A Qualitative Exploration of Educational Experiences of Pakistani Students at Dutch Universities

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The number of Pakistani students studying at foreign universities (e.g., in the Netherlands) is increasing. However, they appear to face educational and cultural challenges. The purpose of this study was to explore and describe these challenges. In this study, 12 Pakistani students enrolled in graduate and post-graduate programs at two Dutch universities participated in a semi-structured interview procedure. The thematic analysis revealed that Pakistani students perceived academic challenges regarding examination practices, academic writing, class participation and group work, which hindered their academic adjustment. They expressed that these challenges were primarily reflective of differences between the educational practices of their home and the host country. They reported the need for support from staff, friends, and family and appreciated the pedagogical practices, course content, and teaching practices at their host universities. Finally, they shared valuable advice for forthcoming students. This study provides recommendations for universities in Pakistan and abroad, and for Pakistani students when they plan to go for education outside Pakistan.
Keywords: Pakistani students, academic challenges, academic facilitation, support system

In recent years, the number of Pakistani students pursuing higher studies abroad has significantly increased(*UNESCO* 2019). The number of students worldwide enrolled in foreign universities was nearly two million at the end of the 20th Century, and it has increased to five million by the year 2016 (OECD, 2018). This increase clearly signs a growing trend in seeking international education. One of the reasons for this increase is the fact that international students prove to be beneficial for both the home and host countries (Knight, 2012). The trend is more visible in developing Asian countries that have contributed 55 percent of all international students' cohort in 2016 (OECD, 2018).

When international students enter a foreign university, they have a set of academic skills and behaviors acquired at home leaning institutions (Zhou, 2010) however, dissimilarities in home and host educational systems can be considerable (Tempelaar, Rienties, Giesbers, & van der Loeff, 2013) and students can face serious problems in new educational environments(Henze & Zhu, 2012). Adaptation ensures skills need to be unbolted or adjusted accordingly (Carroll & Ryan, 2007; Janjua, Malik, & Rahman, 2011) and students need to develop new skills and knowledge in educational and cultural domains of the host environment (Zolfaghari, Sabran, & Zolfaghari, 2009).

In Pakistan, the trend of students moving away to other countries for higher education has become more systematic with the establishment of the Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan in 2003. Many students do that to meet the demands of globalization, particularly in higher education (Kayani, Ahmed, & Shah, 2015). HEC has made considerable efforts to promote this mobility by providing grants to students to study abroad. The most popular international educational destinations are Australia, UK., USA, Japan, Malaysia, and Cyprus (UNESCO, 2011) for the reason that these countries offer higher education in English. In addition, countries such as Germany, Sweden, and the Netherlands attract international students, because they offer a permanent residence or make immigrant living easy (OECD, 2018).

In the last couple of decades, the Netherlands became a popular choice for Asian students. In total, they represent up to 60 percent of the international students in the country. Currently, many Dutch universities have enrolled about 160 Pakistani students (Kelo, Teichler, & Wächter, 2018; Nuffic, 2017): a number that is three times higher than what it was in 2006. Out of the 160 students, 95 are studying in undergraduate programs, while 64 are enrolled in graduate programs. More than half of these students are enrolled in fields such as business, economics, and engineering.

The educational adjustment can refer to a student's ability to meet the demands of a new academic environment and may involve issues such as education background, learning styles, study habits, and language proficiency (Andrade, 2006). Literature suggests that there is a disparity between the Eastern and the Western educational systems that impact educational performance and academic adjustment of students from the East when they seek international

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education (Cao, Zhu, & Meng, 2016). The disparity can be in terms of differences in course content, delivery of education, class participation and assessment methods, which may contribute as an academic shock (Li, Chen, & Duanmu, 2010). Universities in the West and predominantly White nations focus on active participation by students,which is ingrained in their individualistic culture unlike collectivistic cultures of Asian countries including Pakistan (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov 2005). As a result, Asian students experience isolation, depression, despair, and anger due to the perceived disparity in cultural and educational practices (Gebhard, 2012; Rienties & Tempelaar, 2013) besides other challenges (Frambach, Driessen, Beh, & van der Vleuten, 2014; Kühnen et al., 2012). Asian students have been reported to continuously struggle with transformation and adaptation to new thinking patterns and organization of ideas and concepts into writing (Lin & Scherz, 2014). The primary educational stressors include assignments, time constraints to learn and revise the academic material before the exams, low grades, insufficient skills in relevant subjects/fields, difficulties in comprehending the content, and inability to adapt to the interactive pattern of classrooms(Liao & Wei, 2014; Salam, Yousuf, Bakar, & Haque, 2013). Lack of proficiency in the English language hampers more fruitful interactions with the teachers, assignment writing, participation in the class, reading and comprehension (Gebhard, 2012).

