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*Research Article*

# Challenging Preconceptions: Understanding the Employability of Madrassa Graduates

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## Abstract

Madrassas in Pakistan serve as vital institutions for religious education, providing free teaching and accommodation to students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. However, several Madrassa graduates face financial challenges upon entering the job market as a result of the rapidly changing technological environment. The majority of these graduates secure employment in low-wage roles such as mosque management, madrassa instruction, or labor jobs in profit-oriented enterprises. Unlike mainstream educational institutions, madrassas do not include non-religious subjects or technical education in their curriculum, and the government has shown little inclination to support these institutions. To address these concerns, an investigation was carried out in the Khairpur area, utilizing a random sample of 250 madrassa graduates who participated in a structured survey to assess their employment prospects. The survey used a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative measures of job outcomes and qualitative insights into career expectations. Key findings, distinct from existing literature on religious education, reveal that madrassa graduates face unique struggles in providing financial assistance for their families. To improve their quality of life, it is recommended that the government provide scholarships and recognize the value of their degrees by granting them academic credit. Furthermore, the research suggests that engaging madrassa graduates in vocational training programs is essential for facilitating their successful integration into the labor market. In summary, the study sheds light on the economic challenges specific to madrassa graduates in Pakistan and proposes strategies to enhance their future employment prospects.

## Keywords

Pakistan; madrassas; religious education; low-income households; employment market



## Introduction

In Pakistan, the unemployment rate reached an estimated 8.5% in 2023, influenced by economic challenges and rising inflation (Dawn, 2023). The most paramount concern in Pakistan is this. Less than 10% of the over 1.5 million graduates from the about 12,500 unaccredited madrassas (35,000) manage to get jobs in professions that need a college education. Conversely, a significant majority of 86% secure jobs in mosques, madrassas, or other sectors of the labor market, as reported by Farooqui (2018). The remaining pupils either get jobs in low-skilled occupations or experience unemployment.

Furthermore, other investigations have been undertaken in recent years. According to a study by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 63% of individuals who graduated from Madrassas were unemployed during 2015-16, as reported by PBS in 2017. A further survey by the World Bank found that a mere 1% of those who graduated from Madrassas could get employment in the formal sector (World Bank, 2014).

The incongruity between the curriculum followed by Pakistani Madrassas and the requirements of the job market has to be reassessed, considering the severity of this perilous scenario. The curriculum of the Madrassa is not in accordance with the requirements of the employment market (Rashed, 2017). The discrepancy between the requirements of this course/job and the skills possessed by Pakistan's future generation has a detrimental impact. Pakistani madrassa graduates often have difficulty securing employment or jobs commensurate with their education. Sometimes, they are even given positions that do not meet their expectations (Dawn, 2023).

Numerous investigations have been conducted in this field. Nevertheless, there are still unresolved concerns about the specific challenges faced and the measures used to facilitate the smooth integration of Madrassa graduates into the job market. Where do the employment markets for Madrassa graduates and graduates differ? The researchers posed this pivotal inquiry (Routray & Bibhu Prasad, 2018).

Individuals who have completed their education in Madrassas in Pakistan face several challenges. Graduates from different Madrassas in Pakistan are not obtaining job opportunities that align with their academic qualifications (David, 2015). The curriculum of madrassas partially fails to match the workforce's standards. What strategies will the course use to ensure it meets the demands of the markets? The research seeks to evaluate the economic challenges faced by Madrassa graduates in the labour market and the measures taken to adapt the Madrassa curriculum to align with market requirements. This research further assesses the job opportunities for graduates of madrasas.

In recent years, researchers, politicians, and the media have shown a keen interest in the employability of graduates from madrassas. Although madrassa graduates have difficulties securing jobs, proponents assert that their education may be a great asset in many domains, such as education, law, social work, and the media. Nevertheless, the existing body of literature on this subject is still insufficient and disjointed, lacking comprehensive and methodical study on the employability of madrassa graduates and the underlying elements that shape it.

