

EXPERIENCES OF INTERNATIONAL POSTGRADUATE MEDICAL STUDENTS STUDYING IN PUNJAB, PAKISTAN: AN UNSUNG STORY

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Abstract

In a globalized world, international education has become a priority. However, International students face many problems during their education. Pakistan presents different challenges, due to its cultural diversity. Data on experiences of International Students in Pakistan is scarce. We present experiences of Postgraduate medical students studying in Pakistan. This helps in understanding the problems faced by these students and will help in future policy making. This is an explanatory, mixed method, qualitative research design, collecting data from King Edward Medical University, Fatima Jinnah Medical University and University of Health Sciences, Lahore. In first phase, quantitative data was collected using a questionnaire, incorporating personal psychological, general living, academic, social-cultural and English language proficiency issues (Chen et al., 2025). Second phase was used to clarify original findings of quantitative data by phenomenology approach of qualitative study design including interviewing eight Nepali and one Afghani student (Oduwaye et al., 2023). Among all, 63.3% students stated that teaching methods were different from how they learnt previously, still, 69.3% agreed that most of the teachers in Pakistan were excellent facilitators, though 43.3% participants consider this assessment system according to international standards (Worae & Edgerton, 2023). Most of them didn't feel any discriminatory behavior from their peers (56.7%) as well as from their teachers (61.7%) (Zia & Bashir, 2024). Overall, student's adjustment to Pakistan was good. They struggled initially in general but seemed to be satisfied with academics and assessment system. Security threats, visa office issues and certain administrative issues need specific attention (Zia & Bashir, 2024; Okoli & Nweke, 2025).

INTRODUCTION

The globalization of education continued to increase tremendously since world war II. Recent global data show that the number of internationally mobile students has increased substantially over the last two decades, with nearly 6.9 million students studying abroad in 2022,

more than triple the number two decades ago (Migration Data Portal, 2024). International students make an important investment in host countries' economies and contribute through tuition fees and living expenses; host countries continue to expand recruitment strategies and policy supports to enhance international student

mobility (OECD, 2025). However, many international students face challenges when they pursue higher education outside their home countries. These challenges include psychological issues such as homesickness, isolation, loneliness and depression (Rudakova & Lal, 2025), academic issues such as language barriers, communication difficulties and adaptation to new academic cultures, and socio-cultural issues including general living challenges (Soheili & Lanz, 2025). Medicine and health sciences remain among the popular fields of study for mobile students worldwide, yet international medical students may face additional stressors affecting academic achievement and adaptation (Soong & Maheepala, 2023).

Pakistan has potential to attract international students because of its cultural diversity and comparatively low educational costs. Nonetheless, international students in Pakistan encounter various challenges related to security, administrative procedures, and lack of centralized support systems to address their concerns (Zia & Bashir, 2024). There is limited research in Pakistan on problems of international students, with most existing work focusing broadly on international higher education or general student adjustment (Okoli & Nweke, 2025). Data involving international medical students in Pakistan is especially scarce. This study aims to fill this gap by employing a mixed method design to investigate the lived experiences and challenges of international postgraduate medical students in Lahore, Pakistan.

METHODS

This study utilized mixed method- explanatory model study design, which collects, analyzes, and integrates quantitative and qualitative data to address the research question (Chen et al., 2025). All trainees enrolled with a medical university/college for any postgraduate program and were not Pakistani nationals were enrolled in the study. We collected lists of International Postgraduate students enrolled from **January 2024 to December 2024** from all three universities, which showed a total of 81 students. For quantitative study, we distributed questionnaires

to all students. For qualitative study, we planned for 10-12 participants, representing each community (Nepal, Afghanistan, and Somalia), but could manage 8 participants only from Nepal & Afghanistan.

