COVID-19 and Global Education: Experiences of Pakistani International Students

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Abstract

The fragmentary COVID-19 pandemic has affected education globally. It changed the entire education system. This study focused on the experiences and challenges of Pakistani international students' that are getting higher education in China. They went back in late 2019 and early 2020 and were not allowed to come back. A qualitative method was used and interviewed in-depth by ten participants to disclose a combination of pre-departure, during departure, E-learning from Pakistan, financial challenges, and hopes about their uncertain future of higher education. Based on findings, conclusions are made that the Government of Pakistan should take steps immediately, need to provide infrastructure to continue their studies online, create jobs opportunity for them to tackle financial crises until they get back. Additionally, the Chinese Government needs to reconsider releasing the monthly stipend to students who continue their studies online. Executing these measures could have a positive impression on students' life, education and future.

Disciplinary: International Higher Education.

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1 Introduction

The coronavirus disease is not a new word to the globe. First, it was exposed in 1960 (He et al., 2020). Lower and upper respiratory complications in a person are caused by a coronavirus, later it was known as a severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS). At the end of 2019, this new pneumonia pandemic was caused by a novel coronavirus (COVID-19) firstly, reported from Wuhan China. Although pandemics are rare to occur, when they happen they change the entire course of history. The COVID-19 pandemic has wreaked the most destruction on schooling, affecting

learners/students from pre-primary to universities adult literacy, and skills growth establishments all over the globe (Zhu & Liu, 2020). According to UNESCO, the closing of schools and higher education institutions (HEIs) in about 200 countries will impact more than 772 million students across 185 countries – 44.1 percent of total enrolled learners (Bank, 2020). As Governments have implemented lockdowns, travel bans, and other sanitary interventions limiting or excluding internal and international migration since the WHO Director-General declared a global pandemic on 11 March 2020. As a result, the higher education sector has been severely impacted, especially universities with a large number of international students.

The number of Pakistani students seeking higher education abroad has risen sharply in recent years (Batra, 2019). At the end of the twentieth century, there were approximately two million students enrolled in international universities around the world; by 2016, that number had fallen to five million (Engel et al., 2019).

This study reports focusing on the experiences of Pakistani students who are pursuing higher study in China as international students, they went to their homes and were not allowed to come back to China till now. Further, plans to comprehend the issues identified with the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on students' higher education and the unexpected shift of schooling to online instruction. The research is significant for numerous causes. First, over the last decade, particularly with the introduction of bilateral exchanges and cooperation in different fields, especially in tertiary education, grew stronger between the two countries. Secondly, As a result of, the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) program the number of Chinese government scholarships to Pakistani students has risen to 600 annually (Latief & Lefen, 2018). Thirdly, Pakistani students studying in China are the fourth largest student in Asia after South Korea, Thailand, and India (Guruz, 2011). Finally, China is "the world's largest country for international students after high school graduation" (Yang, 2020), and the third-largest host country for international students in the world (Jiani, 2017). In addition, the authors' experience with the higher education system between China and Pakistan, one of the chief authors who earned a Master's degree of Laws (LLM) from a renowned Chinese university and currently pursuing a Ph.D. in China. The experience has improved. Analyze the thoughts and experiences of study participants. The purpose of this study is to answer two broad and detailed research questions.

1. What are the challenges that international students in Pakistan faced regarding pre-departure, during departure, and E-learning?
2. How financial hardships, persistent travel restrictions are affecting Pakistani International Students?

2 Overview of Higher Education Globalization

2.1 Pakistani Students' Mobility and the Prominent Reasons for Studying in China

In the contemporary world, globalization has turned into a progressive advancement in higher education. UNESCO (2006) characterizes internationalization of instruction as it is higher

education that happens in circumstances where the instructor, students, program, organization or supplier and course materials become cross-country. For instance, students voyaging abroad and having campuses abroad is called internationalization. In straightforward, it is a method of bringing a global outlook into training (Spencer-Oatey et al., 2017).

