

# QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT ISSUES IN AUSTRIA: THE CASE STUDY OF PAKISTANI Ph.D. SCHOLARS

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## ABSTRACT

*This study aims to investigate the cultural adjustment issues faced by the Pakistani PhD scholars, studying at different public sector universities of Austria. In doing so, an open-ended questionnaire was used to obtain qualitative data from the participants. The conclusions were drawn by employing the 'Grounded Theory' analysis. Based on seven main themes, emerged from analysis of the responses of participants, the main findings reveal that adjustment in Austria is affected by homesickness, lack of proficiency in German language, communication gap with Austrian community and living without a social life. Moreover, most Pakistani PhD scholars have reported a significant positive change in their attitudes during their stay in Austria. They have improved considerably in the sense of responsibility, sensitivity for others, tolerance towards other communities, independence, confidence, punctuality and in being more digital. We believe that our analysis is a valuable addition to the literature of adjustment experiences of international students. Our findings may also provide helpful information to the prospective students to Austria, relevant university departments, and counseling psychologists.*

**Keywords:** Cultural Adjustment; Grounded Theory; Ph.D. Scholars; Qualitative Analysis; Stressors.

## INTRODUCTION

Student sojourners often experience adaptability issues majorly due to cultural differences that they have to face in the host societies. They are supposed to play their roles according to the norms of their new abode, be it social or organizational. This is, for newcomers, in addition to the adjustment problems that mostly all students face. Indeed, this is challenging enough, not only for the students who have prior information about the differences but also for those who are ignorant of these differences or who expect that the new society does operate like their home

society. Collectively an impact of such unfamiliar experiences is called as “culture shock” (Amiot et al., 2018; Taylor, 2005; Hayes, 1998).

Worldwide, intercultural understanding can be promoted by considering the quality of social, cultural, educational, and psychological experiences of international students. Many researchers in the past have worked on the adaptation problems of these students, about the fact that in a case of research on cross-cultural travelers, international students constitute relatively easily reachable participants (Zhou et al., 2008). Student sojourners have to deal with different levels of stress whereas the contributing factors are psychological and cultural. Some severe potential stressors for international students may include language and communication barriers, lack of understanding of the host culture and the differences between the host and home cultures (Chen, 1999). As language is considered to be a contributing factor in a student’s overall performance, i.e., academic, and social, the lack of proficiency in the new language (of the host culture) may work as a significant stressor (Chen, 1999).

Students from all cultures experience difficulties in adaptation to a new culture, but Asian students sojourning in the UK and the US experience absolute differences in cultural expectations. For that reason, they may constitute a useful ‘extreme case’ for research purposes of student sojourners in general (Redmond & Bunyi, 1993). However, due to numerous reasons, and often out of their anticipation, international students unavoidably face hurdles that keep them away from integrating with the unfamiliar environment, which more often heavily impacts their lives and learning at the university. Therefore, research into such problems is of vital importance for their favorable adjustment to the new circumstances (Wenhua & Zhe, 2013). The current study attempts to investigate the cultural adjustment issues faced by Pakistani PhD scholars living and studying in different public sector universities in Austria. Although the literature is available for analyzing cultural adjustment issues of international students studying in various countries, the population of Pakistani PhD scholars in Austria has never been considered before for this purpose.

The Republic of Austria (Österreich in the native language, German) is a Central European country of nearly 9 million people and is surrounded by Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Liechtenstein, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Switzerland. The country’s official language, and spoken

by the majority of the population, is German. With a parliamentary representative democratic system, Austria is comprised of 9 federating states, and Vienna is the capital and largest city. Other major urban areas include Graz, Innsbruck, Linz, and Salzburg. According to per capita GDP terms, Austria has consistently been ranked as one of the richest countries in the world. The main public sector universities are located in Vienna, Graz, Innsbruck, Salzburg, Linz, and Klagenfurt.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. Next section briefly describes the relevant literature, followed by the section that presents the material and methodology. Major results and discussion are brought into the analysis in the second last section. The last section concludes this article.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Lefsdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern (2015) attempted, by using the Grounded Theory approach, to qualitatively analyze the cultural adjustment experiences of Saudi female students in the United States (US). Quotes of the participants were utilized to demonstrate the diversity of replies which were then gathered into major themes. Their findings indicated that the adjustment of Saudi female students in the US is affected by their proficiency in the English language, their relations and social support, and their ability to successfully navigate the cultural differences. The majority of the students had found themselves to be improved in terms of increased confidence, independence, intellectual growth, and acceptance of others during their stay in the US.

