

American Studies in the Post Pandemic Era: *Reflections on Higher Education in the U.S. and Pakistan and Considerations for Future Collaboration*

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Abstract

This paper examines the significance of American Studies in universities in Pakistan, and the role these programs might play in the coming years. The paper places a specific focus on how higher education and cross-cultural partnerships might be impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. American Studies in Central and South Asia developed most significantly following periods of conflict and war. They grew from a desire to foster bilateral relations and to promote stable transnational relations. Likewise, Central and South Asian nations, in which there has been a significant investment in American Studies as well as ongoing support for corresponding partnerships, we have seen increasingly stable relationships with the U.S. It will be argued in this paper that the post-pandemic-era will pose significant challenges similar to those in previous post-war-periods. The pandemic has intensified significant longstanding problems in higher education and education more broadly such as disparities in student access to learning and inequalities to access to educational opportunity. The impact of the pandemic has created an increased need for cross-cultural collaboration through research and academic exchanges. Universities will need to address the economic, social, and civic impact of the pandemic through partnerships, collaborative research, and supportive relationships. Specifically American Studies in Pakistan and Pakistani Studies in the U.S. offer an opportunity for both countries to address specific aspects of the impact of the pandemic.

Keywords: United States, Pakistan, American Studies, Cross-Cultural Understanding, Partnerships, Covid-19, Higher Education, Pandemic.

Introduction

The Covid-19 global pandemic significantly affected Pakistan and the U.S. higher education system in a number of similar ways. In both countries, the most vulnerable and historically marginalized students have been the most disproportionately impacted. The pandemic has also impacted general education in a significant manner, in a way that will ripple throughout higher education for years to come. Subsequently, universities in the U.S. and Pakistan face a similar challenge.

People in government and in universities need to better understand the impact of the pandemic on education and deal with the related issues more broadly at their respective levels. The challenges created by the pandemic in higher education and student learning will persist for many years. Universities need to address the economic, social, and civic impact of the pandemic through international partnerships focused on peace, stability, and economic development.

The Pandemic's Impact on Higher Education

In the U.S., at the start of the pandemic there were approximately 5,300 colleges and universities and about 17.5 million people attending institutes of higher education.¹² In 2020, due to the pandemic, enrollment of undergraduates in postsecondary degree-granting institutions decreased 9-percent (from roughly 17.5 million to about 15.9 million students).³

In the spring of 2020, colleges and universities in the U.S. were drastically impacted by the spread of the coronavirus. More than 1,300 colleges and universities in the U.S. canceled in-person classes or shifted to online-only instruction.⁴ By Fall 2020, many

David Roof

campuses merged in-person instruction with social distancing and shifted many courses to an online learning format. Universities implemented these plans with varying degrees of institutional success.⁵

During the pandemic universities shifted their schedules and approach to classes, which dramatically impacted student learning. A recent survey found that nearly half of currently enrolled students said the pandemic and changes in university course structure will negatively impact their ability to complete their degree or credential.⁶

College students in the U.S. were dramatically impacted by the pandemic. Research found that approximately 20% of college students had problems accessing the technology needed for online instruction, such as laptops and reliable broadband internet.⁷ Research has also shown that the impact on students was not just academic. Students have indicated that they had difficulty concentrating and often manifested symptoms of depression from isolation.⁸ Research shows increased stress and anxiety and fear and worry, decreased social interactions, poor sleeping patterns, and increased concerns about academic performance.⁹ These factors have seemingly negatively impacted enrollment in universities across the U.S., to an extent which is not fully known at this time.