Presently, China has countless international degree programs at doctoral, master's and undergraduate levels (Gide et al., 2010). In China, global students touched 442,773 in 2016 (Ministry of Education 2017 as cited in Wu and Chan 2019). In 2017, China was positioned as the top desired country for global students in Asia (Ministry of Education 2018). It is reported that Pakistani students have risen in China from 9,630 in 2013 to 25,000 in 2020. It is happened because of a chain of privileged policies after the launching of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (Malik, 2018).

According to China's Ministry of Education, Pakistan ranks third as per the number of global students presently studying in China with a figure of 28,023 students. Currently, 11,100 Pakistani students are studying in various bachelor's programs, 3,600 in Masters, 6156 Ph.D. and 3,000 in Short Term Exchange Programs across China. Many Pakistani students are also studying medical, computer science, engineering, the Chinese language, and various other fields. Whereas around 7,034 are studying on scholarships.

Based on these figures, China has become a popular destination for international students particularly Pakistanis (Akram et al., 2020). Generally, students choose China for its affordable tuition and living expenses as compared to other global educational destinations (Hodzi, 2020; Yang et al., 2020). Most students are not strong financially but they have a keen interest to get higher education at master's and Ph.D. So, they compete for and are eligible to get the Chinese Government Scholarship (CGS), Belt and Road Scholarship (Bilateral program between China and Pakistan), Chinese Institutional grants (which is known as University Scholarship), and Pakistani Government Scholarship through the Ministry of Higher Education Commission in Pakistan to support their higher studies.

2.2 COVID-19 and Higher Education

Recession can have serious consequences for higher education institutions (R. Yang, 2002). For example, tuition fees may be delayed or unpaid due to a decline in the employment of graduates seeking employment over the next few months. Student tuition and other tuition-related funding failed to fulfill government obligations to the university. The outbreak of COVID-19 has a significant impact on changes in student behavior and on the choice of specific research programs. The impact varies but the overall impact on higher education is significant (Amann & Tripathi, 2020; Kolb & Kolb, 2005).

According to the International Association of Universities (IAU) 2020 poll, the Covid-19 affects worldwide student motion at 89% of HEIs. The nature of the effect varies from university to university, but it has mostly been negative. In terms of study, 80% of HEIs indicated that the Covid-19 pandemic has affected their institutions' research. The most frequent effect of Covid-19 has

been the termination or postponement of international travel (at 83% of HEIs) and science conferences (81% of HEIs). Furthermore, at slightly more than half of HEIs, scientific programs are at risk of not being done (52%). According to the IAU Global Survey, approximately 80% of participants conclude that Covid-19 would have an influence on admission figures to the upcoming academic year. Almost half of the respondents (46%) say the effect would be felt by both foreign and domestic students. Some HEIs, especially private ones, have expressed concern that this effect would have a negative financial impact (Tamrat, 2021).

3 Methodology

The qualitative case-study method was used in this study because of its worth to studying natural and social educational phenomena in their normal situation (Ghesquière et al., 2004). The semi-structured interview was conducted with the participants (Yin, 2009).

3.1 Participants

In this study, ten Pakistani students (male & female) were selected as participants who are enrolled and currently studying of various departments in Chinese Universities. This was the first priority to select participants from various cities in Pakistan. The researcher selected the participants who went to Pakistan in late 2019 and early 2020 and later they are not allowed to come back to China till now, because of travels and other institutional restrictions.

3.2 Procedure

Interviews were conducted with the participants through WhatsApp and WeChat (Chinese App) calls. Calls' conversations were recorded after getting the permission of the participants. Every interview persisted approximately sixty (60) minutes. English and Urdu both languages were both used. Urdu was the native language of both interviewees and interviewers. The participants' information has been given.

Table 1: Key information of the study participants.