Olivas and Li (2006), conducted a study to inspect the issues of adjustment, common stressors, and coping strategies of international students in US universities and colleges. They concluded that multicultural counseling and help-seeking behavior of expat students might reduce the stress of international students.

Smith and Khawja (2011), attempted to review the acculturation experiences of international students in the Western Countries. They determined that international students commonly face acculturative stresses, like language barriers, educational difficulties, loneliness, discrimination, and practical problems due to the changing environment. De Araujo (2011), appraised the literature on adjustment issues with international students in the case of American colleges and universities.

Language fluency, social support, duration of stay, discrimination, establishing terms with Americans and homesickness were found as crucial factors in defining adjustment issues.

Yue et al. (2013), analyzed the understanding of the social support system for coping with the outcomes of the acculturative stress of the international students in a regional area in Australia through semi-structured interviews. The findings of the analysis revealed that the family, friends, university, and community comprise the important sources of social support in coping with acculturative stress.

Wu et al. (2015), analyzed the experiences of international students in academic and social-cultural settings in the US through qualitative interviews. Their findings revealed that international students faced academic challenges; experienced social isolation and had to deal with cultural adjustment issues. They suggested that students usually adopt resources derived from the universities to meet these challenges. So according to their findings, it is important for the university faculty and staff to have a better understanding of these difficulties faced by international students. This understanding will enable university personnel to provide effective supportive campus resources and services.

By using survey data of 169 international students in the US universities, Wang et al. (2018), examined the temporal patterns of students' psychological and socio-cultural adaptation and reported a U-curved (two-phase) process of psychological adaptation. From the studied sample, they revealed the most obvious culture shock occurring to the students during the first nine to 24 months of stay in the US. However, the socio-cultural adaptation was found to increase steadily over time, without significant retreat.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study used an open-ended questionnaire to obtain qualitative data from seven Pakistani PhD scholars attending different public sector universities in Austria. A questionnaire was developed following two steps:

Step 1: A face to face interview was conducted to acquire information from two PhD students.

Step 2: 18 open-ended questions were developed on the basis of existing literature and conducted interviews.

The questionnaire was sent through email to all participants, and the nature of questions was also discussed by telephone or through the exchange of emails, to make a clarification about the spirit of questions, wherever required by the participants. After filling, the questionnaires were received back through email. The Grounded Theory approach is employed for the qualitative analysis of the gathered data.

### **Participants**

Seven PhD students participated in the study. Among them, one student is female, and the rest of the students are males. All are currently attending different public sector universities in four different cities of Austria. Their ages are ranged between 28-46 years. Three of them are single while the rest of them are married. However, only a student is living with her spouse. The spouses of the remaining three students are staying in Pakistan. The duration of residence of two participants is more than two years. While the other five participants have been living in Austria for the last one year. All the participants intend to return to Pakistan after completion of their studies in Austria.

### **Procedure**

We had developed 18 qualitative questions on the basis of relevant literature on adjustment issues of international students (Lefdhahl-Davis & Perrone-McGovern, 2015; Miyazaki, 2008; Johnson & Sandhu, 2007; McClure, 2007; Olivas & Li, 2006; Jacob & Greggo, 2001) and acculturative stress (Junzi, 2009; Zhou et al., 2008; Brown & Holloway, 2008; Sovic, 2007; Sam & Berry, 2006; Berry & Ward, 2006; Ward, 2004; Yamaguchi & Wiseman, 2003). Four demographic queries were included in addition. The questions were, in fact, queries to the Pakistani PhD scholars to share their expectations that they had developed before arriving in Austria for study, and the reality that they confronted after the arrival with respect to their expectations as international students.

