Challenges Faced by the International Students Studying in Universities of Pakistan

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Abstract

The study tries to find out the challenges faced by international students in higher education institutes in Pakistan. The main objective was to find out the challenging areas for international students studying in higher education institutes in Pakistan. A descriptive research approach was utilized to find the challenges experienced by international students in Pakistani higher education institutions. Data was collected using a 5-point Likert-type scale questionnaire comprising six parts covering academic, social and cultural, logistic and administrative, financial, discrimination-related challenges, and support and resources. Prior to the main data collection phase, pilot testing was conducted with a small group of international students to refine the questionnaire and assess its alpha reliability (0.921) and validity. Data was collected from 150+ samples using snowball sampling due to a low response rate from different universities. Ethical considerations were considered, and respondents were provided with informed consent outlining the purpose of the study. Data analysis was conducted using statistics software. Descriptive statistics, including frequency distributions and group statistics, were used to quantify and compare the challenges. Mean scores, standard deviation, t-values, and significance were also calculated. The study found certain very challenging areas for international students and certain areas as less difficult. The study recommends a comprehensive support setup for international students by the higher education institutes of Pakistan.

Keywords: International Students, Challenges, Higher Education, Pakistan.

Introduction

The internationalization of higher education has witnessed unprecedented growth in recent decades, with students from around the world increasingly seeking academic opportunities in countries beyond their borders. This phenomenon is characterized by the globalization of education, marked by cross-cultural exchanges, the international mobility of students, and the establishment of diverse learning environments. Pakistan, with its rich cultural heritage, historical significance, and burgeoning higher education sector, has emerged as a compelling destination for international students seeking academic excellence and cross-cultural experiences. International universities strive to educate students for cross-cultural understanding as well as to build their communication competence and competitiveness in the global professional market, in addition to recruiting international students (Namuwonge, 2024).

The higher education landscape in Pakistan has evolved significantly in response to the increasing demand for quality education. The country boasts a diverse array of universities, colleges, and

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academic programs catering to the educational aspirations of a wide spectrum of students. Among the beneficiaries of this expansion are international students who choose Pakistan as their academic destination. They are drawn not only by the promise of academic excellence but also by the allure of experiencing Pakistan's cultural, linguistic, and historical diversity. Because international students come from a variety of artistic and educational backgrounds, higher education is becoming more diversified (Taylor et al., 2016).

While internationalization in Pakistani higher education institutions has grown, the experiences and challenges faced by international students remain a relatively understudied aspect of this phenomenon. The decision to pursue higher education in a foreign land is not without its complexities, and international students often grapple with a unique set of challenges stemming from cultural adaptation, language barriers, academic differences, financial constraints, social isolation, housing and accommodation issues, and healthcare challenges, among others. Many international students encounter challenges in their academic journey to be logically successful in their new learning environment when deciding to study abroad (Alzahrani, 2020).

Study Objectives
The objectives of the present study are to:
- To find out and compare the challenges encountered by male and female international students in Pakistani higher education institutions in areas of academic performance, access to resources, financial aid, admission and accommodation processes, educational support systems, and regulations department.
- To find the differences in various challenges between students in public and private sectors of Pakistani higher education institutions to understand potential disparities and areas for improvement in both sectors
- To provide recommendations and strategies based on the findings to address the identified challenges and enhance the overall experience of international students in Pakistani higher education institutions.

Hypotheses
(H01): The challenges faced by international male and female students studying in higher education institutes in Pakistan are not the same.
(H1): There is a significant difference in the challenges faced by international male and female students studying in higher education institutes in Pakistan.
(H02): The challenges faced by international students studying in public and private higher education institutes in Pakistan are not the same.
(H2): There is a significant difference in the challenges faced by international students studying in public and private higher education institutes in Pakistan.

