



RESEARCH PAPER

Navigating through a New Academic Landscape: Challenges and Coping Strategies of International Students Studying in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative research aimed to explore the coping strategies employed by international students studying at a university in Pakistan. The primary objective was to identify the various challenges faced by these students and the strategies they used to overcome them. A case study approach was utilized to conduct an in-depth investigation. Ten international students from different countries participated in the study. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, guided by an interview protocol. The data were then analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that the international students encountered a range of expected and unexpected challenges, including linguistic and communication difficulties, cultural adaptation issues, academic navigation and adaptation, systemic and administrative barriers, and personal and emotional resilience. To address these challenges, participants employed several strategies, such as self-management techniques and seeking external assistance. The study highlights the need for a comprehensive support system for international students in Pakistani universities to facilitate their adaptation and success.

KEYWORDS Academic Challenges, Coping Strategies, Cross Cultural Academics, Higher Education, International Students

Introduction

In the field of foreign education, Pakistan has emerged as an increasingly appealing destination, owing to a convergence of circumstances (Arshad et al., 2018). Notably, Pakistani universities, particularly those in major urban centers such as Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad, have a reputation for providing high-quality education in a wide range of academic fields (Hoodbhoy, 2021). This academic excellence has drawn international students looking for challenging and comprehensive academic programs. Furthermore, the fascination with Pakistan extends beyond academia, covering its rich cultural heritage and linguistic variety. The country's heterogeneous fabric, typified by Urdu, the national language, and the extensive use of English in higher education, has lured international students looking to immerse themselves in a different cultural context while learning a language of global relevance (Nadira, 2023). When compared to a number of Western nations, Pakistan offers a clear edge in terms of affordable education in addition to its cultural and academic attributes. Pakistan has become a desirable option for international students looking for a top-notch education without the intimidating financial burden typically associated with studying abroad because of its financial sustainability.

The country's status as an Islamic republic has also played an important role in its attraction, particularly among those interested in Islamic studies (Rahman, 2009). Pakistan has long been a popular destination for students interested in studying Islamic theology, history, and culture, all of which have historical and contemporary significance. Furthermore, the availability of government scholarships, which have been extended by numerous countries and organizations, has substantially facilitated the mobility of international students, reinforcing Pakistan's place on the worldwide education landscape. These scholarships served as catalysts for cross-border intellectual exchanges, resulting in a more diverse student body (Inamdar et al., 2022). People-to-people diplomacy has established an environment favourable to international student mobility, encouraged through educational exchanges and partnerships between Pakistan and other nations. (Baloch et al., 2021). This frequently includes student exchange programs and collaborative university efforts that foster cross-cultural understanding and global connectivity (Fabricius et al., 2017).

Finally, the overarching force of globalization, with its interconnectedness and ease of international travel and communication, has prompted students all over the world to seek educational opportunities in many parts of the world, including Pakistan (Altbach et al., 2019). This attests to Pakistan's growing importance as a worldwide educational hub, where students gather to embrace an enriching mosaic of academic brilliance, cultural diversity, and linguistic vibrancy. The exploration delves into the coping mechanisms that foreign students employ to not only survive but thrive in unfamiliar environments (Ashraf et al., 2023). The ability to adapt and overcome challenges takes on heightened significance in the context of international education, influencing not only academic success but also the overall well-being of students who find themselves far from the familiar comforts of home. By examining the coping strategies utilized by foreign students, we gain valuable insights into the resilience and resourcefulness required to navigate the complexities of studying abroad, shedding light on the transformative journey of self-discovery that accompanies such endeavors (Zia & Bashir, 2024).

International students studying in Pakistani universities encounter a myriad of challenges that impact their academic performance, social integration, and overall well-being. These challenges are multifaceted, including linguistic barriers, cultural adaptation issues, academic difficulties, and systemic administrative obstacles. Despite the increasing number of international students and the recognized academic excellence of Pakistani universities, there is a significant need to understand and address these challenges comprehensively. The lack of adequate support mechanisms exacerbates these issues, leaving many international students struggling to adapt and succeed in their new environment. This study aims to investigate these challenges in depth, explore the coping strategies utilized by international students, and provide actionable recommendations to enhance the support systems within Pakistani universities, ensuring a more inclusive and supportive educational experience for all international students.

