

Market Intelligence Brief

Pakistan

Contents

1	Executive Summary	3
2	Introduction	5
3	Macro Environment.....	6
3.1	People.....	6
3.2	Economy.....	8
3.3	Government and education policy.....	10
4	Domestic Education Environment.....	11
4.1	Overview	11
4.2	Early years, primary, secondary.....	13
4.3	Technical & vocational education and training	14
4.4	Higher education.....	16
5	International Education	17
5.1	Student mobility	17
5.2	Transnational education and distance learning.....	23
6	UK Cooperation	25

1 Executive Summary

As the fifth most populous country in the world and second largest economy in South Asia after India, Pakistan is a developing, lower-middle income nation with a GDP per capita of around US\$1,400. Although a significant reduction in poverty has been achieved in Pakistan over the last two decades, human development outcomes have lagged, and economic growth has been volatile and slow. Growth of per capita GDP has been weak, leaving it well behind regional peers including India (US\$2,375) and Bangladesh (US\$2,470) in 2022. After a strong post-pandemic recovery in economic growth in 2021 and first half of 2022, heavy rains during the 2022 monsoon season led to catastrophic flooding, leaving large swathes of the country underwater and more than 30m people displaced, casting a shadow on near term economic growth prospects.

Alongside being one of the world's largest, Pakistan's population is also remarkably youthful, with almost half of the population being under the age of 20 at present according to the United Nations. The booming youth population poses a significant challenge to the country's education system, and indeed capacity shortages, alongside gender disparity, have historically been two of the defining characteristics of Pakistan's education system. With an estimated 22.8m children between the ages of 5 and 16 not attending school, Pakistan has the world's second highest number of out-of-school children. Furthermore, boys outnumber girls at every stage of the education system, showing that the historical undervaluation of female education in Pakistan is still prevalent today. Providing adequate education to the large and growing youth population will be essential if Pakistan is to achieve a 'demographic dividend' in future.

Given the capacity and quality issues prevalent with the domestic education system, Pakistan is a relatively large market for outbound international students. According to estimates from UNESCO, almost 65,000 students from Pakistan travelled abroad to study at the higher education level in 2020, making it the third largest outbound international student market in South Asia, after India and Nepal, and the 18th largest in the world. Since 2010, the volume of outbound students has increased consistently, growing by an average of around 5 per cent per year from 38,000 outbound students in 2010.

Historically, China and Australia have been the most popular study destinations for outbound international students from Pakistan. China's prominence is primarily due to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor agreement that includes favourable education policies towards students in Pakistan, including a large number of scholarships. Prior to the pandemic, there were over 28,000 Pakistani students enrolled in Chinese universities. However, Pakistani student numbers in both China and Australia have fallen sharply over the last couple of years due to strict Covid policies in both countries, with other destinations benefitting. For example, in Australia in 2022, Pakistani student numbers were almost 40 per cent below 2019 peak levels but are expected to recover strongly in the years ahead after the re-opening of Australia's borders.

Looking at the UK's recruitment of Pakistani international students, after seeing modest growth between the 2016/17 and 2019/20 academic years, growth has surged over the last couple of years, with growth of over 60 per cent in 2020/21, followed by even stronger growth of 75 per cent in 2021/22. Most of the growth in student numbers from Pakistan over the last couple of years has come at the postgraduate level. Contributing to the strong growth of late, the UK was

among the first countries to introduce visa flexibility for students during the pandemic, including permitting remote study for the whole 2020/21 academic year and replacing thousands of expired visas free of charge so Pakistani students could still travel, while restrictions in other major destinations such as China and Australia were much tighter. Furthermore, in summer 2021, the UK introduced the Graduate Route, a new post-study work visa that allows eligible students two years (or three years for PHD students) to stay after they graduate to work, or look for work, in the UK.

According to HESA, there were 9,770 Pakistani students enrolled on UK TNE and distance learning courses in the 2021/22 academic year. This is up by 34 per cent versus enrolments in 2019/20, which stood at 7,310. As such, Pakistan currently ranks as one of the UK's top 20 TNE and distance learning markets globally and is similar in size to other South Asian countries including India (12,075) and Nepal (10,700). However, Pakistan is well behind Sri Lanka (45,980) which is the UK's largest market in South Asia and indeed one of its largest globally. In 2021/22, almost 95 per cent of UK TNE provision in Pakistan was via distance learning, with around 80 per cent of provision taking place at bachelor's level. With domestic capacity likely to remain a challenge for Pakistan in future, the country represents a strong opportunity for the UK for growth in both inbound international students and TNE provision in the years ahead.

2 Introduction

This report was produced by the British Council's South Asia Education Insight Hub, with external research support provided by Oxford Economics¹. It is designed to provide UK education institutions with unparalleled data, insight and analysis to support their international education strategies, recruitment activities and partnership development work. The report is also targeted at a UK and Pakistani policy maker audience, by highlighting opportunities and barriers to education and research cooperation that exist between the two countries.

Using the latest data from the most reliable sources, this Market Intelligence Brief represents a window onto Pakistan's education system and student population, as well as the economic and demographic factors, and policy priorities and developments that shape the country's international education outlook. The report examines various aspects related to the internationalisation of the Pakistan education system – including student mobility, transnational education programmes and research collaboration – and also highlights national level education projects and partnerships between the UK and Pakistan.

The information contained in this report is based primarily on desk-based research and data analysis, supplemented with insight and context provided by British Council colleagues on the ground in Pakistan and the wider South Asia region.

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Comments, queries and suggestions in relation to this report are welcome and may be submitted to Sandeepa Sahay, Head of South Asia Education Insight Hub, at sandeepa.sahay@britishcouncil.org

¹ www.oxfordeconomics.com

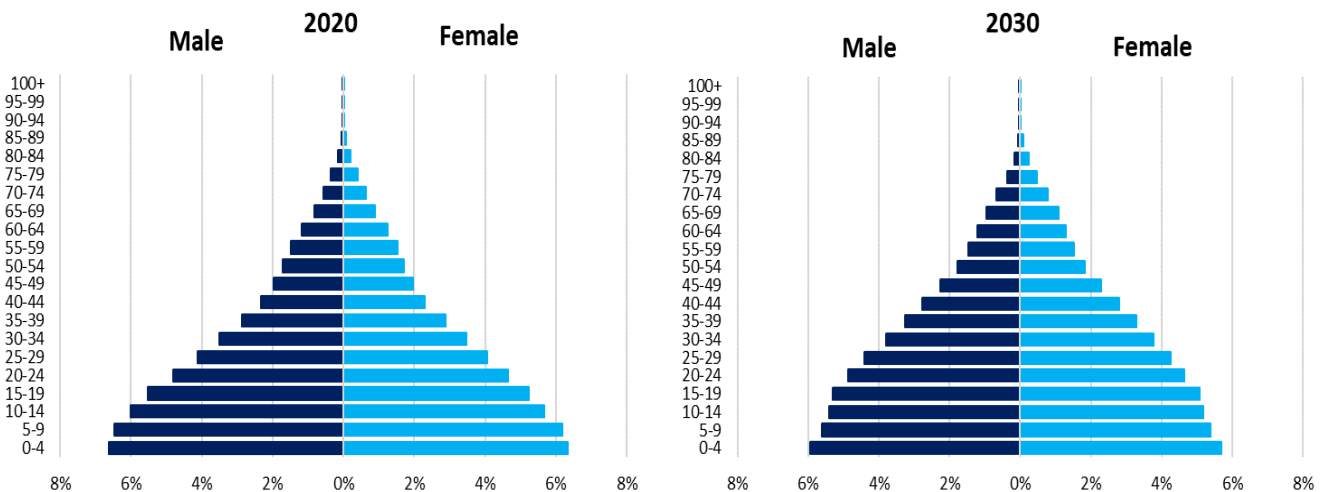
3 Macro Environment

3.1 People

With a population of around 231m in 2021, Pakistan is the fifth most populous country in the world, after China, India, the US, and Indonesia.² However, while still strong relative to many other countries around the world, population growth has slowed considerably over recent decades, from a peak of more than 4 per cent per year in the early 1980s to less than 2 per cent per year over the last decade. This has been driven by a consistent decline in Pakistan’s total fertility rate, which has declined from around 6.5 in the early 1980s to 3.4 in 2020. Still, this was well above the global (2.4) and South Asia (2.3) averages and will support continued robust population growth in future.³ According to the UN, Pakistan’s population will grow to 274m by 2030, and further to around 368m by 2050, by which time its population is expected to be similar in scale to that of the US.