Literature Review
International students pursuing education in foreign countries encounter a host of academic challenges. In a pivotal study by Worae and Edgerton (2023), it was revealed that these students often grapple with difficulties in adapting to the academic environment. Bias and discrimination in the educational context can be a significant hurdle for international students. This research underscores the need for educators to undergo cultural sensitivity training and promote inclusivity in the classroom (Worae & Edgerton 2023; Wilczewski & Alon, 2023). Akram et al. (2020), Kang (2022), Wu et al. (2015), and Nunan (2015) countered research that underscored the profound

impact of language barriers on international students in academic settings. These barriers hindered students' comprehension of lectures, interactions with peers, and execution of routine tasks. English language proficiency is a crucial factor in the adjustment process. While studying abroad, students encounter unique challenges that can vary based on their gender. A study explained the problems female students face in other countries (Nazir et al., 2023). Immigrant female students in other countries encounter challenges in accessing necessities due to societal gender norms, compounded by language barriers and cultural unfamiliarity, highlighting the intersectionality of their experiences as foreign women.

Investigating potential disparities between genders in experiences of adjustment problems, homesickness, and perceived discrimination, thereby illuminating the multifaceted nature of their adaptation challenges (Can, 2015; Lee et al., 2006). Neo-racism experienced by international students in educational settings, revealing instances of derogatory remarks, discriminatory attitudes towards certain nationalities, and linguistic biases, which collectively contribute to a hostile environment affecting their academic and social integration. Tsegat et al. (2018) research conducted in China emphasized the multifaceted impact of cultural barriers on the social and academic adaptation of international students. Difficulties in interpersonal interactions, unfamiliarity with the local culture, loneliness, and limited participation in recreational activities, all of which collectively impacted their adaptation to the new environment (Shah et al., 2021). Stephens (2016) provides a foundational understanding of the challenges international students encounter while adapting to a new culture. How acculturation, the process of adapting to a different cultural environment, often leads to stress and anxiety as individuals strive to balance their cultural heritage with the demands of the host culture.

Ching et al. (2014) and Kavvadas et al. (2022) study underscore the prevalence of homesickness and depression among international students. Ali et al. (2021) delve into the psychosocial aspects of adaptation among international students, with a specific focus on those in Pakistan. Developing an understanding of mental health and fostering a culture of seeking help are crucial components of well-being (Lawn et al., 2022). The stressors they face may include cultural differences, strained personal relationships, feelings of loneliness, and social isolation (Mesidor & Sly, 2016; Prieto, 2016). Additionally, discrimination can further compound their emotional distress (Shadowen et al., 2019). climate-related adaptation challenges are prevalent among international students regardless of their country of origin (Ahrari et al., 2019; Van Praag, 2023). Larose et al. (2019) focus on the critical aspect of adjustment to college life among international students. Financial pressures add stress and anxiety to their university experience, potentially diverting their focus from academics (Heckman et al., 2014). the underutilization of counseling services among international students, as highlighted by Bong et al. (2014).

Theoretical Framework

In the context of my thesis on international students in Pakistani higher education institutions, the communication accommodation theory IS applied to understand the communication barriers and strategies these students employ. For instance, international students converge in their communication by adopting local language patterns, accents, or non-verbal behaviors to blend in with their peers and the academic community. Conversely, they choose divergence in certain scenarios to maintain their cultural identity or when they feel excluded or stereotyped. The theory also sheds light on how communication styles impact students' academic experiences, social integration, and the perception of others in their environment (Giles,1991).

International students, when interacting in the Pakistani educational context, may engage in both convergence and divergence in their communication styles. Convergence would be evident when these students adapt their language, accent, or even non-verbal behaviors to align more closely with the local student body and faculty. A desire for social acceptance, easier communication, and smoother integration into the academic community drives this adaptation. For example, they try to learn and use Urdu or regional languages, adopt local customs in communication, or adjust to the prevalent classroom interaction styles in Pakistan.

