

Higher Education Abroad: Experiences of Afghan International Students in Bangladeshi Universities

By

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A thesis submitted to the BRAC Institute of Educational Development in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Education in Educational Leadership & School Improvement

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Declaration

It is hereby declared that

1. The thesis submitted is my/our own original work while completing degree at Brac University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I/We have acknowledged all main sources of help.

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Ethics Statement

I want to ensure that this paper which has been written under the title of “Higher Education Abroad: Experiences of Afghan International Students in Bangladeshi Universities” is my original work and authentic and the findings are presented with no manipulation in any part. It is also worth mentioning that I was completely neutral during my research to prohibit any kinds of personal experiences and biases because I was also an international student while working on this paper.

This thesis research was conducted with a total of 14 participants. Two of the participants were university members, a Professor and Director Academic and Legal Empowerment, and 12 Afghan students which include both Master`s and Bachelor`s in two different universities with various educational backgrounds from different parts of Afghanistan. The two university members were interviewed and the focus group discussions were organized with students. All participants` confidentiality and privacy are maintained in this research and a consent letter which contained details about the research goal and participants` ethical concerns was sent to research participants before conducting interviews and focus group discussions.

Moreover, all the ethical procedures of the institutions, BRAC IED, which have been introduced are highly considered for completing this research paper. Notably, this research is first-hand research and has not been published or submitted anywhere else. Lastly, the data that has been used for the accomplishment of this research is acknowledged and referenced appropriately. All the data is stored safely and will only be shared throughout a formal process.

Abstract

Pursuing higher education abroad has become a common desire of students globally, especially, among students in developing countries of which Afghanistan is a part of them. Due to the low quality of higher education at most universities in Afghanistan, Afghan students prefer to pursue their higher education overseas. As every year a considerable number of Afghan students come to Bangladesh to continue their higher education, the title; Higher Education Abroad: Experiences of Afghan International Students in Bangladeshi Universities is chosen to explore Afghan students` experience at universities in Bangladesh. This study examines Afghan students` experiences of the universities` learning environments, cultural behaviour, opportunities, challenges, and coping strategies. To conduct this research, a qualitative research method is used. Simi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGD) are used as tools to investigate Afghan students` experiences. The findings of this paper show that Afghan students have better learning resources than in Afghanistan. These students found both people and students respective towards their culture, however, some of the students sometimes disrespect their language. Afghan students experienced many opportunities that helped them to boost their academic and personal skills. Meanwhile, they faced language, cultural, unfamiliarity with the education system, financial, accommodation, and social interaction challenges, which led them to go through different coping strategies during their education journey in Bangladesh.

Keywords: Higher education overseas, Motivation of Afghan students, Learning environment, Cultural behaviour, Opportunities, Challenges, Copping strategies.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my honourable family, especially my father and mother who always encouraged and supported me in my academic journey to have better achievements.

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List of Acronyms

| | |
|--------|---|
| CPJ | Center of Peace and Justice |
| FGD | Focus Group Discussion |
| IT | Information Technology |
| MoHE | Ministry of Higher Education |
| OECD | Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development |
| QDA | Qualitative Data Analysis |
| SDG4 | Sustainable Development Goal 4 |
| UNESCO | The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization |
| USA | United States of America |

Chapter 1

Introduction and Background

1.1 Introduction

Education is one of the fundamental parts of human life, especially in the current century. As Afghanistan has experienced wars for the last few decades, it affected the education system of this country, especially higher education. There are few professional teachers in most universities in Afghanistan and it affected the quality of education at these universities. Based on a report titled Higher Education in Afghanistan: An Emerging Mountainscape by World Bank 2013 cited in Ahmad et al. (2017), in Afghanistan universities only 5% of instructors are Ph.D. and 38% of them are Master`s holders while the rest 57% are university graduates. As a result, Afghan students prefer to do their higher education at overseas` universities compared to universities in Afghanistan due to the high or better quality of education if they are given the opportunities (Bahir, 2021). Besides the quality of education in overseas countries, students will have other opportunities such as developing their `independency` skills, `self-discovery`, enhancing a global perspective, and experiencing a new education system (Moores & Popadiuk, 2011). Meanwhile, international students will be able to learn the local language and have Bachelor`s, Master`s, and Ph.D. degrees from universities with high-quality education (Bahir, 2021) and boost their language and social skills and learn a new culture (Dwyer, 2004; Moores & Popadiuk, 2011).

Along with many opportunities, international students will face challenges such as depression, cultural shock, and differences in culture and academic environments (Moores & Popadiuk, 2011). Bista (2016) also says that when international students enter the host country, they find difficulties to adjust themselves to the social environment where they live. More importantly, another problem that is very common among international students is language

issues and it may have different reasons like; differences in accents, the slang they use, or the way how fast they speak (Townsend & Jun Poh, 2008).

As a large number of Afghan international students are doing their higher studies overseas, especially in neighbouring countries, this study is designed to explore Afghan students` experiences studying at universities in Bangladesh. It is more than two decades since universities in Bangladesh became good partners with the education system of Afghanistan by providing scholarships for Afghan students. Since no research has been done in this area, it gives me the idea to conduct a study to find out about Afghan students` experience studying in Bangladesh; the learning environment, the cultural behaviour, their opportunities and challenges, and how they overcome those challenges. This study will also examine how their education at these universities will help them to get ready for their future educational and social challenges. So, this research may not only give brief information about Afghan students to the Ministry of Higher Education of Afghanistan but also universities in Bangladesh might think over the issue to know the overall educational journey of Afghan students in Bangladeshi universities including their study experience, motivation, challenges, and opportunities.

1.2 Research Topic

There are a large number of students, over one million, who are outside their countries and the majority of them are “Third World” students studying in developed and developing or other Third World Countries, therefore, it would have an impact not only on countries but also individuals (students) involved (Altbach, 1991). Adding to this, Johnston (2015) says that interaction, similarities in culture and adaption to them, different personalities, and identities can affect international students who come from different countries with different backgrounds. As every year Afghan students come to Bangladesh from different parts of Afghanistan with different social, cultural, and personal backgrounds for their higher education, it is important to know how Afghan students experience their higher education in Bangladesh, how are the

learning environment and cultural behaviour – whether their culture is considered in the context of the university or not – at universities, their opportunities and challenges, and how they deal with those challenges when they are in Bangladesh.

To cover these details, the research topic for this study is selected: *Higher Education Abroad: Experiences of Afghan International Students in Bangladeshi Universities*. This research aims to understand and examine the education journey of Afghan students in universities in Bangladesh. Moreover, the study addresses students' perspectives of being international students and studying overseas as well as their opportunities and challenges. This study also covers data on how students' foreign degrees add value to their careers and education inside and outside Afghanistan in the future.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

Students who are participating in overseas universities are increasing each year and its number has doubled four-fold, especially in the last two decades (OECD, 2011 cited in Costello, 2015). It is the same with Afghan students who leave Afghanistan to do their higher education abroad but there are a very limited number of research on Afghan students to study their experiences at overseas universities, especially about Afghan students in Bangladesh. It is quite important to study Afghan international students' experiences to know about their performance at overseas universities as Ahmad et al. (2017, p.2) claim that the academic performances of international students are dependent on the “emotional and environmental” as well as the “cross-cultural” aspects of the new country that they are living in. It means that the lifestyle and adaption to the new culture directly affect their achievements.

Moreover, Bahir (2021) says that many Afghan students attempt to do their higher education abroad due to the high quality of education while they do not know about the challenges that will happen such as new cultural, religious, and language effects. Therefore,

this study will explore Afghan students' experiences studying in Bangladeshi universities to generate data about their educational life practices, opportunities they have at these universities, their challenges, and coping strategies. This study also addresses how their experiences and practices may help them in their future educational and social life.

1.4 Research Questions

Key Question 1:

How is the learning environment and cultural behaviour of Bangladeshi Universities adjusted towards international students?

Key Question 2:

What opportunities do Afghan international students at Bangladeshi universities have and how these opportunities can help them in the future?

Key Question 3:

What are the challenges for Afghan international students at Bangladeshi Universities and how do they overcome those challenges?

Through the first question, I want to know about the learning environment for Afghan international students at universities in Bangladesh. Here the learning environment refers to the teaching-learning facilities, teaching curriculum, and the quality of lessons based on Afghan students' perspectives and to what extent these universities consider students' diverse needs in the teaching-learning process. Besides the learning environment, I am keen to know the cultural behaviour towards Afghan students. When mentioning cultural behaviour, I mean how staff, teachers, and students are interacting towards Afghan students as there are culturally different from Bangladeshi culture. I also wanted to know whether students get any opportunities to represent their own culture in the host or multicultural settings or not.

