

## Emerging Post-Pandemic Challenges in British Higher Education for Students of Pakistani Origin and Potential Solutions

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### ABSTRACT

A combined threat of Brexit, the influence of the Covid-19 pandemic and a challenging cost-of-living crisis has led higher education in the UK into difficult financial waters, (Nash, 2024). In addition to this has been the emergence of new immigration 2024 requirements that are now linked to student status with a higher income threshold for graduates (Baker, 2023). The Research and reporting from the Migration Advisory Committee predicts that the UK international student market is estimated to be worth more than 17 billion pounds and in recent years a rising number of applicants has come from primarily the urban centres of Pakistan. Post-Pandemic work from Colbran (2023) puts forward data that estimates there are approximately 64,000 Pakistani students studying overseas with the great majority of those enrolled in business type degrees. Their research also demonstrates how this figure has increased year on year since 2020 with Australia and the UK being chosen as amongst the most popular destinations for higher education. This study draws on a qualitative approach with use of focused expert interviews from Scotland and England, including experienced academic leaders and students who have come to study in different regions of the UK. The fieldwork was conducted in early 2024 through recorded audio and video interviewing. This research hopes to shed light on the current challenges while also providing solutions to what can be done to further support this student population during unstable economic times.

**Keywords:** International Students, Media Education, Covid-19 pandemic, Pakistan.

### INTRODUCTION

The covid pandemic changed higher education across the world and had a significant impact on the UK HE and FE landscape. Hundreds of thousands of staff and students were impacted due to severe lockdowns, remote teaching was adopted, campuses and satellite campuses were closed, and the student experience greatly reduced. Watermeyer et, al (2020) argues that some of the changes that in turn came about in UK universities have been beneficial with some long overdue, including new and innovative teaching approaches but admits that there was also significant change regarding recruitment patterns and approaches with a greater focus on international markets where students could avoid coming to the UK and save on costs but institutions could still enhance revenue streams.

While domestic students were adversely affected over the last 4 years it was often international students who faced an array of underlying and unchecked academic and personal issues. Mental Health problems and social isolation have been flagged as areas of concerns in recent studies (Savage et.al,2020). While for many international students ties through religion, food, arts and culture to their ethnic communities in the UK were either limited or reduced with strict lockdowns and reduction in socialization.

In this study, semi structured interviews with established Pakistani origin media academics in the UK and students who

have arrived in the post pandemic wave of 2022 and 2023 provide insights into the challenges facing their ethnic academic communities based at a variety of UK universities. The study also addressed what solutions can be presented for future cohorts of students of Pakistani origin coming into the UK's Higher Education sector to prevent further disruption and instability.

### BACKGROUND OF RESEARCH

This research points to how there are ways to combat these post-pandemic issues, including specific student support services, which can contribute in the form of additional language support, academic skills workshops, counselling services for mental health problems arising from cultural and social adaptation problems. This study points to how social media platforms often bridge this gap and facilitate further social integration in terms of cultural exchange and interaction, and career platforms facilitate dealing with issues related to employability including LinkedIn.

### Scope of Research

The gap in the research from this work points to these social challenges specifically drawing on Pakistani students and the diminished role some UK media outlets play in highlighting these growing concerns. Future studies may explore new and emerging long-term consequences of South Asian student issues and their integration into UK society with a larger sample size.

Future studies may further explore the psychological and social implications of cultural stereotypes generated by UK media and their impacts on academic performance and mental health when relating to student issues. Future studies can show how these challenges increase for students from marginalized or more rural South Asian backgrounds, while greater focus can be put on female identifying students and those studying abroad from lower socio-economic statuses.

### **RATIONALE OF RESEARCH**

This research is both timely and relevant as the UK government increased the minimum salary graduates need to earn to stay in the UK from 26,000 to more than 38000 pounds in April, (Jackson, 2024). This led to several major employers including HSBC and Deloitte withdrawing contract offers to graduates of UK courses but from international backgrounds.

Coupled to this has been a change of UK government and an increase in the number of layoffs and financial pressures being placed on HE and FE institutions with staff redundancies becoming commonplace since early 2024, (Griffiths and Wheeler, 2024).

