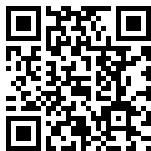


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Title: Lived Experiences of Pakistani Students Enrolled in Short-Term International Mobility Programs

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Lived Experiences of Pakistani Students Enrolled in Short-Term International Mobility Programs

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Abstract

Short-term international mobility is popular among academicians seeking experiences abroad. This study explores the trend where individuals pursue international exposure and education through exchange programs. These programs impart valuable academic and sociocultural experiences, but also present challenges. Hence, the current study aims to explore motivations and challenges faced by international students participating in short-term programs. Qualitative research method was used to explore the socio-cultural impacts of international mobility programs. Using a purposive sampling technique, 15 participants were selected who had undergone international mobility. Data was collected through in-depth interviews of the 15 selected students. Responses to open-ended questions were recorded and transcribed and themes were constructed, using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). It was found that short-term international mobility programs are valuable and perspective changing experiences for the participants, despite being associated with multiple challenges. Such programs motivate individuals to engage in cross-border exposure while building fruitful professional networks, as well as fostering tolerance and respect for others' perspectives, opinions, ideas, and belief system. The researchers recommend greater participation in these programs to enhance personal and professional development.

Keywords: challenges, exchange program, international students, short-term, social networks

Introduction

Globalization has become hugely significant due to the pervasiveness of its impact in every sphere of life. It goes beyond just politics and economics, where changes in one economy can have devastating impacts on others. Globalization exercises a profound influence on the education sector,

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particularly in the realm of higher education (Jung, [2022](#)). It aims for cultural unity, driving constant change in higher education to improve global interconnectivity (Marginson & Wende, [2007](#)).

Learning and education undoubtedly have a vital impact in elevating societal statuses and changing norms. Numerous studies have confirmed that higher education plays a crucial role in developing vital skills in individuals. Such skills have a very positive impact while contributing to the economy, which may lead to the betterment and development of the society (Kyllonen, [2018](#)).

The impact of globalization on the professional and skill enabling education system is within the grasp of internationalized professional and higher education. This refers to the schematics of policies as well as the systems. Industry related initiatives have been undertaken by various educational institutions worldwide to remain competitive, to keep up with global trends, and to be on par with each other (Roy et al., [2019](#)). There are many reasons why internationalization has become increasingly important in the field of higher education (Wu & Chan, [2019](#)). Internationalizing higher education creates a wonderful opportunity for individuals to broaden their horizons and to embrace the diversity of cultures. It fosters the growth of strong social networks that span across the globe, promoting intercultural relationships and networking (Mitchell & Nielsen, [2012](#)). One of the most significant purposes of this study is to identify the overall tendency of Pakistani students studying in the international arena, while the existing studies identify a research gap with reference to measure the tendency of such students.

Mobility on International Scale

International students around the globe embark upon the journey of seeking quality higher education. This trend continues to grow and it has been estimated that more than seven million young men and women per year will opt for higher education by 2025. This can either be within national borders (intra) or across national borders. In search of quality professional and skill enabling education, student mobility is particularly important. It can be categorized into two main types, namely inbound student mobility and outbound student mobility (Knight, [2012](#)).

Foster ([2016](#)) also explored the experiences of Chinese students while studying business in the UK and similarly, that of British students studying

design engineering in China. International student mobility programs provide valuable exposure to diverse cultures and perspectives, enhancing the classroom experience. They are essential and should not be underestimated (Csaszar et al., [2023](#)). In addition, having a classroom filled with students from various cultural and national backgrounds can aid in developing a better apprehension of cultural diversity and shaping new perspectives. Moreover, incoming mobility can significantly improve a country's representation in the international arena (Volford, [2023](#)).

International mobility programs such as the “HEC International Mobility Partnership 2023 Pak-UK Education Gateway” remains vital for fostering collaboration between the higher education platforms of Pakistan and the UK. This joint initiative, launched by the Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan and the British Council in Pakistan, seeks to strengthen the partnership between the academia of both countries. Its success can be deduced by the growing interest of students who have undertaken mobility on a cross-border basis for higher education purposes. A sharp upward growth in the data shows a ballooned effect from 1.3 million students in 2018 to a staggering 4.3 million aspirants in such international mobility programs by 2020. This upward pattern enables the researchers to understand the keenness and will of students to remain abreast of international developments. Consequently, the broadened exposure also gets them an opportunity to enjoy greater financial stability in the international arena due to globalization and a mixed-cultured workforce.