As it is clear from the second question, I focus on the opportunities that Afghan international students have while studying at these universities and how will it help them in their future; higher studies, career, and social life. Moreover, I am eager to know about the challenges of Afghan students since coming to Bangladesh and studying at these universities and what are their coping strategies to overcome these challenges which is the main focus of my third question.

1.5 Purpose of the Study

As it was mentioned about the lack of research on Afghan international students, especially in Bangladesh, this qualitative research paper focuses on Afghan students who are doing their higher studies at two international universities in Bangladesh. One of the most important purposes of this study is to generate knowledge in this area as there is a dearth of literature about Afghan students' educational experiences abroad. Meanwhile, this research aims to explore Afghan students' experiences such as; their academic and life journey, their opportunities and challenges, and their coping strategies for overcoming these challenges since they are in Bangladesh. The study also reflects on the learning environment and interaction with Afghan students' diverse cultures at the universities in which Afghan students are doing their higher studies. Moreover, it discusses students' perspectives of being international students and their motivations and expectations while choosing these universities in Bangladesh. Lastly, this research thesis focuses to study Afghan students' outlook on whether their experiences as international students at universities in Bangladesh help them in their future studies and their careers or not.

1.6 Significance of the Study

As Rossman & Rallis (2003) says research is more important and valuable when it has one or several significance to the "scholarly research and literature, recurring social policy issues,

concerns of a practice or interests of participants” (p. 130). The finding of this research would have several significance. Firstly, the result of this research might help the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) of Afghanistan to reach concise data about Afghan students studying at universities in Bangladesh. So, it may help MoHE authorities to be aware of how neighbouring countries provide good educational opportunities for their young people and lead them to increase the number of educational opportunities overseas for Afghan students. The finding of this research paper may also give Afghanistan`s MoHE authorities a sense of overseas universities` learning environment and bring some effective changes in the higher education system to enhance the quality of education at Afghanistan universities.

Furthermore, the result of this research can be useful for Afghan researchers and scholars as well as foreign scholars who want to research Afghan international students because there is a lack of research on this topic. Also, the research findings will be helpful to the Universities of Bangladesh to take some initiatives for accommodating international students and minimize their challenges. Finally, this research finding will be a good source of information for readers who want to comprehend information about Afghan students doing their higher studies in overseas universities, especially Bangladeshi universities.

Chapter 2

Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

2.1 Literature review

The literature review is an important part of every research which gives the researcher an exclusive sense of other relevant research that has already been done and helps the researcher prepare the research more well-organized to find out in-depth data. Therefore, several articles, journals, and books which were related to my topic have been reviewed to have a broader concept of my research and add to my information about previous studies relating to international students. But I found that there is less far-reaching and extensive research about Afghan international students overseas, especially in Bangladesh that had been done by MoHE or other researchers. Therefore, after reviewing different sources, five main themes and categories were preferred to be discussed with the support of literature that are *i) higher Education ii) international students iii) challenges of international students iv) opportunities for international students v) experiences of Afghan students.*

2.1.1 Higher Education

Higher education functions as a key role in achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) which is about “inclusive, equitable, and quality of education for all” (Owens, 2017, p. 414). It is the only goal that focuses on global education to ensure lifelong learning for all countries because the world population’s social and educational life is growing rapidly and it is impossible to have a better life with our secondary or upper-secondary education due to the competitive world. Improving higher education is not only important for individuals but also for society. When society members receive a higher level of education, they can lead society toward higher income and a lower unemployment rate “along with lower crime, better health, and greater civic participation” (Kyllonen, 2012, p. 85) which are the needs of society. It also

can help people overcome challenges such as; ending poverty, taking action toward climate change, which is the world's main concern, and helping their surroundings (UNESCO, 2016a, cited in Owens, 2017). Moreover, Cortese (2003) emphasizes the role of higher education in enhancing awareness, knowledge, skills, and value for creating “a just and sustainable future” (p.17). It means that higher education is a basic need for a well-developed society and better individual life, without it, ensuring a sustainable future is impossible.

As higher education plays a crucial function in today's social and educational life, it is the responsibility of educational institutions and universities to work on improving the quality of education and train students to better achievement by considering three main areas; “teaching and learning, scientific research, and community service” (Owens, 2017, p. 417). More importantly, higher education became a hot topic of discussion since students try to continue higher education out of the country. Thus, the alteration of students from home to the host country will have certain “cultural, social, and academic” consequences which students need to get adapted to because it has a critical influence on their achievement (Sovic, 2008, p.146). Studies also show that students in host countries experience changes in cultural “norms and values, different expectations, and unfamiliar education system” which cause them acculturation stress (Ma et al., 2020, p.39). Sovic (2008) also discussed this issue as ‘culture shock’ which is the result of unawareness of social communication. Besides the culture shock, the author says that while students go for higher studies overseas, they face ‘academic shock’ which includes issues like; language difficulties in the education system, working with tutors, participation in the classroom, working in groups, and assessments. Hence, universities, especially universities which provide scholarships, should focus on developing services and programs to help students in the acculturation process (Ma et al., 2020). Moreover, students should be provided with a better learning environment as the “relevant conditions of the learning environment (i.e. co-learners, teachers, learning materials, the physical environment,

and the totality of the human and material influences on learners in any particular situation)” that have sufficient effect on students` reflective learning (Bruno & Dell’Aversana, 2018, p.346). Lastly, to improve the quality of higher education, students should be engaged to study with a diverse class that includes students from different backgrounds. It helps them acquire a broad range of knowledge, experience, cognitive skills, motivations, and values and it will let them improve their critical thinking and greater personal development (Guo & Jamal, 2007) during and after their higher education journey.

2.1.2 International students

Prior to discussing international students in detail, it would be better to have a definition of international students. Johnstone (2015) defines the word ‘international’ as used to describe students who live outside of their home country and have “the provision of a nonimmigrant visa”. Similarly, Bista (2016) explains international students who leave their country for the host country to pursue their tertiary or higher education. There are several reasons why students are engaged to pursue their higher studies internationally and it might vary from person to person. Among all, some reasons such as exploring different cultures, learning new ways of thinking and behaving, making new friends, improving knowledge and skills, and increasing self-esteem and confidence are common among all international students (Sherry et al., 2010).

Different students have diverse backgrounds and when they enter a new country for doing their higher education, they would have several impacts on that country, specifically the host university`s education system. Johnstone (2015) says that international students can have impacts on three dimensions of the teaching-learning process; the impact of local and other international students, faculty, and the broader process of university internationalization. As students come from different social, cultural, and educational backgrounds, they can affect their surroundings including their classmates and other students while interacting outside of their class. It also can affect not only the faculty but also the whole university which provides

scholarships for students around the globe, therefore, the curricula in these universities should be developed based on the diverse need of students. Smith & Khawaja (2011) also declare that international students are not financially valuable to the host country but also enrich these countries by sharing their knowledge and skills and enhancing their cultural awareness. Besides the many benefits that international students will bring to the host country, they will also benefit from some opportunities in these countries as well as being faced with some challenges to cope with for continuing their higher education.

2.1.3 Opportunities for international students

Since students are going overseas to pursue their higher education internationally and live in a foreign country, they will have several opportunities that they can take the advantage of. The first opportunity that students can benefit from is enhancing personal and academic growth and bringing changes in their goals and perspectives (Gu et al., 2010; Moores & Popadiuk, 2011). It lets international students realize their strengths while dealing with different challenges in the host country and develop a sense of independence for themselves and be wise in their decision-making in their life. It also encourages international students to be more aware and change their perspectives toward overseas cultures and be more “open-minded” (Johnstone, 2015; Nilsson & Ripmeester, 2016). Moreover, they can have better academic achievements as they are doing their higher education in developed countries by comparing them with their previous educational experiences and reflecting on how to strengthen their failures. International students have the opportunity to develop their social networks which helps them to have social and peer support (Moores & Popadiuk, 2011). So, this social networking helps international students reduce the feeling of loneliness that international students usually face and encourage the sense of being a family which can also let them enjoy activities both inside and outside the learning environment (Moores & Popadiuk, 2011).

Learning to navigate overseas countries' cultures is the other opportunity that international students can use (Gu et al., 2010; Moores & Popadiuk, 2011) although some international students find it difficult to handle. Students can learn about a new culture (Bahir, 2021), find its differences and similarities, and act accordingly to inhibit some cultural misunderstandings. As well as the culture, international students can learn the host country's language and it will help them to succeed the foreign university courses (Dwyer, 2004). Further, studying in overseas countries helps students understand the different goals of education based on different countries' education curricula. For instance, Moores and Popadiuk (2011) mention a Chinese student experience who found the goal of education in China "how to educate students to be very useful people" which is different from North American universities' "fulfilled human beings" (p.297). It means when students seek education in another country, they benefit from both a good quality of education and learn the concept of education within the specific country which lets students be more critical of the knowledge they learn and how to use them in their life.