Name	University Type	Degree	Duration in China	Location in China	Location in Pakistan	Source of Funding
Khan	Public	PhD	3	Lanzhou	Islamabad	University
Haji	Public	PhD	3	Beijing	Sawat	CSC
Mohammad	Public	Master's	2	Shanghai	Multan	Confucius
Natasha	Public	PhD	4	Dalian	Mingora	CSC
Abdullah	Public	Master's	3	Shaanxi	Bahawalpur	University
Usama	Public	PhD	4	Jillin	Okara	Belt & road
Nawaz	Public	PhD	4	Wuhan	Karachi	CSC
Sana	Public	PhD	3	Tianjin	Lahore	CSC
Ehtisham	Public	Master's	2	Beijing	Fasilabad	Mofcom
Butt	Public	Master's	2	Sichuan	Lahore	CSC

The researcher transcribed the collected data through interviews. Two more authors looked over the transcribed data various times for assisting in coding. After analyzing the words that showed the participants' current situation and challenges about their pre and during departure, and E-learning. Two themes were used the first one was "Situational Challenges". Whereas the second was "psychological stress" towards their unsure future. The first theme was referring to family,

social and economic stress whereas the second theme was related to psychological stress. These two themes were developed in order to gather an inclusive explanation regarding "Economic, Social and Psychological Challenges".

4 Findings

4.1 Traveling Challenges (Pre-departure, During Departure)

Many Pakistani students were studying in China and enrolled in Master/Ph.D. programs in various Chinese Universities. In late 2019 and early 2020, they were unaware of the new coronavirus disease when they planned to go back because that period was the starting period of the COVID-19. The following elaboration one of the students quoted.

"I am a PhD student at (University) in Jilin. I visit my hometown once a year to see my parents and family. I booked a flight in mid-November 2019. Now I was waiting to go back to see my family at the end of December 2019. I was very happy. But unfortunately, the day of departure was approaching, I received a message from the airline saying that our flight was canceled for some reason. Now you can request for refund. (Usama)"

The above quote shows that most of the students faced challenges before departure. Although, there might be a reason to cancel the air ticket and not to tell the passengers why their tickets have been canceled. Nevertheless, it affects psychological stress as well as financial. Further, he quoted that;

"I am not financially strong. I use to get financial assistance from the Chinese government. It is enough if I spend my duration of study in China. However, if I want to return once a year, I have to manage and control expenses for more than four to five months. Then I can buy a plane ticket. So the cancellation of my ticket was shocking news for me. Further, I took a ticket from another airline and returned to my country. Throughout my journey, I was under great psychological and financial pressure. (Usama)"

Where students' affected before departure at the same time were also affected during departure (Daramola et al., 2016). During the pandemic Students who were traveling from different airlines in early 2020 were affected by the quarantine policies because of their transit flight. A participant described the challenges that he faced to reach his country. He quoted his experience;

"As several students were traveling to their home country by different airlines, I was one of them. I have booked the connected flight and had to take transit from Malaysia. Because it was a general experience that connected flight was cheapest than a direct flight. However, unfortunately, I was stuck there for more than 14 days, according to their quarantine policy. (Butt)"

"When I reached Malaysia to take transit flight, they refused me to take flight because they required COVID-19 test report. I had the COVID-19 test report but they said we need the report which you did within seven days. Then I arranged money and did the COVID-19 test again. In this scenario, I missed my flight and buy ticket another flight to go. (Abdullah)"

All the quotes mentioned above indicate the different countries' different policies, which have been enforced on the passengers (Chinazzi et al., 2020). The students are unaware of the

policy implementation because they have not faced this situation before in their lives. In this scenario, embassies are responsible. When they know about this natural disaster, they should have to take steps immediately. Students' travels are one of them. They should have made such a mechanism which was suitable for the students to save and sound travel. Nevertheless, in the early stages, they did not do anything except suspended the flight operation. The finding revealed that students faced travel restrictions and challenges.