Literature Review

International education is a dynamic and ever-evolving landscape, with students from across the globe pursuing their academic aspirations in foreign countries (Abdurashidova et al., 2023). These students bring with them a rich tapestry of cultures, experiences, and perspectives, contributing to the global diversity of higher education institutions (Tavares, 2021). However, beneath the surface of this enriching experience lies a complex web of challenges that international students must navigate as they seek

to excel academically, adapt culturally, and maintain their psychological well-being in unfamiliar environments. A qualitative study by Cao et al. (2018) studied coping strategies of Chinese overseas students in dealing with academic challenges. The findings demonstrated that taking notes helped some participants overcome their language barrier in the classroom. The participants also mentioned that they had trouble with academic writing. By practicing reading, writing, and memorization a lot, one person was able to solve the issue. Others suggested copying journal articles and learning sentence structures by heart. According to a study by Gong et al. (2021) one participant asked a teacher for assistance in order to increase his language competency. In a different study, the participants asked the teacher for advice on handling academic demands and communication (Cao et al., 2018). Furthermore, a number of participants in a study by Park et al. (2017) stated that their supervisors are highly helpful because they are considerate of international students' academic and personal needs. Social support was directly related to cross-cultural adjustment; and also acted as a partial mediator of the stress factors and cross-cultural adjustment (Baba et al., 2014). Making friends with international students instead of host country residents, and relying mostly on other international students for emotional and practical help. However, it has been discovered that social support, primarily from overseas students, hinders long-term adjustment and inhibits acculturation (Hendrickson et al., 2011). Engaging in on-campus and off-campus events is a beneficial activity for international students. A number of individuals engaged in extracurricular activities (Amjad et al., 2023, a, b, c; Tsevi, 2018). One participant found that working part-time on campus allowed him to engage with a wider range of people, which improved his communication skills. Another individual offered his time to several initiatives associated with his major. Accordingly, Jean-Francois (2017) discovered that the participants' methods of social integration included helping others, taking part in extracurricular activities, and volunteering. Engaging in both on-campus and off-campus events allows international students to meet more people and learn more about their culture, particularly local students (Nisar & Bashir, 2023).

Cultural Shock and Adaptation Theory, as outlined by Oberg (1960), describes the emotional and psychological stages individuals undergo when exposed to a new culture, making it particularly relevant to your study. Initially, international students may experience the 'honeymoon' phase, filled with enthusiasm and fascination about life in Pakistan. However, as the novelty diminishes, they often encounter the 'cultural shock' phase, where excitement turns into discomfort and disorientation due to differences in language, social norms, and educational practices. This stage, characterized by frustration, homesickness, and a sense of alienation, is crucial in understanding these students' challenges in adapting to their new environment. As they progress into the 'adjustment' phase, students start to develop coping mechanisms, gradually adapting to the Pakistani culture and educational system. This phase is marked by a growing understanding and acceptance of the new culture, which is essential for their academic and social integration. Eventually, in the 'adaptation' or 'biculturalism' phase, students may achieve a comfortable balance, integrating aspects of both their home and host cultures. This stage indicates successful cultural adaptation, where students can navigate effectively between different cultural contexts, enhancing their overall educational experience. Applying Cultural Shock and Adaptation Theory to analyze the journey of international students in Pakistan, from initial excitement to eventual adaptation. It underscores the need for supportive measures in Pakistani higher education institutions to facilitate this transition, ensuring a more inclusive and positive experience for international students (Oberg, 1960).

Material and Methods

The study adopted a snowball sampling method to select 10 participants. This selection was based wide range of experiences, enhancing the richness and diversity of the data. This study iterative process allowed for an in-depth exploration of individual student narratives and coping mechanisms. The interview questions were designed to elicit detailed responses about the students' academic, social, and cultural challenges, and their strategies for coping with these challenges. Questions ranged from asking about specific academic difficulties and social integration experiences to inquiries about cultural adaptation and personal resilience. This study aimed to provide rich, narrative data, this approach allowed for a more nuanced understanding of the complexities and dynamics of being an international student in Pakistan.