Being an international student also gives you the chance to develop skills like; leadership, problem-solving, and communication (Johnstone, 2015) and build your capacity by reaching knowledge and experience and overcoming challenges easily in overseas universities. Lastly, having a good career is an opportunity for which students with overseas education experience are given priority. Nilsson & Ripmeester, (2016) states that graduate students who have international experiences and develop intercultural competence, global awareness, and foreign language training are likely to receive more chance in the labour market than domestic graduate students. The authors also add that fewer graduates with abroad studies may not get a job right after their graduation while the majority of them will find jobs. So, we can say that doing our higher education in overseas countries as international students can help us to enhance our social, academic, language, cultural, and educational knowledge. Even sometimes,

it can give us the chance to live in a developed country where we can have a better living as well as education.

2.1.4 Challenges of international students

Along with many facilities and opportunities that international students may have in overseas countries, they might also face many challenges. The majority of international students usually face language difficulties which leads them not understand lessons, do their assignments properly, and cannot ask any questions regarding lessons given to them (Smith & Khawja, 2011; Johnstone, 2015). Most of them do not have good skills and abilities in the English language while most international universities` curriculum is in English (Sherry et al., 2010; Gebhard, 2012) and it will cause international students not only academic but also social problems. The second challenge which students may struggle with is cultural issues because of unfamiliarity with the host country`s culture (Johnstone, 2015; Townsend & Jun Poh, 2008). Students find it difficult to adapt to a new culture about which they do not know properly. Smith and Khwaja (2011) emphasized this issue under the topic of acculturation which discusses changes as a result of different cultural contact and it usually causes international students “stressors or hassles” which is also known as “cultural shock” (Zhou et al., 2008). This challenge is not always from the student`s side and it sometimes causes by host universities too because there is a lack of cultural programs in those universities which sometimes causes cultural misunderstanding both for students and university members (Sherry et al., 2010). So, it sometimes affects students` achievements as Guo and Jamal (2007) said, “Culture and education are inextricably intertwined, and students` perspectives and worldviews influence their experiences in educational environments” (p.29).

Social exclusion and discrimination are other issues for some international students (Sherry et al., 2010; Smith & Khwaja, 2011) that lead them to not find themselves in the university`s curricula and feel excluded. It means that some international students are given

priority rather than other students and even some students are set aside as they are minorities. Thus, it makes it difficult for international students to find friends and increases their sense of homesickness, and faces a lack of social support (Sherry et al., 2010; Johnstone, 2015) which undoubtedly affects their social interaction with students and the community members.

The other challenge that some international students deal with is finance. Students who do their studies by paying fees by themselves usually face problem financial issues because they are supposed to pay for everything they need in abroad countries. Even sometimes students holding scholarships argue that not having enough money causes them some problems because the stipend which is paid by the university is not enough and cannot fulfil their needs (Sherry et al., 2010). Another factor that creates financial problems for international students is the tuition fee of universities which is at least two to three times higher than domestic students (Bista, 2016) and it mostly causes them cannot purchase whatever they need. Lastly, sometimes the university environment can also be a challenge for international students. As different international students join from different parts of the globe, they have their unique problems and needs such as support, food, and communication in the university environment and when they are not met, they feel isolated (Sherry et al., 2010). Unfortunately, dealing with any of these challenges causes depression (Gebhard, 2012) for the majority of them during their academic journey.

2.1.5 Experiences of Afghan students

Afghan students who study abroad are usually pleased with the host country's cultural behaviour and the quality of education they have in their classes in their education journey. Afghan students found their classmates friendly and good behaviour and said that they are respecting Afghan students a lot even in the first meeting and value their beliefs in their host country (Ahmad et al., 2017; Bahir, 2021). Bahir (2021) also noted that Afghan students are happy about studying abroad due to many reasons; knowing a new culture, learning a new

language (the host country`s language), make living and working abroad, preparing themselves for their future life globally, and even they can make a friendly relationship between the host and their home country by sharing and respecting of each other`s culture and beliefs. Moreover, Afghan students are delighted with the quality of education in an overseas country (Bahir, 2021) and they approved of the relevance of teaching-learning materials of the host country compared to their home country (Janjua et al., 2011). Janjua et al. (2011) also emphasize the satisfaction of Afghan students with the teaching methodology which has been used as they (Afghan students) stated that students are passive learners in Afghanistan`s teaching curriculum while in foreign countries students are expected to be more engaged in the learning process by applying different methods rather than teacher-centred and rote memorization.

Considering all Afghan students` satisfaction and gratification, they face some challenges as well. The first problem that Afghan students face is the adaptation to the new culture (Ahmad et al., 2017). As there is a diversity of cultures around the globe and they vary from each other, it is difficult for Afghan students to adjust themselves to these cultures easily. Furthermore, Ahmad et al. (2017) pointed out that living in an “unfamiliar environment” led Afghan students through other problems in their social life such as not being able to easily shop and struggling with transportation problems. The writer also noticed the feeling of homesick challenge which is common for every international student in the first days of their overseas education. Moreover, Afghan students find it easy to adapt to a new country that has the same religion (Islam) (Ahmad et al., 2017) because they have shared values and beliefs in religion and few differences in culture and customs.

2.2 Conceptual framework

Maxwell (2013) cited in Mayer (2015, p.59) emphasises the conceptual framework as “the system of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories supporting and informing the research conducted” which can be a mix of “experiential knowledge of the researcher,

existing theory and research, and pilot and exploratory research”. Therefore, the conceptual framework is designed after reviewing the literatures and my prior knowledge of the title. By designing this conceptual framework, the research focuses on students` motivations and expectations which quality of education (Bahir, 2021), university degree and ranking, friends` influence, and especially the country`s current situation can be part of them. Moreover, this research focuses on students` opportunities they have had. Those opportunities can be; developing independence skills, enhancing global perspective, experiencing a new education system (Moore & Popadiuk, 2011), language learning, receiving a qualified degree, developing social skills, and learning new culture (Bahir, 2021; Dwyer, 2004; Moore & Popadiuk, 2011).

Meanwhile, this conceptual framework explores Afghan international students` challenges in the host country – Bangladesh. The challenges such as; depression, culture shock or cultural differences, differences in the academic environment (Moore & Popadiuk, 2011), adjusting to a new social environment (Bista, 2016), and language issues (Townsend & Jun Pol, 2008). Considering this conceptual framework, the study tries to discover students` coping strategies which are very important to overcome the challenges they have faced. Lastly, this study gathers data on how Afghan students` experience at universities in Bangladesh would help them in their future life.