We do know that the pandemic impacted college enrollment. A few U.S. universities saw an increase in enrollment during the pandemic. Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), for example, have reported a growing interest among students. For instance, Morgan State (an HBCU in Maryland) reported a 50-percent increase in applications in 2020 as compared to 2019, and the rate of students who indicated an interest in enrollment was also up.¹⁰ Applications have also increased at top tier universities in the U.S., varying from a 16-percent growth at the University of California to universities like Cornell seeing a 31-percent increase

in student enrollment. But university applications and enrollment dropped significantly at most other universities, including a striking drop in the State University of New York system.¹¹ Overall university student enrollment in the U.S. remains down by over one million since the fall of 2019. The pandemic significantly reduced enrollments in community colleges, in some cases by more than 10-percent.¹² The community college system in the U.S. serves the more vulnerable, underrepresented, and economically disadvantaged students. The City University of New York system, as one example, saw a decreased enrollment of thousands of students. Many of these students or their family members lost jobs when the service industry closed their doors.¹³ Many of these students also had limited access to sufficient internet devices or lack of a stable internet connection.¹⁴

The pandemic significantly impacted U.S. universities financially. The cost of transitioning to online learning, as well as the expense of on-campus covid testing, and the loss of revenue (from housing, sports, and so forth) have created a tense and problematic situation at many universities. The Chronicle of Higher Education estimates a large decline in university revenue, with a cumulative loss of about \$183 billion.¹⁵ Universities have responded with corresponding spending reductions often involving staffing cutbacks. An estimated 350,000 employees from the U.S. workforce were lost during the pandemic, and universities have responded with the economic difficulties with furloughs, layoffs, and incentivized early retirement.¹⁶ This impacted higher education with faculty members being especially vulnerable.¹⁷

The Pandemic's Impact on Higher Education in Pakistan

In Pakistan the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan (HEC) oversees research output, university funding, and teaching quality. The HEC recognizes roughly 174 universities in Pakistan, including both private and public institutions, and some institutions which are military or vocational in focus.¹⁸ In 2017/2018, there

David Roof

was a total enrolment in Pakistan's universities of about of 1.6 million. In 2021 the estimated number of students in universities was about .76 million.¹⁹ It is estimated that the pandemic will impact Pakistan's education and could cause \$2 billion in lost revenue.²⁰

In Pakistan, research shows considerable dissatisfaction among students regarding online education. Research during the pandemic revealed that students have "concerns over the lack of institutional support and the quality of online instruction."²¹ As with the U.S., college students in Pakistan have also raised concerns about unsuitable study environments, unstable electricity, and unreliable internet connectivity.²² Most Pakistani university students, like their U.S. counterparts, experienced a great amount of stress and mental health struggles during the pandemic.

Higher education in the U.S. and Pakistan will be impacted dramatically in the coming years by learning loss caused by the pandemic. Moreover, this impact has the potential to severely accentuate preexisting inequalities in access to educational opportunity and the social mobility connected to these opportunities.

The Impact of Learning Loss

In the U.S. and Pakistan higher education will be impacted significantly by learning loss for many years to come. Furthermore, the impact of learning loss in both countries appears to be far more impactful among those students who have been traditionally marginalized. In the U.S., for example, during the pandemic White students have been about one-to-three months behind.²³ Because of the pandemic and confounding impact of a legacy of racism, vulnerable students have been about three-to-five months behind in learning.²⁴ Research on the impact of the pandemic shows that African American students were far less likely than White students to receive in-person contact with

teachers over the period of a week. Moreover, they were three-to-six percentage points less likely to receive only periodic live instruction.²⁵ In April of 2020, the Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey found that 3-percent of African American households decided to homeschool their children, as opposed to returning to public schools and that figure rose by October 2020 to 16-percent.²⁶

As with Pakistan, research on states in the U.S. with a large rural population indicate disparities in access to educational opportunity. Research on Indiana, a state with a rural population in the central U.S. showed that about 68,649 to 84,118 school-age children did not have internet access at home. Overall, in the U.S. there are about 11 million students without a computer, and about 9-million without stable internet access.²⁷ States like Indiana could earn \$12 billion in economic gains over a 20-year period, if the State invested more in its broadband internet access, expanding into the state's rural areas. This estimate came from an analysis by Purdue University agricultural economists.²⁸