Methodology

A quantitative research approach was utilized to investigate the challenges experienced by international students in Pakistani higher education institutions. A structured questionnaire divided into six parts covering academic, social and cultural, logistic and administrative, financial, discrimination-related challenges, and support and resources was developed as the primary data collection instrument. Closed-ended questions with Likert were employed to gather structured responses and ensure clarity in understanding participants' perceptions and experiences regarding these challenges. Prior to the main data collection phase, pilot testing was conducted with a small group of international students to refine the questionnaire and assess its reliability and validity. Snowball sampling was then employed due to a low response rate from different universities. Ethical considerations were considered, and respondents were provided with informed consent outlining the purpose of the study. Data analysis was conducted using Statistics software. Descriptive statistics, including frequency distributions and group statistics, were used to quantify and compare the challenges. Mean scores, standard deviation, t-values, and significance were also calculated.

Reliability

Reliability was checked using Cronbach's Alpha for all scales measuring different challenges. The social and cultural scale containing 9 items had a reliability of 0.872. The logistic and administrative scale containing 5 items showed a reliability of 0.760. The financial challenges scale with 5 items had 0.783. The discrimination scale with 4 items had an alpha value of 0.871. Lastly, the support and resources scale containing 5 items had an exceptionally high value of 0.943. These results collectively demonstrate that the scales used in the study are reliable tools for measuring their respective constructs.

Results and discussion

Table 1: Frequency and percentage of demographic variables

Variable	Description	Frequency	Percent
Gender			
	Male	112	74.7
	Female	38	25.3
Sector			
	Public	49	32.7
	Private	101	67.3

Table 1 presents demographic characteristics of the surveyed population, showcasing key variables such as gender and sector. Among the 150 respondents, the gender distribution was leaned towards

males, constituting 74.7% of the sample, while females comprised 25.3%. Regarding the sector of study, the private sector had a higher representation (67.3%) compared to the public sector (32.7%).

Table 2: Group statistics

	Gender	N	Mean	Std.	Std. Error Mean	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Academic Challenges	Male	112	38.82	11.94	1.12	.47	148	.63
	Female	38	37.76	12.65	2.05	.46	60.88	.64
Social and Cultural Challenges	Male	112	24.08	8.75	.82	-1.67	148	.09
	Female	38	26.73	7.24	1.17	-1.84	76.54	.06
Logistic and Administrative Challenges	Male	112	17.96	4.81	.45	1.62	148	.10
	Female	38	16.52	4.40	.71	1.69	69.21	.09
Financial Challenges	Male	112	17.88	4.67	.44	2.08	148	.03
	Female	38	15.97	5.47	.88	1.92	56.43	.05
Discrimination-Related Challenges	Male	112	9.81	4.98	.47	-1.29	148	.19
	Female	38	11.05	5.38	.87	-1.25	60	.21
Support and Resources	Male	112	14.83	6.77	.64	.96	148	.33
	Female	38	13.60	6.60	1.07	.98	65.33	.33
Total	Male	112	123.42	31.70	2.9	.29	148	.77
	Female	38	121.65	34.62	5.61	.27	59.43	.78

Note: male=112, female=38.

Table 2 shows that there is no significant difference (p>.05) between the mean scores of challenges faced by male and female international students. Anyhow there is a significant difference (p<.05) between mean scores of financial challenges of males (M=17.88, SD=.44), and female (M=15.97, SD=.88).

Table 3: Difference among challenges based on sector of institutes

	Sector	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	t	Df
Academic Challenges	Public	54	41.11	12.14	1.65	1.94	148
	Private	96	37.14	11.89	1.21	1.93	108.04
Social and Cultural Challenges	Public	54	27.44	8.53	1.16	2.99	148
	Private	96	23.25	8.07	.82	2.94	104.98
Logistic and Administrative Challenges	Public	54	18.37	4.64	.63	1.49	148
	Private	96	17.16	4.76	.48	1.50	112.44
Financial Challenges	Public	54	17.61	4.67	.63	.39	148
	Private	96	17.28	5.10	.52	.40	118.27
Discrimination-Related Challenges	Public	54	11.77	4.86	.66	3.05	148
	Private	96	9.19	5.01	.51	3.08	112.92
Support and Resources	Public	54	17.66	5.64	.76	4.57	148
	Private	96	12.75	6.67	.68	4.79	125.72
Total	Public	54	133.98	31.71	4.31	3.22	148
	Private	96	116.79	31.20	3.18	3.20	108.47