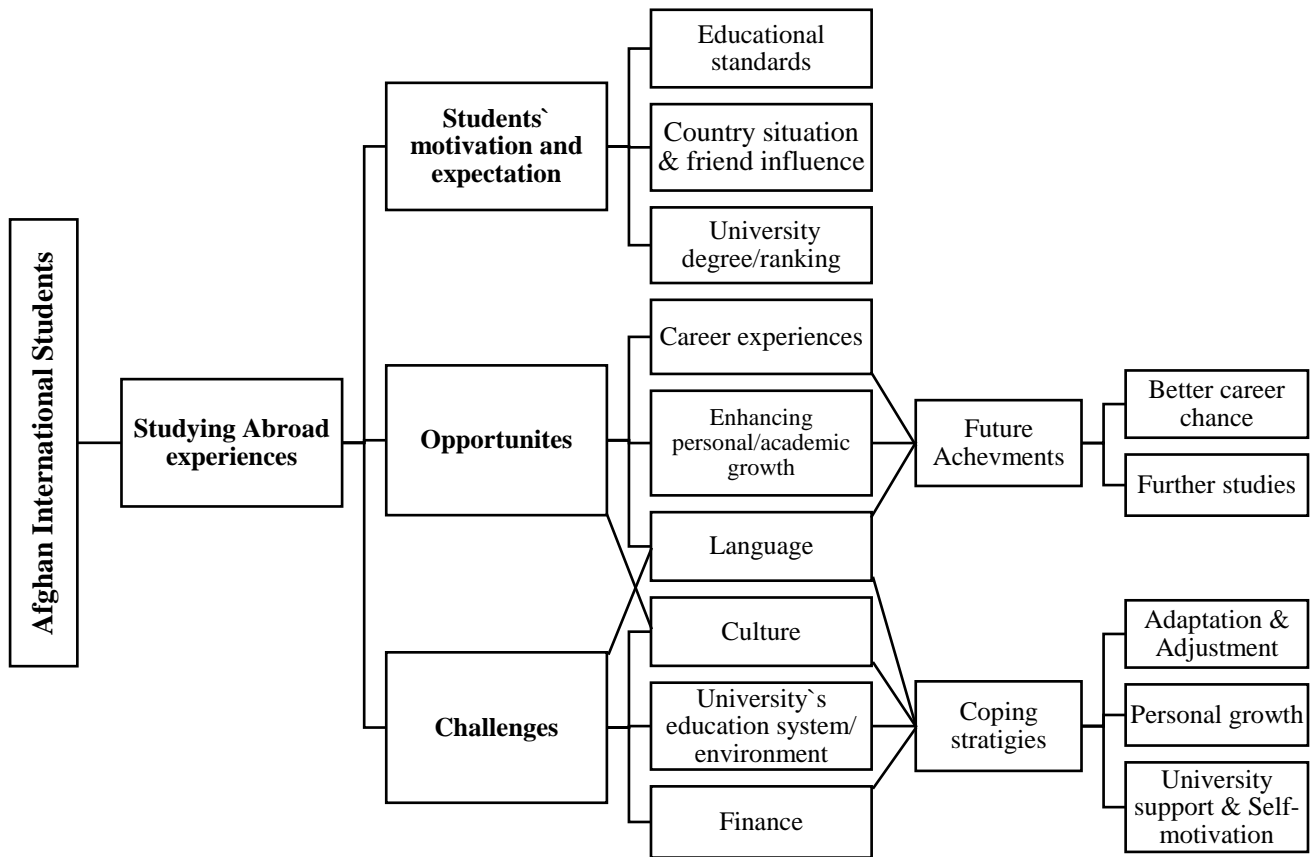


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of study on Higher Education Abroad: Experiences of Afghan International Students in Bangladeshi Universities

Chapter 3

Methodology

The current chapter of this study is about the research design that was applied to complete and conduct this research paper. This chapter covers the following details and topics; Research Approach, Research Site, Research Participants, Sampling Procedure, Data Collection Methods and Tools, Data Collection Process, Role of the researcher, Data Analysis, Ethical Issue and Concern, Credibility and Rigor, and Limitation of the Study.

A qualitative research method was used to conduct this research to gather in-depth data about Afghan students studying higher education at Universities in Bangladesh. This research focuses on Afghan students' experiences of their learning environment and cultural consideration, challenges, and opportunities they had in their higher studies at these universities since they came to Bangladesh. This research paper also points out the coping strategies that Afghan students used to overcome those challenges during their studies at these universities.

3.1 Research Approach

As explanatory and descriptive data was needed to complete this research paper, a qualitative research approach that provides an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon (Anyan, 2013) is used for addressing the research process. This approach emphasizes respondents' words rather than quantification in gathering and analysing the data and gives the chance to collect data both "verbal and visual than a numeric form" (Devetak et al., 2010, p.78) of data which helped me as a researcher to find the main and real data. Moreover, through the qualitative approach, the researcher can review and analyse the collected data from different angles because there are many views of reality and it can be different from various perspectives (Dodgson, 2017). It means that in this paper, the collected data is based on different Afghan students' perspectives because every individual participant had their responses to different

questions. Meanwhile, this approach helped me to gain various data from different respondents with different “environmental and sociocultural” contexts which definitely affected my research results (Dodgson, 2017, p.355) because my research participants were from different parts of Afghanistan with uncommon sociocultural and environmental backgrounds and different experiences studying in Bangladesh.

As long as the research is about the experiences of Afghan students doing their higher education at universities in Bangladesh, it needs qualitative research because a qualitative approach deals with participants’ experiences, beliefs, attitudes, and interactions to reach an in-depth understanding of social objects (Jackson, et al., 2007; Pathak et al. 2013). Further, Pathak et al. (2013, p.192) say that qualitative research “give voice to the participants” and allows participants to share their experience related to the research and it leads the researcher “to a new aspect of the study” to collect more authentic data. The author also adds, “with qualitative methods, the relationship between the researcher and the participant is often less formal than in quantitative research” (p.192) and it facilitates the research environment between researcher and participants to be more friendly and reduce the participants` stress while participating the study.

There are many ways to collect data in qualitative research such as; fieldwork, case studies, interview, focus group discussion, observation, and document reviews (Jackson et al., 2007; Hameed, 2020). Therefore, to conduct this research, two methods; focus group discussion (FGD) and semi-structured interview were used. Further, FGD help to have more ideas about the “topic in a limited amount of time” and semi-structured interview allow both interviewee and researcher to be more flexible (Jackson et al., 2007, p.25).

Lastly, to complete this piece of research paper for data analysis, thematic analysis and coding which is a part of the thematic analysis are used. As Guest et al. (2011) state that

thematic analysis is not only focused on the explicit ideas words or phrases but also will focus on implicit ideas “within the data, that is, themes”. The author also says, “Codes are then typically developed to represent the identified themes and applied or linked to raw data as summary markers for later analysis” (p.9).

3.2 Research Site

The research site is playing a key function in conducting the research successfully and is counted as an integral part of any research (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Therefore, it should be chosen carefully so that the researcher can collect enough authentic data. As it can be clearly known from the research title, the research site is in Bangladesh. The two private and international universities in different parts of this country that are providing scholarships for international students, including Afghans were chosen for this research paper, in which every year many Afghan students are coming to these universities for pursuing their higher education both at the Master`s and Bachelor`s levels. The first university that has been chosen for conducting this research is located in Dhaka city, the capital of Bangladesh. This university is one of the well-known and high-ranking universities in this country in which many Afghan students from different parts of Afghanistan are currently doing their studies in different majors. The second university which has been chosen as a research site is located in Chittagong, the south-easternmost area of Bangladesh. This is the university that provides scholarships for women, especially for women in Asian countries. This university gives yearly more than hundreds of scholarships only for Afghan girls to come to this country for accomplishing their higher degree of education.

The chosen sites in different divisions of Bangladesh provided the opportunity to meet students with several years of educational and social experiences in this country to find more in-depth and detailed data. These sites helped me to collect data from two different angles, two

geographical locations; the first one which is the capital of this country and is more developed and is open to foreigners, and the second one which is located in the south-easternmost of this country and is less developed. This situation would have affected Afghan students` experiences due to that my research participants shared different data and it helped me to go more in-depth and find a mass collection of data. I could manage to choose two universities in Dhaka city from two different universities but I preferred to have my sites from two different parts of this country to have different experiences of Afghan students. Because in Dhaka city all Afghan students might have had the same experience while in two divisions it is impossible. Moreover, it gave me the chance to meet a university professor and authority as well as students to have more detailed data about the learning environment and cultural behaviour toward different international students, especially for Afghan students studying at these two universities in Bangladesh.

Field Plan

| No. | Activities | Date | Participants | Strategy | Remarks |
|------------|----------------------------|-------------|--|---------------------------------|-----------------------|
| 01 | Focus Group Discussion #01 | 16.12.2022 | X University Students | Tape recording and note keeping | Writing Transcription |
| 02 | Focus Group Discussion #02 | 21.12.2022 | Y University Students | Tape recording and note keeping | Writing Transcription |
| 03 | Interview #01 | 24.12.2022 | Y University Professor | Tape recording and note keeping | Writing Transcription |
| 04 | Interview #02 | 11.01. 2023 | Y University Director Academic and Legal Empowerment | Tape recording and note keeping | Writing Transcription |

Table 1: The research field plan for conducting the research.

3.3 Research Participants

Sargeant (2012) believes that research participants are the most important part of qualitative research who should be able to “best inform the research questions” and be capable of knowing the phenomenon of the understudy, hence, they should be chosen appropriately (p.1). Based on my research topic and need, the research participants of this research paper are Afghan students who were studying their higher studies at two different private international universities in Bangladesh. There were twelve Afghan students research participants considering both genders; three male students and nine female students who were from different provinces of Afghanistan. Among all of them, six of them were doing their Master`s studies in different majors with different educational backgrounds in Afghanistan except one of them who did her Bachelor`s in Bangladesh. The rest six were Bachelor`s students in different majors that include students who were doing their education in Afghanistan but due to the low educational level in some universities in Afghanistan, withdraw from their previous majors and joined these universities. The age group of all these participants was between 21-33 years old. I selected all students who had at least one year of experience studying and living in Bangladesh except two participants who had four and six months of living and studying in this country due to the lack of participants I faced and all of them were focus group discussions (FGD) participants.

Additionally, I wanted to have interviews with two university professors to collect data not only from the students` side but also from the university side but due to the non-availability of teachers, I could not manage to have two interviews from two professors. Instead, I interviewed an Associate Professor in Peace and Conflict Studies and a Director Academic and Legal Empowerment at the Centre of Peace and Justice of these two universities.

