

**Youth Engagement for Sustainable Future: Educational and Leadership Outcomes of Students Empowerment Programs in Chitral**

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**Original Article**

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**Abstract**

Youth engagement and development is recognized as a critical driver of sustainable development across the globe. This study aims to explore the outcomes of youth engagement activities in promoting youth education, empowerment, leadership skills, and sustainable development in Chitral. Using a quantitative research approach, this study assesses how participation in the activities of Youth Empowerment Club (YEC) influences the academic motivation, civic responsibilities, leadership qualities, intellectual competencies, and awareness of students for sustainable practices. The study respondents were selected from the executive body, general body and volunteers of the Youth Empowerment Club (YEC), University of Chitral, while using simple random sampling technique. Primary data was collected through a structured questionnaire. The sample size was 124 which was determined using Slovin's formula (at 5% margin of error) from a total of 180 YEC members. Respondents were then selected from each department (treating each department as stratum) using proportionate stratified sampling technique keeping in view their proportion in the total membership. Respondents from each stratum were selected using simple random sampling technique to ensure equal probability of inclusion for each member.

$$n = \frac{180}{1+180(0.05^2)} = \frac{180}{1+180(0.0025)} = \frac{180}{1+0.45} = \frac{180}{1.45} \approx 124$$

Data were processed with Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) for descriptive statistics. The findings indicate that a significant portion of respondents reported positive perceptions about youth engagement activities under the YEC platform. For instance, a significant percentage of respondents reported perceived enhancement of their confidence, leadership skills, teamwork abilities, academic performance, environmental awareness, social responsibilities and commitment towards community development activities under the activities of Youth Empowerment Club of the University of Chitral.

**Keywords:** Youth Engagement, Sustainable future, Empowerment programs, Platforms, Leadership skills, Social transformation

**Introduction**

At global level, youth is one of the most essential demographic components of population. Youth is recognized as an essential part of the population with significant potentials and capacities to expand the economy and carry out sustainable socio-economic transformation in society. Pakistan is the fifth most populous country in the world with a large number of youth population. In fact, about 68% of Pakistan's total population are under the age of 30 (Fussel & Greene, 2021; Ahmad, Bhatti, Urooj, & Javed, 2022). In general terms, youth refer to a stage of life after childhood and before becoming an adult. It is a period of growth, learning, networking, becoming more independent and includes people who are between the ages of 15 and 24 (Okijie, Effiong, & Iriabije, 2023). However, definition and understanding of youth vary across countries and regions

based upon their experiences, life patterns, legal explanation and area of residence. Today, there are almost 1.2 billion young people between 15 to 24 years of age, comprising 16% of the global population, and it is estimated that by 2030 the number of youth population will reach 1.3 billion, almost 7% of the global population.

The role of young people in shaping the future is essential for the nation's economic advancement and overall prosperity. They have the ability to drive growth and contribute significantly to national development and supports economic growth (Romer, 1990; Chaudhry, Zahir, Farooq, & Arif, 2013). Youth engagement in positive activities is significant in our society (Alicea, Pardo, Conover, Gopalan, & McKay 2012; Gemert, Peterson, & Lien 2008), and effective youth engagement is highly debated and realized factor for personal growth, identity, empowerment, social support and national development at large (Blanchet-Cohen & Salazar, 2009; Davidson, Wien, & Anderson, 2010). Youth engagement is central to youth development and promote progress towards shared goals and decision making. Positive youth engagement facilitates young people to share their expertise, convey their voice, prepare for meaningful roles, and create an effective youth-adult partnership that foster mutual accountability. Youth engagement interventions allow young people to participate in meaningful opportunities, perform roles that allow them to build on their strengths, accept responsibilities, and contribute to planning and decisions that not only affect themselves but society at large (Lonska, & Boronenko, 2015; Lerner, 2018). It is a process that offers opportunities for positive development, strengthen state citizen relationships, encourage power sharing, and prepare youth for taking new roles and responsibilities essential for national building and sustainable future (Lerner, 2018). However; youth empowerment and development require a proper space, platform and networking.