Throughout the history of Islam, the madrassa has served as the primary institution for education and knowledge. The Holy Prophet, may peace be upon him, would communicate with and guide the newly converted Muslims. The first mosques in Islamic history served as



Madrassas, educational institutions, and places of worship. At that time, this schooling was considered the fundamental basis of mainstream education. The educational process in Islam starts with the cultivation of human character. They asserted that the cosmos was brought into existence by the one and omnipotent deity, Almighty Allah. They are equipped with the necessary skills to address the challenges of the contemporary world and thoroughly understand them.

Madrasas are longstanding Islamic educational institutions in Pakistan. For generations, these schools have served as the nation's main provider of Islamic education. Nevertheless, Madrasa education has faced criticism due to its deficiency in imparting practical and technical skills, leading to a restricted range of job prospects for Madrasa graduates (Khalid, 2014).

Several reasons contribute to the low employability of Madrasa graduates. Madrasa education generally emphasizes religious studies and lacks practical or technical training, which is crucial in today's employment market. Furthermore, Madrasas lack recognition from the Pakistani education system, depriving Madrasa graduates of access to mainstream education and career prospects. Mumtaz, (2019). Furthermore, the negative perception associated with Madrasa education in Pakistan sometimes leads to prejudiced treatment of Madrasa graduates while seeking employment opportunities (Ali, 2017).

Iqbal et al. (2015) argue that religious school education must change in order to effectively function as a tool for popular education since they see general education as a modern concept. Jalandhari (2011), who opposes reforms and modernization in Islamic education, views the madrasa as a specialized educational institution catering to certain religious and sociological requirements. Saleem (2014), a supporter of de-Westernization and the "Islamization of knowledge," examines the subject of education in madrasas from an ideological standpoint, diverging from modernist and conservative approaches. Islamists support the decolonization of the current European and liberal concept of general education and call for its closer integration with Islamic education and knowledge. The governing board views the madrasa as a public educational institution that promotes religious and societal harmony. The Paigham-e Pakistan, a comprehensive declaration against radicalization issued on January 10, 2018, called upon the religious community to discourage division and sectarianism in mosques and religious schools. It emphasized the role of religious scholars in creating an environment where madrasas and mosques are solely utilized for prayer and education in the teachings of the Holy Qur'an and Sunna.

Akbar (2002) asserts that religious schools provide a cost-effective, easily accessible, and authentically Islamic alternative to traditional education. Singer (2001) characterizes these Madrasahs as a "phenomenon within the broader educational system." Goldberg (2000) saw these as a means of "preparing the spiritual warrior" before 9/11. Coulson (2003) describes religious schools as "instruments of extensive education." The 9/11 Report specifically characterizes madrasahs as "incubation facilities of violent extremism."

Mumtaz (2019) asserts that most Madrasahs in Pakistan are privately operated, with just a small number overseen by the Auqaf departments. The Madrasah students exhibit the highest level of intolerance compared to other student groups in Pakistan. Additionally, they have the highest level of support for a proactive approach to foreign policy. According to a poll by Rehman (2004), Madrasah students in Pakistan were the most aggressive set of pupils compared to those in Urdu and English-medium schools. They were also more supportive of engaging in conflict with India. They also opposed granting equal rights to non-Muslims and



women as citizens. Madrassahs provide free religious instruction, as well as accommodations and meals, specifically for those who are economically disadvantaged. In the same poll, Rehman (2004) found that most respondents belonged to the lower socioeconomic classes. According to Fayyaz (1994), students enrol in Madrassahs mostly for economic and social motives rather than religious exploration or study.

According to Rehman (2004), Madrassahs generate brainwashed priests from different Muslim sects who adhere to extreme Islam and engage in militancy. The Madrassah system of education in Pakistan is widely believed to have been a catalyst for intolerance, violence, extremism, and conflict within the country. Critics argue that religious seminaries contribute to the rise of intolerance, violence, and extremism by promoting indoctrinated religious ideologies. However, Brent (2005) argues that the claim that these Islamic schools generate terrorists is an overstatement. He emphasizes that they are not instructed in the technical abilities necessary to be a proficient terrorist and should not be seen as a threat. Stern (2001) notes that although some Madrassahs do teach secular courses.