In Pakistan, two kinds of educational systems run in parallel, largely at the public and private schools and universities. Public schools and universities are run by the government and private institutions by non-governmental organizations. Public schools provide education to students (70% of children) who belong to low-income families and comprise of a large rural block. Such schools usually have weak infrastructure, low educational standards, less qualified teachers (mainly in science and English) and the absence of basic learning materials (Razzaq & Forde, 2014). Conversely, private schools are fashioned in line with western educational models and have relatively better facilities and education standards (Javed, 2016). The students from these schools then move to higher institutions, colleges, and universities that have the same public-private division. A common observation suggests that private-schooled students do better in international universities than students who attend public schools (Javed, 2016).

Pakistani higher educational system supports those students who can reproduce information delivered through a lecture. This emphasis promotes selective study habits and inhibits critical skills of reasoning, analysis, and evaluation (Shah & Afzaal, 2004). Due to this, the teacher-student interaction in classrooms becomes lopsided where the teachers succumb to dictations and students may become passive learners (Inamullah, Hussain, & Din, 2008). Students are urged to remain within the confines of the textbook for examination (Ali, Tariq & Topping, 2009).

Though English is used as the principal medium of instruction at public and private universities, it is the common observation that students in public schools face language challenges both in speech and writing. In a way, this models a set of challenges that mimic challenges faced by students who go abroad for higher education, though the latter are more intense. The English language is a complicated hurdle for Pakistani students, and though they share these language difficulties with other Asian students, Pakistani students do overcome these impediments in time (Javed, 2016). Other challenges include differences in educational systems, home and abroad (Akhter, 2013; Bastien, Seifen-Adkins, & Johnson, 2018)

and structure of cultural differences (Hofstede et al.,2005), especially at Dutch universities (Rienties & Tempelaar, 2013).

The availability of a *support system* eases the transition process of international students in the new educational system and consists of sub systems that cover academic, social and psychological support. Academic support comes from teachers, academic advisors, student organizations and writing labs, while social support depends upon international friends, parents, and relatives. Psychological support is more selective as it comes from psychological consultants or clinicians. Conversely, inadequate support services of the university and lack of social support can impede academic performance and adjustment among international students (Khawaja & Dempsey, 2008).

Rationale of the Study

Given the growing number of international students, it is imperative that the students should be informed about prospective adjustment challenges (Yeravdekar & Tiwari, 2014). Furthermore, the recipient universities should also be aware of the possible educational and cultural challenges that international students face as they make transition to the host universities (Knight, 2012; Zafar, Kousar, Rehman & Rehman, 2018), as little is known about educational challenges and related stressors (Henze & Zhu, 2012; Jehangir & Khan, 2015; Misra & Castillo, 2004). The present study focuses on this neglected area, particularly for Pakistani students studying overseas. The study has filled in the gap in the available literature pertaining to Pakistani students studying abroad and addressed their adjustment challenges. Another reason to carry out this study came from the fact that almost 60 percent of Pakistani students who received HEC scholarships returned back to Pakistan without completing their degrees due to academic and possibly adjustment failures (Haq, 2015) and that the number of academically unsuccessful Pakistani students has risen since then (Leap-Pakistan, 2017). Since a fair percent (17%) of Pakistani students had gone to universities in the Netherlands for their studies (Haq, 2015), this study focuses on using this Pakistani student cohort as a model to explore academic challenges faced by students studying abroad in general.