The study aims to prevent further issues from arising and to equip educators and prospective students engaged in international studies in both the UK and Asia.

### **RESEARCH PROBLEM**

The primary area of focus for this study is to isolate what are the key academic and social issues facing Pakistani international students in the UK in the years post pandemic and examine the drivers of these problems.

### **RESEARCH QUESTION**

- What are the key drivers of the challenges facing post-pandemic Pakistani university students in the UK?
- How can these issues be addressed to prevent further problems?

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The key framework guiding this work is qualitative in nature, deploying an expert interviewing approach drawing on thematic analysis.

The study also incorporates the role of transcription and semi structured interviewing where needed to present key arguments, debates and issues facing this focused ethnic community.

### **FORMULATION OF HYPOTHESES:**

There are limitations to this research approach, like any qualitative study which focuses on understanding patterns of human behaviours and lived experiences. (Polkinghorne, 2005).

This qualitative study provides a deeper insight into the subjects' experiences from their personal perspectives, reflecting the realities and challenges they each encountered on their student journey.

The 6 semi-structured interviews were conducted using video and audio recording devices and platforms in early 2024. The researchers struck a balance between predetermined questions and the need for the interviewee to give room and scope to the participants to be flexible in exploring emerging issues as they may arise during each bespoke interview. The need to combine structure and natural conversational flow throughout the interviewing process provides windows of opportunity to gain deeper understandings and deliver potential solutions for the

challenges presented which in turn has been invaluable throughout the fieldwork.

Further analysis was carried out in mid Spring 2024, using thematic analysis, with common areas of concern, and solutions grouped together to create this paper. This approach is vital in helping interpret potential themes in qualitative data and in turn presenting the findings in an engaging and compelling manner for academic publication. Thematic analysis helps to bring to the surface subtle nuances between one finding and another. It also improves repetitive patterns and helps identify some of the themes in this study including economic challenges, media coverage, cultural acclimatization (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

### **RATIONALE:**

Primary rationale for this work is to discern the key drivers and emerging issues facing this community through drawing on a focused sample size with varying experiences. In turn this study aims to provide answers to the problems where possible and also explore the media correlation regarding this academic group.

### **SIGNIFICANCE OF RESEARCH**

This qualitative methodology is oriented towards garnering a greater understanding of complex lived experiences. It is also a methodology which lets researchers accurately and honestly hear from interviewees on their own subjective experiences and the meanings each gives to his or her actions and within specific social contexts while on their academic pathways (Bryman, 2006; Polkinghorne, 2005). It is assumed that the qualitative research follows from the benefits which stem from offering the depth and insights into varied human experiences which can be lost during using a wholly quantitative process.

### **LIMITATION OF RESEARCH**

However, qualitative research also has some drawbacks including challenges surrounding objectivity, bias, and the approaches to data collection and analysis at times are deemed interpretative (Bryman, 2006). In addition, qualitative methods are resource heavy and take up considerable time which limits the scope of the research and fieldwork. In some cases, the sample size can play a role and doesn't always adequately reflect all the views from study cohorts, (Öhman, 2005). In previous international focused media doctoral work (Mahon, 2021) and post-doctoral work (Mahon, 2021) which drew on 30+ interviewees the importance of sample size played a role in allowing for a wider range of views and more coherent thematic analysis.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

More than a decade ago McDonald (2014) explored the key issues facing what was then a growing international student population in the UK. He points to the value of this influx as having two primary benefits, influence and economic. However, McDonald (2014) along with other scholars including Clough et.al (2024) and Daru (2021) all touch on a growing number of challenges being faced by such varied social groups coming to the UK. Each author also draws on the cultural nuances for student groups with many coming from cultures where they are unable to question the lecturer.

South Asian students including those of India and Bangladeshi origin are often based around specific study centres including London, Birmingham and parts of Yorkshire. Those based in these hubs often display an array of issues not just academically but also socially and economically also. This further deters not only the education journey of the concerned cohorts but also in

turn impacts personal growth and professional development in certain instances.