As with the U.S. the pandemic impacted poor and disadvantaged families in Pakistan. The digital divide in Pakistan more significantly impacts disadvantaged students, especially girls. Schools closed in Pakistan for about seven months during the first wave of the pandemic. These school mostly reopened in September 2020, but then were closed again by November.²⁹ UNICEF reported that in Pakistan remote learning was not possible for 23-percent³⁰ of young children due to a lack of access to digital devices.³¹ Poor and disadvantaged households were the worst hit, with many families struggling to afford even a single device. As with the U.S., geographical barriers in Pakistan have also had an impact. Broadband is expensive outside Pakistan's major cities and around 26% of urban youth had no access to technology whereas in rural areas over 36% lacked access.³²

David Roof

Vulnerable children in Pakistan, particularly girls, who live in remote areas with limited access to technology, were most impacted by the pandemic. The use of smartphone penetration stood at roughly 51-percent in 2020 and just one million school-age students out of the overall 22.8 million students in school have consistent access to digital devices and bandwidth.³³ In Pakistan, it is estimated that roughly 40 million children have access to television. Subsequently, the government shifted its Covid-19 distance learning strategy to a TV channel called Teleschool.³⁴ The long-term impact of this strategy is unknown at this time, but it appears that this strategy was insufficient in providing educational access to Pakistan's poorest families.³⁵

In the U.S. and Pakistan, the pandemic disproportionately impacted students with a tribal identity. In the U.S. the death rates for Native Americans were significantly higher than for other demographic groups.³⁶ On tribal affiliated reservations in the U.S. students struggled with internet access following school closures. In Pakistan students from the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) suffered more disproportionately.³⁷ In view of this, governmental agencies in Pakistan and the U.S. need to support universities and education more broadly in tackling the unprecedented problems caused by the pandemic. Likewise, international education and student exchange programs were impacted by the pandemic and should be examined moving forward.

The Pandemic's Impact on International Education

There were roughly more than one million international students enrolled in U.S. universities in 2019 before the pandemic began. This was a record number. International students make up about 6-percent of the overall higher education student population, which benefits domestic students, and provides a key source of revenue for universities.³⁸

Research found that new international student enrollment dropped during the initial phase of the pandemic by 43-percent and as of Fall 2020 overall international student enrollment was down about 16-percent.³⁹ Institutions will lose at least \$3 billion according to a report from the NAFSA, the Association of International Educators, who estimate this drop as stemming from international student enrollment declines in Fall 2020.⁴⁰ This organization argues that “without congressional action and financial relief to support international education, it is estimated there will be a loss of more than \$4.5 billion to U.S. higher education and tens of thousands of American jobs.”⁴¹ Instead of beginning their university education online, a number of recently admitted students took a “gap year” while others who were already enrolled took a longer leave of absence. Many international students also found themselves incapable of obtaining a U.S. visa.⁴² The Higher Education Commission of Pakistan also reported that due to the pandemic, admission offers, and visas of many scholars seeking education in the U.S. was delayed. It is hoped that these students will proceed with their studies in the U.S. in the coming years.⁴³

International Collaboration in Higher Education

Although many students in Pakistan have an interest in the U.S. culture and politics, the academic study of the U.S. and North America from a Pakistani perspective is rather limited. American Studies as an academic discipline in Asia more generally, however, has grown sporadically over time. Specific interest in American Studies in Asia as a comparative study has grown more steadily since the 1990s.⁴⁴ Traditionally, the impact and aftermath of war and the desire to normalization of bilateral relations between countries has driven the push for American Studies and a perceived need for serious study of the U.S. for reliable policy consultations. This has been the driving force in expanding American Studies at research institutes.⁴⁵ Likewise, conflict has often corresponded to conflict in the region. As one example, in 1978 the U.S. cut its diplomatic ties with Taiwan just one year before the The American

David Roof

Studies Association of the Republic of Taiwan began. After the ties between the U.S. and Taiwan were restored that the American Studies Association grew significantly, helping secure a network of connected academics and research collaboration. In the 1970s only a few universities and research institutions had an active program in American Studies.⁴⁶ As with Pakistan, American Studies programs in Asia are often directed toward political science and international relations.⁴⁷ Even so, these Associations and the corresponding Centers serve as incubators for interdisciplinary research and a catalyst for scholars who are interested in cross-cultural studies.