Pakistan has a remarkably youthful population, with almost half of the population being under the age of 20 at present. Looking ahead, although the population is expected to age gradually in future, the proportion of under 20s in the population is expected to remain high at around 44 per cent by 2030, compared to 48 per cent at present. At the same time, the share of the population aged over 65 currently stands at around 4 per cent and is expected to rise marginally to 5 per cent by the end of the decade.

Figure 1: Pakistan’s population pyramid, 2020 and 2030



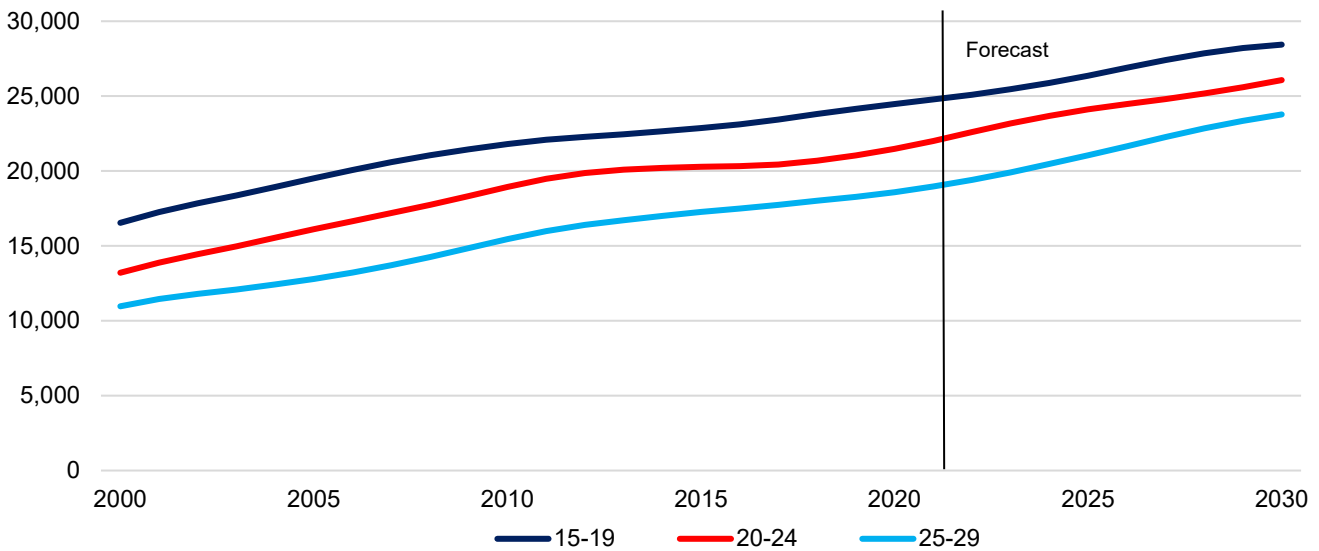
Source: UN Population Division

² World Population Prospects, United Nations Population Division, 2022, <https://population.un.org/wpp/>

³ Fertility Rate: Pakistan, World Bank, 2022, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN?locations=PK>

Looking specifically at the age bands of most relevance to UK higher education institutions (HEIs), each of these groups have grown strongly and consistently over the last two decades. Over this period, the student age population (15-29) grew from around 41m in 2000, to 56m by 2010 and further to almost 66m by 2021. Looking ahead, robust growth in the student age population is expected to continue, with the population projected to reach 78m by the end of the decade.

Figure 2: Pakistan’s student age population (000s)



Source: UN Population Division

Given its demographic structure and outlook, Pakistan is well-placed to benefit from a ‘demographic dividend’ in future and has some of the greatest demographic opportunities for development in the world as the growing youth population enters adulthood. However, the demographic dividend can only be achieved with adequate investment in the education and skills of the youth population, harvesting the fruits of long-term human capital development. At present, over 40 per cent of Pakistani children aged 5-16 are out-of-school, according to UNICEF, which represents a significant challenge not only for the Pakistani education system, but the country more widely in the years ahead.⁴

According to the UN, approximately 37 per cent of the Pakistani population lived in urban areas in 2021, which was closely aligned with the South Asia average. Looking ahead, the urbanisation rate is projected to rise to around 41 per cent by the end of the decade, and to 52 per cent by 2050, when just over half of the Pakistani population is expected to live in urban areas. The most populous city in Pakistan is Karachi, with a population of 17.2m, followed by Lahore (14.0m) and Faisalabad (3.7m).⁵

The largest religious denomination in Pakistan is Islam, with the vast majority (96.5 per cent) of the population identifying as Muslim. Other religions including Hinduism and Christianity account

³ Pakistan, UNICEF, 2022, [Give every child the right to education](#)

⁵ World City Populations, World Population Review, 2023, www.worldpopulationreview.com/world-cities

for the remaining 3.5 per cent.⁶ In terms of languages, Pakistan is a multilingual country, with several different languages spoken as first languages. Urdu is the national language and serves as the lingua franca of the country and is one of the two official languages of Pakistan, alongside English. However, numerous regional languages are spoken across the country, with Punjabi the most spoken (45 per cent).

Despite English being one of the country's official languages, according to the English First (EF) English Proficiency Index, Pakistan has a 'low' level of English proficiency, ranking 70th out of the 111 countries covered by the analysis in 2022 and 11th out of 24 countries in Asia.⁷

3.2 Economy

Over the past two decades, Pakistan has achieved significant poverty reduction, with increased economic opportunities outside the rural economy and increased migration and associated remittances enabling 47m Pakistanis to escape poverty between 2001 and 2018. However, despite significant progress on poverty reduction, human capital development remains a significant issue. For example, Pakistan is facing a serious problem of child under-nutrition, with about 38 per cent of children in the country stunted and around 75 per cent experiencing learning poverty, according to the World Bank.

The Pakistani economy remains reliant on agriculture and especially the important cotton harvest, with the agricultural sector accounting for 20-25 per cent of GDP over the last decade. However, industry, which has accounted for around 20 per cent of GDP over the last decade, has strong potential for future growth given the size of the domestic market. Meanwhile, services have accounted for more than 50 per cent of GDP over the last decade.

The Covid-19 pandemic put a halt to more than 50 years of uninterrupted annual economic growth in Pakistan, with its economy contracting by 1.3 per cent in 2020. However, with strong recovery growth of 6.5 per cent in 2021, GDP returned to pre-pandemic levels within a year. Despite domestic and external pressures, large-scale manufacturing, agricultural production, and workers' remittances continued to grow robustly in 2022, contributing to strong annual GDP growth of around 6.2 per cent for the year. Despite this, the near-term outlook for the Pakistan economy is clouded by the catastrophic and unprecedented floods experienced in the country in late 2022. After heavy monsoon rains for several months, around one third of the country is underwater, with just over 33 million people affected, equating to around 15 per cent of the population.⁸

As such, Pakistan's economy is under severe stress, with low levels of foreign reserves, a depreciating currency and record levels of inflation. The devastating floods, along with difficulties in securing quality fertilizers and animal feed, have reduced agricultural output and employment opportunities for low-income workers. Similarly, dwindling foreign reserves, import restrictions, flood impacts, high fuel costs, policy uncertainty, and the slowdown in domestic and global demand have affected industry and service sector activity. Overall, economic growth in 2023 is