However, youth empowerment and development require a proper space, platform and networking and it is not possible in isolation. Youth engagement and empowerment does happen through interaction with other people and social systems. The youth engagement platforms, provide opportunities for experience sharing, building relationships, participation in supportive environments, exploring one strengths and challenges as well as possible avenues of contributions to the larger society. Unfortunately, in our society, positive opportunities are not abundantly available and many young people grow up with few positive relationships and inadequate opportunities to explore themselves and contribute to the world. It is evident that young people are valuable assets and we cannot develop young people without participation, capacity building, opportunities, listening and integration (Sen, 2000; Kagitcibasi, 2012; Lerner, 2018).

Youth is a potential age group, and the Pakistani youth holds special space in any discourse related to national development. However; the prevailing ideological, socio-cultural, political and media narratives in the country lead Pakistani youth to complication, radicalism and religious extremism among the youth, especially at educational institutions. In this context, Youth Empowerment Club serves as a tremendous opportunity for youth engagement, growth and development at the campus premises of University of Chitral. The Youth Empowerment Club is primarily focusing on youth engagement in a range of areas including promotion of leadership skills, academic motivation and mentorship, climate action, volunteerism, democratic values, peace education, and cultural activities through different activities. Broadly, this research seeks to assess the educational and leadership outcomes of Youth Empowerment Activities (YEC) activities at University of Chitral; however, following are specific objectives of the study:

### **Objectives of the Study**

1. To know the impact of youth engagement activities on students' academic performance
2. To access the importance of youth empowerment activities on students' leadership skills and teamwork spirit
3. To identify the impact of youth empowerment activities on social responsibility, and sustainable development

**Theoretical Framework**

This study has reviewed, amalgamated and utilized different approaches and theoretical models to develop a broader umbrella for the study. This study is informed by a range of participatory models and has derived its argument from the Laura Lundy “model of children participation” (2007), which focuses on children welfare through certain interconnected factors including space, voice, audience and influence. This approach advocates meaningful participation of children for generating change by providing a space to the children to express their voice and influence decision making (Ward, & Lundy, 2024). The positive youth development (PYD) theory of Richard M. Lerner, Peter Benson, and Karen Pittman (1990), posits that youth possess inherent strengths and with provision of proper support and opportunities, they can realize and enhance their strengths, opportunities and create supportive environments, build networking, and share experiences that promote meaningful and sustainable change. The positive youth development approach supports youth engagement within their schools, families, peer groups, organizations and communities in a productive and constructive manner. This approach recognizes, utilizes, and enhances youth's strengths by providing opportunities, fostering positive relationships, and furnishing the support required for enhancing their leadership strengths (Brown, 2010; Lerner, 2013). In this context, the transformational and empowering leadership approach of James MacGregor Burns (1978), focuses on inspiring young people through vision, empathy, and mentorship to unlock their potential for personal growth and collective impact. This is a shift from traditional, top-down approaches to fostering collaboration, innovation, and self-confidence that turn young individuals into proactive change agents (Goethals, & Allison, 2016). Further, David Wilcox's (1994), model explains that the central element in participation is empowerment, control decision-making process, and citizen influence on the organization at different levels. Wilcox's participation is based upon information sharing, consultation, mutual decision making, acting together and supporting in a way that satisfy all the relevant stakeholders involved and distribute the power between them and the organization (Wilcox, 1994). The theoretical framework highlights the importance of participation and youth development as well as facilitates development of study design, tool of data collection and analysis.