In general, I had fourteen research participants; two participants for interviews and twelve participants for two FGDs (six students for each FGD). The total spent time for interviews was 60-90 minutes and for FGDs 90-110 minutes. All the research participants were selected based on the research objectives and aims. Lastly, to have brief information about research participants, I have designed a table which includes participants` data and will be presented in the Appendixes part.

3.4 Sampling Procedure

To respond to the needs and objectives of the research paper, purposive sampling which is a part of non-probable sampling was used. Purposive sampling helped me as a researcher for the “identification and selection of information-rich cases” from limited resources (research participants) which involve individuals or groups who are knowledgeable and experienced about the “phenomenon of interest” (Palinkas et al., 2015, p.533). It gave me the option to choose participants based on the research title and purpose (Rai & Thapa, 2015). Purposive sampling also helped me to select my participants based on their “availability and willingness to participate, and the ability to communicate experiences and opinions in an articulate, expressive, and reflective manner” (Spradley, 1979 and Bernard, 2002 cited in Palinkas et al., 2015, p.534).

This research paper also followed homogenous sampling which according to Shaheen and Pradhan (2019) allows the researcher to have participants from the same group and gather them to have in-depth data. My research sample was a combination of all Afghan international students with backgrounds of studying at universities in Bangladesh and almost they were with similar age groups in two different FGDs.

3.5 Data Collection Methods

Two different methods were used as the main tools for data collection in this thesis research; the semi-structured interview and focus group discussion (FGD). The semi-structured interviews helped me as a researcher to organize a set of predetermined open-ended questions along with emerging questions during the interview for enhancing more in-depth data (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Besides the interviews, the two FGDs that were conducted with Afghan students in two different universities created the opportunity to gather my research participants in homogenous groups to collect various data for one specific question from different participants at the same time.

It is also important to be mentioned that I have piloted my questionnaires before conducting my FGDs and interviews. This piloting helped me a lot to remove some unnecessary questions and add some points that I have forgotten in my questionnaires. It helped me to put the questions in sequence and decrease the number of my questions.

The themes that were chosen for data collection for both interviews and FGDs are; demographic data, perception of Afghan students about being international students, afghan students` motivations and expectations for studying abroad, the learning environment in these universities, cultural behavior toward Afghan students, students opportunities and challenges, and their coping strategies to overcome those challenges.

3.5.1 Interview

Anyan (2013) defines the interview as a method that gives individuals (researchers and respondents) the chance to reflect and share their “predicaments, needs, expectations, experiences, and understandings” about the research topic (p.1). I conducted two interviews with two different university members; one of them was an Associate Professor in Peace and Conflict Studies and the other one was the Director Academic and Legal Empowerment at the Center for Peace and Justice (CPJ). To arrange these two interviews, I officially asked the X

University office and one other student from Y University who was facilitating both the interview and FGD's participant at this university, through emails to introduce two professors who are available to sit for interviews. Fortunately, the Y University student could introduce me to one of her professors but X University could not introduce any professor instead, they introduced the Director Academic and Legal Empowerment. Before conducting the interview, I sent them an email to my participants to know their available time for an interview along with the consent letter to let them know about the goal of the research, ethical concerns, and audio recording issues during the interview. After receiving their confirmation, I scheduled interviews and I had one face-to-face and one online interview through the Zoom application as the participant was out of the country.

These two interviews helped me enhance more detailed data by formulating a mix of main and follow-up questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2005; DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006) when I knew that the questions are not completely answered. The expected time for each interview was 60 minutes which they were already informed about but overall it took 60-90 for both interviews.

3.5.2 Focus group discussion

I also used focus group discussion to gather homogenous research participants “systematically and simultaneously” (Babbie, 2011, cited in Boateng, 2012. P.54) with the same background and experience, all Afghan students, in small groups but with impressive and deep discussion for seeking data on a specific topic of interest (Palic, 2015; Omar, 2018). I conducted two FGDs with Afghan students studying in Bangladesh and it gave me the chance to compare my participants' experiences and ideas and find similarities and differences in their experiences (Omar, 2018) in two different FGDs. Moreover, it not only helped students be influenced while discussing in “group dynamic” and remember issues that might be forgotten in individual

conversation but also me to generate new themes along with predetermined ones while participants were discussing in groups (Palic, 2015; Boateng, 2012).

I conducted both FGDs face-to-face with both university students. Before the FGDs, I sent them consent letters through email which included details; information about myself, the purpose of research, ethical issues, and audio recording. I also created WhatsApp groups for my FGDs research participants to give them the chance to share their concerns and questions related to their participation in my research. I started my FGDs by reintroducing myself and greeting them to create a friendly environment where the participants feel comfortable while sharing their ideas and experiences. These FGDs let me observe my participants` gestures and facial expressions and take notes while responding to my research questions as well as recording the FGDs. In the end, one Afghan student from each FGD was asked to briefly share their experiences of studying and living in Bangladesh to have their overall experience. Students sent their overall written experiences after some days and their overall written experiences will not be included in FGDs` transcripts.

3.6 Role of the Researcher

From December 16, 2022, I was able to conduct my FGDs and interviews with twelve Afghan students and two university members in both universities in Bangladesh. Since I have the same experience as other Afghan students participating in my research, I tried to be conscious about my judgment and interpretation of data. So, I can say that I was neutral in my research and did not refer to my personal experiences as an international student in Bangladesh while analysing my findings. Also, as I might have some experiences which have not been expressed by my participants, I did not influence them by giving some probes and asking them to explain more. Moreover, for the authenticity of the data, I tried to create a friendly relationship with my participants and let them feel comfortable and give me “their story” (Fink, 2000) while

gathering data from my participants. As Kvala (1996) cited in Fink (2000) explains “an interview inquiry as a ‘moral enterprise’ has to do with one aspect of the researcher's role”.

3.7 Data Analysis

To analyze the collected data, I followed the six steps for qualitative data analysis which is introduced by Creswell (1994). Firstly, I organized the data for analysis by transcribing the recordings and notes that I had already taken from interviews and FGDs. Secondly, I reviewed all those transcriptions to get the overall information of the data and reflect on them. Then, I tried to omit some non-essential data from interviews and FDGs transcriptions. In the third step, I organized the data into chunks and segments and “put tags, names or labels against pieces of the data” (Punch, 2004, p.204) which had already been collected. I also used the coding process to know “what words and phrases illustrate and elaborate each concept” (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p.286) of my research and used the predetermined codes and generate new codes which were mentioned in the collected data.

In the fourth step, I generated themes from the created codes and it helped me with the thematic analysis that is used to discuss a deep understanding of data (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Right after that in the fifth step, I sorted and classify the themes and found the interrelation between them for a better understanding of the data. Finally, I interpreted the data based on the five analysis steps and presented it through a narrative method by critically reflecting on both similarities and differences of themes created from the collected data. But before the final interpretation of the data, I sent my analysis of findings for a peer briefing to an external auditor who was not a part of my research to check my findings for more validity of the data (Jackson et al., 2007). Furthermore, Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA) programming was used for making notes, comparing themes, and codes, and creating new themes and categories that were needed for my research.

3.8 Ethical Issues and Concerns

Ethical issues are the most important part of research and the researcher must consider research participants' "right, value, and desire of informant(s)" (Creswell, 1994, p. 198) and ensure that they will not be deceived or harmed by participating in the research (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Therefore, to consider the ethical issues and concerns, I sent a consent letter that included issues such as; my details, the purpose of the research, their confidentiality (using Pseudonyms) and anonymity, and the use of a tape recorder for recording their conversation. In the consent letter, it was also written that they can withdraw their participation in my research at any part of the research. I also followed the member-checking procedure (Jackson et al., 2007) which means, when all the notes and recordings were changed to transcripts, I sent them to my participant to look back to the transcripts and add/remove the data that they have already given. But I have not received any revision from my participants' side to bring any changes to my transcribed data. Lastly, I prohibited any kind of reflection on my experiences as an international student and acted as a neutral facilitator.

3.9 Credibility and Rigor

To consider credibility in my research, I have gone through some processes such; as stating the researcher (my) position, using different methods for data collection (Rossman & Rallis, 2003), member checking, and peer debriefing (Rossman & Rallis, 2003; Creswell, 1994) which helped me to collect rich data. Before directly starting the research, I designed a research proposal and send it to my expert supervisors for their approval and feedback. I used different methods (interview, FGD), tools, and resources to collect data and give rationale to my research themes and questions. Moreover, I have completed two courses of research as required for completion of my Master's degree which covered issues like; identifying problems, designing research questions, conducting research, analysing research findings, writing

research proposals, and preparing students for writing the dissertation. Therefore, these two courses help me to gain enough research knowledge and be aware of those steps throughout my research.