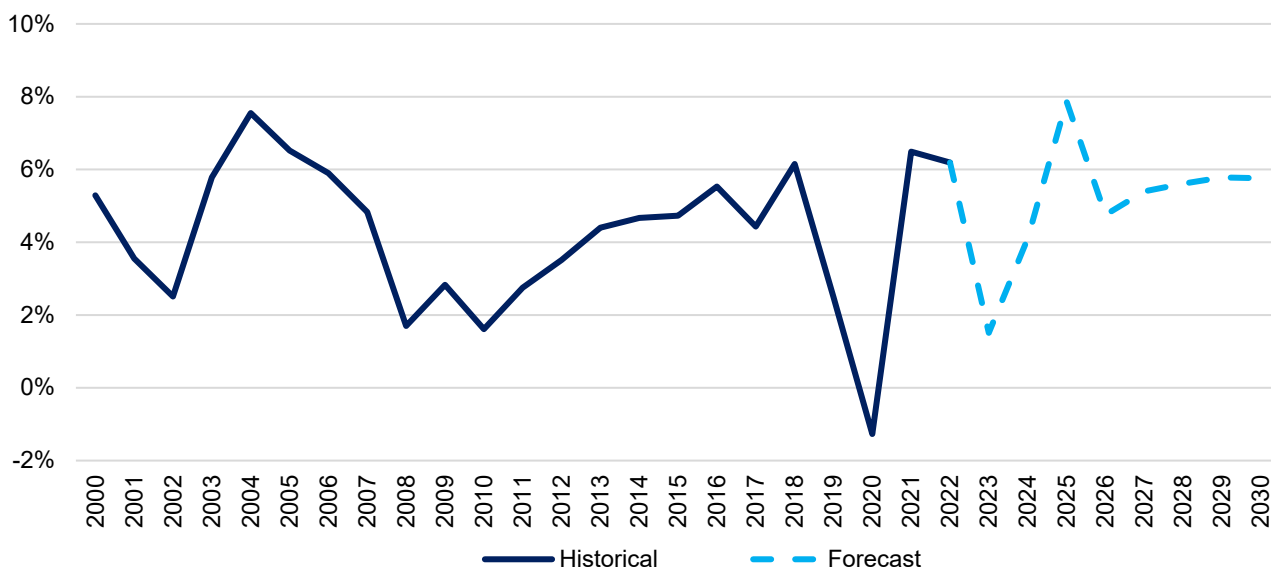
⁶ Pakistan Country Summary, *CIA World Factbook*, 2022, www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/pakistan/summaries

⁷ English Proficiency Index, *English First*, 2022, www.ef.com/wwen/epi/regions/asia/pakistan/

⁸ Pakistan climate change: One third of the country is underwater, *Open Access Government*, 2022, www.openaccessgovernment.org/pakistan-climate-change/142864/

expected to slow sharply to around 1.5 per cent, from 6.2 per cent in 2022. This would represent the weakest pace of annual economic growth in Pakistan in decades (aside from the pandemic) and risks are to the downside with the possibility of a sovereign default looming large. However, medium term prospects are brighter, with growth expected to return to the 5-6 per cent per year range by the mid-2020s, notwithstanding current high levels of economic uncertainty.

Figure 3: Pakistan’s real GDP growth



Source: Haver Analytics / Oxford Economics

As of 2022, Pakistan’s GDP per capita (nominal terms) stood at US\$1,385, making it one of the poorest countries in South Asia and well behind regional peers including India (US\$2,375) and Bangladesh (US\$2,470). Indeed, growth in GDP in per capita terms has been weak over the last decade, constrained by the country’s persistent infrastructure deficit, fiscal mismanagement, and political uncertainty. Major reforms in these areas are needed to improve long-term growth potential.

Currently trading at around 300 per US dollar, the Pakistani rupee (PKR) has suffered continued devaluation over recent years, following ongoing concerns of a widening trade balance deficit and a strengthening US dollar. During 2022, the rupee depreciated by almost 26 per cent against the dollar and plunged further in January 2023 after the IMF demanded that the unofficial cap on the rupee exchange rate was changed to a market determined rate. In response, the central bank hiked its main policy rate to 17 per cent in January and with inflationary pressures also a major concern, the rate had risen to 21 per cent by April. Although continued exchange rate volatility is likely, Oxford Economics expects the policy rate hikes over recent months to support the PKR in the near-term with appreciation back towards 150 per US dollar expected by the mid-2020s, which will provide a boost to the affordability of international study for Pakistani students.

Given the relative weakness of the pound in 2022, the Pakistani rupee depreciated by a lesser 13 per cent against the pound during the year, compared to 26 per cent against the dollar. In common with the outlook against the dollar, the rupee is expected to appreciate against the pound over the coming years, reaching a value of around 200 per pound by the mid-2020s from around 360 per pound at present.

3.3 Government and education policy

Pakistan is a federal parliamentary republic, which has Islam as its state religion. The country's President acts as a figurehead, representing the unity of the nation state. The Prime Minister of Pakistan leads the executive government, which is independent of the state government. Provincial governments in the four provinces of Pakistan operate with a high degree of independence from the central government.⁹

Politics in Pakistan have been generally unstable since independence in 1947, with regular military involvement. Weak governments have resulted in a poor overall economic performance and low foreign investment, while at the same time relations with India have remained tense.

The education system in Pakistan is overseen by the Federal Ministry of Education and the provincial governments. The federal government's main role in the education system is to assist in curriculum development, accreditation, and the financing of research and development.

Given its very large and youthful population, development of the education system in Pakistan is a key priority for the government. The National Education Policy 2017-25 sets out the country's core medium term objectives for the sector, which include the expansion of early childhood education, achieving universal primary education, provision of free elementary and secondary education, increasing literacy rates across all age groups, achieving gender equality in education, and creating a knowledge economy through higher education.¹⁰ Furthermore, in its wider Vision 2025 national plan¹¹, development of human capital was identified as a crucial element for the country's future success, and set out the following specific objectives for the education sector:

- Increase primary school enrolment and completion rate to 100 per cent and literacy rate to 90 per cent
- Increase higher education coverage from 7 per cent to 12 per cent, and increase number of PhDs to 15,000
- Improve primary and secondary gender parity index to 1

⁹ Political System in Pakistan, *Democratic Foundation*, 2022, www.democraticfoundation.com.pk/political-system-in-pakistan

¹⁰ Pakistan National Education Policy 2017-2025, *Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training*, 2017, https://planipolis.iiep.unesco.org/sites/default/files/ressources/pakistan_national_education_policy_2017-2025.pdf

¹¹ Pakistan 2025 – One Nation One Vision, *Government of Pakistan*, 2014, www.pc.gov.pk/uploads/vision2025/Pakistan-Vision-2025.pdf

4 Domestic Education Environment

4.1 Overview

According to UNICEF, Pakistan has the world's second highest number of out of school children, with an estimated 22.8m children between the ages of 5 and 16 not attending school. In the 5-9 age group, 5m children are not enrolled in schools, and this number more than doubles when looking at the 10-14 age group. Furthermore, gender disparities are stark, with boys heavily outnumbering girls at every stage of education. The main causes of the gender disparity include safety concerns, child marriage, and the fact that the education of young women has historically been undervalued in Pakistan. Regional disparities are also present and are underpinned by poverty. Families, particularly in rural areas, often cannot afford the costs associated with education. It is not uncommon for girls from impoverished families to be left at home to cook and do housework so that the parents can work to provide the household with essentials. In Pakistan's largest, poorest province, Baluchistan, the percentage of out of school children stands at around 70 per cent, while only 12 per cent of children are out of school in the Islamabad capital territory.¹² These regional disparities have a significant impact on regional economic outcomes and make it difficult for rural regions to develop.

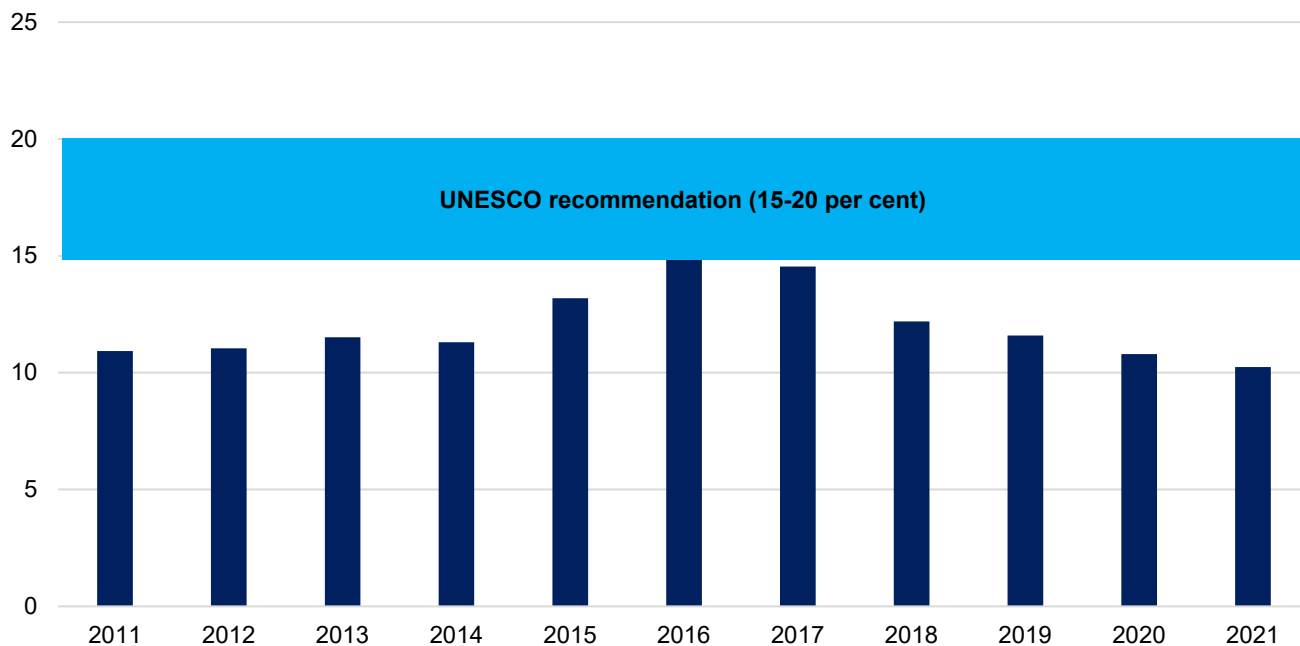
Furthermore, while progress has been made in improving access, Pakistan's education system remains very selective, with the best educational opportunities only available to those with wealth or influence. Other leading issues within the education system in Pakistan range from dysfunctional and run-down school facilities that lack sanitation and electricity, to underqualified teaching staff. The system is overwhelmed by Pakistan's booming youth population and will require significant investment to overcome these problems.