**Methods and Procedures Used in Conduction of the Study**

The study was conducted under the quantitative research design in which the issue under study was quantitatively analyzed (Schutt, 2019; Stockemer, Stockemer, & Glaeser, 2019). Youth engagement is critical factor in sustainable future and different organizations are working on development and empowerment of youth in Chitral, however; this study is focusing upon the interventions of Helping Hand for Relief and Development (HHRD) at University of Chitral, where a Youth Empowerment Club (YEC) has been formed to engage students in different positive activities, to develop their leadership, communication and teamwork skills and enhance their academic motivation and performance for sustainable future. In this context, an initial survey of the target area (union council) was carried out to identify the executive body, general body and volunteer members of the youth empowerment club of HHRD at the University of Chitral. The purpose of this exercise was to collect the information for sample selection as well as access the target respondents for data collection. After this, list of the students engaged in the YEC activities was prepared. Primary data was collected from respondents through structured questionnaire. The sample size was calculated using Slovin's formula (at 5% margin of error) keeping in view the total membership of the organization as 180.

Sample Size at a 5% margin of error = 5% (0.05):

$$n = \frac{180}{1+180(0.05^2)} = \frac{180}{1+180(0.0025)} = \frac{180}{1+0.45} = \frac{180}{1.45} \approx 124$$

Sample size ≈ 124

The questionnaire was prepared considering study topic as well as different interventions of the YEC to collect comprehensive data. The study included both male and female students. Respondents were selected from each department using proportionate stratified sampling technique in proportion to their representation in YEC. Each department was treated as a stratum.

Respondents within each stratum (department) were then selected through simple random sampling in proportion to their membership in YEC. The collected data was analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), while the results were presented in the form of different tables to derive study findings and conclusion (Mertens, Pugliese, & Recker, 2017; Albers, 2017). Further, the study is based on descriptive statistics using frequencies and percentages. The study does not employ statistical tests to identify causal mechanisms behind the impact of different activities on respondents' empowerment in different spheres/aspects. Rather, wherever impact is mentioned, it is the result of students reported impact that they perceive to have received from different activities of the Youth Empowerment Club.

## Results and Discussion

### General and Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

The demographic information shows that data was collected from both and female and 70 (54.45%) respondents were male and 54(43.54% were female. Further, out of the total 124 respondents 20 (16%) were associated with YEC for less than six months, 34(27.41%) for 6-12 months, 54(43.54%) from 1-2 years, while the remaining 16(12.90%) remained associated with the YEC for more than two years. The respondents for this study were selected from different departments and the table shows that 40(32.25%) were selected from the Department of Computer Science, 35(28.22%) from Department of English, 20(16%) from Department of Education, 10 (8%) each from Departments of Sociology and Zoology, and 09(7.25%) were from the Department of Management Sciences. In addition, the sample was collected from active semesters of the university and 42(33.87%) were from 5<sup>th</sup> semester, 34(27.41%) were from 3<sup>rd</sup> semester and the remaining 48(38.70%) were selected from the 7<sup>th</sup> semester. The demographic information is important which indicates the type of study respondents, their gender, academic diversity, semester and thus ensure validity of the data collected and presented.

**Table. 1: General and Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents**

Response Option	Frequency	Percentage	Total
Male	70	54.45%	54.45%
Female	54	43.54%	43.54%
<b>Total</b>	<b>124</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>
Association with YEC	Frequency	Percentage	Total
Less than 6 months	20	16%	16%
6–12 months	34	27.41%	27.41%
1–2 years	54	43.54%	43.54%
More than 2 years	16	12.90%	12.90%
<b>Total</b>	<b>124</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>
Response Option	Frequency	Percentage	Total
Deptt: of Computer Science	40	32.25%	32.25%
Deptt: of English	35	28.22%	28.22%
Deptt: of Education	20	16%	16%
Deptt: of Sociology	10	8%	8%
Deptt: of Zoology	10	8%	8%
Deptt: of Management Sciences	09	7.25%	7.25%
<b>Total</b>	<b>124</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>124</b>
Response Option	Frequency	Percentage	Total
5 <sup>th</sup> Semester	42	33.87	33.87
3 <sup>rd</sup> Semester	34	27.41%	27.41%
7 <sup>th</sup> Semester	48	38.70%	38.70%
<b>Total</b>	<b>124</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>15</b>