One of the major trends of globalization remains the global acceptance of English language as the means of communication. In other terms, it implicates that the students from across the globe prefer English speaking countries, such as USA, Great Britain, and commonwealth countries of Canada and Australia, as their preferred host countries for higher and professional education. A whopping 53% of students who indulge into international mobility hail the Asian continent as the pursuant of professional/international degrees and education (OECD, [2023](#)). International mobility programs benefit both students and institutions, although they can also cause academic stress and require adjustments to new environments (Singh, [2022](#)).



Pakistan and Internationalization of Higher Education

The impact of globalization is evident in the education system and policies of Pakistan. The Higher Education Commission (HEC) is taking action to align with global trends by designing policies and implementing programs. HEC's efforts have been remarkable since its establishment in 2002 (Jung, [2022](#)). More Pakistani students are studying abroad, with the majority choosing universities in the USA, UK, Australia, Germany, and Canada. About 71865 students have participated in international mobility programs (UNESCO, [2021](#)).

Through formal agreements known as MOUs, collaborations between developed and developing nations' education systems and universities have been incredibly impactful in the internationalization of education. When examining the Pakistani education system, the HEC stands out for its commendable contributions. It has formed partnerships with various foreign countries and prestigious agencies, such as DAAD (Germany), KTH (Sweden), and CSC (China) through MOUs. These collaborations offer students the chance to receive full scholarships, discounted fees, and partial scholarships for studies (Zakaria et al., [2016](#)). International MOU agreements allow universities to offer mobility programs that enrich the learning environment and enhance cultural interactions (Jeptoo & Razia, [2012](#)).

Objectives

Since, international MOU agreements allow universities to offer mobility programs that enrich the learning environment and enhance cultural interactions, hence the principal objective of this research was to explore students' perspective based on several key elements, influencing them to leaving their home country for foreign education. The specific objectives of the study are appended below.

- To understand the aspirations, motivations, and insights gathered by Pakistani students who have experienced short-term mobility provided by international educational programs.
- To highlight the cultural shock experienced by Pakistani origin students.
- To find out the peculiar insights of a unique nature into the role played by social networks.

Methodological Framework

Qualitative research approach was used in the current study. Purposive sampling technique was used to choose the respondents. In-depth interviews were conducted from 15 students who had experienced international mobility. The target population of Lahore city (Punjab) has been selected for the study. There were 15 students who remained the primary source of data and they were defined as the sample for this study. The researchers only had access to selected Pakistani students who had firsthand experience of international mobility programs, either through the Pak-UK Gateway, HEC, and British Council Pakistan.

To achieve broader views about Pakistani students' experiences and perspectives, in-depth interviews were found to be ideal. The primary purpose of in-depth interviews is to uncover detailed and clear understanding of the participants' approach and viewpoint about the topic of research (Ranney et al., [2015](#)). In-depth interviews were chosen to gain detailed information about Pakistani students' mobility and to explore the topic from various perspectives based on the participants' experiences and views. Additionally, and most importantly, an informal, casual, and friendly interaction with the respondents resulted in a trust relationship which allowed the participants in many cases to give multidimensional views on the topic under study.

An interview guide was also used to gather data from the respondents. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was carried out for an in-depth understanding from the perspective of respondents involved in short-term mobility programs. Subjective meanings are important as they are based on experiences. Hence, the experiences of individuals were given importance (Creswell, [2017](#)). The themes for guide were meticulously developed by the researchers to ensure that a wider range of responses, understanding, and lived experiences may be gathered. Moreover, the researchers provided concise and informative descriptions of the aspects covered in their study, which are as follows:

- Motivations for the mobility program
- Preliminary experiences
- Culture differences
- Stress management
- Improve interaction skills and social networks



- Post mobility program

Data Collection and Transcription

Primary Data was gathered from respondents who had experienced short-term international mobility programs using semi-structured interview guide. The inclusion criteria for respondents included ages between 25 to 35 years. After getting the consent of the respondents, interviews were recorded

Data was conducted in bilingually, both in Urdu and English languages, as per the respondents' convenience. Responses to open-ended questions were also accrued through interviews in order to get unbiased and detailed responses. Time duration of every interview was between 30 to 45 minutes. Lastly, data was transcribed, using the researcher' notes and audio-recordings for each interview. Note-taking helped and assisted the researchers to identify the areas that could further be probed for future reference and that could also help to analyze the data.