As noted, there is an inconsistency where many students in Pakistan have a curiosity about the U.S. but have limited opportunities for the academic study of the U.S. from an international perspective.⁴⁸ Various countries in Asia have used this curiosity to foster collaborative academic research with the U.S. to address economic development and different crises like those emanating from the pandemic.

The Impact of American Studies on Cross-Cultural Relations

American Studies as an academic discipline in Asia began in countries like Vietnam in the 1940s.⁴⁹ The scholarly study of the U.S., however, remained stagnant until the aftermath of WWII and in countries like Vietnam were not appreciated fully until after events like the Vietnam War. In countries that have not experienced significant conflict with the U.S., American Studies did not take hold as dramatically. For example, in Malaysia, American Studies happened more sporadically through various discounted courses.⁵⁰

There are several examples of successful investment in American Studies. An American Studies Center in Singapore, for example, has become central to understanding U.S. relations in that region. This Centre's mission statement reads, "in recognition of the

importance of the United States in Asia,” and it was founded in order to study “America, using the disciplines of Business, Law, and the Arts and Social Sciences.”⁵¹ Its principal activities were to be “the development of an American studies teaching program, the conduct of American studies research, and the building of relations.”⁵² The U.S. quickly became Singapore's largest trading partner while Singapore now ranks as America's tenth, a remarkable standing for a country of only four million people. By the early 2000s Singapore had hundreds of students taking courses covering some aspect of American culture, though only 170 of them were enrolled in American Studies designated courses.

American Studies programs and centers in Asia help ensure that future leaders will better understand U.S. ideological underpinnings that will, in turn, promote bilateral relations. American Studies programs have also proved successful in addressing strained relations and mitigating problems stemming from different values in the U.S. and the Asian context.⁵³ A key aspect of American Studies that is necessary for dealing with crises like the impact of the pandemic is its interdisciplinarity that is central to this discipline. This has several potential benefits—for American Studies, but also in theory there are possible benefits for other area studies disciplines. In addition, American Studies outside the U.S. generally has a strong transnational dimension that can be paired with interdisciplinarity.⁵⁴

Area Study Centre for Africa, North and South America

The only institution in Pakistan to offer American Studies as a separate distinct discipline is the Area Study Centre for Africa, North and South America in Islamabad. This Centre, established in 1978 under an Act passed in 1975, is an autonomous institute funded by the University Commission and affiliated with Quaid-i-Azam University (QAU).⁵⁵ Rais A. Khan a former director of the Centre for American and African Studies at Quaid-i-Azam University, noted in the 1980s that almost all universities in

David Roof

Pakistan cover “elements of American Studies in the various disciplines. However, no university offers a program and a degree in American Studies as a separate and distinct discipline”⁵⁶ Khan also noted that while American Studies are pursued in Pakistan, traditionally, American foreign policy has attracted the most attention in U.S.-Pakistan relations.⁵⁷

It is important to recognize that the U.S.-Pakistan relations have been impacted by a number of events beyond the pandemic in recent years. One of the most impactful factors is the U.S. involvement and recent withdrawal from Afghanistan. Attiq-ur-Rehman writes: “...the unprecedented growth in public antipathy towards the U.S. has become an essential part of the political narrative whereby the public finds suspicious all cooperative ties of their government with the U.S.”⁵⁸ This is another key reason that American Studies in Pakistan is needed to help cultivate stability and development in higher education following the pandemic.

As with American Studies in Pakistan, the academic study of Asia has been sporadic in the U.S. Given the evolving nature of international relations, South Asian Studies should now assume a prominent place in undergraduate education in the U.S., to provide undergraduates with opportunities to learn about this region.⁵⁹ South Asian Studies in the United States have a very different character today from that which they had before WWII.⁶⁰