Method

Participants

The present study selected seven male and five female students from two major universities in the Netherlands, who ranged in age from 20-37 years. Students' educational status ranged from graduate to PhD. levels, and their length of stay ranged from 6 months to four years in the host country. Among the participants, three had attended private universities in Pakistan and the other nine public colleges and universities before entering universities in the Netherlands. We selected participants on criteria outlined by Beine, Noël, and Ragot (2014): international students are those who migrate solely for education. Their length of stay in the host country ranged from 6 months (minimum) to 4 years (maximum) (M = 13.9 months). Besides, only those students were selected who intended to go back to their parent country after the completion of their studies. Pakistani immigrant students were not included. More details of the participants are given in Table 1 below

Table 1

Demographic Information of the Participants (N=11)

Participants	Degree	Area	Funding	Duration (Months)
P9	Graduate	Engineering	Self-financed	30
P10	Graduate	Engineering	Self-financed	48
P1	Masters	Agriculture	Self-financed	20
P2	Masters	Agriculture	NFP	18
P3	Masters	Agriculture	NFP	20
P12	Masters	Architecture	Self-financed	5
P4	Masters	Biotechnology	Self-financed	4
P7	Masters	Biotechnology	NFP	14
P5	Masters	Social Sciences	Self-financed	4
P8	PhD	Agriculture	HEC	6
P6	PhD	Environmental Science	Parent Department	24
P11	PhD	Environmental Science	Parent Department	24
			Mean =	13.9

Note: HEC = The Higher Education Commission of Pakistan; NFP = The Netherlands Fellowship Program

Instrument

The interview consisted of 12 questions, six questions covered demographics, e.g., gender, age, duration of stay at the host country, funding sources and affiliation with the public-private university and specialization area, whereas the other six questions were derived from literature (Bai, 2016; Kwon, 2013; Misra & Castillo, 2004; Preston & Wang, 2017; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). The latter questions are presented in the interview guide below.

Interview Guide

- What are your major stressors in academics? Prompt: methodology, interactive discussions during the class, high expectations, course content, group work, teaching styles, academic writing, oral presentations, objective/subjective type of questions, language issues
- Which academic experiences do you perceive as facilitating to the educational practices of the host university?
- Where or from whom have you received academic support? Prompt: parents, peers, lecturers, seniors, teaching assistants, co-nationals, other international students, academic advisors.
- Other than university-based resources, what are the sources of support?
- Have you been to campus counselors for unbearable academic challenges?
- Do you have any advice for other students thinking about studying in the Netherlands?

Procedure

All the participants were sent a detailed email with information about the study, along with informed consent. They were given enough time to respond to this email and if they agreed to take part in the study by signing the consent form. Any questions and concerns regarding the study were dealt with at this stage. We approached them in person at a location of their convenience. In-depth interviews were carried out, followed by thanks and appreciation letters.

Two researchers (a PhD. and Masters student) conducted interviews in English, which took 60-120 minutes to complete. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed with the consent of the participant and the material was kept in the principal investigator's office under lock and key.

Results and Analysis

Analysis of data was carried out through thematic analysis (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017) by reducing text, classifying emerging themes, and clustering them to gain insight. The advantage of thematic analysis is that the researcher can perform initial coding following the interview. The interview guide itself helps in initial coding(Maguire & Delahunt, 2017).

To conduct the analysis, the transcripts/data were repeatedly read and studied to gain insights to themes, which resulted in three significant meaningful themes i.e., academic challenges, facilitating learning experiences and social support (see Table 2) and many other ancillary themes along with verbatim quotes from the participants.

Table 2

A Summary of Themes, Sub-themes, and Illustrative Quotes

Main Themes	Sub-themes	Illustrative Quotes
Academic Challenges	Examination Pattern	"The way the exams are designed is troublesome. The questions are related to the topic but not according to what we study" (P10). "For me, exams are conducted in a different manner. Their pattern is like more closed-ended questions. You have more objective type questions and answers and less of subjective type questions, quite challenging for me" (P2). "What they teach you is almost the same as you have learned in bachelors, but when they give you some questions in exams, they make you think about things which are not necessarily found in the books" (P1). "The only way to succeed is to understand the basic concept and try not to memorize from the books. Be more analytical, rather train your mind to be analytical" (P4).