In its Education 2030 Framework for Action, UNESCO recommends that governments should allocate at least 15-20 per cent of public expenditure to education.¹³ Looking back over the last decade, Pakistan has only reached this level of expenditure once (2016) and has fallen well short in most other years. Given the sheer volume of out of school children in the country and the ambitious objectives for the education sector over the coming years as set out in its National Education Plan and Vision 2025 framework, allocating additional funds to the education system will be necessary in the years ahead.

¹² Education in Pakistan, *World Educations News + Reviews*, 2020, <https://wenr.wes.org/2020/02/education-in-pakistan>

¹³ Education 2030 Framework for Action, *UNESCO*, 2016, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000245656>

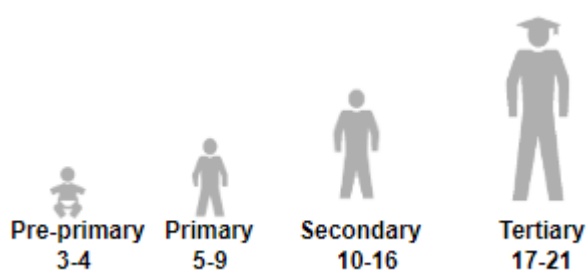
Figure 4: Pakistan government expenditure on education (per cent total government expenditure)



Source: World Bank

The education system in Pakistan is built around four key stages: pre-primary, primary, secondary, and tertiary education. Education is technically compulsory from age 5 to 16 (primary and compulsory secondary) but many children, especially those in rural areas, do not have access to education throughout these years.

Figure 5: Official school ages in Pakistan, by level of education



Source: UNESCO

While Pakistan has historically had a very centralised system of government, education is an area that has become increasingly decentralised, with many matters of school curricula being delegated from the federal government to provincial governments, and from provincial to local district governments. However, the federal government continues to set some overarching policies and quality standards and is still responsible for the primary oversight of both the higher education system, and technical and vocational education (TVET).

Over the last decade due to encouragement from the government, there has been a growing role for the private sector in the delivery of education in Pakistan. In 2020/21, the public sector served 29m students (54 per cent of all students), with the remaining 25m (46 per cent) enrolled in the private sector.¹⁴

4.2 Early years, primary, secondary

Since 2010, free and compulsory education for all 5–16-year-olds has been considered a fundamental right in Pakistan.¹⁵ The implementation of this constitutional right, however, is ongoing, as an estimated 44 per cent of children aged 5-16 are still out-of-school.

Early childhood education between the ages of three and four has historically been given little attention in Pakistan. The government estimates that around one third of children aged 3-4 participate in pre-primary education. Most of this early childhood education is administered in affluent urban areas, with a mix of public and private kindergartens. The government is seeking to increase the uptake of pre-primary education, but progress in this area has been slow, with many issues still to address elsewhere in the education system.

Most children that participate in Pakistan's education system start school at the age of five. The academic calendar year for primary and secondary school aged children runs from February to June and from September to January, with a break that coincides with monsoon season. Since colonial times, the primary language of instruction in Pakistan's primary and secondary education system has been English. This remains the case in most private schools but is increasingly being replaced by Urdu in public schools. Elementary school lasts five years (grades 1–5) and is followed by three years of middle school (grades 6-8), two years of lower secondary (grades 9-10) and two years of upper secondary (grades 11-12).

In elementary school, the curriculum typically includes English, Urdu, regional languages, mathematics, science, social studies, and Islamiyat (Islamic studies). Islamiyat is seen as critical for instilling Islamic values in children for both personal development and for the formation of national identity. Although these are the most common core subjects found in elementary schools, there are variations in the curriculum between different provinces. This has been the case since 2010, when the administration of the school system was devolved from the federal government to the provincial governments. The provinces of Punjab and Sindh carry out standardised examinations at the end of grades five and eight, but this is not the case in every region. A national curriculum committee has been tasked with coordinating standards between provinces and introduced a single national curriculum in 2020, with the aim of alleviating the problems associated with the fragmented system of the past. This National Curriculum Programme was initially implemented at primary level, followed by the secondary level, though implementation across the country has been inconsistent.

¹⁴ Pakistan Education Statistics 2020-21, *Ministry of Federal Education & Professional Training*, 2023, <http://library.aepam.edu.pk/Books/Pakistan%20Education%20Statistics%202020-21.pdf>

¹⁵ Transition From Law to Education, *Pal Network*, 2017, <https://palnetwork.org/article-25-a-transition-from-law-to-implementation/#:~:text=On%20April%2019th%202010%2C%20the,road%20where%20do%20we%20stand>

Students must complete middle school, passing their grade eight provincial exam, to gain entrance to secondary school. Pakistan's secondary education system is centred on high stakes examinations and rote learning. In lower secondary school (grades 9-10), there are three different specialisation streams. These are science, humanities, and technical. After choosing one of these specialities, students typically select three subjects from that category. In addition to these chosen subjects, students must partake in the mandatory core subjects. These typically include Urdu, English, mathematics, Pakistan studies and Islamiyat. At the end of grades 9 and 10, students sit exams which count towards their secondary school certificate (known as the 'matriculation certificate').

Upon achievement of the matriculation certificate, students can progress to upper secondary education (grades 11 and 12). According to UNESCO, however, only 23 per cent of students' progress from lower secondary into upper secondary school. In upper secondary school, students pick one stream (such as science) and then partake in a number of mandatory subjects, alongside some selected subjects from their chosen stream. Similar to the examination process for the matriculation certificate, students undertake examinations across two years (year 11 and 12) to complete their higher secondary school certificate.

4.3 Technical & vocational education and training

Given the country's very large and youthful population, TVET is seen as a critical component of the wider education system in Pakistan which can help address youth unemployment and equip the workforce with the skills needed to spur economic development. With this in mind, the government is aiming to develop a TVET system that can accommodate 20 per cent of all school leavers by 2025.

TVET in Pakistan can be undertaken on an informal industry-based apprenticeship programme, or through a formal secondary-level certificate or diploma. In the case of formal TVET training, the curricula typically include the mandatory subjects of the national upper secondary curriculum. This provides students on TVET programmes with the option of progressing to higher education. Vocational subjects are offered in selected secondary schools and are studied alongside the other subjects.