Regarding the Educational Landscape for South Asian students, a mix of issues often begin with basic understanding of dialect, accent and other linguistic barriers as discussed by Clough et al, (2024). Although an emerging number of South Asian students are confident at written and spoken English, they may still encounter challenges due to the use of academic language which is prevalent throughout UK universities and is often seen as being often more complex. McDonald (2014) reiterates that lack of confidence in this space has a direct correlation with student success and retention. Clough et al, (2024) also refers to international students who have withdrawn from UK courses and points to how many come from vocational focused cultures where the modules, assessments and pedagogy need to clearly identify with employability.

This in turn poses a range of problems for students in understanding key and core course materials if they cannot isolate how the tie into job opportunities in their country of origin. Further educational differences include contributing throughout oral and group discussions and presentations, while expressing ideas clearly through both formative and summative assessments and during sit down exams. This linguistic difficulty can further be intensified by the existing different educational expectations and pedagogical styles which can differ significantly from Pakistani institutional undergraduate delivery. Rather than seeking support when this occurs, Daru (2021) points to how Asian students often shy away from asking for help or availing of additional mental health or academic staff. Daru (2021) suggests that in many academic situations Asian students are also grouped together and therefore also lose confidence in coming forward.

A further area that is important to note is surrounding South Asian educational systems tend to be more exam-oriented whereas the UK education system emphasizes criticality, pitching, class participation, portfolio assessment and continuous assessment approaches that draw on a mixed pedagogy both at undergraduate and postgraduate levels (Nayak, 2017). These changes not only their confidence but also their academic success in certain subject areas and in dynamic classes, where they are often mixed in with domestic students or those from North America. McDonald (2014) describes how student feedback from international groups has demonstrated that they are keen for support that aligns to pre studies including acclimatisation ahead of leaving their country of origin.

All this academic pressure and shifts can lead into wider issues surrounding shock and confusion regarding societal norms (Ghuman, 2002). Significant differences in social norms, lifestyles and social patterns, can leave international students with a sense of isolation and a growing issue which is homesickness (Clough et al.) (Nachatar, 2023). Clough et al (2024) explains that one area where international students further face challenges is that of balancing their home cultures, their faith, their diet and their social structure with that of their new environment. Daru (2021) also suggests that these internal struggles regarding identity and place and purpose are further compounded by establish cultural stigma surrounding mental health and that despite being in a more open society these norms from Asian cultures remain commonplace in international student communities.

Clough et. al (2024), Daru (2021) and McDonald (2014) all mention economics surrounding international students with the former focusing heavily on the lack of support and training

regarding money management for many international student groups. Clough's work points to how many international students at postgraduate level may have relied on family and community values and traditions regarding spending and therefore were not equipped for budgeting far from home and in a different currency. Moreover, there is often post pandemic, an expectation for students to secure part-time jobs to not only ensure financial sustainability while studying overseas but to meet travel, accommodation and ever rising food costs (Acar, 2023). However, for many international students understanding the work dynamics of the UK, how to find jobs, what roles they are qualified to undertake, and the work culture are all alien. Clough et.al (2024) refers to a body of work by Reilly explaining that student financial stress domestically is not reported on and that with internationals the issue is kept under wraps due to societal pressures. Daru (2021) refers to this as avoidance and repression and highlights while other international student groups may have patterns of help seeking behaviour, those from Asian communities do not. What is also clear is that many international student groups are not aware of the financial support available to them via UK universities and including counselling and wellbeing services.

McDonald (2014) explains that to better support the international student experience in the UK, funding and training is needed for educators and that this would prove costly. In industry that is post-pandemic experiencing financial challenges, it is unlikely staff will be equipped with the resources needed to support often in many cases very large class groups of students from international communities.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This research paper aims to interpret the experiences of Pakistani students in the UK. It is more explanatory in capturing the depth and richness of experiences and understanding their range of coping mechanisms and where needed adaptation strategies, while also providing solutions to the key issues that arise. This qualitative study may in turn inform sociology and media researchers through understanding cultural background and personal narratives. The research is ethnographic in nature and blends sociological and creative media approaches.