Table 3 shows that there are significant differences (p<.05) between the mean scores of sub factor of. social and cultural challenges of public (M=27.44, SD=8.53), and private (M=23.25, SD=8.087), discrimination-related challenges of public (M=11.77, SD=4.86), and private (M=9.19, SD=5.01), support and resources of public (M=17.66,SD=5.64), and private (M=12.75,SD=6.67). The total mean score for challenges faced in the public sector is higher (133.98) compared to the private sector (116.79). The t-test result shows a significant difference between the two sectors (p < .05), with t(148) = 3.22, indicating that the difference is statistically significant. Based on the mean scores, international students in public higher education institutions face more challenges overall compared to those in private institutions. This is evident from the higher total mean score for the public sector.

Table 4: Academic challenges

Statements	%age of respondents N=150			Mean	Std. D
	Very Challenging	Moderately Challenging	Not Challenging		
Comprehending the accent of Pakistani English-speaking academia	32	49.3	18.7	2.82	1.29
Writing assignments in English.	16	35.3	48.7	2.02	1.22
Participating in a class activity.	32	48.7	19.3	2.81	1.29
Completing assignments and projects in groups with various nations.	29.3	43.3	27.3	2.66	1.32
Working in groups with students from my home country.	21.3	29.4	49.3	2.16	1.40
Getting the desired academic responses from my teachers.	33.3	49.3	17.3	2.87	1.20
Studying with teaching methods used in Pakistan.	40.7	48	11.3	3.12	1.22
Adapting the Pakistani grading/evaluation system.	30.3	53.3	13.3	3.04	1.22
Following assessment practices.	26	56.7	17.3	2.76	1.23
Following the rules and regulations of the university.	24	38.6	37.3	2.44	1.40
Dealing with culturally related subject.	29.3	56	14.7	2.88	1.24
Dealing with favoritism.	39.4	46	14.7	3.08	1.32
Coping with curriculum.	28	54	18.0	2.74	1.24
Studying in a bilingual class.	37.4	51.4	11.3	3.12	1.29

The data presented in the table 4 reflects the perceptions respondents regarding various academic challenges within the Pakistani educational institutes. Challenges related to comprehending Pakistani English accents were significant, with 32% of respondents finding it very challenging. Similarly, writing assignments in English posed significant difficulties, with 35.5% indicating it as moderately challenging yet 48.7% saying it is not challenging. Participating in class activities also emerged as a notable challenge, with 32% finding it very challenging. Adapting to Pakistani grading systems was deemed moderately challenging by 53.3% of respondents, while dealing with favoritism was a major concern, with 39.4% finding it very challenging. Studying in a bilingual class was another significant hurdle, as indicated by 37.4% of respondents finding it very challenging. These statistics underscore the diverse array of challenges faced by students in navigating language barriers, academic expectations, cultural shocks, and institutional practices within the Pakistani academic.

Table 5: Social and cultural challenges

Statements	Very Challenging	Moderately Challenging	Not Challenging	Mean	Std. D
Establishing relationships with local students.	34.6	44	21.3	2.90	1.38
Establishing relationships with international students.	19.3	31.3	49.3	2.10	1.35
Establishing relationships with country fellows.	18	24	58.0	1.96	1.33
Accessing my traditional food and its ingredients.	46.7	39.4	14.0	3.24	1.37
Adapting to Pakistan's seasons.	44.7	42.6	12.7	3.20	1.37
Adapting social norms and behavior.	30	55.3	14.7	2.91	1.28
Settling down with roommates.	24.7	48.7	26.7	2.65	1.32
dealing in local market	32.7	48.6	18.7	2.92	1.30
Accustoming with society after my arrival at my university	32.7	50	17.3	2.86	1.30

Table 5 reflects the perceptions of respondents regarding various social and cultural challenges within the Pakistani educational institutes. Challenges related to dealing in local market were significant, with 32.7% of respondents finding it very challenging. Similarly, Adapting social norms and behavior posed significant difficulties, with 55.3% indicating it as moderately challenging yet 30%% saying it is very challenging. Adapting to Pakistan's seasons also emerged as a notable challenge, with 44.7% finding it very challenging. Accustoming with society after arrival at the university was deemed moderately challenging by 50% of respondents, while Accessing traditional food and its ingredients. was a major concern, with 46.7% finding it very challenging.