4.2 E-learning Experience from Home Country (Pakistan)

Most of the countries suspended their flight operations and imposed travel restrictions on the masses (Hasan, Mahi, Sarker, & Amin, 2021; Ozili & Arun, 2020; Wang & Han, 2021). China declares that its education and learning process will shift from offline to digital during pandemic (Zhang et al., 2020). No one knows when travel restrictions will be smooth and they will go back to the host University and take live classes. Students expressed their stress and challenges regarding online classes. They explained that they do not have any other option except wait and respond to the host University (Guo & Zhang, 2020). The situation compels students to take online classes from various applications like; Tencent Meeting, Zoom, Voov Meeting, etc. They explain that;

"I am a doctoral student at University in Nanjing, I have been stranded in Pakistan for one and a half years and I am unaware that when I can return. It is challenging for me to keep up with online classes due to time differences and connectivity issues. Furthermore, some Chinese apps do not work here. Haji"

"I have been in Pakistan for two years. During online classes and meetings, I always face connection problems because we use a Chinese app that does not work smoothly. This is affecting our studies quite a lot. (Sana)|

"I have been stuck in Pakistan for the past 20 months. I came back in late December to conduct some fieldwork and was supposed to return in January, but I decided to stay here till the coronavirus situation improved. But I couldn't go back till now. If I talk about classes being held online, it is a good system overall, but obviously, the level of involvement and engagement is not the same as in-class lectures, and also lack of infrastructure in Pakistan creates many problems. (Khan)"

Pakistan is a developing country and has many financial and infrastructural problems (Farid et al., 2015). Students are worried because they cannot go back to carry on their studies while also not taking online classes because of less necessary infrastructure for the digital learning process, and the online application does not work because of territorial restrictions. One most prominent problems in Pakistan is electricity; it can be turned off during class, and students missed the lecture. Furthermore, sometimes they are out of electricity and unable to attend the class which is study loses for the student.

"I have been waiting to go back to China for a long time, because I need the university's facilities, like laboratories, apparatus, and supervisor assistance to continue my studies. I request

the authority to take notice. Because our future is in danger. We cannot take any more semesters online. We need labs and hospitality. (Natasha)"

However, the above statement was supported by those who need labs and assistance because online learning is suitable for those who belong to the humanities and arts discipline and do not need labs to do experiments, so it is a valid argument by one of the participants for those who are doing experimental research.

4.3 Financial Challenges

Pakistan is known as a developing country and facing many political and financial challenges with a lack of financial resources, lack of political instability and many others challenges. Many students get higher education from abroad, specifically in China, and get a monthly stipend to support their higher education. However, students who come to Pakistan, and could not go back to China. They are taking online classes for one and a half years, but they are not getting a monthly stipend. According to the policy, they get their stipend when they get back to the University. The quote is an example that imitates upon the financial challenges Pakistani students are experiencing while doing their higher education internationally.

"I am in trouble as I have been in Pakistan from 1 February 2020. I took one of the last flights coming back to the country. Initially, I was excited to be with my family and leave my problems behind. However, as time passes, happiness has started to fade away. My wife and I are also pursuing a Ph.D. degree at one of China's top universities, and we used to receive a stipend that has now been suspended. They suspended the stipend in August 2020 and said that we could start receiving it once we return to China. Meanwhile, we are in a dilemma as we cannot get jobs here in Pakistan. Employers refuse to give us jobs as we cannot commit time duration to them. We are nowhere, and we cannot go back. Furthermore, we are going through immense financial difficulties/Challenges here in Pakistan. Further, I have no hopes shortly of my return to China. (Nawaz)"

"Before coming back to Pakistan, I used to save some incentive to send it to my family. My monthly scholarship has been suspended by the University, and my family is suffering because they rely on the money I used to send them from China. I was also supposed to graduate this year, but unfortunately, I could not. I have applied for a job here in Pakistan in the hope that I will be graduated this year. However, I am disqualified two months ago because I do not have a degree, and they required a degree. (Ehtisham)"

This financial situation lousy impacts their studies; it drives their attention to the other problems, and families also get in trouble. Students pursue their studies on self-funded and scholarship. If they do not get their scholarship on time, it can put the students under challenging conditions. The living expense can be waived because they are not in China right now, but the tuition fee cannot be waived for self-funded students. Then they need to borrow money from their families and friends that are embarrassed for the students.