Most of the data were collected through face-to-face conversations with my participants except for one interview which was online. Then the data was transcribed and sent back to research participants for member checking. But before the data collection procedure, consent letters were sent to participants for their agreement in which the title and purpose of the research, ethical issues of participants, and their anonymity were mentioned. Furthermore, I used a peer debriefing process by sending my research to check my research findings after finishing my first draft and giving me feedback regarding my research. It would be important to say that as I am also an Afghan international student, I have not included my bias and judgment in my interpretation and I neutrally interpreted my participants' given data.

3.10 Limitations of the study

In every research, limitations are an inseparable part and researchers usually face some limitations while conducting their research. This research paper also presents several limitations that the researcher faced and some strategies were taken into account to address these limitations. Firstly, my research participants were supposed to have at least one year of experience studying in Bangladesh but two of them had only four to six months of experience because of a lack of participants in one research site and the availability of Afghan students due to exam time in the other research site. As all Afghan students were FGD participants which is viewed as an unnatural setting, those two who did not have more experience (non-experts) might be influenced by more experienced (experts) students (Jackson et al., 2007) while giving data. So, to prevent this risk, I did not influence them by asking regular questions and let them share their experiences with questions they had experienced.

Secondly, I faced a challenge while conducting my second FGD in my second research site, Chittagong, because some of my research participants were not ready to join my research if it was conducted in some public places like restaurants or café due to the crowded environment this city has. Therefore, I asked one of my friends who had been living in Chittagong for several years to help me arrange a silent and quiet setting where my participants feel relaxed and comfortable and give me in-depth data without any hesitation. Lastly, a lack of literature is the most important one. There were few numbers of research about Afghan international students, especially in Bangladesh which caused some difficulties in my literature review. To address this issue, I reviewed other related research that was adaptable in the context of Afghanistan and could address its issues related to this topic.

Chapter 4

Results

4.1 Introduction

The research findings are presented based on the data that were collected through focus group discussions (FGDs) and interviews. Two interviews were conducted; one with a university Professor in December 2022 and another one with the university's Director Academic and Legal Empowerment at the Centre of Peace and Justice in January 2023. Also, two FGDs were conducted with Afghan students who were doing their Bachelor's and Master's studies in two different (X, Y) universities in Bangladesh on two different days in December 2022 in Chittagong and Dhaka cities. The findings of this research are based on the research questions and the study's aims. To anonymise the participants, I used a combination of letters and numbers to represent individuals, e.g. P1; P2, etc.

After analysing the data, the finding of this research is divided into six topics following sub-themes for some topics which are discussed below;

- Afghan students' perception and experience as international students in Bangladesh
- Reasons motivated Afghan students to pursue higher education in Bangladesh
- Afghan students' experiences in universities' learning environment
- Cultural behaviour towards Afghan students in the universities' environment
- Opportunities for Afghan students studying in Bangladesh
- Challenges of Afghan students studying in Bangladesh

4.2 Afghan students` perception and experience as international students in Bangladesh

The word international itself may convey different meanings for every student and it causes each student to have different ideas about being an international student. One of the participants (P9) in FGD #2, 21.12.2022 said, “*When I think about the word international and when I came here, so it was the education system; the difference in the education system*”. To confirm these differences in the education system, one of the Afghan students says;

In general, X University ranks among the top universities I've ever attended in my education journey. One of the most important things to mention is offering better facilities for both local and international students, a curriculum of the highest quality, providing students with the chance to study abroad at other international universities around the world, and facilitating job opportunities for students in other institutions, especially at X organizations wherever its branches are available (P2 overall experience, FGD #1: 16.12.2022).

Besides the education system, another Afghan student pointed out the word ‘diversity’ when she heard the word ‘international student’ as she states, “*I can say like the first thing that comes to my mind is diversity. Being in a diverse community, having people from different nationalities, different languages, and different cultures*” (P12, FGD #2: 21.12.2022). By considering the word diversity, she means learning the differences and knowing how to live with those differences in a diverse environment. P6 in FGD #1, 16.12.2022 also states that being an international student gives you the chance to know about the country`s context and act upon them because the environment is more informative than the education system, as he points out, “*I have learned a lot from their experiences, knowledge, culture, and language and it taught me what to do and what to not do in the context of this country*”. Moreover, a research participant considers this learning as an important change in her life but says it needs time to adapt;

And my personal life has been actually a huge change. I live in a diverse community where people come from different backgrounds and cultures. It is sometimes difficult to interact with them and still too much care not to make

them feel uncomfortable. Because each culture has unique values, it takes a long time to understand them (P7 overall experience, FGD #2: 21.12.2022).

Some students define this learning as an unconscious learning procedure that can be a good experience for Afghan students because it gives them the idea of comparing the home and host country`s cultures and learning certain positive views of its culture;

When you are in a new culture, you are unconsciously forced to bring some changes to yourself and it is a really good experience. When you leave your home country for the host country, you see many differences and it makes you think of those differences and consider them as a part of your life. If they were good, you will learn and if they were not, you will ignore them (P1, FGD #1: 16.12.2022).

Moreover, one of the participants (P4) points out international students as their country representatives, *“I think a person who wants to go abroad and wants to pursue her higher education has lots of responsibilities. First, you are the representative of your country and people will judge your country based on what you will be doing”* (FGD #1: 16.12.2022). She believes that it is Afghan students` responsibility to represent a better view and face of their home country to the country in which they are pursuing their higher education.

4.3 Reasons motivated Afghan students to pursue their higher education in Bangladesh

Many reasons motivate Afghan students to accomplish their higher studies overseas along with some expectations to be fulfilled. The first reason that motivates Afghan students studying at universities in Bangladesh is the quality of education that can help them in their further studies in developed countries as one of the participants (P10) argues;

I guess the reason that most of us decided to come and study abroad is that we don` t want to pursue only our Bachelor`s. We want to do our further studies and have our Master`s, Ph.D., or whatever. So, if we have an international degree, it most probably helps us to do our higher studies in developed countries (FGD #2: 21.12.2022).

This is also a kind of expectation that Afghan students have while choosing universities in Bangladesh. P1 claims, *“The main expectation that an international student has is to have a*

degree from the university and that should be in a high level of standards” (FGD note #1: 16.12.2022). Universities` ranking and partnership with other organizations are other factors that motivate Afghan students to choose these universities P6 states, *“Several things motivated me. One of them was the university ranking. Secondly, its connection and partnership with other big organizations, for example, the Open Society University Network... X University can provide better opportunities for its students through its international partners”* (FGD #1: 16.12.2022).

Similarly, becoming a future leader is also a reason for studying at these universities as one of the Afghan students says, *“I wanted to be an influencer guy for women...So current [Y] university means that they will empower me and open the door of the world for me* (P9, FGD #2: 21.12.2022). Also, it is the Y University`s vision as P13, a professor at this university, asserts, *“Asian countries, especially South Asia including Afghanistan, are kind of dominated by the patriarchy. So, it (Y University) provides scholarship to teach how those students will grow as leaders in the situation of patriarchy”* (Interview #1: 24, 12, 2022). Some students considered their friends as the main influencers to choose these universities P11 says, *“A friend of mine came here earlier. So, she used to tell me and then like the way that I observe, like how she's changing, right... So, that's the main motivation that I wanted to come to Y [University]”* (FGD note #2: 21.12.2022). While it is different for P8 who was suffering from the current situation in Afghanistan – the Taliban Government banned education for girls – which causes her to leave Afghanistan to continue her education in Bangladesh as she says, *“So, I had no choice because of our country`s situation. Then I decided that I have to come here”* (FGD note #2: 21.12.2022).

Along with the mentioned motivations, they had some expectations that were fulfilled P6 says;

My first expectation was that I can know and learn a new culture. Second, I can exchange ideas with other students and learn their ideas. Actually, I wanted to know what I am thinking at this age and what others think who came from other countries at this age. Thirdly, I wanted to know how the educational system outside of Afghanistan, the teaching system, and teacher-student interaction (FGD #1: 16.12.2022).

Considering the P6 expectations, it seems to be a goal of X University to create a learning environment where students can come from different parts of the world in one place and can share their knowledge. P14, an X University authority, states, “*When X University was established, the thinking was that how do we bring all these, you know, students from the global south in one place and make X University a hub for knowledge sharing and also learning*” (Interview #2: 11.01.2023). But some expectations that students had were not fulfilled as one of the research participants (P4) claims;

Well yeah, before coming and enrolling in this university, I really expected an international environment as X is an international university. But till yet I haven't found my classes as an international classroom as I am the only international student and the rest are Bangladeshi” (FGD #1: 16.12.2022).