Data Collection

A questionnaire was developed and validated by the experts. A cognitive interview was carried out to ensure that the respondents interpreted the items in the manner the author intended. Finally, pilot testing was done on International doctors working as house officers in the same institution or postgraduate trainees. Based on this pilot testing, reliability testing was done keeping the reliability coefficient of 0.70. The questionnaire comprised three sections. Section I included 23 questions regarding the demographic profile. Section II included 27 questions regarding the socio-cultural experiences, personal psychological experiences, academic experiences, general living experiences while also keeping in mind the theoretical framework presented by Talebloo et al. (12). All these questions were marked on a five-point scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree). Section III comprised 03 open-ended questions asking for the top three challenges being faced as International Postgraduate Medical Students in this campus. The qualitative data instrument/interview guide was sourced from the open-ended sections of the questionnaire, keeping in mind the theoretical framework presented by Talebloo et al. (12). The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions. Probes were used to encourage clarification and elaboration on specific points. This interview guide was examined by two experts in the field of education, and their suggestions on each question were taken into account.

Data Collection Procedure

An invitation letter was sent to all students by email. This invitation letter contained the information brochure, informed consent, and questionnaire. Students were requested to fill the questionnaire depending on their last three months' experience and send it back through email.

After data analysis of the questionnaire, a convenience sample of follow-up interviews were conducted through a call for volunteers. This selection was based upon the responses of Section III of the questionnaire. One semi-structured interview was conducted with a single Afghani student, and one focused group discussion was conducted with seven Nepali students. The rest of the Afghani students and Somali students didn't give consent for interviews. The research team was already working with these international graduates as colleagues, so a close relationship already existed. This already established warm relationship allowed our study participants to share their experiences of living in Pakistan.

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of Khyber Medical University.

Data Analysis Procedure

All quantitative data was entered into SPSS Version 23. Qualitative variables were analyzed by calculating their frequency and proportions. Quantitative variables were analyzed by calculating their mean and standard deviation. Tests of significance were applied, where appropriate. A p -value ≤ 0.05 was considered significant. The verbatim-transcribed interview and FGD were analyzed. Single or a few sentences were identified as codes, then codes were summarized into relevant themes for each participant. Thematic analysis was used. This qualitative data was transcribed, coded, and analyzed by the researcher independently. Participant confirmation was asked after reviewing summary results. In the end, themes were grouped into four relevant categories.

RESULTS:

Total sixty participants contributed in quantitative data collection. After initial coding, Thematic Analysis was done to create meaningful patterns.

Quantitative Findings:

Demographic Analysis of participants is presented in Table 1. While regarding student's personal experiences as homesickness and feeling of loneliness, 38 (63.4%) responded positively.

Though, 22 (36.6%) were less confused and anxious during their stay in Pakistan. Only 11 (18.3%) respondents think that they have lost their cultural identity during their stay in Pakistan. Among all, 38 (63.3%) students stated that teaching methods were different from how they learnt previously, still, 39 (69.3%) agreed that most of the teachers in Pakistan were excellent facilitators. Academic help from peers was declared as effective by 46 (75%) participants. When they were asked, 33 (57%) students were happy with their academic performance. University library was found helpful in studies by 31 (51.6%) students.

Most of the students (40%) were not happy from university's athletics and gym facilities. Visa was a big problem for majority of the students (63.3%). Security threats were experienced by 46.7% of the respondents. Majority of the respondent were satisfied with their accommodation though 48.3% of the students were not comfortable with Pakistan weather. Pakistani food is enjoyed by 33 (55%) participants. A total of 27 participants stated 'they can't wear what they want to wear'. Financial issues leading to stress was experienced by 28 (46.7%) students. Students were almost equally divided on statement 'I am facing difficulties in communication due to language barriers'.

Distribution of students according to origin of country and gender in shown in figure 1.

Majority of the Nepali students (74.19%) think that the recreational facilities are really lacking for them ($p < 0.05$). A total of 19.35% Nepali and 20% Afghani students think they have lost their own cultural identity while living in Pakistan but none of the Somalian student do. ($p = 0.71$). Home sickness was experienced by 68% of Afghani students, 58% of Nepali students and 75% of Somalian students ($p = 0.38$).