Moreover, what did they find most interesting and least enjoyable about their stay in Austria? Additionally, we asked questions regarding acculturative stress; differences between their home and host cultures; social adjustment; English and German language aptitude; cultural support and their interactions with Austrians; experiences of discrimination, harassment, and stereotyping; and individual growth. These queries effectively revealed any possible adjustment issue. These questions also provided an opportunity for contributors to unveil their actual experiences.

Each of the participants was thanked verbally for their time.

### **Data Analysis**

Data from the open-ended questionnaire was analyzed by employing the methodology of Grounded Theory so that the coding process is accomplished in various phases. For instance, (a) initial coding; (b) focused coding and (c) theoretical coding. Continuous comparisons were made during all stages of the coding process. This practice confirms that the investigation procedure was occurring in parallel with the data collection. In line with Morrow (2005), the steps of the coding procedure were linear. After coding, analysis of the data, explanation, and presentation was comprised of a continuous and interactive process. The initial coding was constituted of a line-by-line coding of each sentence. In order to highlight and specify usefulness and relevance, only those parts of the data are analyzed which were found most relevant to our research questions. The direct coding, the first step, was focused on the analysis of the language of participants for consideration of important words and statements.

The sorting of the data into specific categories, by utilizing the frequently appearing initial codes, is named as focused coding. During this step, codes were organized into the broader categories of participant meaning. The second phase is represented by the start of the interpretive process. The last step was based on theoretical coding. The association established during the previous step, between and among the categories was identified in the last step. This identification process helped in explaining the data and producing a framework to have an understanding of studied experiences. Following Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern (2015), the responses, obtained through the qualitative questionnaire, were analyzed for thematic relationships. Additionally, the patterns and concepts of the replies of participants were analyzed through an inductive method approach.

## **RESEARCH FINDINGS**

### **Major Results**

Relevant to the adjustment of Pakistani PhD scholars, seven main themes emerged as a consequence of the analysis of the questionnaire data: (1) Expectations versus Reality about Studying and Living in Austria; (2) Cultural Shock and Adjustment; (3) Cultural Differences between Pakistan and Austria; (4) Experiences of Discrimination/Stereotyping/Harassment

due to being an International Student; (5) Language Proficiency and Difficulties in Communication; (6) Relationship, Help-Seeking and Social Support from the Supervisor and Local Austrian Community; (7) Psychological Impact of Studying in Austria.

The quotes and statements of scholars were utilized to probe each of the themes mentioned above. Moreover, the statements are analyzed to show an agreement or the difference of opinion; any unique idea in beliefs, spirits, or experiences. The adjustment issues, faced by scholars during their stay in Austria, are highlighted by these topics.

### **Theme 1: Expectations versus Reality about Studying and Living in Austria**

***Expectations about Academic Facilities:*** The majority of the Pakistani PhD Scholars had very high hopes regarding educational facilities, opportunities for learning and quality of education available in Austria (Respondents 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6). An example of this type of response includes “*my expectations were high about educational level and living facilities*” (Respondent 2). Another participant responded that “I always expected a quality education before my arrival to Austria” (Respondent 1). One of the interviewees expressed his academic expectations about Austria before arriving in a modern place with high-tech laboratories, opportunities for learning, the latest techniques and having opportunities of working with an international group (Respondent 3). One of the participants said that he expected to have a lot of supportive colleagues, teachers, office mates and Pakistani guys (Respondent 7).

***Reality about Expectations:*** The majority of the participants expressed that reality is not very different from their expectations about the academic facilities (Respondents 1, 2, 3, 5). For example, one of the interviewees expressed that “*the reality is not much different from my expectations*” (Respondent 3). Some of the respondents even found reality much better, even higher than their expectations about the quality of education. Like one respondent said that “*I found studies better than expected*” (Respondent 1). Another one shared his experience as “*I found much more than expected, i.e., more facilities and more cooperation*” (Respondent 2).