4.4 Afghan students' experiences in universities' learning environment

4.4.1 Learning Facilities

Afghan students in both focus groups found the universities they study, equipped with better facilities in their learning environment. One of the participants (P4) in FGD #1, 16.12.2022 says, “*One thing that X [University] I want to say. It has good facilities whatever facilities you want it has*”. To confirm this, P14, an X University authority, adds, “*If you look at the overall infrastructure, there are good size classrooms, with IT facilities, with overhead projectors*” he also says, “*Students can access online materials. It has got a very good library, which has got both online and offline facilities*” (Interview #2: 11.01.2023). But students in both focus groups face a lack of sufficient place for self-study P4 complains, “*But in case a place that you want to study it doesn't have... There is no place where you can sit and study... Even if we go to the new campus, they don't have enough space*” (FGD #1: 16.12.2022).

4.4.2 Teaching curriculum

Afghan students emphasize the better quality of education and the education system that these universities are following. The education system these universities follow is international rather than a country-based education system as P12 states, *“The quality of education, the education system is not based on the education system of Bangladesh. It's more based on the USA education system. So, Y University is following their education system”* (FGD #2: 21.12.2022). To confirm this, P14, an X University authority, says, *“These curriculums are not country-specific. These curriculums are more global”*, he also adds, *“So, there is a lot of experienced experiential learning here, and many adjunct faculty here are also professionals. So, they bring in that day-to-day experience in classrooms”* (Interview #2: 11.01.2023). So, we can say that by studying at these universities, Afghan students gain an international level of education along with practical and real-life experiences which adds to lesson efficiency in their education journey at universities in these country.

Afghan students also liked the assessment system of these universities as one of them noticed;

You know, the whole semester you'll start studying from the beginning till the end. But in Afghanistan, it's only for the final or when it's the midterm exam. But here, when the semester starts, you have a presentation, you have an assignment, you have this and that till the end of the semester, you will not be free (P12, FGD #2, 21.12.2022).

To add to the P12 speeches, P14, an X University authority says, *“The assessments are not only done on traditional examinations. There are seminars and other modern techniques being used in the assessment to get the best outcome for the students”* (Interview #2: 11.01.2023).

Afghan students found the plagiarism and grading process very good in these universities which can be noticed in P10 speeches, *“The thing that I really love about the Y [University] assessment method, is that they are very strict and serious about plagiarism”* (FGD #2: 21.12.2022) to add to her speech, P2 says, *“They [X University teachers] will give you a score*

based on the answers written on your paper” (FGD note #1: 16.12.2022). After assessments, students said that they will receive feedback based on their performance to work on their weaknesses and strengthen them, as a research participant (P9) in FGD 2#, 21.12.2022 points out, *“They send us feedback every semester and it is like many pages. You have to fill that... the changes that they are going to bring according to our performance is by their feedback”*.

4.5 Cultural behaviour toward Afghan students in the universities` environment

4.5.1 Cultural Events

Along with providing a better learning environment, culture is the other important aspect to be considered for international students. The collected data from both focus groups show that Afghan students are glad about having cultural events at their universities. Regarding this issue, P6 states, *“we have a program ‘culture show’. We have this program every year. In this program, students from different parts of the world will come by wearing their national clothes and showing their culture and customs”* he also defines this program as a motive for showing their culture, *“this is the program from the university side to give the students the motivation to show their culture to others”* (FGD #1: 16.12.2022).

Besides having cultural programs, students also have the opportunity to exchange some cultural values with other students from different parts of the world as P9 mentioned, *“Yeah. This is Culture-Cross Day. We are going to wear other country clothes. You are looking so nice in that”* (FGD note #2: 21.12.2022). These programs are not only for students but staff can also have their specific programs on specific days, *“I think there are many occasions that students and teaching staff and other admin staff with different cultural backgrounds celebrate them on different days for their religion or culture”* (P13, Interview #1: 24,12,2022).

4.5.2 Interaction towards Afghan students and their Culture

Afghan students found staff interactions positive and respectful and said that they try to be friendly when they see Afghan students. A research participant (P6) declares, *“I have not seen any interaction that seems to be bad toward international students from the staff side. When they see us, they can easily recognize us as international students and try to be very friendly with us, I mean Afghan students”* (FGD #1: 16.12.2022). Besides being friendly, P7 in FGD #2, 21.12.2022 has said that some staff are willing to learn Persian words like; staff in the dining room like to learn names of *“foods in Persian”*. An X university authority (P14), also adds, *“I know that some of my colleagues in the university they even sometimes personally ask foreign students how they are their whereabouts, even during Eid festivities, and invite them to their homes so that they feel they don't miss their homes”* (Interview #2: 11.01.2023). On the opposite, some students seem to be disappointed. A research participant (P10) claims that some staff are *“generalizing students based on one student`s behaviour”* and if one Afghan student does something bad, they will say all *“Afghan students are like that”* but in general, students felt happy about their interactions (FGD #2, 21.12.2022).

Data in both focus groups show that Afghan students found teachers well-interact with foreign students and willing to join in their cultural festivities as P7 in FGD #2, 21.12.2022 says, *“Once we have celebrated Nowrooz [New Year]... teachers came from different departments. Like we had our Chinese Professor, Professor Yuzi. He was there with some other teachers from different faculties”*. To confirm this issue, P13, a professor at Y University, focuses on respecting students` customs as a minimum requirement and says, *“we shouldn't say anything negative about those and different cultures and customs and the religion, of course, which is the minimum requirement”* (Interview #1: 24.12.2022). Meanwhile, some Afghan students also said that they have some teachers who do not have good interaction with Afghan students as P10 claims, *“But sometimes they are thinking that Afghan students are not,*

you know, mentally stable. That's what hurt a lot and I don't like that one" (FGD #2: 21.12.2022). But the majority of teachers have good behaviour and try to be supportive and friendly with international students which can be easily understood from P9 speech in FGD #2, 21.12.2022 as she says. *"...one day I just I was quiet in class and he [the teacher] asked me 'can I talk with you for five minutes'. He gave me out of the class and said that 'are you fine'? 'If you have any problem, you can share it with me I'm your friend'"*.

Afghan students are also delighted about students in the university environment as P11 points out, *"All of them are my friends since I know my classmates, I have still them and I am close to them. I used to go on trips with them. They are more, you know, happy if I go and visit them and they're going to welcome me"* and P7 in the same focus group adds, *"They really admired our outfits. I can see my friends from other countries. They're borrowing my friend's clothes. That's very nice"* (FGD #2: 21.12.2022). But it seems to be different from local students to international students, *"I was in contact with others who were my classmates and their interactions with our culture were good. Personally, the experience that I have with international students compared to Bangladeshi students was different. We were friendlier with each other compared to Bangladeshi students"* (P2, FGD #1: 16.12.2022). Even some students face disrespect toward their language P7 in FGD #2, 21.12.2022 argues;

I feel sometimes they don't respect some things, but we do back. I have a Bangladeshi roommate and besides some classmates and I have seen some strange behaviour and sometimes kind of something that when we are talking in Persian, they didn't know some words, and they were just like, you know, repeating them, and laughing with their friends and they saying, what is that word? What is its meaning? And this kind of thing.

Also, both focus group students stated that some of the local students are not willing to work with them in academic environments P1 claims, *"In academic environments, it is somehow impossible to work in groups with local students. We tried very much to be friendly with them and work in groups with local students but we could not"* (FGD #1: 16.12.2022).

4.6 Opportunities for Afghan students studying in Bangladesh

4.6.1 Learning Language

The data collected from focus group discussions and interviews show that students have different opportunities while studying at universities in Bangladesh. The first opportunity that they mentioned is boosting and learning language skills as P2 mentioned, *“In Afghanistan, most universities have a Persian teaching curriculum but this university has an English teaching curriculum which will give you English proficiency”* (FGD #1: 16.12.2022). It can also be noticed in P13’s speeches, a university professor, in interview #2, 24.12.2022 as he says that during three years of undergraduate studies, students have the chance to boost their *“English writing skills”*. Moreover, P2 in FGD #1, 16.12.2022, says that they are with other international students and it will help them to *“learn other languages rather than English”*. In the same focus group, P6 expressed the importance of language learning for developing networking skills as he points out, *“The first thing that is most important in networking is language and fortunately, now we learned the basics so that we can make communication with our surroundings”*.

4.6.2 Learning Culture

Besides the language, students also have the opportunity to learn about different cultures from different students while they are accomplishing their higher studies in Bangladesh. In this regard P10 in FGD #2, 21.12.2022 states, *“So, I wanted to learn about new cultures. Like when we are here, we’re almost from more than 15 countries. I really like to see, especially Cross-Culture Day. So, everybody is just showing their own culture”*. To add to this point, P2 says, *“More importantly, we can find different friends from around the world, be in contact with them, and learn about their cultures and traditions”* (FGD #1: 16.12.2022).