Ethical Consideration

This research emphasized on the ethical standards, considering diverse cultural backgrounds of the participants. Informed consent was sought and participants were informed about maintaining data privacy and security. Maintaining equilibrium between the possible hazards and expected advantages of research necessitates ethical concerns to be considered at every phase of a qualitative investigation.

Data Analysis

The perspectives and experiences of 15 participants were categorized under various themes including motivations, initial experiences, social dynamics, the impact of social networks, encounters with diverse cultures, and the reintegration experiences of Pakistani students upon returning to their original environment through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).

Findings and Discussion

The study would help the researchers to draw the following deductions through six themes accrued from the data collected from the respondents who availed short-term mobility programs. These six themes included motivation of mobility programs, preliminary experiences, culture, stress

management, interaction skills, improving social networks, and post-mobility programs.

Motivation for Mobility Programs

Since the dawn of the 21st century the world has emerged as a global village. Indeed, the entire planet is now virtually connected. This virtually globalized world is one of the basic reasons behind the motivation for mobility programs. Furthermore, the print and electronic media also shape the minds of young students to pursue their studies from advanced and developed countries in order to bolster their skills. Scholarship programs are also a source of motivation through which a student can get a high level of education free of cost with a high degree of job certainty. Such perspectives also incline a student to search for offshore study options. That seven students out of fifteen responded that “I searched through different media advertisement and social media information”. However, eight students out of fifteen responded that “I searched about scholarships programs through HEC and International universities” *websites*.

Further the respondents were motivated by personal growth and future benefits to experience the culture and education system of a developed region. Adapting to a new environment was challenging; however, orientation sessions and social gatherings helped them to adjust. Differences in academic experiences between the host university and the home institution were also analyzed. The country's socioeconomic conditions have motivated students to seek opportunities to explore the developed regions of the world. However, some respondents hold contrasting views as they also saw this as an opportunity to secure better employment prospects in the future.

Knowing the demands for international experience in our local markets, I want to grab this opportunity to improve my communication skills and perhaps the social networks for future endeavors. Being an extrovert, I always had a desire to personally and practically view the highest education standards and to apply those techniques in Pakistan. Furthermore, it also gave a chance to creatively think of business ideas.

I was always fond of viewing the education practices of the developed world. Being a social scientist, the very thought that the



contents and contributions are coming fairly much from the East so I want to explore the higher education practices.

Preliminary Experiences

During their stay, Pakistani students faced a significant challenge due to the linguistic barriers they encountered in their classes. While exploring different cultures was necessary to understand their language, the students struggled with the language difficulties they faced. However, with the help of their instructors, the students gained laudable experience while undergoing international traveling and found the use of information technology more convenient.

Another issue faced by male respondents was the difficulty of carrying out all the household chores, such as washing utensils and cleaning their rooms on their own. This challenge inculcated the importance of self-maintenance tasks among them, which may help them in their future endeavors.

International mobility programs have a significant impact on students, as they help to inculcate the element of individuality among them. Individuality is the sense that individuals do not judge others based on their own perceptions, rather they consider individuality to be the main concern. It is important to guard individuality in the Pakistani society, as the norms and values of the behavior is often dictated by the society. That seven students responded that “I have experienced linguistic issues to exchange communication in the receiving country”. However, twelve students responded that “I had experienced self-maintenance is a primary challenge”

Culture Differences

International mobility programs provided students with an opportunity to observe the advanced and developed world's systems. It enabled the participants to honor the different aspects of other cultures which was not possible earlier for them. By indulging and experiencing the hosting cultures, the students immediately faced cultural shocks. On the other hand, they were able to draw a comparison between both the cultures, appreciating their overall cultural diversities, variations in norms, values and customs. After sometime, Pakistani students adapted to these cultures and tried to fit-in the requirements of a specific culture and society, meeting their set of norms and values in order to ensure their survival. In both academic and other patterns of life, the existence of respect, honor, and dignity is

significant. Respect includes not just respecting different views, rather addressing both physical and psychological needs of students undergoing the experience. Thinking and formation of views based on techniques of a critical and intellectual nature is regarded as very high in any academic setting. Basically, the students learnt that such opportunities provide a holistic view of different cultures when engaged in such activities with all the different nationalities, while sharing their own domestic and regional perspectives. That during the in-depth interview, nine student responded that “I have experienced immediate cultural shock owing to variation in food, dissimilar religious practices” while six students out of fifteen emphasized that “I had faced variation of artifacts and diversity in social norms and values”.