**Respondents' knowledge about formation process and different activities of the Youth Empowerment Club**

The table is about respondents' knowledge about the formation process and different activities of the Youth Empowerment club. The table explains that 114(91.93%) respondents were aware about the formation process of the YEC, and only 10(8%) replied in no to the question. In response to the different activities of YEC excessive number of respondents i.e.108(87.09%) responded in "yes", while 16(12.90%) responded in "no" to the question.

Table. 2: Respondents' knowledge about formation process and different activities of the Youth Empowerment Club.

Gender	Frequency	Percentage	Total
Yes	114	91.93	
No	10	8%	
<b>Total</b>	<b>124</b>	<b>100</b>	
Response	Frequency	Percentage	Total
Yes	108	87.09	
No	16	12.9	
<b>Total</b>	<b>124</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

**Respondents' participation in different activities of the Youth Empowerment Club**

The following table shows the participation of respondents in different activities of the Youth Empowerment Club (YEC). The data shows that out of the total respondents 64(51.61%) participated in different educational/mentoring activities of the youth empowerment club, 36(29.03) participated in the leadership related trainings/sessions under the youth empowerment club. The data further shows that 24(19.35%) respondents participated in activities of the youth empowerment club that were related environmental awareness and sensitization.

Table. 3: Respondents' participation in different activities of the Youth Empowerment Club.

Response	Frequency	Percentage	Total
Educational training/mentoring	64	51.61%	51.61%
Leadership skills training	36	29.03%	29.03%
Environmental awareness	24	19.35%	19.35%
<b>Total</b>	<b>124</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

**Respondents educational and other improvements after participation in the Youth Empowerment Club (YEC) activities**

In table 04 it has been found that majority of the respondents i.e. 68 (54.48%) stated that participation in youth empowerment club (YEC) activities has improved their knowledge, 32(25.80%) agreed that participation in youth empowerment club (YEC) activities have improved their social skills, and the remaining 24(19.35%) responded that their participation in the activities of the youth empowerment club (YEC) have enhanced their critical thinking skills. Further, the table also indicate that participation in YEC activities have also resulted in improvement of other areas that broadly contributed to their academic as well as social development. The data shows that majority of the respondents i.e. 64(51.61%) were of the opinion that participation in YEC activities has increased their motivation to continue education, 33(26.61%) responded that participation in the YEC activities have developed their problem-solving skills, and 27(21.77%) affirmed that participation in YEC activities have facilitated them to gain career-related knowledge.

Table. 04: Kind of educational/other improvement after participation in the YEC activities.

Response	Frequency	Percentage	Total
Improved Knowledge	68	54.48%	54.48%
Improved Social Skills	32	25.80%	25.80%
Enhanced Critical Thinking skills	24	19.35%	19.35%
<b>Total</b>	<b>124</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>
Response	Frequency	Percentage	Percentage
Increased motivation to continue education	64	51.61%	51.61%
Developed problem solving skills	33	26.61%	26.61%
Gain career-related knowledge	27	21.77%	21.77%
<b>Total</b>	<b>124</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

**Participating in YEC group activities that helps in the development of social skills**

The table below is about participation of YEC group activities that helps in the development of social skills. The data indicate that excessive number of the respondents 48(38.70%) agreed that the YEC platform has developed their confidence level, 33(26.615) responded that their participation in the YEC activities has developed their teamwork skills, 22 (17.74%) stated that participation in the YEC activities have enhanced their communication skills, and rest of respondents i.e. 21(16.93%) affirmed that engagement in YEC activities has helped them to overcome their academic fear of failure.

Table: Participating in group activities that helps in the development of social skills.