However, some of the respondents found reality very different than what they expected about the academic environment. As one of the respondents said that “*I expected to have my own sitting place in the department, a laptop, and all other related facilities but I don't have any*



*of these (Respondent 4).*” Another respondent said that “*contrary to my expectations, I found the lack of proper guidance and experienced many discouraging attitudes, even from my Pakistani colleagues: they keep disturbing me and interfering and even sometimes misleading....*” (Respondent 7).

***Non-Academic Expectations/Expectations about Social Environment:***

The majority of the respondents had very high hopes about the quality of life and living facilities in Austria (Respondents 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, and 7). They expected it to be a very safe place to live and a very easy life in Austria (Respondent 6). One of the participants told that she had expectations about no religious and ethnic discrimination (Respondent 6). One of the respondents told that he had very realistic expectations about the terrestrial environment of Austria because of his previous foreign exposure (Respondent 4). Another respondent had expectations about Austria that came from Hollywood movies as according to him: “*I was expecting a Hollywood type open social set up with a conducive study environment (Respondent 7)*”. One of the participants expressed as “*I expected that the German Language will not be a barrier as Austrians, I supposed, speak fluent English*” (Respondent 6).

***Reality about Expectations:*** Almost all of the participants expecting a very high quality of life and living facilities in Austria found their expectations to be very genuine and realistic. However, one of the respondents said that contrary to her expectations; he found Austria not to be that safe. She added her experience on the very first day of her arrival in Austria as her wallet was stolen (Respondent 6). Some of the participants also described how Austria was different from what they had expected. For instance, “*I found Austrians to be socially very conservative people and they are typically scared of Pakistan and Pakistani guys*” (Respondent 7). One of the participants also found her expectations about language to be proved false as she said: “*I was wrong in assuming that the Austrians will be fluent in speaking English, so The German language is a barrier*” (Respondent 6).

**Theme 2: Cultural Shock and Adjustment**

***Culture Shock or Acculturation Stress:*** After coming to Austria, most of our respondents did not experience any cultural shock (Respondents 2, 4, 5 and 7). In response to the question that why they did not experience any sort of cultural shock or acculturation stress, a few of them provided



an explanation. For example, one of the respondents explained that “based on my previous experience of foreign traveling, I was expecting the same” (Respondent 5). One of the respondents (Respondent 7) explained that the rest of the things were expected; except the reserved attitude of the Austrian community. However, he did not classify it as “culture shock or acculturation stress.” Interestingly, one of the participants said that not a culture shock, but he was expecting more conservatives and racism in Austrian society, but he found it to be different from what he thought, i.e., it is not (Respondent 2).

Some of the respondents did experience culture shock and acculturation stress (Respondents 1, 3 and 6). For instance, one of the respondents (Respondent 1) explained his experience of culture shock in a very detailed way as: *“Of course; like every naive visitor, I also felt some “cultural shock (s)” in Austria. The social system of my parent society is completely different and as a product of that society, I always learned how to give respect to elders, how to treat the younger’s, what to do when an elder visit my place and when I visit him. How often one should visit the Mosque for prayers, etc. What is the role of women in our society, how to keep them bound? However; after arriving here in Austria this was not less than a shock for me when observed that every individual is free in her/his own circle, Women are as human as men, there is no authority for directing someone to any religious act, etc.”*

So, according to this respondent, his observations about the overall social setup were no less than a shock. For one of the participants (Respondent 3), adjustment in Austria in initial days was complicated by the completely different working/studying style which took him some time to adjust. Another participant (Respondent 6) said that she experienced cultural shocks in too many ways: *“regarding food; I never imagined that ice-cream could have alcohol in it, dogs are allowed in trams.....impossible in my country, Acculturation stress: in Ramadan when people want me to join them for food or drinks, at times I have been asked weird questions about my fast”*. So, the respondents who have experienced the cultural shocks triggered by many factors that range from differences in societal norms, values, and overall setup to differences in food, religious practices.