### **THE RESEARCH DESIGN:**

This research paper drew on expert interviews with lived experience in the UK as international students and former students turned educators. The selection process involved reaching out to more than 20 potential contributors with those studying media coming forward as being most comfortable to undertake video and audio interviews.

The participants were all asked the same set of questions pertaining to the following two areas, the greatest challenges they faced coming to the UK and studying here and also follow up queries exploring what more could be done to help others following in their footsteps.

The second thematic area focused on what role media can play in supporting and highlighting these and other concerns from Pakistani international students during their time in the UK.

### **DATA COLLECTION METHODS:**

Recorded Audio and Video Interviews were adopted due to distances involved with some interviewees in England. This approach also allowed for transcription and easier approach to grouping key themes and issues.

**ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS DURING THIS STUDY:**

This 2024 study was conducted adhering to ethical guidance and support from the University of the West of Scotland. This qualitative research approach assures and provides the participants with trust and enhances their security by allowing them to participate only with consent and permission. The ethical study ensures that the participant provides informed consent

for participation in the study before the study commences and further via their audio and video recordings (Wiles et al., 2006). Anonymity was provided as an option for the study but was not considered by the mostly media focused participants.

**ANALYSES AND INTERPRETATIONS**

**The Primary Challenges Being Discussed**

All of the participants agreed that there are an emerging list of

	Location	Course	Background	Time in the UK	Hometown
Aizaz Ahmed	Newcastle	MA Podcasting	Writer and Journalist	1 year	Lahore
Shahab Uddin	Glasgow	MA Media Studies	Digital Content Creator	2 years	Kheshgi Payan
Javed Sattar	Paisley	Audio Engineering	Lecturer and Broadcaster	56 years	Dundee
Khizer Hayat	Glasgow	MA Digital Media	Journalist and Photographer	1 year	Mardan
Farhandad	Edinburgh	Business Psychology,	Entrepreneur	1 year	Charsadda
Ziaullah Hamdard	Southampton	PhD Media	Researcher and Journalist	6 years	Mardan

challenges facing students coming from Pakistan to study at universities in UK with language and accent being to the fore.

Aizaz Ahmed a media student at Sunderland University, outlined the primary issue he faced on coming to the North of England, *“The language barrier was a huge challenge for me, the language and the accent, the cultural change, the thing i noticed here was completely different to what we grew up with in Pakistan”.*

Ahmed’s concerns are supported by Pakistani students in Scotland,

*“Understanding English, not knowing what people are saying”*, Khizer Hayat, MA Digital Media, Stirling University,

Ziaullah Hamdard is an established media

researcher, journalist and academic based in Southampton University and recalls his own early weeks after coming from Mardan, *“I personally struggled myself with all the accents in this country, even attending lectures and not understanding fully”.*

Coupled to the language challenges, is the gulf in cultural approaches outlined by Media scholar and educator Javed Sattar.

Javed Sattar, New College Lanarkshire Lecturer and Journalist *“The weather is very cold and harsh, it’s different culture, local students have a very much Friday, Saturday pub*

*culture, Pakistani students also may not have an understanding of even some of the English accents”*

Sattar’s views were echoed by Shahab Uddin, but he believes that prospective students need to prepare in advance of coming to a new country and dealing a different learning environment.

*“The cultural diversity, adjustment challenges for us from Pakistani, before coming to the UK, a student should know how to adjust themselves”*, Shahab Uddin, MA Media student at Stirling,

Khizer Hayat who’s based in Stirling in central Scotland feels part of this preparation is also about learning what is needed and to research well in advance, *“Understanding needs of the visa process, working on financial management is also tough here”*, Khizer Hayat MA Digital Media, Stirling University,

Aizaz Ahmed explained that the learning culture is a significant

shift and it in turn inhibited his time in HE in England, he explains this was due to, *“The teaching style, the environment, the study environment, it is all different for me as a Pakistani student in the UK.”*

Shahab Uddin, a MA Media student at Stirling University believes the simple approach is to become familiar with the teaching approaches and pedagogies prior to coming into a post graduate course in the UK, *“Striking a balance, academic experts and cultural experts are important”.*

Contributing to the linguistic and educational challenges for students is also life outside their campuses.