Most of the Afghani (72%), Somalian (75%) and Nepali (54%) agreed that curriculum adequately prepared them to serve as doctor in their home country ($p = 0.31$). Amongst all, 58.1% Nepali, 68% Afghani and 75% Somalian students stated that teaching methods in Pakistan were different from how they learnt previously ($p = 0.87$) still, majority thinks that their teacher are excellent facilitators ($p = 0.27$).

Only 38% Nepali students and 25% Somali students agreed that they cannot establish relationship with Pakistani students while 52% Afghani students doesn't agree to the statement ($p = 0.55$). Only a few (32.2% Nepali, 16% Afghani and None from Somalian) students feel discriminatory behavior from their peers ($p = 0.17$) or from their teachers ($p = 0.20$).

Only a minority of Nepali (35.49%) and Afghani (24%) students feel comfortable in using

university's gym and athletics facility as compared to Somalian (50%) students ($p = 0.29$). Visa processing is a big problem for 61.3% Nepali, 75% Somalian and 64% Afghani students ($p = 0.19$). Most of the Nepali students (58.06%) enjoyed the Pakistani food in comparison with 50% of Somalian and 52% Afghani students ($p = 0.28$). Security threats was an issue for 16% Nepali, 20% Afghani and none of the Somalian student ($p = 0.89$).

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics

Variable	n	%
Marital Status		
Single	29	48.3%
Married	30	50%
Divorce	01	1.7%
Religion		
Islam	36	60%
Buddhist	15	25%
Hindu	03	05%
Others	06	10%
Programme enrolled		
MS	37	61.7%
MD	15	25%
FCPS	07	11.7%
PhD	01	1.7%
Reason for studying in Pakistan		
Scholarship from Pakistan government	28	46.7%
Scholarship from other countries	04	6.7%
Family/Friends living in Pakistan	18	30%
Pakistan education system	19	31.7%
What is your plan after post graduation:		
Back to work in home country	48	80%
Continue higher education in home country	08	13.3%
Get a job in Pakistan	01	1.7%
Continue higher education in Pakistan	01	1.7%
Get job in other countries	02	3.3%
Will you recommend others to come to Pakistan for Higher education		
Yes	52	86.6%
No	08	13.4%
Reasons for recommendations		
Good education system	19	86.3%
Well organized system	1	4.5%
Good training	1	4.5%
Free hand to work	1	4.5%
Variable	n	%
Marital Status		
Single	29	48.3%
Married	30	50%
Divorce	01	1.7%
Religion		
Islam	36	60%
Buddhist	15	25%
Hindu	03	05%
Others	06	10%
Programme enrolled		
MS	37	61.7%

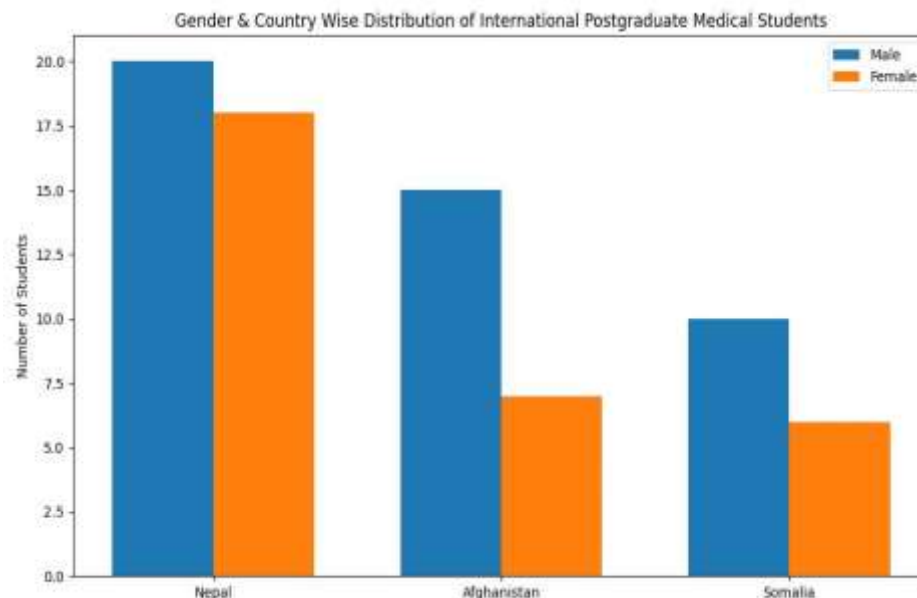


Figure 1: Gender and Country wise distribution of International Postgraduate Medical Students