***Culture Adjustment/Coping Adjustment Difficulties in Austria:*** The majority of the respondents talk to their friends when they face problems or adjustment difficulties in Austria (Respondents 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7). For

example, one participant (Respondent 5) said that *“Fortunately, the other Pakistani scholars are very cooperative so that I can manage easily”*.

Many scholars also include the family as a very supportive unit in coping with the adjustment issues here. For instance, one respondent (Respondent 4) told that if the problems are not much personal, then I share with my friends otherwise, my wife is a good counselor. One of the other respondents (Respondent 6) explained her coping strategies for adjustment issues in Austria as: *“I write poetry, I discuss my problems with my friends and sometimes with my family, I sometimes take advice from my teachers in Pakistan”*.

One of the respondents (Respondent 7) also included his supervisor along with friends among those with whom he discusses his adjustment issues in Austria and tries to find a solution. To all these responses there is one exception, and that is by respondent 1, as according to him, he has not experienced any problem till the date of adjustment here.

### **Theme 3: Cultural Differences between Pakistan and Austria**

***Disagreements in both Cultures:*** All of the respondents have the same opinion that religion, culture, and society are on the whole difference between the two countries. One of the challenging cultural differences between Pakistan and Austria towards adjustment in Austria, as reported by many scholars (Respondents 2, 3, 5 and 7) is that the Austrian community is reserved while on the other hand, Pakistani society is socially more integrated. One of the respondents (Respondent 7) said that this particular cultural difference, i.e., lacks communication forms a stressor in adjusting with overall differences, as according to him: *“Beliefs about religion, social setup, study environment and family set up. However, the only stressor from these differences is the Austrian community’s lacking communication with me. Otherwise, everything is fine.”*

Some respondents (Respondents 2 and 3) pointed out some cultural differences between Pakistan and Austria, which, according to them are very positive and appreciable, i.e., Austrians do not interfere in others’ work, and for them, personal space and life are more important. As religion very much influences the Pakistani society and culture, this fact is also expressed by the Respondent 6; in explaining cultural differences between two countries: *“For me, culture and religion go hand in hand; I practice Islam and here in Austria people follow Christianity (to a certain extent). However, for Austrians culture is separate from religion.”*

There exist differences in the treatment of women and other cultural values between societies. One of the respondents (Respondent 1) explained some of these aspects of cultural differences which he has observed and appreciates about the Austrian culture: *“It would need a long discussion to explain what I observed (even the main differences) between the two cultures. However; our belief regarding the treatment of women is entirely different from here (Austria), our cultural values say for a meal is quite formal, I mean giving that much of time to food has been sorted out here. In short, I would say these people have worked out their cultural values.”*

**Likes and Dislikes about Living/Studying in Austria:** The responses that we got from the scholars regarding the most enjoyable thing about living/studying in Austria include freedom, full cooperation from the department, the freedom of doing work without any stress, friendly lab environment, exposure to developed society and the educational system and gender equality. One of the respondents (Respondent 7) explained in detail the things that he enjoys the most about living here: *“Here are no blackouts, the transportation system is fine, and I benefit from the freedom of speech, actions and reactions. Red-tape is absent from offices. The environment is clean enough to enjoy, without any noise. I may live independently.”*

When asked about the least enjoyable things about living/studying in Austria, the most common response was *“living without a social life as was in Pakistan.”* One of the respondents (Respondent 7) expressed as: *“Regarding studies, everything is fine. Sometimes I want to talk to my neighbors, people around me and to travel around in groups. However, I cannot do it easily.”* Some of the respondents (Respondent 2 and 5) explained that we have to deal with homesickness while living in Austria, which is hard. One of the respondents (Respondent 6) found “Independence” as least enjoyable while residing in Austria. Two respondents (Respondent 1 and 4) found nothing which is least enjoyable about living here.