4.4 Travel Restrictions to Get Back to China and the Response of Host Universities

The Chinese Ministry of Education is reportedly hesitant to allow thousands of foreign students back to China due to the fear of imported coronavirus infections. About 5,000 Pakistani students cannot return to Chinese universities (Khan et al., 2020). Students are afraid that their grades will drop if they cannot continue their studies. In January 2021, the Higher Education Commission (HEC) recommended Pakistani students enrolled in higher education institutions in China continue their online courses and stay in touch with Chinese institutions. According to HEC, an international immigration policy for foreign students has not yet been established, because the waves of COVID-19 favored the spread of the disease. One participant talked about close contact with the host institution. He explains;

"I am attending online classes for two consecutive semesters. Now my research work is about to start because my course works are completed. At this stage, I need to do lab work and need supervisor guidance too. But unfortunately, how can it be started whether I am here in Pakistan, not on campus? To know that when I can go to China, I have only two ways: my Professor (advisor) and the second is the international student office (ISO). However, when I use to ask my Professor, he replies "I do not know. Ask by international student office (ISO)." At the same time, when I ask from the ISO, then I get a reply that they did not receive any notice from the Government. You have to wait until we get the notice from officials. If there is any notice, we will inform you. (Muhammad)"

HEC further explains that Based on the actual assessment of the epidemiological situation, Beijing's central government of China will take appropriate steps to return Pakistani students to their respective Universities. Updated student visa instructions will be informed. The above findings indicate that students are compelled to face this situation, because they do not have an option except to face it. They are helpless and depressed because they do not have a job in their country. They also do not know when the situation will be alright.

5 Conclusion

Since COVID-19 first broke out and border restrictions came into place in March 2020, many international students studying in China have found themselves locked out of the country. China is the world's largest country for international students, and although some are currently inside the country (Wen et al., 2018), many are not. The study findings revealed that online learning seems impractical because of the lack of infrastructure (internet and electricity) in Pakistan (Bol, 2020). Most of the students are not so wealthy and get limited scholarship amounts from the Chinese Government to do their living expenditure in China. They cannot afford and bear it if they face this situation for a long time (Outhwaite, 2020). The problem can be solved, but they get panic because of the inability to pay the expense at that time. Secondly, they also support their families from that incentive which they get. Most students belong to middle-class families, and they need to support

them economically. Lastly, if they do not come back soon, they will go further into stress and depression because their future is at stake.

The debate continues over whether the COVID-19 outbreak will lead to the internationalization of higher education. This epidemic clearly affects higher education around the globe, (Marginson, 2020), especially international student mobility. The outbreak has significantly reduced the movement of international students due to travel restrictions, and university closures. The COVID-19 outbreak is a major concern for foreign students who are believed to have health and safety issues while studying abroad. Despite that, the issues should be resolved in a well-mannered from both sides Pakistan and China. The responsible officials and representatives of the Pakistan Government need to take immediate steps in this serious matter. Government should provide the infrastructure to carry on their studies online and, also creates jobs opportunities for those students that are facing financial challenges and affecting psychologically. On the other hand, the Chinese Government and host universities need to reconsider their decision for releasing monthly stipends to those who have been continuing their studies online and fulfilling the entire requirement instructed by the host Universities. If the monthly stipend is released to the students their entire obstacle whether that is financially or psychologically will vanish, and they can have focused on their studies.

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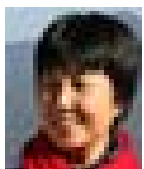
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