Javed Sattar, New College Lanarkshire Lecturer and Journalist, *“It rains a lot here, accommodation can be a big challenge if you are not living on campus, private accommodation may be of very poor standard, central heating issues, these challenges are important, having access to Pakistani food, diet follows Islam, halal food very important”.*

Sattar suggests that Pakistani students only gain mainstream media attention when things go wrong.

Javed Sattar, New College Lanarkshire Lecturer and Journalist, *“focus only comes on when things go wrong, if they are involved in a crime, it’s magnified and amplified, no less different day to day.”*

For all contributors, economics were a concern, with financial management and pressures impacting their own student journeys and those of their fellow Pakistani students.

Javed Sattar, New College Lanarkshire Lecturer and Journalist, “Living conditions hasn’t been understood, university hasn’t always engaged, student is living on campus, sometimes they don’t due to costs, they don’t understand the challenges being faced.”

Farhandad a business psychology student at Heriot Watt University in Edinburgh has found his time in the UK full of financial pressures, “Immigration checks, an extra layer of stress, navigating international travel insurance, elevated costs everywhere”.

With international students often paying double the fees of domestic students, media researcher Ziaullah Hamdard has outlined that there is now a shift away from government or employer paid courses with students of Pakistani origin post pandemic having to work at least one part time job to meet the financial demands,

“If they are sponsored it is different to the challenges they face if they are self-funding”, Ziaullah Hamdard, Media Researcher, Journalist and Academic, Southampton University,

With all of these pressures Hamdard sees more international students staying away from joining other international or domestic student communities and instead turning to their own ex-pat groups,

“They want to be integrated, to make friends in society, sometimes it is difficult due to cultural differences”, Ziaullah Hamdard, Media Researcher, Journalist and Academic, Southampton University,

## DISCUSSION SURROUNDING THE SOLUTIONS

While each of the contributors were quick to point to the issues, they and other Pakistani students were facing they also were determined to provide answers and give advice and felt that it was vital to work through these situations.

“I just work a lot on my wellbeing here in the UK, i do work on my self-esteem, joined some communities that are not Pakistani to how to survive in this climate”, Aizaz Ahmed, Media Student Sunderland University,

Shahab Uddin feels that international students don’t speak out as much or as loudly as domestic students, despite paying higher fees and believes communication is key,

“They should join cultural programmes to dive into the new culture, if they are stressed, they should speak out to university staff, they should also use sports”, Shahab Uddin, MA Media student at Stirling,

From an academic and study perspective Khizer Hayat feels talking up can help,

“Making new and innovative study plans, join study groups, seek help and support from their teachers and professors, they also take some breaks, they also stay connected to their friends and family back home, this helps with the pressure.”, Khizer Hayat, MA Digital Media, Stirling University

Javed Sattar believes a simple solution is to avoid being in challenging locations and situations prior to picking a UK university course in the first place, through simply avoiding locations that are not aligned to international communities,

Javed Sattar, New College Lanarkshire Lecturer and Journalist, “What happens if you live in a small town, living down in Ayr is quite challenging for halal food”.

Sattar feels living closer to ethic and religious hub that aligns to the origin countries of international students can be effective, “Culture can play a part, observing certain religious festivals, they may not be long day of fasting in the UK”, Javed Sattar, New College Lanarkshire Lecturer and Journalist,

A final solution is to look at extra-curricular activities including sport, cinema and music,

Khizer Hayat, MA Digital Media, Stirling University, “Sports can help them in this regard, exploring the new places, in my view balancing academic life with social life can be helpful for their wellbeing.”

Edinburgh based Farhandad agrees that it’s important to belong to social groups, “Can boost their wellbeing being by integrating” Farhandad, Business Psychology, Heriot Watt University Edinburgh.

## Debate and Discourse Around

### The Media’s Role

Through not only speaking up to educators and within their own cultural and student groups, the research participants were quick to point out how they also need to amplify and project their issues using local and national media as well as social media platforms.