Response	Frequency	Percentage	Total
Overcome academic fear	21	16.93%	16.93%
Developed confidence	48	38.70%	38.70%
Improved teamwork skills	33	26.61%	26.61%
Enhanced communication skills	22	17.74%	17.74%
<b>Total</b>	<b>124</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

**Type of activities organized to develop leadership skills?**

The following table is about different types of activities organized under the YEC to develop leadership skills among the students. Out of the total respondents 15(12.09%) responded that YEC organize different competitions, 54(43.545) affirmed that YEC organize debate and discussions, 37 (29.83%) responded that YEC organize different mentoring sessions, while the remaining 18(14.51) responded that YEC also organize different community outreach activities.

Table: Kind of activities organized to develop leadership skills.

Response	Frequency	Percentage	Total
Different competitions	15	12.09%	12.09%
Debate and Discussion	54	43.54%	43.54%
Mentoring sessions	37	29.83%	29.83%
Community outreach activities	18	14.51%	14.51%
<b>Total</b>	<b>124</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

**Kind of personal improvement through the leadership activities of YEC**

The table below explain the personal improvement resulted as a participation in the leadership activities of the YEC. In this regard, 37(29.83%) respondents noticed improvement in their communication skills, 45(36.29) responded that participation in YEC activities have developed their confidence level, 23(18.54%) noticed that participation in YEC activities have enabled them to communicate their ideas effectively with others, and 19(15.32%) respondents were of the opinion that participation in YEC leadership related activities have enhanced their working in group/team.

Table: Kind of personal improvement through the leadership activities of YEC.

Response	Frequency	Percentage	Total
Improved communication skills	37	29.83%	29.83%
Developed confidence level	45	36.29%	36.29%
Effectively communicate my ideas to others	23	18.54%	18.54%
Helped me to work in group	19	15.32%	15.32%
<b>Total</b>	<b>124</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

**In your opinion, what is the primary focus of leadership related activities of YEC?**

The following table highlights the primary focus of leadership related activities of YEC. Majority of the respondents i.e. 75(60.48%) stated that the primary focus of leadership related activities of YEC is to develop social skills, confidence level as well as communication. Further, 32(25.80%) responded that the primary focus of leadership related activities of YEC is influencing and guiding other students in education, and only 17(13.70%) stated that the primary focus of YEC activities is to provide financial assistance to the students.

Primary focus of leadership related activities of YEC.

Response	Frequency	Percentage	Total
Develop social skills, confidence and communication	75	60.48%	60.48%
Influencing and guiding other students in education	32	25.80%	25.80%
Provide financial Assistance to students	17	13.70%	13.70%
<b>Total Table: What is the</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

**Overall, impact of engagement/empowerment programs on youth development**

The following table explains the overall impact of the engagement/empowerment programs on youth development. In response to the question, 37 (29.83%) affirmed that the impact of engagement/empowerment programs on youth development is very high, and 49 (39.51) stated that the impact of engagement/empowerment programs on youth development is high. Further, 31(25%) respondents highlighted the impact as moderate, only 7(5.64%) stated that impact of engagement/empowerment programs on youth development is low.

Table: The overall impact of engagement/empowerment programs on youth development.

Response	Frequency	Percentage	Total
Very High	37	29.83%	29.83%
High	49	39.51%	39.51%
Moderate	31	25%	25%
Low	07	5.64%	5.64%
Very low	-	-	-
No impact	-	-	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	

**Are YEC youth empowerment programs important for sustainable future?**

The following table highlights information about the YEC youth empowerment programs and sustainable future. In this regard, majority of the respondents i.e. 109(87.90%) affirmed that YEC youth empowerment programs are important for sustainable future, 11(8.89%) replied in no, while the remaining 04(3.22%) were not sure about the importance of YEC youth empowerment programs for sustainable future.

Table: YEC youth empowerment programs and sustainable future.