#### **Theme 4: Experiences of Discrimination/Stereotyping/Harassment being an International Student**

We asked the respondents that if they had faced any discrimination or if they had ever been treated unfairly being a Pakistani/international student. All of the respondents had a common answer, *No, not at all.*

#### **Theme 5: Language Proficiency and Difficulties in Communication**

For almost all of the Pakistani PhD scholars, the German language was

an important part of their adjustment to Austria. Since all the respondents are beginners for the new language, they consider it as a barrier and a challenge in the way of their successful adjustment. However, all of the respondents are quite proficient in English. According to them, during their stay, English is the only source of communication and significant help for them. For instance, one of the respondents (Respondent 1) explained that *“English is the only ‘lingua franca’ for me here in Austria, and I can speak good English”*.

### **Theme 6: Relationship, Help-Seeking and Social Support from the Supervisor and Local Austrian Community**

***Relationship with Local Austrian Community:*** Most of the respondents (Respondents 1, 2, 5 and 7) said that Austrian people are very cooperative and helpful. Some of the respondents (Respondents 1 and 3) termed the nature of their relationship with Austrians as *“friendly and informal.”* However, one respondent (Respondent 6) had a mixed opinion about the nature of her relationships with the Austrians. She says, *“Some are friendly while others are not, aged people are friendlier, an element of respect is always there.”* One of the participants (Respondent 7) shared his pleasant experience with some Austrian families as *“I have a very fine social relationship with two Austrian families. They are very kind and cooperative, even in my personal matters. They live in other cities in Austria.”* However, one of the scholars (Respondent 4) told that it is only limited to studies if I have to talk specifically about the relationships with Austrians.

***Relationship with Supervisors:*** When asked about the professional relationships with the supervisor, all of the scholars gave a very positive response. Two of the respondents (Respondent 1 and 6) expressed that they have a quite friendly and informal relationship with their supervisor. Two of the interviewees (Respondents 2 and 5) said that the relationship is quite fruitful and that their supervisors are very cooperative. One of the respondents (Respondent 3) explained in detail the nature of his relationship with the supervisor as: *“Provide space and freedom for doing research work, guide whenever asked, ask for progress every week and encourage”*.

Another respondent (Respondent 7) expressed his relationship with the supervisor as: *“I have two supervisors and an external examiner. Two of them communicate very fast.”* One of the scholars (Respondent 4) said that the relationship is magnificent, and the way professors here deal

entirely different from Pakistani teachers. It is much better here. So overall Pakistani PhD scholars are experiencing very cooperative behavior from their supervisors in Austria.

***Social Support and Help-Seeking Behavior:*** As reported by McLachlan and Justice (2009), the most common difficulty for international students is their isolation and loneliness. During their academic sojourn, it could be due to not having someone with them from their family. When interviewed about their support group during their stay in Austria, the most common reply of Pakistani PhD scholars was, “Friends.” For most of them, social and emotional support came primarily from their friends and family. For instance, one of the respondents (Respondent 7) discussed his social support group as, *“Family and friends. Regarding studies, I prefer discussing with my supervisor.”* Another respondent (Respondent 6) said that my social support group during my stay in Austria is comprised of my parents, friends, and teachers. She explained, *“My parents, my friends in Pakistan and in Austria (living in Graz, Linz, and Vienna), my teachers in Pakistan.”*

### **Theme 7: Psychological Impact of Studying in Austria**

For many of the Pakistani scholars, studying in Austria is an experience which has brought many positive changes in them. According to them, they have felt considerable changes in them regarding an increased sense of responsibility and sensitivity, more tolerance towards other communities, increased independence, confidence, punctuality, and openness and being more digital. One of the interviewees (Respondent 2) described that he had been changed a lot since coming to Austria. For example, he can live alone and does self-cooking. Some respondents talked at length about the changes in their ideas, concepts, and beliefs since coming to Austria. An example is a response by Respondent 1, *“I feel quite relaxed here. Many things which had learned in Pakistan I just realized that they were not exactly like that. My approach to many aspects of life is going to be different now.”* Another respondent (Respondent 7) also explained that *“I now dislike interfering in other’s personal matters, religious and social beliefs”*. One of the respondents (Respondent 3) did not want to answer this question while according to respondent 4, someone else can better tell whether he has changed or not since coming to Austria so according to him, he cannot answer this question.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