“Give more coverage to South Asian communities from BBC and Sky, same way newspapers can give them proper coverage, give them a special beat, a south Asian coverage beat” suggests Ziaullah Hamdard, Media Researcher, Journalist and Academic, Southampton University,

Aizaz Ahmed a media student at Sunderland University feels that many Pakistani students in the UK have the skills through their programmes of study to make a difference, “As a media student media can do wonders, my suggestion is please do engage international students, Pakistani students, lessen their concerns, it is benefitting both sides, it can also be good journalists’ channels and platforms.”

This proactive view is held by Pakistani students at Stirling University, “They can host sessions, they can highlight cultural, on camera workshop to support learning”, Shahab Uddin, MA Media student at Stirling.

Ziaullah Hamdard cautions that coverage can be two-fold, “Media can play an important role, it can also highlight sets of problems”, Ziaullah Hamdard Media Researcher, Journalist and Academic, Southampton University,

Aizaz Ahmed expected more coverage and content highlighting the issues he in turn has faced prior to arriving in the UK,

“The role of the media highlighting the issues impacting Pakistani students is very disappointing in the role they could play, they face so many challenges, so much pressure on finances, intensely adopting the university culture” Aizaz Ahmed, Media Student Sunderland University,

Media researchers suggests that more needs to be done to bring attention to the issues facing UK student groups post pandemic,

“I don’t think mass media represents minority groups, there is a dire need for more coverage in mainstream media”, Ziaullah Hamdard, Media Researcher, Journalist and Academic, Southampton University,

Ziaullah Hamdard has also pointed out if the issues highlighted during this study are covered in UK media it is often not in the English language, “I guess have seen such as community radio

stations, has helped highlight their communities' problems, they often do their programmes in Urdu and other languages", Ziaullah Hamdard, Media Researcher, Journalist and Academic, Southampton University,

Moving forward the study participants want to see more attention from media outlets, with Pakistani students still favouring UK institutions despite immigration, financial, cultural and language difficulties,

Shahab Uddin, MA Media student at Stirling, "Broadcast media can amplify voices, we need more serious discussions."

Uddin added that "social media can also help, to help promote voices" and in turn can get more coverage on bigger media platforms and channels". Digital pathways may be the way forward according to college lecturer Javed Sattar.

Sattar has a simple solution that is cost effective and could be impactful,

"Journalists need to engage with cultures and those of other heritages, create a podcast from the language in the country they have come and also in English." Javed Sattar, New College Lanarkshire Lecturer and Journalist,

As Sattar suggests that these kinds of stories don't get much attention to begin with, "You may get 1 in 100 stories by media students, UK media doesn't primarily focus on day-to-day life, just on spaces at university", Javed Sattar, New College Lanarkshire Lecturer and Journalist

Khizer Hayat believes there is a gap in knowledge, academia and media coverage of the needs of Pakistani students but one that can be filled quickly and provide a pathway for future student cohorts.

"Create (radio and podcast shows) about their issues and problems, share tips and tricks to tackle new societies and anxiety and stress, they can also mention support services and events, they can connect student communities and highlight their problems, share tips and tricks to tackle new societies and anxiety and stress, they can also mention support services and events, they can connect student communities together" Khizer Hayat, MA Digital Media, Stirling University,

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## CONCLUSION

What is apparent from this small but varied and vocal sample of students and educators in the UK of Pakistani origin is that there are issues and challenges facing their community right now. What is also clear is that there is not a significant body of work from research standpoint to create discourse and discussion on this topic.

A number of studies and reports having been published that draw attention to the fall out of the covid pandemic on higher education (Rehman, et al, 2021) but few provide insights from those who either studied and worked during the lockdown or chose to come to the UK just after.

An encouraging finding from this work has been the desire to find answers to the problems the study has highlighted from those partaking in it. Through engaging with social media, creating content, building media relationships, focusing on integrating culturally and researching and preparing prior to coming to the UK, a number of the problems raised in this study can be averted and addressed.

A further recommendation can be more focused recruitment and bespoke support services from educational institutions to address these and other concerns.

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