As Ali (2015) reported, one of the issues faced by Madrassa graduates is a mismatch between their education and professional opportunities. While there is recognition of this problem, Pakistan has not yet implemented the required prompt measures to tackle the occupation. The increase in activity is caused by a range of difficulties, such as limited information on employment vacancies, institutional limitations, geographical hindrances, and factors related to race or sexual orientation.

In addition, the study conducted by Hashim et al. (2017) observed several socio-statistical traits and practices. Considering the importance of this matter, the current research aims to gather data on the decrease in employment and provide a structure for more detailed analysis. McClure (2015) suggests that this will aid educational and employment planners in making more informed decisions, especially for the youth, Pakistan's most important asset. At a study conducted by Richter (2019), it was found that the educational programs offered at Madrassa do not adequately equip most of its graduates for lucrative employment opportunities across different industries. Perplexed by their narrow business preconceptions, these graduates have consistently gravitated towards radicalism. Subsequent administrations, adhering to the Zia regime, failed to acknowledge the significant growth in the quantity of Madrassas and their graduates who embraced these institutions. Madrassas increased from 2,800 in 1988 to 9,900 in 2002 (Murtadho, 2017).

During that period, the Sunni Madrassa saw significant expansion, reaching 7,000 establishments. Indeed, the number of Deobandi Madrassas increased more than the overall number of Madrassas. During General Zia ul Haq's tenure, the proliferation of Madrassas in Pakistan increased. He disseminated his beliefs by influencing public opinion and exerting religious authority (Bakar, 2017).

Between 1972 and 1981, Pakistan's population experienced a 29% growth; however, the number of graduates from religious institutions witnessed a significant rise of 195% over the same period (Mani, 2019). Consequently, a surplus of individuals who had graduated from Madrassas but had an inadequate understanding of business concepts. Due to the lack of recognition of their degrees by those outside the religious community, Madrassa graduates had difficulties securing employment in competitive labor markets. During the Zia regime in 1982, the University Grants Commission recognized Madrassa degrees as being on par with MA



degrees in Arabic or Islamic Studies. This decision provided more opportunities for Madrassa graduates to pursue other subjects.

Research done by Aziz et al. (2017) examined the job prospects of individuals who graduated from madrassas in Peshawar, Pakistan. The survey revealed that graduates from madrassas had many obstacles in securing employment, such as a dearth of exposure to contemporary education, a restricted grasp of the English language, and limited social and professional connections. Nevertheless, the research also revealed that those who completed madrassa education had significant attributes such as profound theological comprehension, self-control, and dedication to their job, which might prove advantageous in several professional domains. Zahra, Shaikh, and Ali (2017) researched how employers in Pakistan see graduates from madrassas. The research revealed that several companies exhibited reluctance in recruiting madrassa graduates owing to their perceived deficiency in technical and vocational proficiencies, low familiarity with contemporary education, and the negative stereotypes connected with madrassas. Nevertheless, the research also revealed that employers acknowledged the positive attributes of madrassa graduates, such as their extensive theological knowledge, self-control, and diligent work ethic. These qualities may be effectively used in many fields, such as education, social work, and media.

In his 2004 publication, Rahman, a distinguished Pakistani scholar, asserts that religious schools are undeniably institutions with a deliberate aim of shaping society. It is important to clarify that religious schools, which were mostly conservative institutions before the Afghan-Soviet struggle, have recently become intellectually engaged and sometimes prone to violence. In a study by Khalid (2018), the correlation between madrassa education and employment in Pakistan was examined. The research revealed that madrassa education lacks the essential skills and knowledge demanded by the modern job market. Nevertheless, the research also revealed that individuals who completed their education at madrassas had significant soft skills such as effective communication, strong interpersonal abilities, and high emotional intelligence, which might be advantageous in several professional domains. The research suggested that the education provided at madrassas should be revamped to include contemporary education and vocational training to improve the job prospects of madrassa graduates.

Moreover, research was carried out in Bangladesh to investigate the job prospects of Madrassa graduates in the country. The study revealed that individuals who graduated from Madrassas had restricted options to get formal education and training, negatively impacting their capacity to find employment. Nevertheless, the research also emphasized that individuals who graduated from Madrassas held crucial proficiencies, such as proficiency in reading and writing Arabic, which was highly sought after in many industries, including media, tourism, and non-governmental organizations (Salam & Akhter, 2020).