	Academic Writing	"The hardest is academic writing. I have a technical background in technical writing but in the field in which I have enrolled demands a philosophical style of writing. Switching to a new style has been stressful" (P12). "The big issue is with scientific writing. I can write, and you can even understand it, but when I have to produce an excellent scientific article, it causes trouble for me. I took a course but still, I am not capable of producing good writing stuff" (P11). "Research writing is difficult. I have not been into academic writing in my home country. Now, I have to spend more time when I write an article. It takes me a full day to complete only one paragraph. Academic writing is stressful" (P12).
	Class Participation	"In Pakistan, teachers come in the class, deliver a lecture and go away. Students are not asked to interact as such. In this system, I had to present my opinions, which was quite challenging for me"(P10). "I always respect my teachers and can never think to interrupt them during the class. However, gradually I am becoming an active participant in the classroom" (P2). "The first period is like a transformation period and was quite difficult. I had to learn, adjust, interact with others and then to express my own opinion. Initially, I thought that if I had some questions I should not have really asked the teachers in the class. Now it's fine and really not difficult" (P9).
	Group Work	"Initially, I had to do much work in a group. Some group members contributed more than I in the group work did because they were more aware of the topic and due to this, I suffered" (P7). "Although we have done a lot of group work in Pakistan. However, I could not perform well in the group. The probable reason that I couldn't perform well was that they (other co-members) sometimes come up with the topics which I was not familiar with. They had an advantage of greater exposure to course content, which I had not studied before" (P4). "(...) However, there are some free riders as well so you have to do all the work all alone sometimes. Once I was hooked up with a Chinese girl, and she did not understand English. She did not contribute to a group task. For two months I was doing all the group work alone. Maybe she was inefficient, or her language barrier was the reason to not add to the group" (P5).
Educational Practices Facilitating Learning Experience	Teaching Practice	"Mostly incoming students think that everything will be spoon-fed on the PowerPoint presentation but it is the other way around. Therefore, students fail. So keep in the mind that when you come here, you should know how to work independently"(P10). "The teacher-student interaction is grounded in reciprocal respect and understanding. Our teachers treat us as we are equal to them on personal and intellectual grounds. There are no formalities involved in communicating with the teacher. We even call the teachers by their first names to avoid any official procedure" (P6). "I am privileged to study from the largest public sector university in Pakistan. I believe some teachers really polished my skills. The issue is that in Pakistan, educational culture is different. We have immense respect for teachers, which creates a distance between teachers and students" (P2). "I feel that the teachers want to prepare students to their best. In Pakistan, culture is different. Most of the teachers just come in the class, take attendance, deliver a lecture and go away. I wonder what is the need to pay heavy amounts in the name of the institutional fee if the focus of the teacher is to take attendance and dictate from the books? Why can't our teachers be a little more productive?" (P11).
	Course Content	"It is a sort of friendly environment, which encourages you and makes you perform better. Just by looking at my face, they realize that I am struggling with something and need help. They are definitely attentive to details and it helps you in your struggle"(P6). "The thing is that the education system is practical. For example, you are studying a new concept on Monday then it would have a tutorial on Wednesday for that you have to be very much focused. It is different from the system in Pakistan because their system is mostly theoretical" (P10). "The course quality… is of high level and it demands a lot of participation and research as compared to Pakistan" (P1).
	Pedagogical Practices	"Here is a system which is called "problem-based learning" in which you have to explore some questions about the course, to solve the problems and then to discuss it with group members. So it is related to your course but you cannot find answers in one book rather, you'll have to research it in detail. It's kind of learning which gives you background knowledge on the theme of the entire course. I like how they found a balance between practical work and theory" (P9). "Here the system focuses more on developing critical and analytical skills in the learners. Their method of education, books, practical, tutorials, mini-research projects have been designed in a way that discourages rote memory and students have to engage in deep learning in order to succeed. The concept of memory oriented learning and assessment seems alien and misfit in their actuated educational practices. Their policy is to enable the students to think out of the box. I had to shift my approach from memorizing to understanding" (P4).