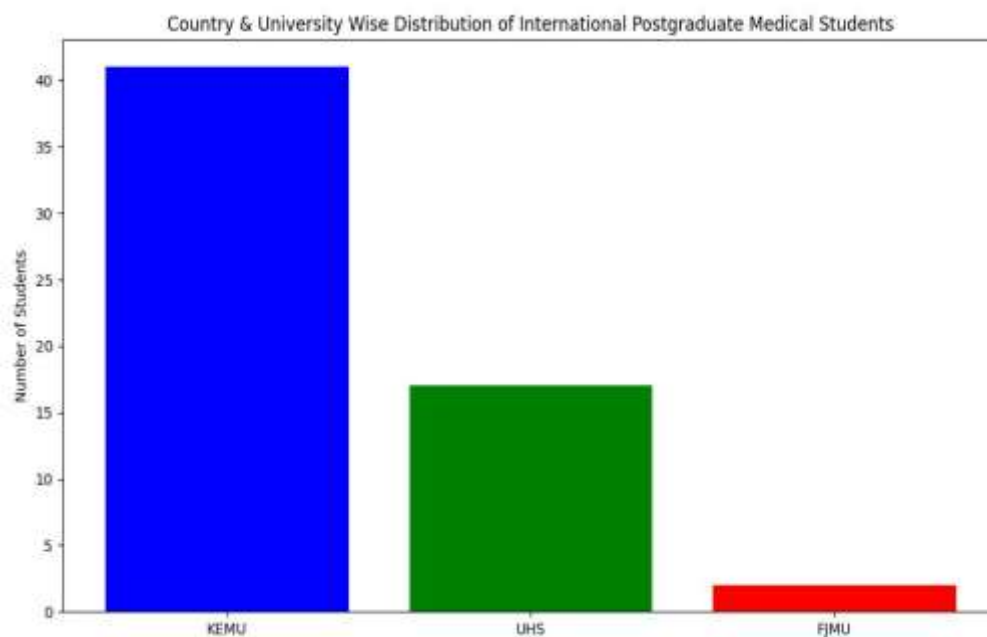


Figure 2: Country and University wise distribution of International Postgraduate Medical Students

Table 2: University wise difference regarding academic issues

		KEMU (n = 41)	UHS (n = 17)	FJMU (n = 02)	P value
1	I always found Pakistan higher education system difficult to understand	17	04	01	0.13
2	My curriculum adequately prepares me to serve as doctor in my own country	22	15	01	0.04
3	Teaching methods are different from how I learnt previously	23	04	01	0.10
4	Teachers are not teachers but excellent facilitators	27	11	01	0.91
5	I can get effective academic help from my peers	28	15	02	0.40
6	I can get adequate opportunities to participate in research articles	21	13	01	0.28
7	My research work is upto international standards	23	07	01	<0.05
8	I am happy with the level at which I am performing academically	19	12	02	0.21
9	I find University library helpful in my studies	21	09	01	0.78
10	Assessment system is not in accordance with my educational background	14	03	11	0.60
11	Assessment process comply with International standards	21	09	02	0.74
12	I can get effective information from the university officials in my academic issues	28	13	02	0.89

Qualitative Findings

The findings showed that international students faced various problems in Pakistan. These problems were related to their interaction with persons, society, as well as university (Rudakova & Lal, 2025).

Facilities:

Participants spent a significant proportion of time discussing facilities during interviews. Different facilities were picked as themes. Most of the Nepali and Afghani students were not happy with the accommodation. One student said, "Internee hostel is very old, air conditioners are not allowed, filtered water is not available." About overcrowding, one student said, "Three girls are staying in one room." Issues with married female students were even more grave. Both Nepali and Afghani students were facing problems during summer days when temperatures can reach up to 46°C.