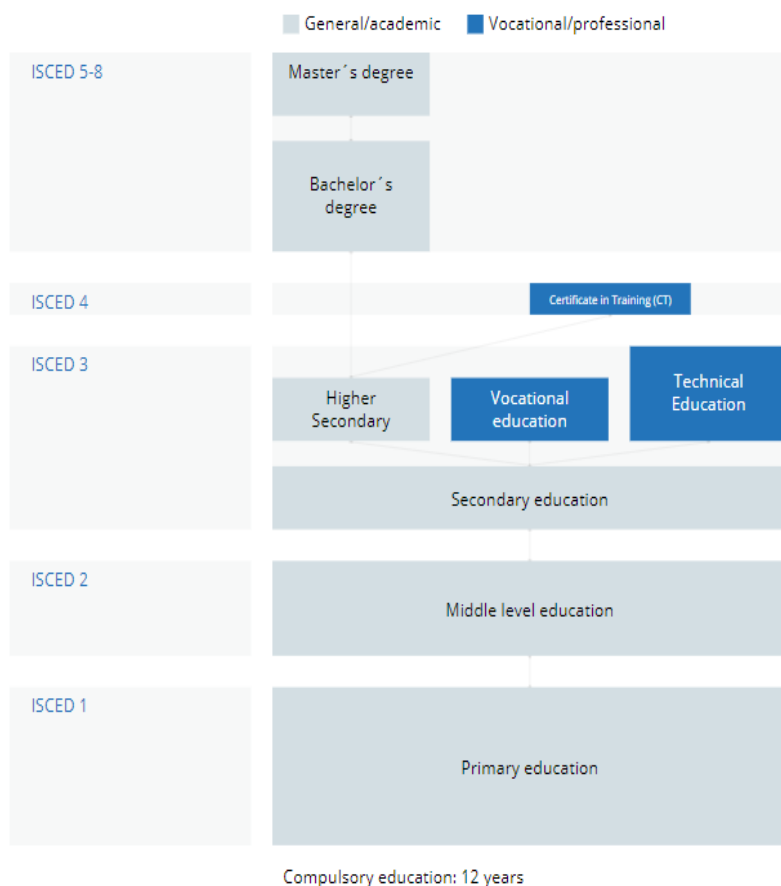
Post-secondary TVET programmes can be studied in polytechnic institutions and colleges of technology.¹⁶ According to UNESCO, there are a total of 3,740 TVET institutions across Pakistan and these institutions are overseen by the National Vocational and Technical Training Commission. As of 2018, there were around 450,000 students enrolled in vocational education, which represents approximately 1 per cent of the 15–24-year-old population. Only around one third of these 450,000 students were female.

With support from the TVET Reform Support Programme, competency-based training is increasingly being implemented, with a growing trend around the establishment of centres of excellence across provinces through donor funding.

¹⁶ Pakistan TVET Country Profile, UNESCO, 2022, <https://unevoc.unesco.org/home/Dynamic+TVET+Country+Profiles/country=PAK>

The TVET sector in Pakistan has historically been held back by a lack of national coordination and an outdated curricula that failed to adequately prepare students for the labour market. To address these problems, Pakistan’s government initiated a programme in 2009 to develop a National Vocational Qualification Framework (NVQF). The primary goal of this programme was to create a system of competency based, nationally standardised TVET qualifications that are aligned with international standards. The NVQF is still under development but will eventually comprise of eight qualification levels. The first four levels are already established and are secondary-level vocational certificates. Completion of level five will enable students to obtain a diploma. Levels six, seven and eight relate to higher education-level vocational certificates and will award students with titles of ‘Bachelor’, ‘Master’, and ‘Doctorate’ respectively.

Figure 6: Structure of the formal education and training system in Pakistan



Source: UNESCO

4.4 Higher education

Pakistan has a small but growing higher education sector. According to UNESCO, tertiary enrollments amounted to just 305,000 in 1990. By 2019, this number had grown to 2.6m. Despite this growth, overall participation rates in tertiary education are still very low in Pakistan, with a gross enrollment ratio of just 12.2 per cent in 2019, which compared to higher rates of 27 and 24 per cent in India and Bangladesh respectively. Much like other parts of the education system in Pakistan, HEIs suffer from a lack of funding, which has resulted in a lack of qualified faculty and poor coordination and cooperation between institutions.

HEIs in Pakistan tend to follow a semester system. The system comprises of two semesters, each 16-18 weeks in length, that run from January to May, and from August to December. The predominant language used in Pakistan's HEI's is English, but some institutions teach in Urdu.

In Pakistan there are 209 universities recognised by the Higher Education Commission - the federal institution responsible for the oversight, regulation, accreditation, and funding of higher education in Pakistan. Most public universities are large multi-faculty research institutions, offering a large range of academic programs. Conversely, private universities tend to be much smaller and more specialized. Overall, 11 universities in Pakistan are ranked within the 2022 Times Higher Education World University Rankings top 1,000 universities, with Quaid-i-Azam University in Islamabad ranking top, as Pakistan's only university in the top 600.¹⁷

To gain a place in one of Pakistan's accredited universities, students will almost always need a higher secondary school certificate. There are, however, some exceptions whereby specific courses will accept applicants with a technical board diploma. Most institutions require students to have achieved a minimum grade of 50 per cent in their higher secondary school certificate, but this threshold can be much higher for more prestigious universities and more competitive graduate programs. Admission to prestigious universities may also be dependent on the passing of an admission test or interview, administered by the university.

Aside from universities, Pakistan is home to almost 3,000 colleges and other teaching institutions that are affiliated with universities. These institutions provide higher education certificates but do not grant degrees and unlike Pakistan's universities, these institutions are overseen by provincial governments. In recent years, a system of community colleges has been established, which are designed to provide more applied programmes that lead to employment-gearred associate degrees.

¹⁷ World University Rankings 2022, *Times Higher Education*, 2022, www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2022#/page/0/length/25/locations/PAK/sort_by/rank/sort_order/asc/cols/stats

5 International Education

5.1 Student mobility

According to estimates from UNESCO, almost 65,000 students from Pakistan travelled abroad to study at the higher education level in 2020, making it the third largest outbound international student market in South Asia, after India and Nepal, and the 18th largest in the world. Since 2010, the volume of outbound students has increased consistently, growing by an average of around 5 per cent per year from 38,000 outbound students in 2010.

Historically, China and Australia have been the most popular study destinations for outbound international students from Pakistan. China's prominence is primarily due to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor agreement that includes favourable education policies towards students in Pakistan, including many scholarships. Prior to the pandemic, there were over 28,000 Pakistani students enrolled in Chinese universities.¹⁸ However, Pakistani student numbers in both China and Australia have fallen sharply over the last couple of years due to strict Covid policies in both countries, with other destinations benefitting.

Looking at the UK's recruitment of Pakistani international students, after peaking at almost 11,000 in the 2010/11 academic year, student numbers fell consistently for several years to below 6,000 by 2016/17. This was likely caused by the introduction of higher tuition fees at UK universities, stricter post-study working visa requirements, and increased interest in other study destinations. However, from 2017/18, Pakistani student numbers began to recover modestly, reaching almost 8,000 by 2019/20. Then, in 2020/21, the number of Pakistani students studying in the UK surged by over 60 per cent, reaching a new peak level of more than 12,000. In the 2021/22 academic year, there was another even stronger surge, this time by 75 per cent which took the total number of Pakistani international students in the UK to just below 22,000, making the UK by some distance the most popular English-speaking study destination for Pakistani international students at present. Most of the growth in student numbers from Pakistan over the last couple of years has come at the postgraduate level. In particular, demand for one-year master's degrees offered by UK universities has increased significantly, particularly from cost conscious international students, given that most full-time UK masters programmes take half the time to complete, compared with similar postgraduate programmes in many rival study destinations.