Support System	Academic Support	Academic Advisor	"The course quality here is very much self-learning and you are really not like spoon-fed anything. You need to have the basic idea of how things work. They want you to be an analytical person and problem solver" (P10).
			"I take help from an academic advisor who is nice and accommodating"(P11).
			"For minor things, I take help from academic support staff, but mainly I asked my supervisor and co-supervisor for help. They interact with me quite often, when I need help" (P4).
			"If I face an academic issue or stuck with a question, I would ask for advice from the seniors. Here we have a perfect system in which every Ph.D. student trains Masters students and every post-Doc students guide Ph.D. students" (P7).
		Campus Counselor	"I was challenged with independence in the educational and social life in the Netherlands. (On educational front) some concepts were really new and so difficult for me, and I had to really work hard to grasp those concepts. However, for two times, I failed and had to reappear in the exams. Due to all these situations, I went through a severe depression although I deny it. I was aware that I am depressed. I dropped motivation at one point in my academic life and my supervisor referred me to the campus counselor. I attended sessions for a few months to come back to my normal life" (P1).
			"The new life and independence here distract me. I failed 3 courses and could not maintain the pace of my work. The local Government canceled my scholarship. My teachers were worried and they referred me to the counselor. I attended their sessions but eventually decided to go back to my home country (P3)."
	Social Support	Family	"Being human and while living abroad, I guess every student feel and came across stressful life situation related to education, personal and the family. In such situations, I prefer to spend more time with my family and I used to talk to them"(P7).
			"I had a very tough subject in the first year. For the first time, I could not score well. It touched me a lot. Anyhow, I did manage the pressure with the help of my family. They encouraged me to retake the exam, and then I did it" (P9).
		Friends	"I suffered from Homesickness in the initial 10 days and then I found some good friend from the Pakistani community. They are a source of great support"(P2).
			"I would say that usually, I discuss all the general and academic issues with my friends at the university. They are serving as a family because we are supporting each other" (P1).

Table 3
Frequency of Themes and Subthemes (N=11)

| | Academic Challenges | | | | Educational Facilitating Experience | | Practices Learning | Support System | | | |
| | | | | | | | | AS | | SS | |
Participant	EP	AW	CP	GW	TP	CT	PP	AA	CC	FY	FD
P1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1
P2	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	1
P3	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	0
P4	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1
P5	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1
P6	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	1	1
P7	1	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	1	0
P8	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	1
P9	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	0
P10	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	1
P11	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	1
P12	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	1	1
Total	9	7	4	7	7	8	10	9	2	10	9
	27				25			30			

Abbreviations: EP =Examination Pattern, AW = Academic Writing, CP = Class Participation, GW = Group Work, TP = Teaching Practice, CT = Course Content, PP = Pedagogical Practices, AS = Academic Support, SS = Social Support, AA =Academic Advisor, CC = Campus Counselor, FY = Family, FD = Friends
Number Coding: 0=a theme or a sub-theme not supported by the participant, 1= a theme or a sub-theme supported by the participant.

Table 3 provides counts of illustrative quotes through which the themes and subthemes were extracted. Total count for academic challenges was 27, for educational practices 25, and for support system 30; and though these counts are similar, narratives of students did emphasize support over challenges and appreciation of education they were getting. Students were more inclined to talk about the support from family, friends, and counselors than about the quality of education they were getting.

Academic Challenges

Academic challenges included a struggle with understanding course material, examination patterns, academic writing, group work, and class participation (see Table 2 for the participants' quotes).

Examination pattern. The students *(n=9)* complained about the exams and the examination patterns. They correctly assessed that exams demanded a definitive and critical approach in answering questions. The participants shared that they had to come up with a new learning pattern to succeed in the new examination system, which required the application of analytical skills instead of mere memory.

Academic language and writing. Another area of concern was academic writing. Although the participating students possessed sufficient knowledge of the English language to express their ideas, they experienced *(n=7)* immense difficulties in writing assignments or theses and submitting articles to high impact academic journals. The latter is especially important for the PhD. students, who in the Dutch system are supposed to publish a minimum of three articles in an academic journal in order to fulfill the requirements for obtaining the degree.

Class participation. Pakistani students enrolled in graduate classes particularly expressed class participation as a challenge. The students *(n=4)* were initially reluctant to participate and preferred to remain quiet. However, when they observed that class participation was an excellent source for a better understanding of the content, they started to participate. Their class participation improved with time, but even then, they depended upon the teacher who would ask them to participate.

Group work. The participants considered group work as a source of learning. However, students from graduate classes *(n=7)* struggled with group work due to unfamiliarity with some course elements or lack of exposure to some updated courses in the syllabi. Besides educational differences among group members, some specific characteristics of co-students and lack of experience to work in a diversified group also hindered full participation in a group task.

Educational Practices Facilitating Learning Experience

The second theme that emerged from the participant's responses provided facilitation of learning and proficiencies, these included teaching practices, advanced course content, and pedagogical method.