Afghani students were not in the habit of eating spicy food like Pakistanis. A Nepali student

interestingly clarified a misconception regarding food, "All Pakistanis suppose that we are vegetarians but it's not like that." Though Afghani students didn't have much to say about the library, Nepali students were very hopeless regarding it. One student said, "Main library is closed by 2pm with few books and insufficient space" (Soong & Maheepala, 2023).

Social Environment:

According to the results of the study, students also faced cultural, communication, and language difficulties (Zia & Bashir, 2024). Nepali students had to change their dressing according to local norms but they think that it's a temporary situation. They complained that their cultural festivals were not given importance. "We even do Eid rosters as we live in hostels but we do not get off for our festivals, no one deals with our issues."

Most of the Afghani students came from the era of the Taliban government, so they experienced a

significant cultural change upon coming to Pakistan. They felt racially discriminated, saying, “We get discrimination from Pathan (especially from Quetta) here rather than Punjabis” (Okoli & Nweke, 2025). Difficulties of interaction took place with patients. One student said, “I have learnt to write tablet, spoon, morning, evening, and sachet in Urdu.” Another student raised her voice, saying, “We are worried for the exam as we can have Punjabi and Pashto patients.” Afghani students faced a lot of language issues. “Sir, I didn’t know Urdu. I knew people of Pakistan speak Urdu, however, haven’t heard of it myself.” Students used to translate into Pashto first and then memorize the literature. Nepali students did feel security issues, while Afghani students didn’t show any such concerns (Rudakova & Lal, 2025).

Academic Difficulties:

During the interview, participants spent considerable time discussing issues related to studies (Chen et al., 2025). Nepali students had mixed views regarding the curriculum. Some students never saw the curriculum of their specialty, some only reviewed it during the exam, while some are witnessing the upgradation of their already existing curriculum. One student said, “The university does not have any written curriculum for Anesthesia.” Another one said, “We had a curriculum prepared in 2007, and it’s now being revised recently after the Central Induction Policy.” Nepali students felt discrimination among ‘Kemcolians/Non-Kemcolians’ and MS/FCPS students. “FCPS students are supposed to be superior to MS trainees even during ward rounds” (Soheili & Lanz, 2025). Afghani students were not happy regarding their research proposals. “It’s everyone’s own effort to do research, but no one facilitates here. My synopsis was delayed for 6 months due to the calculation of sample size.” Most Nepali students were not happy with the teaching methodologies in their universities. “In this era of advancement, block anesthesia is the preferred technique. The same block anesthesia

techniques are being practiced in Nepal but not in Pakistan” (Worae & Edgerton, 2023). Afghani students were of the view that initially the situation was not good. There were no regular classes, and skill acquisition was also without any supervision. One student said, “Once I requested my supervisor to deliver at least one lecture a week or a month, to which my supervisor replied, ‘No one gave me a single lecture in my 5 years of training in residency, how can I deliver?’ Now things have changed. We are having regular classes and supervised skill acquisition.”

International Service Program:

Depression and homesickness are problems for a few Nepali students, especially married couples. “My baby is at home in Nepal. Though I miss my husband and family, I miss my child the most” (Zia & Bashir, 2024). Nepali students are worried about the leave policy. They had to leave for Nepal in order to renew their Visa as well. Only 2 leaves per month are allowed, which are not sufficient. “You ask for leave in the department, it seems like you are the most important person in the ward.” “I requested my professor for three weeks of leave, who assured that these leaves would be unpaid.” Afghani students experienced the same problems. Visa is a big issue for Nepali students. For initial processing and scrutiny, they have to attest their documents from HEC and share their credentials with the CCPO office, ISI, FIA, and the Ministry of Interior. This is a 4-6 months process, and they are issued a 3-month visit visa for this purpose. “There is no correspondence between the Nepal embassy, Pakistan passport office, and our hospital.” “No one knows when, how, and from where rules are changed abruptly.” Afghani students, on the other hand, also had similar problems. They are issued visas for 3-6 months and single entry only. Though visas can be issued from Pakistan, “People are scared of that because then agency people come over to your residence and check every record and document.”