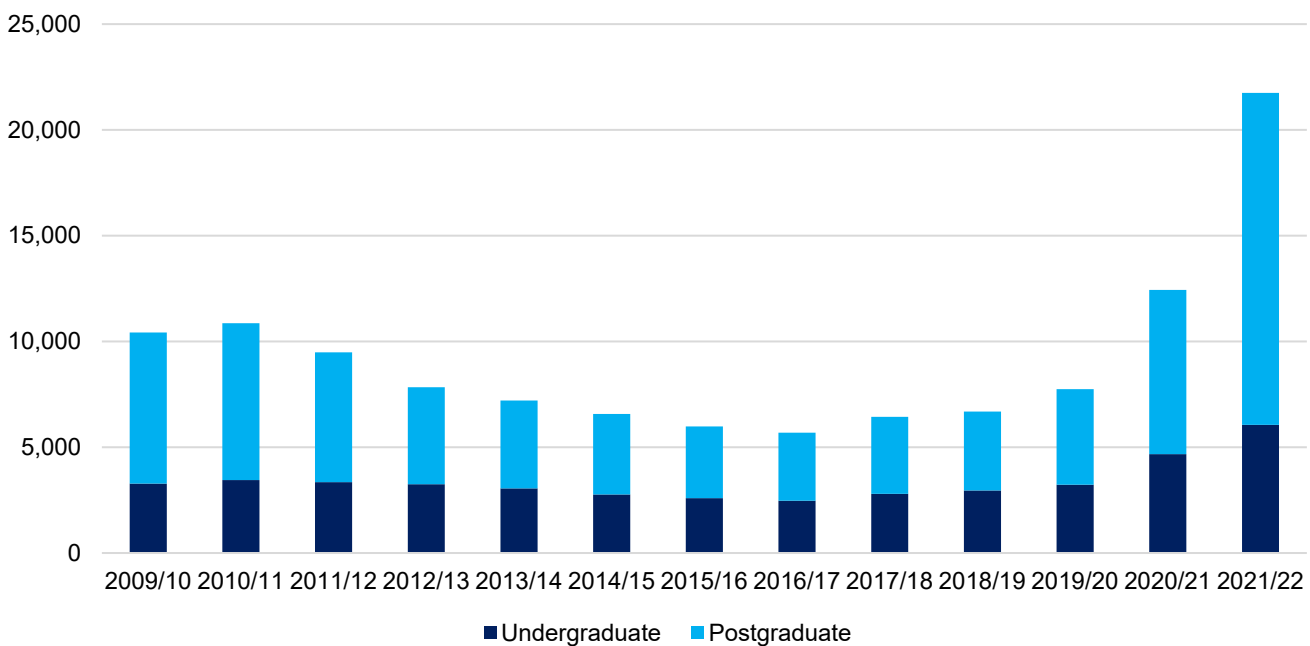
Also contributing to the strong growth over the last couple of years, the UK was among the first countries to introduce visa flexibility for students during the pandemic, including permitting remote study for the whole 2020/21 academic year and replacing thousands of expired visas free of charge so Pakistani students could still travel, while restrictions in other major destinations such as China and Australia were much tighter. Furthermore, in summer 2021, the UK introduced the

¹⁸ China Gears Up For Return of International Students, *University World News*, 2022, www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=2022082420051560

Graduate Route, a new post-study work visa that allows eligible students two years (or three years for PHD students) to stay after they graduate to work, or look for work, in the UK.¹⁹

Consistent with the recent surge in Pakistani international student numbers, UK study visa issuance to Pakistani nationals has grown strongly over recent years. In 2021, visa issuance to Pakistani students was more than three times higher than the pre-pandemic level. Furthermore, study visa issuance to Pakistani nationals doubled in 2022 compared to 2021, reaching just over 28,000. This made Pakistan the fourth largest sending country to the UK, only behind India, China and Nigeria and suggests that the strong growth seen in Pakistani international student numbers in the UK continued in the 2022/23 academic year.

Figure 7: Pakistani students in HE programmes in the UK



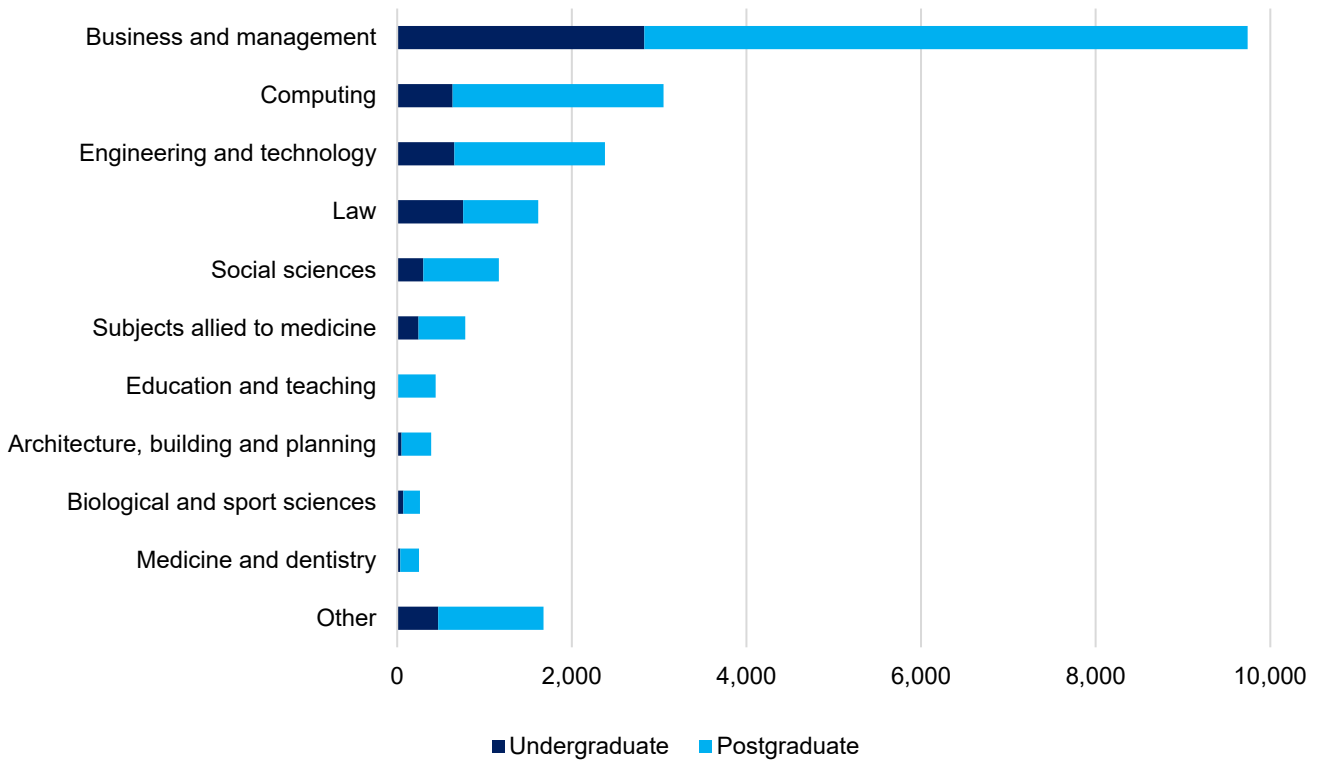
Source: HESA

Regarding subject areas, business and management is by far the most popular subject area with both undergraduates and postgraduates, with a total of 9,740 enrolments in 2021/22. This was around three times more than the second most popular subject, computing, which had 3,050 enrolments. The next most popular subject choices were engineering and technology (2,380), law (1,615) and social sciences (1,165). Looking back over the last 5 years, there has been a large degree of consistency in the subject choices of Pakistani students in the UK, with the top five subjects remaining the same and business and management by far the most popular choice throughout.

¹⁹ On International Students Day, UK Immigration minister says to Pakistani scholars: Choose the UK, *Gov.uk*, 2020, [UK education minister says to Pakistani scholars: Choose the UK.](#)

Meanwhile, over much of the last decade, Russell Group institutions have accounted for 25-30 per cent of all Pakistani students enrolled at UK HEIs on average. However, this share fell to 17 per cent in 2020/21 and further to just 11 per cent in 2021/22. This was the lowest share since HESA records began in 2002/03 and shows that the recent surge in Pakistani enrolments at UK universities has been primarily driven by enrolment growth at non-Russell Group institutions.

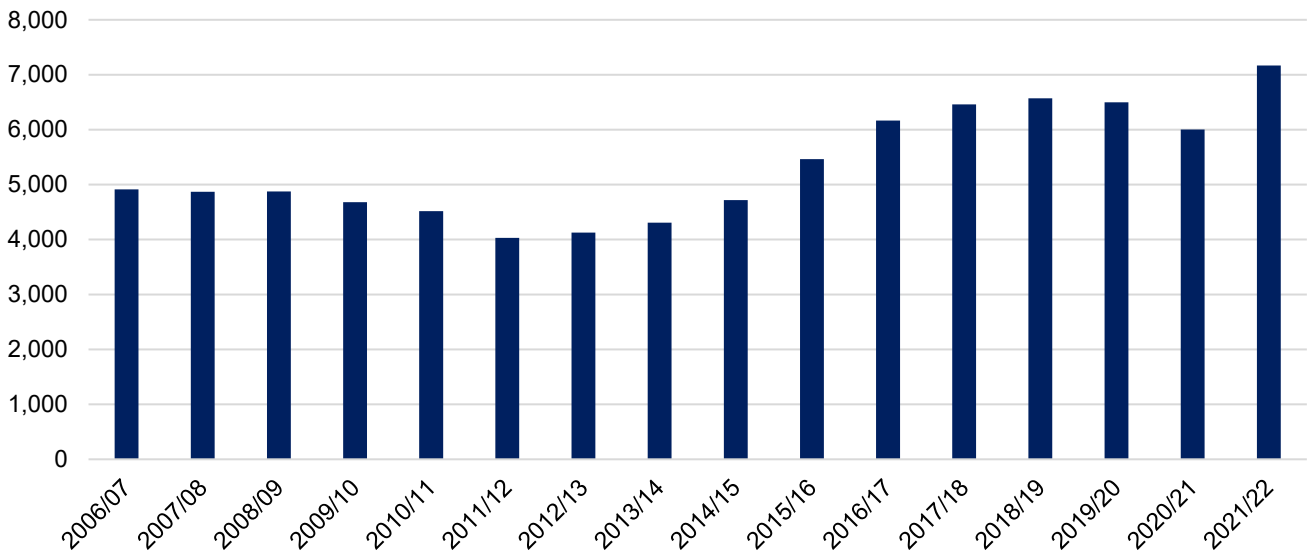
Figure 8: Subjects studied by Pakistani HE students in the UK, 2021/22