In the U.S., the primary organization promoting Pakistan Studies is the American Institute of Pakistan Studies (AIPS), established in 1973. AIPS “is a bi-national research and educational organization with a mission to promote academic study of Pakistan in the US and to encourage scholarly exchange between the US and Pakistan.”⁶¹ AIPS provides research fellowships to American researchers, administers lectureships, and sponsors academic conferences.⁶² It is a member of the Council of American Overseas Research Centers. In 2020 this organization was also equally

impacted by the pandemic: “As we scramble to get used to our COVID-19 existence, AIPS continues its mission of enhancing Pakistan Studies in the U.S. and strengthening higher education in Pakistan.”⁶³ As Dr. Matthew A. Cook, a Professor of South Asian and Postcolonial Studies at North Carolina and former president of AIPS wrote in 2020, “COVID-19 remains a significant issue that impacts AIPS and its mission. Because of the pandemic, many of AIPS’s regular and in-person activities are on ice. Nonetheless, in other ways, AIPS has been busier than ever.”⁶⁴

Following the aftermath of the Cold War the U.S. adjusted its focus in South Asia from security to economic issues. The American economy is studied in the Pakistani universities.⁶⁵ Economic developments particular to the United States are well reported in the Pakistani media and are also followed through in American news magazines such as *Newsweek*, *Time*, and *Business*.⁶⁶ These programs impart knowledge of American political, social, and economic development over time and of the major institutions, processes, and challenges—cultural and structural—that shape American public life today. There has always been a challenge in Asia regarding how to harness all the interest that exists in American Studies, as this interest is often dispersed among many different fields and across many different universities.⁶⁷ A few experts in U.S.-Pakistan relations have advocated for increased collaboration between research centers, supplemented by programs, such as those operated by the Library of Congress.

The Centre for North and South America in Islamabad, however, is a great potential catalyst for unifying efforts to expand American Studies and is consistent with the model used in some Scandinavian countries. As one example, the University of Southern Denmark in Odense offers a popular graduate program in American Studies. This institution has roughly seven faculty and students who study two general disciplinary tracks, in “culture” (including literature) and “history and society.”⁶⁸ As with most

David Roof

American Studies centers, a primary focus is to “be able to work across more than one discipline”, and in being consistent with other American Studies programs, ensure that students will develop “an interdisciplinary understanding of [North American] regions and possess in-depth and extensive specialist knowledge.”⁶⁹ In an American Studies Association Newsletter Paul Lauter suggested that there are “at least two overlapping and conflicting definitions of American Studies”; one “emphasizes interdisciplinary ways of exploring and knowing things American and subject matters that cannot easily be accommodated within traditional disciplinary boundaries” while the other “represents a focus on a particular part of the world ... for work in the traditional disciplines.”⁷⁰ American Studies programs in Europe and Scandinavia train students in combining different knowledges, methods, inquiries, and perspectives directed at gaining a better and more complex understanding of the U.S., cross-cultural relations, and related international problems.⁷¹ American Studies requires students to demonstrate the ability to integrate knowledge and analyze, assess, and deal with complex phenomena, issues, and situations even with limited information, and to do so both critically and systematically.⁷² The Centre for North and South America in Islamabad has great potential for promoting this critical, interdisciplinary, and transnational dimension of American Studies especially through collaborative projects like the University Partnerships Grants Program (UPGP).

The Importance of Partnerships

U.S.-Pakistan partnerships can be beneficial to all. The ability to analyze, question, and understand events and experiences is essential for academic and scientific development. Constructively debating ideas and opinions is central to our intellectual and long-term development, and international collaborations help to facilitate this. American Studies offers the opportunity to thoughtfully analyze the culture, history, politics, society, and development of the United States. Furthermore, as a discipline,

American Studies focuses on the interpretation of U.S. history, culture, politics, and society. If education policy and practice are to better meet needs of the post-pandemic era, international partnerships are a necessary component, though these partnerships in education need to be examined to ensure they are efficient and effective. Evidence indicates that international partnerships in higher education can mobilize the work and resources of universities and government agencies to solve the types of local and regional problems stemming from the pandemic.⁷³

Recently, a few U.S. based institutions have developed institutional partnerships with Pakistan's Higher Education Commission, in areas such as Islamabad and Karachi.⁷⁴ Faculty research partnerships have also been established with public services and private industries in the Sindh, Punjab, Gilgit and Balochistan regions.⁷⁵ The programs and projects appear promising. Still, there is a need to foster ongoing international cooperation focused on cross-cultural understanding. American Studies in Asia is unique in its ability to foster interdisciplinary research, sustainable networks, and ongoing academic understanding between the U.S. and Asia.