In the qualitative phase of the research design, the development of open-ended questions takes center stage, aiming to elicit detailed and nuanced responses from international students regarding their experiences in Pakistani higher education institutions. These self-developed open-ended questions, carefully aligned with the research objectives, are designed to encourage participants to share personal insights and perspectives on academic challenges, social integration issues, and cultural adaptation experiences. Emphasizing flexibility in the interview process, the researchers recognize the importance of adapting to the dynamics of each interview, allowing for the exploration of interesting or unexpected topics that may arise during the conversation. To refine the effectiveness of the questions, a crucial step involves conducting pilot interviews with a subset of participants. This pilot testing serves to validate the clarity of the questions and ensures they prompt the desired depth of responses. Furthermore, ethical considerations play a pivotal role in question development, with a commitment to formulating inquiries that are ethically sound, non-leading, unbiased, and respectful of participants' diverse experiences and backgrounds.

In-depth interviews were conducted via various methods including online video calls, live interviews, and phone calls, ensuring accessibility and accommodating participants' preferences and voluntary consent. All data collection methods adhered to ethical consideration and confidentiality protocols by assuring the participants that their personal identity and data will not be shared and revealed.

Results and Discussion

The qualitative analysis of the experiences of international students in Pakistan uses a thematic approach to explore the intricacies of their journeys. This delves into the rich, nuanced narratives provided by the participants, uncovering the layers of challenges, adaptations, and personal growth encountered in a foreign academic and cultural landscape. Through a meticulous thematic analysis, we identify and interpret the recurring patterns and themes that emerge from the students' experiences. These themes reflect the diverse range of coping strategies and personal insights and offer a deeper understanding of the complexities involved in cross-cultural adaptation. By analyzing these stories through a thematic lens, a comprehensive and empathetic understanding of the international students' experiences, highlighting their resilience, adaptability, and the transformative impact of their time in Pakistan. This analysis not only contributes to the academic discourse on international education but also offers practical insights for educational institutions, policymakers, and future students embarking on similar journeys

The data revealed that language is the primary theme related to the obstacles faced by international students. The majority of the participants find it challenging to live and study in universities of Pakistan because since foreign students are not native to the country, they face difficulties with vocabulary, grammar, fluency, and pronunciation, among other language skills

The first subtheme under linguistic challenges involves the direct difficulties posed by language differences. Students often struggle to understand and be understood in the new academic and social environment, which can hinder their educational progress and integration.

"The first problem was a language barrier and cultural shocks. So, the language barrier I coped with trying to learn the local language and improving my second language, which was English" (Participant 1). This highlights the initial struggle students face in adapting to a new linguistic environment and their efforts to overcome these barriers through learning and improving their language skills.

"The teachers tend to still prefer Urdu as their language of instruction and this mainly affected me a lot" (Participant 4). The preference for the local language by instructors creates an additional layer of difficulty for non-native speakers, affecting their learning experience and participation in class.

This subtheme highlights how students can feel excluded when the primary language of instruction and communication is not their own, leading to a sense of isolation and academic disadvantage.

"Teachers in the class go for the Urdu. Mostly class my whole class is Pakistani and I'm the only one who is a foreigner. Foreigners will only mean that they will not change the whole lecture. And teachers I feel like they don't even feel comfortable delivering the whole lecture in English" (Participant 2). This quote illustrates the sense of exclusion and discomfort experienced by foreign students when the language of instruction is not tailored to include them, leading to feelings of isolation and disadvantage. *"I remember in my first semesters the amount of the quizzes and assignments that I missed just because I didn't understand when teachers were announcing them in the classes"* (Participant 8). This indicates the practical academic challenges that arise from not understanding announcements and instructions given in a different language, leading to missed assignments and quizzes.

Cultural Adaptation and Integration theme addresses the cultural challenges and the process of integrating into a new societal context. It emphasizes the impact of cultural differences on students' social life and their efforts to bridge these gaps. Cultural shock is a common experience for international students as they adjust to new norms, values, and ways of communication. This subtheme captures the initial disorientation and adjustment period.