Stress Management

When traveling to a foreign country, students often experience feelings of loneliness and isolation on account of the fact that the receiving countries having cultures and structures different from their own culture. Through the exchange experience, a sense of tolerance, adaptability, emergence, and frequent interaction with the host society is developed from various perspectives including psychological, socioeconomic, political, and cultural ones. Through such interaction the students balance their stress management and psychological burdens. That five students responded that “I have deady missed my family and friends all the times” while seven students out of fifteen expressed that “I had compelled to adapt and emerge in the receiving country because there was no other option left to survive”.

Improve Interaction Skills and Social Networks

The role of social ties is of critical importance for Pakistani students as these ties offer opportunities across various domains. Social ties provide support in terms of navigating the challenges associated with adapting to a new environment. Additionally, establishing contact with individuals of their own community and mother country in the foreign country provides them with a sense of attachment, as well as with a hope of association and reconnection because of their similar place of origin. On the contrary, their frequent interaction with the larger population of the host country also improves their skills and social networks, for the reason that being alien in the receiving society and their dependency tends upon the receiving students community. Without interactions and social networks, students can



alienate themselves and their survival can be on stake. That six students out of fifteen responded that “I had met my Pakistani friends in the receiving country who gave him a feeler of his native town”. That eight students out of fifteen responded that “I had established my interaction with foreign national’s students and sooner his social interaction gave him a circle of close friends”.

Post-mobility Program

One major benefit seen and understood of such programs was not being limited only to enhancing interaction skills, rather to help in improving social networks that always could be very useful for future aspects and endeavors. Despite numerous monetary challenges and the prevailing economic situation in Pakistan, Pakistani students' motivation to study abroad remains strong. Pursuing a brighter future, the potential of permanent residency and the desire for a world-class education continue to motivate these students. Ten students out of fifteen responded that “I had acquired permanent residency documents and now I am very much secure in both socio-economic context”.

Conclusion

The Higher Education Institution (HEI) of Pakistan has made commendable efforts to promote internationalization in higher education. However, there is still a room for improvement and the implementation of the above recommendations can go a long way to enhance the overall productivity of its international mobility programs. The wholesome findings depict that the students’ off-shore studies enhance their educational skills, as well as improve their social networking and social skills. The mobility programs enable them to adapt to other cultures and determine their adjustability in order to survive in the host country. They develop respect for other cultures keeping in view culture relativism. They are able to manage their stress when they get into the inviting countries through a sense of tolerance, as well as kill their loneliness and isolation through a variety of interaction both with local people and others. This interaction gives them a feeler of satisfaction, togetherness, sense of attachment, and integration. Being in a foreign country, they begin to learn how to keep their self-maintenance in a trans-frontier environment through a variety of daily work including their laundry, cooking, and cleanliness. Mobility programs successfully impart such self-surviving skills.

Recommendations

The researchers would like to suggest the following aspects for future studies on this topic:

1. It was found that most of the students from Pakistan who travelled abroad apart from their learning point of view preferred to find their post-studies settlement and inhabitation abroad. This tendency should be curtailed and a mechanism should be put in place to get those students to work for their country.
2. The government should re-design their employment and engagement process, so that the interest of foreign qualified students is enhanced to work in their own country. Their incentives mechanism should be overvalued keeping in view their skills and qualification.
3. Meticulous planning should be undertaken by aspirant students. They should plan their stay keeping in view the most important aspect of financing their studies and should do a thorough research into exploring and utilizing all possible and available opportunities in the best possible way offered by the host university and local communities. Students should not hesitate to contact university student services and affairs at the pre-departure stage and also during the study period at the host university.
4. An ambassador or a focal person should be nominated by the former students association to provide guidance and proper navigation to the future desirous students selected for short-term or even long-term student mobility programs.
5. Research on long-term student mobility programs and their impact as experienced by Pakistani student's needs to be conducted regarding gaining employment opportunities, enhancing knowledge, and interaction patterns.
6. More detailed and in-depth studies are needed to assess the impact of exchange programs on students' personalities, particularly in areas such as view formation, tolerance, social networking skills, and citizenship education.
7. Future researches can also be undertaken for policy decision-making by the academia in contrast with local and international level of education being imparted keeping in view the factor of globalization.



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