Response	Frequency	Percentage	Total
Yes	109	87.90%	87.90%
No	11	8.87%	8.87%
Not sure	04	3.22%	3.22%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

### Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study are consistent with several similar studies conducted on the significance of citizen participation in promoting democratic values and informed decision-making processes. Arnstein (2015) in his model “A ladder of citizen participationin” which identified problems in citizen participation highlighted that participation practices at higher levels of the ladder of participation encourage citizens to realize their power and the power holder to decentralize power of decision making to the excluded citizens (Arnstein, 2015, 1969). Arnstein model depicts different levels of participation and demonstrates the importance of citizen participation in decision making and power sharing processes. As explained above, this study also demonstrates that youth perceive participation as an important empowering mechanism resulting in development of their communication skills, and enhancement of their confidence level. Further, this study supports David Wilcox’s (1994) model which explains that participation and empowerment are central elements in decision-making processes influencing an organization at different levels. The process of participation is based upon information sharing, consultation, mutual decision making, acting together and supporting in a way that satisfy all the relevant stakeholders involved and the distribute the power between them and the organization (Wilcox, 1994), as reflected in this study as well.

Further, the results reflected in this study support Diana Conyers (1986), “Decentralization and Development” where she advocated that decentralization is applicable to all human development situations. She asserted that decentralization involves the transfer of power to individuals or organizations that are involved in decision-making processes. Similarly, this study also supports Roger Hart (1992),” Children’s Participation from Tokenism to Citizenship”, that explores the significance of the voices of young people. The study of Roger Hart (1992) argues that participation is primarily a process of sharing decisions. He asserts that participation is an acquired skill set that is developed during the process of collaboration among young and adult people, and promotes a sense of ownership. He further argues that ownership cannot be achieved without meaningful participation of the young citizens in decision-making that affects their lives (Hart,1992). The study of Bennett, & Hays (2023) “engaging youth for positive change”, Lwasaki (2016) study on the “the role of youth engagement in positive youth development and social justice youth development for high-risk, marginalised youth”, Majee & Anakwe (2020) study on “Youth engagement”, and Hastings, Barrett, Barbuto & Bell (2011) “Developing a Paradigm Model of Youth Leadership Development and Community Engagement” found that positive engagement and participation are important for integrating youth, building their leadership skills and shaping their future. Similarly, as stated by (Moscovitch and Drover, 1981 & Cochran (1986), that individuals understand their own needs better than anyone else, and empowerment is an interactive process of personal and social change that aims to increase the ability of people to control their own lives (Rappaport, 987; Whitmore (1988). In addition, the study by Doneys et al. (2020) highlights the role of space and relationship in shaping the process of empowerment processes. The current study was based upon the YEC activities which are focused on building responsible youth for sustainable future and found aligned with the study findings of Cavalieri and Almeida (2020) that asserted that empowerment is an active social process with others sharing different but collective responsibilities for their uplift (Horochovski, 2006). The development of the necessary skills and abilities of youth to act autonomously requires certain targeted interventions that allow the youth to grow and develop their social skills and capital.

This study concludes that youth engagement initiatives are transformative in nature and have the potential to promote good governance and sustainable future. The study demonstrates that youth perceive their participation in different activities of Youth Empowerment Club as significantly enhancing their educational aspirations, critical thinking abilities, communication skills and leadership competencies. These findings indicate that the youth empowerment programs serve as vital platforms for skill development, civic awareness, collaboration, and social responsibility and are exhibited in increased confidence, teamwork spirit, academic excellence, and stronger commitment to community development and environmental sustainability among students. The findings also suggest that investing in youth engagement and empowerment interventions is not only beneficial for individual growth and development but also essential for building resilient and sustainable communities. Such activities, may also equip young people with the knowledge, skills, and leadership capacity to act as change agents, thereby contributing a critical role to advancing sustainable development goals and shaping a more inclusive future.

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