Teaching practices. The participants highly appreciated the teaching practices in their host country. The majority of the participants *(n=7)* were of the view that teaching practices were largely student-centric in their host university. The frequent communication with their teachers and respect they received from the teacher facilitated their learning.

Course content: Under this theme, participants *(n=8)* revealed that they really appreciated the course content striking a balance between theory and practice. They valued the availability of the new and updated curriculum that made them feel confident to join the market right after the completion of their degree.

Pedagogical practices. The pedagogical practices at the host university was another theme that emerged from the participant responses. The students *(n=10)* admired the way the educational system has been designed, scheduled and implemented at the host university.

Support System

A distinction can be made in academic and social support systems. The participants *(n=9)* shared that they sought support from their academic instructors and other staff members, family, and friends to cope with the stress caused by the challenges associated with their academic life. They *(n=10)* expressed that for general life issues their support mainly came from family and friends, whereas for their academic problems, they preferred to get support from teachers, senior students, study advisors, and campus counselors (see Table 2 for participants' quotes).

Academic Support

a) **Teacher/supervisor**. Students with questions on the content or related to examination or choice of courses have easy access to teachers or thesis supervisors to ask for their help.

b) **Senior students**. At most departments of the university. The PhD. students serve as a resource person for master or bachelor students who have questions or problems related to academic issues.

c) **Counseling service.** The university offers counseling services like a writing lab, thesis rings, or consults with a study advisor or counselor for students who need extra support in their studies.

Social support

a) **Family**. Participants shared that they relied mainly on the support of their family in times of stress by talking to them often on a daily basis. Especially, at the start of their life in the Netherlands, they are faced with many new challenges and turn to their family for advice or comfort.

b) **Friends**. Next to family, students rely on their friends, when they have a hard time; these can be Pakistani friends, but also other friends from other nationalities who are in the same position.

Advice for Forthcoming Students

The participants were not very specific about giving advice but emphasized that forthcoming students should study hard, pay attention, and take time to understand and adopt the new practices of the new educational environment with efforts and hard work. They believe that the key to success is hard work and persistence. Here are some of their suggestions:

"Everyone will struggle in the first period because we came from a background obviously where education is being very different, teaching style is very different and we have been taught in a way that is very different, but if you apply the learned concepts you could be as good as the other people around you" (P4).

"If you are okay to leave your comfort zone and if you are okay to do extra hard work, then do come here. Otherwise, stay there" (P12).

"The teacher helps only when you start thinking about how things work. There are brilliant teachers who are ready to answer you but first, you really need to show them your courage and willingness to learn otherwise they really don't teach you" (P10).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of Pakistani students in Dutch universities in terms of academic adjustment. This research suggests that the students struggled with critical thinking-oriented examination, academic writing, and group work. All participants learnt to function within the foreign educational structure and system but at the cost of time. This finding is similar to other studies concentrating on the prevalence and management of the academic experiences of Asian international students (Kwon, 2013; Liao & Wei, 2014).

The participants revealed that the examination pattern proved to be the most challenging area. They experienced difficulty to learn and prepare themselves for the new examination pattern, perhaps due to the cultural differences in the education system (Lin & Scherz, 2014). The problem-solving educational culture of Western universities (Smith & Khawaja, 2011) made it difficult for students to adapt since

previously, they were primarily concerned with selective rote learning for exams (Ali et al., 2009). Moreover, in line with the findings of several studies (Hofstede, 2005), the fact that the students come from a collectivistic culture where family pressure can be high, made their challenges more profound. The students felt a responsibility to succeed in exams with good grades, which put them under constant pressure.

Another finding exposed that acquaintance with the English language in the home educational system facilitated Pakistani international students to understand lectures, course content and to communicate with international peers. However, the participants struggled with academic writing, a skill that is lacking in the in-home educational culture, where there is a near absence of research and academic writing practice. In fact, academic writing requires logical order and practice, sound grammatical knowledge, ability to express the ideas, making the connection between the texts and usage of rigorous vocabulary and practice to produce publishable text in (preferably high impact factor) research journals (Genc & Bada, 2010). However, the traditional English language courses taught at Pakistani universities prove deficient to inculcate the necessary ability and writing skills among the majority of postgraduate students (Sajid & Siddiqui, 2015). Based on the results of the study of Sajid and Siddiqui (2015), it could be recommended that in order to assist the students in academic writing skills, there should be separate units operating in higher education institutions in Pakistan as there are in European universities. These writing services labs can assist the students. They may become able to cope with the challenges associated with writing research papers.