Source: HESA

In terms of location, London (4,005 students) is the preferred region of study in the UK for students from Pakistan, with almost one in five students studying in the capital in 2021/22. Scotland was the next most popular region with 3,410 students, followed by the East of England (3,180). At the institution level, the most popular in 2021/22 was the University of Hertfordshire (2,010), followed by Coventry University (1,020) and the University of the West of Scotland (940).

Figure 9: Pakistani HE enrolments in the US

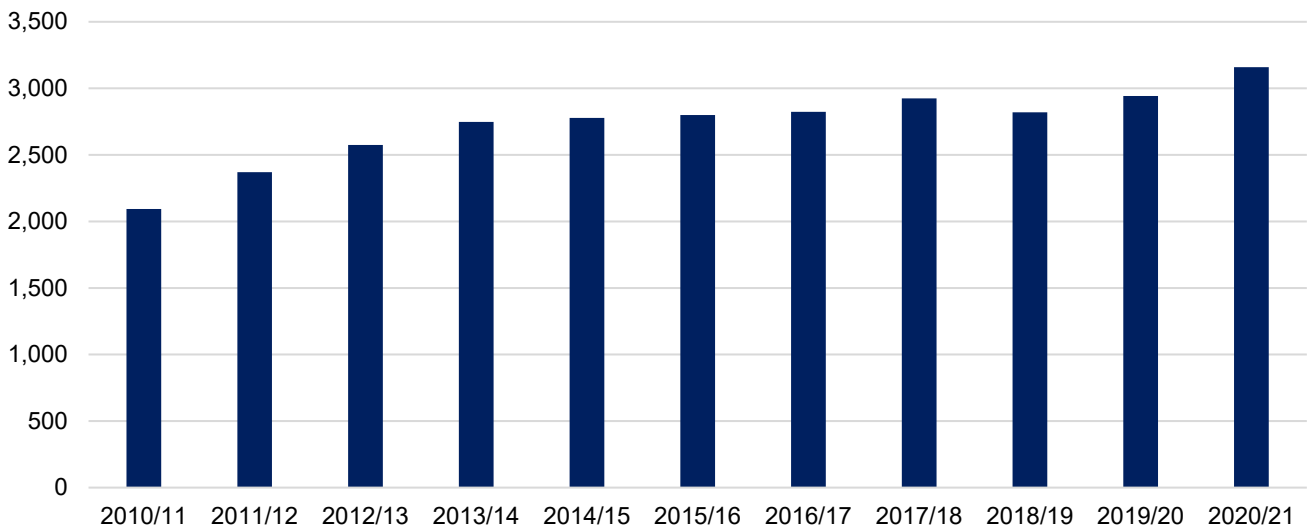


Source: IIE (Note: OPT students excluded).

After several years of decline and after reaching a low of just over 4,000 in 2011/12, Pakistani student numbers in the US have rebounded over recent years. By 2019/20, student numbers had reached around 6,500, representing growth of more than 60 per cent since 2011/12. However, student numbers fell back by around 8 per cent in the 2020/21 academic year to 6,000, as international travel restrictions weighed on student mobility prospects. The sustained period of growth seen in the years prior to the pandemic resumed again in 2021/22, with growth of 19 per cent and student numbers surpassing pre-pandemic levels, reaching a new peak of almost 7,200.

Looking ahead, the Biden administration is aiming to provide a more accommodative environment for inbound international students than under President Trump, through reforms to the immigration system and more flexible visas for international students which may pave the way for continued strong growth in Pakistani international student flows to the US in the years ahead.

Figure 10: Pakistani HE enrolments in Canada

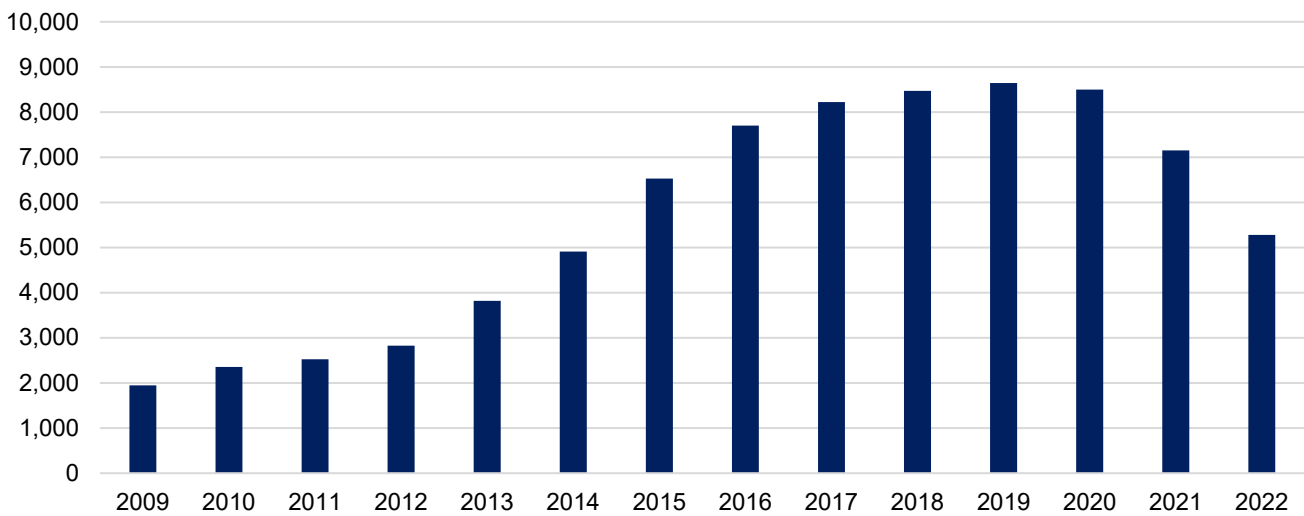


Source: StatCan

Compared to the other traditional English-speaking study destinations, Pakistani international student enrolment in Canada is relatively low, with student numbers hovering in the 2,500-3,000 range for much of the last decade, rising just above the 3,000 threshold for the first time in 2020/21. However, despite the uptick in growth in 2020/21, on the whole, growth in Pakistani student numbers in Canada has been largely stagnant in recent years. A significant obstacle for Pakistani students is the Canadian visa process, with the visa approval rate for Pakistani students at just 37 per cent in 2021, compared to a global average of 60 per cent and significantly higher approval rates in other South Asian countries, including Bangladesh (46 per cent), India (60 per cent) and Nepal (71 per cent). However, evidence suggests that the low approval rate may be a result of more frequent errors in the applications of Pakistani students compared to other countries, rather than a systematic rejection of Pakistani applications by the Canadian government.²⁰

²⁰ 'Is it Hard for a Pakistani Student to Get a Canadian Student Visa?', Go2Canada Education, 2022, www.go2canadaeducation.ca/faq/is-it-hard-for-a-pakistani-student-to-get-a-canadian-student-visa

Figure 11: Pakistani HE enrolments in Australia



Source: AusTrade

After a period of very strong growth throughout the 2010s, Australia has become a leading destination for Pakistani international students. The remarkable rate of growth has been built upon the history of close educational ties between the countries and supported by the favourable post-study visa work and immigration opportunities and marketing efforts from the Australian government. Pakistani student numbers in Australia grew from around 1,950 in 2009 to 8,645 ten years later in 2019. However, student numbers fell back slightly in 2020, before falling more significantly in 2021 and 2022 as Covid-related travel restrictions and highly restrictive border control and international travel policies implemented by the Australian government halted the inflow of international students. By 2022, Pakistani student numbers in Australia had fallen to just under 5,300, comparable to the levels seen back in 2014. To counteract this, in late 2021, the Australian government temporarily extended work rights for international students and is offering other incentives such as visa application fee refunds to entice international students back, which could help facilitate a return to the upward trajectory of student flows from Pakistan to Australia in the years ahead.