"Indirect communication is more common. This can lead to misunderstandings or misinterpretations of intentions or meanings in conversations" (Participant 7). The adjustment to different communication styles is a significant part of the cultural adaptation process, often leading to misunderstandings and the need for greater cultural awareness. Building relationships in a new cultural context can be challenging due to differing social norms and expectations, which can lead to feelings of loneliness and the need for targeted social support mechanisms.

"It was so hard building relationships for me because the way we build a relationship and the way they build was different" (Participant 1).

"Due to my accent, it was also very hard as well. Like even though if I'm talking English to them, it's hard for them to understand the styles and everything people are very judgmental or like they don't accept you" (Participant 2). This quote highlights the social isolation felt due to linguistic differences and accents, which can lead to feelings of rejection and exclusion, impacting students' ability to integrate fully.

The academic navigation theme encompasses the challenges related to academic systems and practices in the host country. It sheds light on the difficulties in adapting to different teaching styles and the need for better institutional support. Differences in teaching styles and academic practices can create barriers for international students, affecting their learning experiences and outcomes. *"I saw a lot of favouritism come into play"* (Participant 3). The perception of favouritism within academic settings can undermine the educational experience and exacerbate feelings of alienation for international students, indicating a need for more equitable teaching practices.

A lack of support from institutional authorities can pose significant barriers to international students' academic integration and success, highlighting the importance of accessible and supportive administrative services. *"When I was getting my admission in my university, I felt like the administration and the dean, the workers and the professors, they weren't much of a help to me. It felt like they were kind of against me getting an admission to the university"* (Participant 10).

The systemic and Administrative Barriers theme highlights the systemic issues and administrative obstacles that international students encounter, emphasizing the need for more supportive institutional frameworks. This repetition underscores the critical challenge posed by uncooperative administrative staff and the systemic barriers within the institution, indicating a need for improved administrative processes and support for international students.

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The personal and Emotional Resilience theme reflects the strategies and personal attributes that help students cope with and overcome the challenges they face. It underscores the importance of resilience, self-reliance, and external support systems.

Students often develop a range of coping strategies to manage their academic workload and overcome language and cultural barriers, including self-help tools and seeking peer support.

"I tried to understand like maybe translating them or going to Google and finding the lectures by myself. Or sometimes my friends, classmates would help me out" (Participant 2). Students develop various coping strategies, including self-help tools and peer support, to manage their academic workload and overcome language barriers, demonstrating their resourcefulness and adaptability. *"I developed a time management system that included breaking down tasks into manageable chunks and setting realistic deadlines. Additionally, I have also been utilizing the help and support of the faculty and fellow students to overcome these challenges"* (Participant 9). Effective time management and seeking support are key strategies for academic success, highlighting students' proactive steps to navigate their

academic challenges. Maintaining a positive mindset and drawing on personal beliefs and spiritual support can be crucial for emotional resilience.

"I had already forgiven them and wished nothing but the best for them" (Participant 3). Personal beliefs and a positive mindset play a crucial role in maintaining emotional resilience and fostering a supportive attitude towards others, despite challenges. This underscores the importance of mental and emotional strength in overcoming adversity.

The support systems and services currently available for international students in Pakistani universities are designed to address various aspects of their academic and personal lives, ensuring a well-rounded support structure (Tufail & Bashir, 2023). Academically, universities offer language proficiency programs such as English as a Second Language (ESL) courses to help international students improve their language skills and better engage with the academic curriculum. Additional academic support is provided through tutoring, writing centers, and study groups that facilitate collaborative learning and peer assistance. To aid in cultural adjustment, universities conduct orientation programs that provide insights into local customs, guidance on navigating cultural differences, and opportunities for cross-cultural interactions. Regularly scheduled cultural workshops and events further promote cultural understanding and integration. Financial support is also available through scholarships and financial aid packages specifically designed for international students, alleviating their financial burden and making education more accessible.

Health and well-being services include comprehensive mental health counseling and support to address the unique emotional challenges faced by international students, as well as on-campus health centers providing medical care. Administrative and logistical support is provided through guidance on visa and immigration matters, ensuring compliance with local regulations, and assistance in finding affordable and convenient housing options.