Participants in this study considered group work as a challenging experience, which they eventually managed to deal with. The theme in current study is in line with the results of a study that indicated that interactive teaching, discussion, and group work are shallow areas in higher academic institutions in Pakistan (Ali, Tariq & Topping, 2013). Moreover, undefined roles, social loafing of other group members and exposure to the latest course content made the group work challenging for Pakistani international students. This finding is consistent with the challenges faced by Asian international students studying in the universities of New Zealand (Li & Campbell, 2008).

Based on participants' responses, class participation also appeared to be quite challenging, which can be viewed from two perspectives. From an educational perspective, the pedagogical practices in the public sector universities of Pakistan do not explicitly allow the students to ask questions (Siddiqui, 2007). Pakistani teachers dictate their students from their already prepared notes. In this process, the student remains a passive learner who is preparing for examination only (Ali et al., 2013; Khan, Khan, & Turi, 2017). With this background, it becomes impossible for the student to ask questions even if there is a problem in the comprehension of content. From a cultural perspective, the feature of respect for the teacher is inculcated in the student's mind by his or her culture. Therefore, the students find it unethical to ask questions to the teacher. This cultural pattern also hinders class participation and interactive discussion (Tan & Yates, 2011).

The participants appreciated teaching practices in their host university and had high regard for the pedagogical model and the closeness they experienced with teachers. Positive and professional behaviors of teachers played an important role for students to get adjusted to the new educational environment. A majority of the students suggested that the pedagogical culture of Pakistani universities needs remodeling. The flaws and weaknesses need to be removed (Ali et al., 2013). The Public Service Commission vouches

for this belief and blames low-level performance of students to low standards of teaching practices in the traditional educational system (Annual Report, 2017). Fortunately, HEC (2003) is rectifying that by launching staff development programs and introducing interactive teaching methodologies (Haider, 2008).

Students appreciated the updated, cutting edge course content at host universities, and wished something like that could be realized regarding course content in Pakistan. The Government of Pakistan admits that curricula used in universities do not meet the diverse needs of the students and special efforts would be needed to update them, which would benefit students personally and professionally (Ali et al., 2013)

The role of academic and social support among international students is clear (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). The present study confirmed this and is consistent with previous research indicating that Asian students preferred the support of family and co-nationals and international friends (Gebhard, 2010). This was also observed in the narratives of Pakistani students who were eager to seek help from the international office, academic advisors, and international student associations (Bertram, Poulakis, Elsasser, & Kumar, 2014) because they promote effective acculturation (Nailevna, 2017), and seek counseling services, as opposed to other Asian students who seemed to be not confident about getting counseling (Ying & Han, 2006).

Conclusion and Implications

Students highlighted different challenges during their transition process in the host university and they largely denoted these challenges to traditional pedagogical practices at home country. These findings are in line with the available literature (e.g., Ali et al., 2013; Inamullah et al., 2008; Javed, 2016). The results of the current study suggest that there is a need to improve the Pakistani educational system and review the educational practices, so that they can meet up the international educational standards. Nevertheless, the Pakistani education system cannot be solely blamed for all the results. There are at least three stakeholders that can play a positive role.

First, students must do some homework before seeking admission abroad. They should explore the study pattern, course content and assessment methods used at the host universities to avoid educational challenges (Preston & Wang, 2017) and join the international groups (on social media) to explore, understand and get support for such groups. Second, universities of Pakistan could improve the training of teachers and research culture as initiated by HEC (Ali et al., 2009). Third, universities could employ academic advisors to assist students with diverse educational and cultural backgrounds. The university administration offices of the host countries can help the students by providing information about the scheduling of courses, study programs, and academic culture. A cultural representative can facilitate the students in matters of cultural adjustment.

Limitations

The first limitation is that the study has not taken into account the mutually exclusive academic challenges faced by undergraduate, graduate and post-graduate Pakistani students. These challenges can be diverse and must be related to age, duration of the study, and pedagogical differences. Hence, future researchers must conduct studies by considering these challenges across different study Levels. Second, the sample of the study was limited to Pakistani students enrolled in two Dutch Universities only; more participants from other

Dutch universities could be approached in the future. This would give a broader view to researcher to explore the phenomena under study.

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