing students with essential academic and non-academic resources. Although socioeconomic inequalities continue to influence educational outcomes, effective institutional support mechanisms can narrow achievement gaps and promote more equitable opportunities for student success. This finding supports the assumptions of Social Capital Theory (Coleman, 1988) and the Theory of Student Involvement (Astin, 1993), both of which emphasize the importance of institutional resources and student engagement in enhancing academic performance.

Overall, the study concludes that improving institutional support systems is a practical and effective strategy for enhancing academic achievement among university students regardless of their socioeconomic background. Universities should not only focus on expanding access to higher education but also invest in comprehensive support services that foster academic excellence, student well-being, and educational equity. These findings provide valuable implications for higher education policymakers, university administrators, and educators seeking to develop inclusive institutional policies that improve learning outcomes and reduce socioeconomic disparities in higher education.

Recommendations

Universities should expand scholarships, tuition fee waivers, emergency financial aid, and work-study opportunities to support students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and reduce

financial barriers to academic success. Institutions should strengthen academic advising, mentoring, tutoring centers, writing support, and study skills workshops to improve students' academic performance and persistence. Universities should ensure equitable access to computers, high-speed internet, online databases, e-learning platforms, and digital libraries so that students from all socioeconomic backgrounds can benefit equally from modern educational technologies. Professional counseling, psychological support, and career guidance programs should be enhanced to help students manage academic stress, improve motivation, and maintain overall well-being. University administrators and policymakers should formulate evidence-based policies that specifically address the needs of economically disadvantaged students by promoting equity, inclusion, and equal educational opportunities.

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