The author conducted a study in Malaysia to examine the job prospects of Madrassa graduates in the country. The study revealed that Madrassa graduates encountered many obstacles, such as insufficient English language skills and formal educational qualifications, which harmed their employment opportunities. Nevertheless, the research also emphasized that Madrassa graduates exhibited crucial competencies, such as religious knowledge and values, and that employers were greatly esteemed in the religious and social domains (Mohamad & Mustaffa, 2020).



The employability of madrasa graduates in Pakistan has been scrutinized, leading to government-led reforms to integrate religious education into the mainstream education system. One of the significant initiatives in this regard was the National Action Plan (NAP), launched in 2014. The plan aimed to combat extremism, which involved reforms in the madrasa sector. Research indicates that while NAP brought attention to the need for regulation and modernization of madrasas, its implementation faced challenges, particularly concerning resistance from madrasa administrations who were cautious of government interference in religious education (Park & Niyozov, 2008). Nonetheless, the focus on madrasa reforms under NAP highlighted the government's recognition of the need to equip madrasa graduates with skills that align with the requirements of the broader job market.

In addition to NAP, the Pakistani government established the Pakistan Madrasa Education Board (PMEB) in the early 2000s to introduce a modern curriculum in madrasas. This included secular subjects like mathematics, science, and English, traditionally absent in the curriculum. Studies by Latif (2022) suggest that while the PMEB initiative showed initial promise, the lack of consistent funding and support led to its limited success in bridging the gap between religious and secular education. More recently, the Single National Curriculum (SNC) is another step toward standardizing education across various sectors, including madrasas. According to a report by Saeed et al. (2024), the SNC's goal is to create uniform educational standards, which could potentially improve the employability of madrasa graduates by equipping them with comparable skills to those in public and private schooling systems.

International organizations have also played a role in madrasa reforms. UNESCO and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) have initiated initiatives to modernize religious education in Pakistan. These efforts often involved curriculum development, teacher training, and introducing critical thinking skills in madrasa education (Daheri, M. 2022). Similarly, USAID-funded projects that enhance literacy and vocational skills among madrasa students have shown positive outcomes, particularly in developing employable skills such as computer literacy and English proficiency Tolani et al. (2022). However, some studies caution that international involvement in madrasa reforms is often viewed with suspicion, leading to limited acceptance among traditionalist segments (Riaz, 2008).

Efforts at modernization have not been limited to government and international agencies alone. Some madrasas have initiated vocational training programs in IT, tailoring, and electrical work to improve job prospects for their graduates. A study by Ali et al. (2024) indicates that when effectively implemented, these skills-oriented programs significantly enhance madrasa graduates' employability by providing them with practical, market-relevant skills. Moreover, partnerships between madrasas and local universities or non-governmental organizations have shown promise in enhancing curriculum quality and offering better career guidance to students. These collaborative efforts highlight a growing awareness within the madrasa community of aligning religious education with contemporary societal needs.

Despite these initiatives, the literature underscores that challenges remain. The lack of consistent policy implementation, resistance to change from within the madrasa sector, and limited financial resources are recurring obstacles that hinder comprehensive reforms. Scholars like Shahin emphasize the need for a more collaborative approach involving dialogue between government agencies, madrasa representatives, and civil society to foster trust and ensure that reforms are culturally and religiously sensitive (Shahin, 2023). Addressing these complexities



is crucial for successfully integrating madrasa graduates into mainstream educational and employment sectors.

Focusing on the current and past initiatives aimed at reforming the madrasa system reveals that while progress has been made, the path to fully integrating madrasa graduates into the broader job market remains fraught with challenges. Future reforms need to build on existing efforts while adapting to the evolving demands of the labor market and Pakistan's socio-religious context. This includes not only updating curricula but ensuring that the graduates have access to career counselling and skill development opportunities that align with contemporary job market needs.