Data is not publicly available concerning inbound international students in Pakistan. But while the overall inbound mobility rate is believed to be low, universities in Pakistan do accept international students. For example, the International Islamic University (IIU) leads the country in international student recruitment, hosting more than 1,700 international students in 2019.²¹ Many Pakistani institutions have developed international-facing marketing to accelerate the internationalisation of the country's higher education sector. It is now commonplace for universities to establish mutual agreements on research collaborations and student/staff exchange programmes with overseas partner institutes. Nevertheless, a knowledge gap on the necessities of internationalisation still exists and a greater level of understanding is required to improve the quality of higher education and develop university infrastructure that is attractive to foreign students.

²¹ IIU Confers Degrees on over 6,500 Female Students, *The News*, 2019, www.thenews.com.pk/print/444166-iiu-confers-degrees-on-over-6-500-female-students

5.2 Transnational education and distance learning

According to HESA, there were 9,770 Pakistani students enrolled on UK TNE and distance learning courses in the 2021/22 academic year. This is up 34 per cent versus enrolments in 2019/20, which stood at 7,310. As such, Pakistan currently ranks as one of the UK's top 20 TNE and distance learning markets globally and is similar in size to other South Asian countries including India (12,075) and Nepal (10,700). However, Pakistan is well behind Sri Lanka (45,980) which is the UK's largest market in South Asia and indeed one of its largest globally. In 2021/22, almost 95 per cent of UK TNE provision in Pakistan was via distance learning, with around 80 per cent of provision taking place at bachelor's level.

Pakistan's TNE policy was launched in 2018. However, it is currently being revised and as such, the current policy is only applicable to existing TNE partnerships, with no new partnerships being approved at present. The British Council is assisting with the development of the updated TNE framework and revamp of the TNE quality assurance mechanism through the Pak-UK Education Gateway. In a report published by the British Council on TNE in Pakistan through this programme, the types of collaborative arrangements supported by the Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan are noted as:

- **Delivery Partnership:** External degree programmes for which tuition/facilitation is provided by a local institution, while course of study, study materials, question paper and assessment is done by foreign universities/institutions under the supervision of a third party like the British Council. The local institutions in this type of collaboration would be required to fulfil all the pre-requisites of HEC criteria for an affiliated college.
- **Franchise Agreement:** Local institutions franchised by a foreign university for the award of a foreign degree where students are assessed and evaluated locally and the degree is awarded by a foreign university. The local institutions seeking to operate under this mode would be required to fulfil all the pre-requisites as specified for a degree awarding institution in the Guidelines/Criteria for establishment of a university/degree awarding institution approved by the Federal Cabinet.
- **Overseas Campus:** A campus entirely administered, managed and operated by a foreign university in Pakistan and award of degrees by a foreign university identical to degrees given to on-campus students in the principal seat. Universities seeking to operate under this mode would be required to gain approval from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Interior, the respective provincial government and apply to HEC for a No Objection Certificate (NOC). Such universities would be required to fulfil all the pre-requisites of HEC approved campus criteria.²²

Furthermore, in 2021, the HEC released its 'Online and Distance Learning (ODL) Policy', which provides a framework for cross-border university education as well as online education hosted by Pakistani universities.²³ This policy lays out the requirements that must be met by institutions who wish to provide online-based higher education in Pakistan. The ultimate goal of this policy is to

²² Transnational Education Handbook Pakistan, *British Council*, 2021,

www.britishcouncil.pk/sites/default/files/transnational_education_handbook_pakistan.pdf

²³ 'Online and Distance learning (ODL) Policy', *Higher Education Commission*, 2021, www.hec.gov.pk/english/policies/Documents/ODL-Policy-Circulated.pdf

provide more widespread and affordable education to students in Pakistan, without compromising on quality. To achieve this goal, the policy outlines four main objectives:

- **Standards:** Before offering online education, institutions must meet a set of minimum standards set by the HEC.
- **Quality enhancement:** A move towards international standards for higher education. This objective also involves narrowing the perceived quality gap between distance and in-person education.
- **Expansion of access:** By allowing universities to provide lower-cost online distance learning courses, a greater number of Pakistani students will gain access to higher education.
- **Facilitation of life-long learning:** The expansion of educational options for in-career professionals.

Over the next few years, the implementation of the ODL policy will be an essential pillar in the development of Pakistan's human capital, as the demand for higher education in Pakistan will likely continue to far outweigh the capacity of domestic institutions. However, ODL policy is currently being reviewed and revised, having been rushed through due to the pandemic and the need for universities to offer online teaching and courses at that time.

6 UK Cooperation

The UK government launched an updated International Education Strategy in February 2021, which restated its commitment to growing the industry's economic impact to £35bn annually by 2030. Within this plan, five priority countries (India, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Vietnam and Nigeria) with significant potential for bilateral growth in the international higher education sector were identified. In addition to the five priority countries, six additional markets, including Pakistan, were highlighted for special focus from the UK International Education Champion, Sir Steve Smith. Pakistan's inclusion on this list underlines the perceived strategic importance of Pakistan by UK policymakers for the future growth of international education in the UK.²⁴

The Punjab Education Sector Programme Phase 2 (PESP2) has been the UK's largest bilateral programme to support education in Pakistan. Between January 2013 and July 2021, the UK's Department for International Development allocated £420.5m to support the government of Punjab in reforming the delivery of education in the region.²⁵ This programme aims to ensure that more children in the Punjab region receive high quality education, and that they stay in school for longer. PESP2 is intended to complement the UK-supported Punjab Education Reform Roadmap.²⁶

Furthermore, Pakistani students benefit from several UK university scholarship schemes, such as the UK's Chevening Scholarship Scheme. This scheme is comprised mostly of one-year master's courses across various UK universities and is awarded to students with a demonstrable potential to become future leaders. Since its inception in 1983, over 1,200 Pakistani students have been awarded the Chevening Scholarship. The GREAT scholarship scheme is another scheme available to Pakistani students. Each GREAT scholarship is worth a minimum of £10,000 towards tuition fees for a one-year postgraduate course and there are 15 scholarships available to Pakistani students each year. Additionally, in September 2022, the British High Commission announced an additional 75 scholarships for Pakistani students to study in the UK. This was announced during a reception in Lahore that marked 75 years of UK-Pakistan relations. As well as this, the British Council awarded approximately 50 scholarships to Pakistani women studying STEM subjects in 2022 as part of its wider Women in STEM scholarship scheme.²⁷

Co-operation between the UK and Pakistan has led to many of the UK's chartered professional bodies exporting education to Pakistan. Pakistani students can study with UK professional bodies such as the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA), the Chartered Institute of Purchasing and Supply (CIPS), and the Institute of Financial Services (IFS). These professional bodies, along with several others, allow students to sit their exams in Pakistan and receive UK-based professional qualifications.²⁸ In November 2020, the UK's Department for International Trade, alongside the British Council, brought together eight leading UK professional bodies to

²⁴ International Education Strategy: 2021 update, *UK Dept. for Education and Dept. for International Trade*, 2021, www.gov.uk/government/publications/international-education-strategy-2021-update/international-education-strategy-2021-update-supporting-recovery-driving-growth

²⁵ UK Aid to Pakistan, *Parliament.uk*, 2022, <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/25869/html/>

²⁶ School Reform Road Map, *Punjab.gov*, <https://schools.punjab.gov.pk/schoolroadmap>

²⁷ British Council Pakistan Scholarships, *British Council*, 2022, www.britishcouncil.pk/programmes/education/scholarships

²⁸ Pakistan Profession Qualifications, *British Council*, 2022, www.britishcouncil.pk/exam/professional-educational/professional-qualifications

participate in a virtual trade mission with Pakistan.²⁹ This trade mission helped to form strong partnerships with Pakistani colleges, universities and professional bodies, which will help to further increase opportunities for Pakistani students to receive internationally recognised professional qualifications in the future.

²⁹ Chartered Professional Bodies from the UK Visit Pakistan Virtually, *gov.uk*, 2020, www.gov.uk/government/news/chartered-professional-bodies-from-the-uk-visit-pakistan-virtually