DISCUSSION

Our study exploring the experiences of international postgraduate medical students studying in different medical institutes of Punjab

reveals multiple strengths and weaknesses of Pakistan's Higher Education System. This experience can be categorized into living facilities, social environment, academic difficulties, and passport issues. These issues have been studied for decades in the USA, UK, Australia, and New Zealand, but they differ significantly from the experiences of international students studying in Pakistan.

Interesting facts were revealed from a qualitative study conducted in the USA on non-medical undergraduates and postgraduates (Rudakova & Lal, 2025), involving 10 participants from China, Taiwan, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, and Saudi Arabia, who claimed that their teachers were nice, professional, and approachable. However, they faced difficulties in communicating with their professors due to the language barrier. The majority of our participants were from Nepal, Afghanistan, and Somalia. Most of the students were of the view that 'teachers are not just teachers; they are excellent facilitators,' so interaction with the faculty significantly affected student outcomes and academic performance. This study didn't discuss general living issues and visa policy issues, which seem to be major concerns in our setup (Soheili & Lanz, 2025).

International non-medical undergraduates and graduates from Russia shared their experiences by qualitative study design. Ten participants from China, Iran, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan were enrolled (Zia & Bashir, 2024). Students agreed that their teachers were good, professional, and approachable in spite of a few interaction barriers. In our study, most of the students agreed that teaching and assessment methods were not in accordance with their educational background, yet they find teachers as excellent advisors.

Germany is also an attractive country among international students. International medical students studying in Germany face language difficulties (Okoli & Nweke, 2025). They reported to be scared and have feelings of failure and uncertainty regarding exams due to the language barrier. In our study, the medium of instruction is English, and almost every student can understand English. In this study, most of the students were

attracted by scholarships offered by the Pakistan Government. Among these, only a few opted for Pakistan on the basis of the quality of the study program (Zia & Bashir, 2024).

A study conducted on the 'Royal College of Surgeons,' Ireland, showed promising results. It was a mixed-method study design enrolling 31 first-year undergraduate students, followed by quantitative data collection from 467 students belonging to Ireland, Europe, Canada, USA, Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. Many students found difficulties in daily living. In this study, the students had not experienced discrimination in college, but a few instances were mentioned in society, an issue described by other host countries as well (Worae & Edgerton, 2023).

From an Asian perspective, a study of 15 students from Iran, Yemen, and Sudan studying at University Putra, Malaysia (UPM), a non-medical university, showed quite different results (Soong & Maheepala, 2023). In this study, food and accommodation were always major problems for international students. In our study, students were not happy with the accommodation provided by the university, though it was not expensive. Students were not concerned about transportation as almost all of them were living within university premises. Communication problems resulting from cultural differences were noted (Rudakova & Lal, 2025). Lack of entertaining activities is an important factor for homesickness, loneliness, and depression (Chen et al., 2025). There is no clear leave policy for international students. They are bound to visit their home country every six months to renew their visa, and even two weeks of leave was not sufficient.

Strengths of our study were that it is the first study on international postgraduate medical students studying in Pakistan. Issues of security threats and visa office concerns were also highlighted, which were not discussed by other Pakistani studies. Though these results cannot be generalized to other parts of the world, they can be generalized to the Pakistani perspective and can provide good background information for policy-making by the Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan.

Limitations of our study are few but significant.

The study focused on Punjab only; issues of students in Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Balochistan may differ. Afghani students in our population were reluctant to participate in the study and refused to come for interviews due to security reasons. Somali, Iranian, and a few Chinese students couldn't be enrolled in the study as they were on leave during the study period. Future studies should focus on issues like security threats, visa problems, along with cultural, general living, and academic issues.

CONCLUSION

Overall, students' adjustment to Pakistan was good. They struggled initially with general living and cultural issues. They seemed to be satisfied with academics and the assessment system, but this still needs a lot of improvement. Security threats, visa office issues, and certain administrative concerns need specific attention. Future research should involve a more diverse population of students studying in Pakistan. As more universities are evolving nowadays, these studies will help guide future policy-making for international students.

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