Table 6: Logistic and administrative challenges

Statements	Very Challenging	Moderately Challenging	Not Challenging	Mean	Std.D
Utilizing the local transportation system.	47.3	36	16.7	3.25	1.36
Opening bank accounts.	72.7	16.7	10.7	4.04	1.36
Renewing visa/passport (process).	62	35.4	2.7	3.79	1.20
Arranging university accommodation.	42	41.3	16.7	3.10	1.40
Arranging private accommodation.	49.3	43.3	7.3	3.40	1.29

The data presented in the table 6 reflects the perceptions respondents regarding various logistic and administrative challenges within the Pakistani educational institutes. Challenges related to Utilizing the local transportation system were significant, with 47.3% of respondents finding it very challenging. Similarly, arranging university accommodation posed significant difficulties, with 42% indicating it as very challenging yet 41.3% saying it is moderately challenging. Renewing visa/passport (process) also emerged as a notable challenge, with 62% finding it very challenging. Opening bank accounts was a major concern, with 39.4% finding it very challenging. Studying in a bilingual class was another significant hurdle, as indicated by 72.7% of respondents finding it very challenging.

Table 7: Financial challenges

Statements	Very Challenging	Moderately Challenging	Not Challenging	Mean	Std. D
Getting scholarship opportunities.	49.3	43.3	7.3	3.44	1.27
Finding a part-time job on campus.	64	25.4	6.7	3.90	1.24
Finding a part-time job off-campus.	60	34	6.0	3.84	1.22
Receiving money from the home country.	51.3	29.3	19.3	3.29	1.49
Paying rents	40.6	33.4	26.0	2.91	1.48

The data presented in the table 7 reflects the perceptions respondents regarding various financial challenges within the Pakistani educational institutes. Challenges related to paying rents were significant, with 40.6% of respondents finding it very challenging. Similarly, getting scholarship opportunities posed significant difficulties, with 49.3% indicating it as very challenging yet 43.3% saying it is moderately challenging. Receiving money from the home country also emerged as a notable challenge, with 51.3% finding it very challenging. Finding a part-time job off-campus was a major concern, with 60% finding it very challenging. Finding a part-time job on campus was another significant hurdle, as indicated by 64% of respondents finding it very challenging.

Table 8: Discrimination-related challenges

Statements	Very Challenging	Moderately Challenging	Not Challenging	Mean	Std. D
Facing discrimination related to my place of birth	35.4	32.7	32.0	2.73	1.51
Facing discrimination by some teachers and university staff	38.7	32	29.3	2.84	1.52
Facing discrimination by some other international students.	38	16	45.3	2.26	1.43
Facing discrimination related to my religious affiliation.	26.6	24.7	48.7	2.28	1.52

The data presented in the table 8 reflects the perceptions respondents regarding various discrimination-related challenges within the Pakistani educational institutes. Challenges related to Facing discrimination related to my place of birth were significant, with 35.4% of respondents finding it very challenging. Similarly, facing discrimination by some other international students significant difficulties, with 38% indicating it as very challenging yet 45.3% saying it is not challenging. Facing discrimination by some teachers and university staff also emerged as a notable challenge, with 38.7% finding it very challenging. Facing discrimination related to my religious affiliation was deemed not challenging by 48.7% of respondents.