A variety of experiences of cultural adjustment were explored as a result of analyzing questionnaire data. Adjustment issues such as their expectations

about Austria before coming to Austria, cultural shock and adjustment, cultural differences, their communication ability in the German language, social support in Austria constitute significant factors in adjustment. Many of the respondents are spending their first year in Austria or have hardly started their second year (Respondents 1, 3, 4, 5 and 6). Whereas, two respondents have stayed here for more than two years (Respondents 2 and 7).

Almost all of the scholars had very high expectations about educational facilities, *i.e.*, opportunities for learning, latest techniques, high-tech labs, and quality of education available in Austria. Probably one of the reasons for their elevated expectations relates to the fact that Austria is a developed country and Pakistanis normally do expect high academic facilities and standard of living in Austria being a developed economy. The majority of the scholars found the reality as per their expectations and even better than what they expected in some cases. However, one of the respondents got disappointed with not having his sitting place, a laptop, and related facilities while another scholar unexpectedly found a lack of guidance, discouraging and interfering attitudes of his Pakistani fellows.

In an analogous way, almost all of the scholars had very high expectations about the quality of life and living facilities in Austria and their expectations proved to be true after their arrival. According to one of the respondents' reasons for developing realistic expectations is his previous foreign exposure. One of the scholars based his expectations on Hollywood movies that Austria will be socially very open society as he perceived from movies, but according to him, he has found the Austrians to be socially very reserved. In a similar fashion, another scholar expressed that she expected Austria to be a very safe place, but her expectations were proved wrong when her wallet was stolen on the first day of her arrival. She also expected the Austrians to be very fluent in speaking English so that the German language will not be a barrier for her, but she found it otherwise.

Many of the scholars did not experience culture shock or tiny of it or not exactly culture shock when they came to Austria. One of the respondents gave credit to his previous foreign exposure for not experiencing culture shock. Another respondent said that although the reserved attitude of the Austrian community was quite unexpected for him, still he did not classify it as culture shock. Similarly, another scholar also said that not culture shock, but he was expecting more conservatives and racism here. However, he found it otherwise.

For those who did experience culture shock or acculturation stress, contributing factors included many. For instance, one respondent said that the social setup in Austria was not less than shock for him when he observed that every individual is free in his/her circle. The women are not kept bounded, but rather treated equally as men; and no one has the authority to direct someone to any religious act. Another respondent explained that she experienced culture shock in many forms as in the shape of food, dogs in trams. She also added that she has gone through acculturation stress during Ramadan (the Islamic month of fasting) when people want her to join them for food or drinks, at times, she has been asked weird questions about fast.

The majority of the scholars take counseling of their families and friends by talking to them and seek help from other Pakistani scholars in Austria to cope with their adjustment difficulties. One of the respondents told that he also sometimes discusses his adjustment issues with his supervisor, besides his friends. Another scholar expressed that along with her friends and family, she also sometimes takes advice from her teachers in Pakistan, and additionally she gave expression to her adjustment difficulties in the form of poetry. However, one respondent exceptionally has not faced any problems in adjustment till the date.

All the scholars have a consensus on that religion, culture and society are on the whole difference between the two countries. They have a consensus on their opinion that the challenging cultural difference that complicates adjustment for Pakistani scholars in Austria is the reserved attitude of the Austrian community, as Pakistani society is more social and open. One of the scholars added that cultural differences are themselves did not stress, but what constitutes stressor is the lack of communication of the Austrian community with us, which makes for us cultural differences difficult to understand and to adjust.

Some scholars pointed out some cultural differences between the two countries which according to them are very active and appreciable that is the Austrians do not interfere in others' work, and for them, personal space and life are more important. One of the respondents said that religion very much influences Pakistani society and culture, but for Austrians, culture is separate from religion. Another respondent appreciated some of the cultural aspects of Austria, which are different from those of Pakistan, including equal treatment of women, spending less time on a meal. In his opinion, Austrians have worked out their cultural values.