### **Delimitation of Study**

The study participants consisted exclusively of graduates from the Madrassa in the Khairpur area of Sindh. The rationale for selecting this specific area is twofold: First, Khairpur has a significant concentration of Madrassas, making it an ideal location to explore the employability of graduates in a region where religious education is prevalent. Second, focusing on a single area allows for a more in-depth analysis of the challenges faced by Madrassa graduates within a specific socio-economic and cultural context. By narrowing the scope, the study aims to provide detailed insights into the localized factors influencing employment outcomes, which may serve as a foundation for broader comparative studies in other regions.

### **Methods and Design**

Studies, especially surveys, are inherently quantitative and descriptive. The data was collected from individuals who have completed their education at Madrassas in three administrative subdivisions of the Khairpur district and who are now either working in other locations or actively seeking employment. An 18-item closed questionnaire was developed with a five-point Likert scale. The questionnaire was constructed based on expert input, relevant research, and personal experiences. The instrument has undergone validation, and an analysis conducted using SPSS indicated that the items' reliability was measured at  $\alpha = .78$ . A total of 250 graduates were administered the survey by Özkaya et al. (2021). The collected data was then organized into a table, and a statistical analysis was conducted to determine the mean (Ott & Longnecker, 2010).

To ensure that the sample was representative of the broader Madrassa graduate population, a random sampling technique was employed across the three subdivisions home to a diverse mix of (Basheer, 2016). This approach minimized selection bias and aimed to reflect the range of socioeconomic backgrounds, employment statuses, and religious sect affiliations. Moreover, the sample size of 250 was considered sufficient based on the estimated population of Madrassa graduates in the district, ensuring the findings could be generalized with reasonable confidence (Basheer, 2016).

Cronbach's alpha value of .78 further supported the survey instrument's reliability, indicating good internal consistency. As for validity, the questionnaire underwent expert review and was pilot-tested with a small group of Madrassa graduates to refine ambiguous questions and ensure the instrument measured the intended constructs. Thus, the results are considered valid and



reliable, with careful attention paid to the generalizability of the findings to the broader Madrassa graduate population.

## Results and Discussion

*Table 1. Perceptions of madrassa employment*

<b>Statement</b>	<b>SA</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>UD</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>DA</b>	<b>Mean</b>
I decided to enroll in a Madrassa due to my financial situation.	184	12	4	20	30	47.4
On the employment market, a madrassa degree is not preferred.	185	30	10	15	10	47.4
Those who graduated from madrassas had no trouble finding employment.	158	37	17	20	18	43.4
The experiences of Madrassa graduates are insufficient to adapt to work markets.	172	44	13	12	9	46.2
Typically, employers won't hire Madrassa graduates.	141	70	15	12	12	40.5
Madrassa graduates either inherited businesses or obtained employment in mosques or madrassas.	175	34	10	12	19	46.0
Government agencies hired madrassa graduates.	23	15	21	18	173	46.3
English, arithmetic, and other non-religious disciplines are taught.	0	5	0	5	240	49.5
The Madrassa administration has organized vocational training.	0	0	5	5	242	48.6
Unemployed madrassa graduates become extremists.	153	35	22	21	19	38.3
The Madrassa students receive government stipends.	0	0	0	0	250	50.0
Madrassa receives government funding for routine expenses.	0	0	0	0	250	50.0
Madrassa has attempted to adapt its curricula to the needs of the labor market.	6	5	5	6	228	48.2
Typically, Madrassas self-collected their funding.	240	10	0	0	0	49.5
Madrassa students are only taught religious subjects.	238	5	5	2	0	48.8
The Madrassa in the modern day does not cater to contemporary needs.	0	3	5	7	235	48.5
The curriculum at madrassas encourages ideas of extremism and militancy.	15	6	42	45	142	38.6
In most cases, job markets favor graduates of other universities over Madrassa graduates.	211	19	12	5	3	44.9

The results highlight the considerable obstacles that Madrassa graduates have while attempting to join the labor market. Although some individuals who have graduated from Madrassas may elect to work in mosques or continue teaching in Madrassas, their degrees are frequently not widely acknowledged, restricting their opportunities. Consequently, a significant number of graduates have difficulties obtaining jobs that use their talents and education, resulting in either underemployment or unemployment (Nabi, 2003).