Community-building initiatives are vital, with various student clubs and associations fostering a sense of belonging among international students. Mentorship programs pair international students with local student mentors who offer guidance and support. Career services play a crucial role in helping international students find internships, co-op opportunities, and post-graduation employment, enhancing their career prospects. Finally, universities establish channels for international students to provide feedback and express concerns, allowing continuous improvement of support services. These comprehensive support systems and services ensure that international students have a positive and successful academic experience in Pakistani universities.

The findings of this study align with several aspects of existing literature on the challenges and coping strategies of international students. Our results match Cao et al. (2018), who identified language barriers, cultural differences, and academic pressures as significant challenges for international students. Similarly, Tsevi (2018) emphasizes the importance of language proficiency and cultural adaptation, supporting our findings on the necessity for language support programs and cultural orientation sessions. Both our study and Jean-Francois (2017) recognize the critical role of academic support in helping international students cope with academic pressures, including tutoring, writing centers, and study groups. However, there are some mismatches between our findings and other studies. Unlike Baba et al. (2014), who highlight social support as a crucial coping mechanism, our study found that social support structures, such as mentorship programs, are often underdeveloped in Pakistani universities. This suggests the need for more structured support systems to foster a sense of community among international

students. Additionally, Hendrickson et al. (2011) emphasize the role of host family support in easing cultural adjustment. However, our research indicates that institutional support and peer networks play a more prominent role in the Pakistani context. This discrepancy could be attributed to cultural differences and the specific socio-economic environment of Pakistan.

Conclusion

The research revealed that international students at a university in Pakistan faced several challenges during their studies. Despite coming from diverse backgrounds, these students encountered common difficulties. The main challenges identified were related to linguistic barriers, cultural adaptation, academic navigation, systemic issues, and personal resilience. The linguistic challenges included vocabulary, grammar, fluency, and communication barriers, with a significant impact from the predominant use of Urdu in academic settings. Cultural adaptation issues involved adjusting to new social norms and communication styles, leading to social isolation and difficulty in building relationships. Academic challenges were linked to differing teaching styles, lack of institutional support, and perceived favoritism. Systemic and administrative barriers included uncooperative administrative procedures and lack of support during the admission process. To overcome these challenges, international students employed several strategies. These included self-help tools, peer support, effective time management, and maintaining a positive mindset. Personal beliefs and spiritual support also played a crucial role in their emotional resilience. In summary, international students in Pakistan face a complex array of challenges, but they demonstrate resilience and proactive coping strategies. These findings can inform policies and support services to better facilitate the academic and social integration of international students.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, several recommendations are proposed to enhance the experience of international students. Institutions should offer language proficiency programs, such as English as a Second Language (ESL) courses, to improve language skills and engagement with the academic curriculum. Additionally, orientation programs providing cultural insights and guidance on local customs can aid in adjusting to the new environment. To support academic success, institutions should offer resources such as tutoring, writing centers, and study groups. Financial aid and scholarships specifically for international students can alleviate financial stress and increase accessibility. Mental health services and counseling support should address emotional challenges like homesickness and cultural adjustment issues. Guidance on visa and immigration matters, with access to knowledgeable staff, is crucial for compliance with local regulations. Diversity and inclusion initiatives can foster a sense of belonging and reduce discrimination. Establishing career services to assist with internships, co-op opportunities, and post-graduation employment can enhance career prospects. Providing affordable housing options and promoting community through clubs and mentorship programs can improve well-being. Institutions should establish channels for feedback from international students to inform service improvements. Encouraging international collaboration through student exchange programs and academic partnerships can enrich the educational experience.

Additionally, international students should prepare thoroughly before arriving in the host country by researching the local culture, language, education systems, and other relevant aspects. Universities must address language issues by offering pre-term language courses to improve communication and academic performance. Departments

should ensure clear communication of information to both local and international students, potentially through mentorship programs where senior local students guide international peers. Future researchers should expand their focus to include preparation and support mechanisms for international students, involving larger participant numbers and different universities to understand challenges and coping strategies comprehensively. By implementing these recommendations, stakeholders can significantly enhance international students' academic and social integration, ensuring a more supportive and inclusive educational environment.

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