Several scholars mentioned enjoying freedom, full cooperation from the



department, the freedom of doing work without any stress, friendly lab environment, and exposure to developed society, the administrative system and educational system, gender equality and clean environment while living in Austria. “Living without social life as was in Pakistan,” “dealing with homesickness” and “independence” are the factors that are least enjoyable about living/studying in Austria, as mentioned by the majority of scholars? However, few scholars found nothing that is least enjoyable about living/studying in Austria, so they enjoy everything about living here. None of the scholars has ever experienced discrimination from the Austrians being international/Pakistani students, although a few of them expected some form of discrimination before coming to Austria. Fortunately, they have never been treated differently by the Austrians in the capacity of international/Pakistani students.

For the Pakistani PhD scholars in Austria, German language proficiency is a key factor in adjustment, as all of the scholars are either quite beginners or almost having no proficiency. Therefore, the German language is a significant barrier for them and in their opinion, if learned, then it would be an immense help in adjustment here. They are quite proficient in The English language, and this is the only way of communication for them while living in Austria. The majority of the scholars describe their nature of relationships with Austrians that Austrians are very cooperative and helpful. Some of the scholars termed the nature of their relationship with Austrian people as “*friendly and informal*” while another scholar has a mixed opinion about this as she said that some are friendly, others are not, she found aged people to be friendlier, but she found the Austrians as very respectful people. All of the Pakistani scholars interviewed, have very active and fruitful relationships with their supervisors as according to them supervisors have very cooperative behavior towards them and guide them whenever needed.

In line with Ching et al. (2017), the most common difficulty for international students was their isolation and loneliness. During their academic sojourn, it could be due to not having someone with them from their family. In this situation, social and emotional support comes primarily from their friends and family. One of the scholars said that if the necessary support is related to studies, then he also discusses with his supervisor, in addition to his friends and family. Another respondent told that she also sometimes consults her Pakistani teachers, friends, and parents.

Finally, for the majority of the Pakistani scholars, studying in Austria is an experience which has brought many positive changes in them. Many of

the scholars described the ways they had been groomed after being an international student. They can, now, feel an increased sense of responsibility and sensitivity; more tolerance towards other communities; increased independence, confidence, punctuality, and openness; and they have become more digital. Some of the scholars said that their experience had caused very positive changes in most of their ideas and beliefs about people. For example, one of the scholars said that he does not like to interfere any more with others' personal matters, religious or social beliefs.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study is an exploration of subjective descriptions of the adjustment experiences of Pakistani PhD scholars in Austria and is qualitative, by nature. The statements and quotes of the respondents are used to describe the complexity and diversity in responses. Seven main themes emerged from analyzing the responses of the participants. These themes are, "expectations versus reality about studying and living in Austria"; "cultural shock and cultural adjustment, cultural differences between Pakistan and Austria"; "experiences of discrimination/ stereotyping/ harassment due to being an international student"; "language proficiency and difficulties in communication"; "relationship, help-seeking and social support from the supervisor and local Austrian community"; and "psychological impact of studying in Austria". The main factors that affected the adjustment of Pakistani PhD scholars in Austria include their proficiency in the German language, lack of communication with the Austrian community, living without the social life and family as was in Pakistan and homesickness.

The majority of the Pakistani scholars reported being changed, during their stay in Austria, regarding an increased sense of responsibility, sensitivity, tolerance towards other communities, independence, confidence, punctuality and being more digital. The results of the analysis can help in understanding the adjustment experiences of Pakistani PhD scholars, living, and studying in Austria. This understanding can provide valuable information to counseling psychologists and concerned university departments such as international student services. The Higher Education Commission of Pakistan can also incorporate these findings in preparing future scholars for higher studies in Austria. The potential shortcoming of the study is that the sample size is relatively small. For future research, this should be increased to enhance the diversity of responses; and questions, included in the questionnaire, can also be more elaborated to obtain more detailed information for analysis.

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