Table 9: Support and resources

Statements	Very Challenging	Moderately Challenging	Not Challenging	Mean	Std. D
Getting the support from university support office for international students.	43.3	31.3	25.3	3.00	1.53
Getting information regarding the immigration/documentation procedure by my university.	39.3	38	22.7	2.94	1.42
Locating support office in university.	34.7	37.3	28.0	2.76	1.49
Finding concerned official.	38.6	36.6	24.7	2.93	1.50
Scheduling and appointment with support office.	36	39.4	24.7	2.86	1.50

The data presented in the table 9 reflects the perceptions respondents regarding various support and resources challenges within the Pakistani educational institutes. Challenges related to getting information regarding the immigration/documentation procedure by my university were significant, with 39.3% of respondents finding it very challenging. Similarly, scheduling and appointment with support office difficulties, with 39.4% indicating it as moderately challenging yet 36% saying it is very challenging. Finding concerned official also emerged as a notable challenge, with 38.6% finding it very challenging. Locating support office in university was deemed moderately challenging by 37.3% of respondents, while getting the support from university support office for international students was a major concern, with 43.3% finding it very challenging.

Findings and Discussions

The findings below confer the previous findings of studies showing that International students pursuing education in foreign countries encounter a host of academic challenges. In a pivotal study by Worae and Edgerton (2023), it was revealed that these students often grapple with difficulties in adapting to the academic environment. Bias and discrimination in the educational context can be a significant hurdle for international students. This research underscores the need for educators to undergo cultural sensitivity training and promote inclusivity in the classroom. Worae and Edgerton (2023), Wilczewski and Alon (2023), Akram et al. (2020), Kang (2022), Wu et al. (2015) and Nunan (2015) countered research that underscored the profound impact of language barriers on international students in academic settings.

1. There is no significant difference between the mean scores of challenges faced by male and female international students across all categories except finance.
2. Male students face higher financial challenges as compared to female students.
3. Significant differences were found in the mean scores of sub-factors, such as social and cultural challenges, discrimination-related challenges, and support and resources of both male and female students.
4. For social and cultural challenges, the mean score for public sector students was significantly higher than that of private sector students.
5. Discrimination-related challenges for the public sector were significantly higher than that of private sector students.
6. Public sector students reported a significantly higher mean score for support compared to private sector students.
7. The total mean score for challenges faced in the public sector was significantly higher compared to the private sector.
8. These findings reject the null hypothesis (h0) and support the alternative hypothesis (h1), indicating a significant difference in challenges faced by students in the public and private sectors. Overall, international students in public higher education institutions encounter more challenges than those in private institutions, as evidenced by the higher total mean score for the public sector.

Recommendations

Based on the challenges identified in this study, several recommendations are proposed to enhance the experience of international students in Pakistani higher education institutions as;

- Establish dedicated offices and support services tailored for international students, guiding administrative procedures, legal issues, and cultural adaptation.
- Streamline administrative processes related to banking, visa renewals, and accommodation. Collaborate with government bodies and financial institutions to simplify these processes.
- Introduce language courses, including Urdu and English, and cultural orientation sessions to assist students in overcoming communication barriers and adapting to local culture.
- Improve access to financial services, collaborate with local banks to offer services like reduced fees and documentation assistance tailored to the needs of international students.
- Expand employment opportunities, create more on-campus job opportunities and internships specifically for international students, and advocate for policy changes to ease work restrictions.
- Prepare students before their arrival with comprehensive pre-arrival guides covering climate adaptation, traditional food access, and local customs, available in multiple languages.

- Increase the number of scholarships and simplify the application process for scholarships specifically for international students, ensuring widespread information dissemination.
- Assist in finding both university and private accommodation, including legal guidance on lease agreements and awareness programs about the local housing market.
- Establish health and wellness services sensitive to the cultural and linguistic needs of international students, including mental health support and counseling services.
- Implement peer support and mentoring programs, like buddy systems, to ease the acclimatization process.
- Establish regular feedback mechanisms to assess and improve the support services based on student experiences and suggestions.
- Organize community engagement and social activities to better integrate international students into the university community and local society.
- Advocate for policy changes at institutional and governmental levels for more flexible visa regulations and work permit policies.
- Provide tailored academic support services, including tutoring, writing workshops, and study groups, to meet academic challenges.
- Integrate technology to enhance learning and social experiences, such as developing apps for easy access to university services and creating online platforms for community building.
- Establish mentorship programs where experienced international students guide newer ones and leadership programs tailored for international students.
- Utilize digital platforms for communication and engagement, creating online communities where international students can interact, share experiences, and access resources.

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