The non-recognition of Madrassa degrees poses a substantial obstacle for graduates. While graduates from other institutions may qualify for government stipends or have access to a broader array of job prospects, Madrassa graduates are often disregarded. The absence of acknowledgement is exacerbated by a dearth of resources for Madrassa graduates since institutions have not allocated funds to pay the living costs of the graduates.





One major challenge encountered by Madrassa graduates is the notion that they are linked to terrorism (Malik, 2006). This myth sustains the notion that Madrassa graduates lack the reliability and competence to make meaningful contributions to society, restricting their employment opportunities. It is crucial to debunk this misconception and emphasize the important expertise and knowledge that Madrassa graduates possess.

The report emphasizes the need for Madrassa management to update its curriculum to align with the demands of the labor market. By integrating modern fields such as mathematics, physics, and linguistics, Madrassa graduates will have enhanced skills to effectively compete in the employment sector. This will also aid in addressing the idea that Madrassa graduates are deficient in the essential skills and knowledge required for success in the labor market (Moeis, 2022).

While these recommendations are valuable, the feasibility of implementing them in Pakistan's current socio-economic and political climate must be critically examined. Integrating non-religious subjects into Madrassa curricula faces significant opposition from conservative religious factions that influence government policy, making curricular reforms difficult. Additionally, financial constraints within the government limit the potential for providing scholarships or funding vocational training programs for Madrassa graduates. Government support for Madrassas remains limited, as political priorities often favour more traditional public education systems. Moreover, public perceptions linking Madrassa graduates to extremism further complicate efforts to secure government or private-sector support for these graduates.

In summary, the results of this research highlight the difficulties that Madrassa graduates have while seeking work. The main obstacles faced are mostly due to the lack of acknowledgement of their academic qualifications and the prevailing impression that their degrees are linked to acts of terrorism. To tackle these problems, Madrassa management must update its curriculum and provide graduates with the tools and assistance needed to thrive in the employment sector. However, given the socio-political challenges, collaboration between the government, civil society, and Madrassa leadership will be essential for any reform to be successful. Only when Madrassa graduates can overcome the economic barriers, they encounter can they achieve their maximum potential. Farooqui (2018) supported and recognized the challenges faced by Madrassa graduates in securing work. Furthermore, they stressed the need to modernize Madrassas to address the discovered deficiencies.

## Conclusion

Due to the exorbitant expenses associated with attending contemporary educational institutions, empirical evidence indicates that almost all children from low-income households choose to register in madrassas. As a result, graduates from low-income households must financially assist their offspring after they complete their studies at madrassas. Nevertheless, those who have graduated from madrassas face many barriers while seeking work, including a disparity between their degree and job requirements, a preference for graduates from other institutions, a lack of familiarity with technology, and various hindrances in the job search process. Most Madrassa graduates are employed as mosque supervisors, Madrassa instructors, or in similar roles. According to Sorenson (2018), companies avoid employing Madrassa students due to their limited work-related skills. The government displays a lack of concern



toward madrassas or their graduates. As madrasas only focus on religious education, no adjustments are being made to the curriculum to align with the demands of the job market. The Madrassa administration and government do not provide skill-based or vocational training programs that effectively prepare graduates for employment in the labor market. Unemployment frustration may lead to any breach of regulations that disrupts the tranquility of the legal and societal order.

However, in addition to government intervention, private-sector partnerships can be critical in addressing these challenges. Collaborations between Madrassas and private enterprises could lead to establishing vocational training programs, internships, and apprenticeships tailored to market needs. This would help Madrassa graduates acquire practical, in-demand skills and improve their employment prospects in industries beyond traditional religious roles. Such partnerships can bridge the gap between Madrassa education and the demands of the contemporary job market while reducing reliance on government initiatives alone. By incentivizing private sector participation, the burden of reform is shared, creating a more sustainable solution to the unemployment challenges faced by these graduates.

Future investigations should address gender inequalities in Madrassa education and career prospects. The government should also play a crucial role in assisting Madrassa graduates by enacting laws encouraging vocational training, facilitating job placement, and introducing other programs to enhance employment prospects. By following these suggestions and fostering public-private partnerships, Madrassa graduates would have better prospects for securing jobs in the labor market, benefiting the younger generation and contributing to the country's development.

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