The U.S. and Pakistan need to develop partnerships that focus on major development challenges and address issues like the challenges facing universities in the coming years. Partnerships and collaboration between the U.S. and Pakistan can be viewed in terms of the method of program delivery and partner responsibilities. Consequently, international partnerships can take a number of different forms, however, it is the relationships that develops between the sides involved in the partnership that is most important. Research on a student exchange programs between the U.S. and Pakistan has shown positive results. Some examples stem from the 'Enhanced Partnership with Pakistan Act of 2009'.⁷⁶ The Act prioritized democratic governance, economic development, and investment in people. The Act was envisioned to "facilitate access to education for all children in Pakistan, and especially for

David Roof

young women and girls, to raise literacy rates and decrease drop-out rates. Another related focus was teacher education.”⁷⁷ It was considered a major shift in foreign support for Pakistan, as it significantly increased the civil assistance provided to the country as compared to previous attempts at funding. Research on an ‘Enhanced Partnership with Pakistan Act of 2009’ funded a partnership between Ball State University and the Area Study Centre for Africa, North and South America at Quaid-i-Azam University that revealed enhanced relationships and intercultural understanding. This research also indicated that effective partnerships could cultivate ongoing engagement, participation, and cross-cultural collaboration. Furthermore, it showed that these relationships can capitalize on the capacities and skills, those that each partner contributes to the project. Finally, the research from this partnership showed that effective relationships allow for capacity building as well as effective skills and knowledge that can be adapted to changing environments. Effective relationships depend on a number of other key factors. If they involve the development of constructive implementation of well-written contracts, they can lead to the development of effective teaching and learning strategies.

Recently, the Ambassador of Pakistan to the U.S. Masood Khan asked for improvement in “cultural ties between Pakistan and the United States and to promote people to people exchanges.”⁷⁸ He said that the prevailing cultural affinities and relationships “formed a foundation for promoting understanding between the two nations.”⁷⁹ Relationships are essential and these American Studies programs should seek to foster new partnerships that bring people together. China has recognized the importance of a relationship with Pakistan fostered through international university exchange programs.⁸⁰

Given the impact of the pandemic, Americans Studies should support research into education more broadly, the teaching profession, and inequalities in educational opportunity. Research

on the impact of the pandemic in Pakistan revealed that universities should seek to better understand the factors impacting students access to education.⁸¹ The current challenges in education require additional research and monitoring of data at the student, teacher, and school levels potentially with new approaches tailored to a changing context. American Studies in Asia has often offered an opportunity to explore the intersections of local and regional histories, focusing on peace and security.⁸²

Conclusion

American Studies programs in Central and South Asia have generally grown during periods of post-war or in periods following conflict when leaders sought bilateral relations more broadly through academic domains by means of research institutes and student/faculty exchange programs. New achievements as well as new challenges in the Asian region have, in the past, generally led to a new focus and attention in the field of American Studies.⁸³ The pandemic revealed and, in many cases, amplified problems in higher education and student learning more generally. On all levels, educators need to better understand the effect of the pandemic and to address the broader issues at their respective levels. Educators need to address the economic, social, and civic impact of the pandemic through international partnerships. For higher education in the U.S. and Pakistan to address the impact of the pandemic and to better meet needs in the next century, international partnerships are necessary components. Evidence suggests ways that international partnerships help universities solve community, regional, and national problems. There is a need to cultivate effective partnerships in American Studies centers in Asia and to ensure that these new partnerships model are efficient and effective. We need to develop partnerships that focus on major development challenges and provide a greater impact by addressing inequalities in access to educational opportunity exacerbated by the global pandemic.

David Roof

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David Roof

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David Roof

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⁴ Andrew Smalley, "Higher Education Responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19)," news release, 2021.

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