4.6.3 Developing Personal, Social, and Academic Skills

The other opportunity that Afghans as international students have is developing personal, social, and academic skills. P6 in FGD #1, 16.12.2022 points out, “*When I was in Afghanistan, I felt shy in my social interaction but since I came to Bangladesh, I become so motivated in interaction and communication.... Even now if I do not know anyone, I can easily communicate with him and will not be shy*”. Along with communication, students can also improve their leadership and problem-solving skills and be more flexible in some cases;

...besides studies, there are lots of clubs. Like we have Debate Club, we have mental health, and we have many more other clubs where students will have the opportunity to experience leadership skills. And they will, you know, have the opportunity to learn how to communicate, they will be in situations where they will learn how to be a good problem solver and be more flexible sometimes (P7, FGD #2: 21.12.2022).

So, developing these skills helps students to develop their mutual understanding level as P13, a university professor, says, “*So, I think on the bottom line, the university provides a good environment for enhancing the mutual understanding of students*” (Interview #1: 24.12.2022).

There are also some exchange programs through which students can improve their academic skills as well as social and personal skills but their number, is very limited and all students cannot receive them. To declare this point, P12 says, “*For academia, we have opportunities like exchange programs and internships. But the exchange program is very limited. You know, they will announce. In the end, they will select only two students or even one student, which is very complicated*” (FGD #2: 21.12.2022). Further, some students point out enhancing ‘confidence’ and ‘self-independency’ skill while studying at these universities;

My short academic journey at Y University is full of experiences and lessons to be learned. Studying as an international student made me more confident and independent in my studies since I follow my courses with passion and interest and I am keen on learning from the class and my own research in different courses (P7 overall experience, FGD #2: 21.12.2022).

4.6.4 Work Experience

Students also can have work experience while studying in these universities as P7 states, *“besides studies, students have the opportunity to do Work Study. Uh, it gives every individual student, if they experience, they receive the experience of work areas that is much different from class. And they will be more confident when they apply for a job”* (FGD #2: 21.12.2022).

As well as Work Study, Afghan students can also do some internships which will be provided by their universities. In this regard, P6 explains, *“X [University] has good networking with different organizations and companies, and every time, different companies refer to this university to hire its students for internships after an interview with them”* (FGD #1: 16.12.2022). To confirm this, P14, an X University authority, says, *“We had an Afghan girl here who did an internship with us and worked with us for a few months and that is how foreign students can try to add value to their learning* (Interview #2: 11.01.2023). But in opposite, some students find it difficult to find internships;

I expected that the university might provide some internship for us or it becomes a means that we can work with other organizations. But it has not happened I am in the last semester and I was supposed to do some internships. I applied a lot but unfortunately, I couldn't get any internship (P1, FGD #1: 16.12.2022).

Besides having work experience during their studies, students said that they will have job good opportunities once they graduated from these universities either within or with universities partners as P2 states, *“When you have your education at this university, you are given the privilege of working with organizations which have partnerships with this university. Because it has partnerships with organizations even in our country where you may find a job”* (FGD #1: 16.12.2022). To confirm this point, P14 says, *“In our centre, there are at least four colleagues who are X University alumni. So, this actually shows that they also have career opportunities within the university and within the bigger X [University] family”* (Interview #2: 11.01.2023). However, some students were concerned about meritocracy in the current country's government and situation which would make it difficult for them to find jobs;

But unfortunately, now the problem is that because of this situation and everything is gone. Nothing is left. It means previously I had a dream that I would have a good opportunity in my career life but now, no, due to the current situation in Afghanistan (P10, FGD #2: 21.12.2022).

4.6.5 Further Studies

Students also will have further education opportunities once they are graduated from these universities as P1 says, “X [University] is a member of the Open Society University Network. Therefore, you can be easily accepted into any of those universities for your further studies” (FGD #1, 16.12.2022). P10 also adds, “As Y [University] is known in the world and then if we have the degree from this university, I am sure it will help us with further opportunities and studies” (FGD #2: 21.12.2022). They also said that their professors are supportive in this regard and will help as much as they can, P6 states, “...teacher, especially those who are in research majors can recommend us for further studies if we want to apply for our Master`s and Ph.D. in the future” (FGD #1: 16.12.2022). A Y University professor (P13) also asserts that the university itself can be good preparation for students for their Master`s studies as most of the courses in the Y University are “research-oriented” (interview #1: 24.12.2022).

4.7 Challenges of Afghan students studying in Bangladesh

4.7.1 Language

Along with many opportunities, students also have some challenges since they are studying at universities in Bangladesh. As they discussed the language as an opportunity, it can also be a challenge as P11 states, “So, for me when I came to Y [University], it was like maybe for the first few months I was facing some challenges to speaking in English” (FGD #2: 21.12.2022). P3 in FGD #1, 16.12.2022 confirms the language problem and says that language challenges can create some communication difficulties “both with teachers and students and society” members. Moreover, most of the students in FGD #1, 16.12.2022 complained about teaching language which even cause them to fail some courses as P6 says, “I failed one of my courses

because of the language. All the lessons and examples were given in Bangla language, so, I could not know what the teacher said". Even sometimes, language challenges cause Afghan students to feel excluded, as P4 claims, *"Therefore, in some group works, they prefer to work in their group and speak in their language which is difficult for me to understand. As I am only one international student and they are willing to work in their groups, I feel excluded"* (FGD #1: 16.12.2022).

4.7.2 Culture

The second challenge that students faced is cultural shock which includes issues like customs, behaviour, weather, and food. As P6 declares in FGD #1, 16.12.2022;

And the cultural differences considering the behaviour are very different. The behaviour that we expect in Afghanistan, we cannot have here because the environment and the culture are different, our culture is different and theirs are different. We are mostly friendly but these people are not, especially, with other people [foreigners]... Most of the customs which may make us happy, will not make them happy and they may accept and like few of them because of differences. For example, in our culture, when we see some of our friends, we hug them but local people do not have this custom.

Besides customs, P2 in FGD #1, 16.12.2022 claims that Bangladeshi food culture is so difficult to adapt to because *"their food is so spicy and international students do not like it"*, especially the hostel`s foods. For some students, the weather can also be a challenge in the first few days as P9 says, *"And also at the beginning, it was the weather, the problem, a challenge, you know? Oh my God, I couldn't breathe here. I said, there is no fresh air"* (FGD #2: 21.12.2022).

4.7.3 Difficulties in Education System

The other challenge could be the teaching curriculum that Afghan students faced. A research participant (P5) points out, *"But the first days were difficult because everything was different; methods, lesson format, and language, therefore, I was always with P1 to use her guidance and experiences at X [University] education system* (FGD #1: 16.12.2022). To support this, P13, Y University professor, says, *"And also maybe because our university follows the*

American Liberal Arts Education model, in the early period students need to know about this and its purposes. Otherwise, they may face some challenges with their education result”

(Interview #1: 24.12.2022). A research participant (P11) also emphasizes;

The education system is different at Y University compared to Afghanistan and it causes some problems. For example, for doing an assignment I have to spend one or two weeks but students who are familiar with this system and have a good educational background can do it in a night because they already have everything in their minds (FGD #2: 21.12.2022).

4.7.4 Living Standards

Besides mentioned challenges, Afghan students face some challenges in their living situation.

P10 in FGD #2, 21.12.2022 complained about their hostel situation and she says that in the past they had “*much better food*”, they had enough space to study and pray but now they cannot because the number of students is doubled in each room. Most of the Afghan students also mentioned financial problems due to the low stipend they receive as one of the participants (P8) claims, “*The students are always out of money, yes. Because the stipend which will be given is less but everything is expensive when you buy*” (FGD #2: 21.12.2022). In the same focus group, P10 points out people’s disrespect while interacting with Afghan students, she says, “*in 2019, when I first time went to Dhaka, a shopkeeper asked me from which country I am, I said Afghanistan, and they said, ‘Domb’ [explosion sound] and then they laugh. It was a very bad experience I had*” (FGD #2: 21.12.2022). However, it is the opposite of P5 experiences who found people’s interactions friendly as she said, “*Even outside of the learning environment they are very respectful. Once I went to the bank and they respect me a lot and even asked me to sit there and have coffee or tea with them*” (FGD #1: 16.12.2022).

4.7.5 Coping strategies for Afghan students to overcome challenges

Since Afghan students are facing some challenges studying in Bangladesh, they are trying to go through different strategies to cope. To come up with some challenges, P3 in FGD #1, 16.12.2022 emphasizes adapting to the new environment because “*the culture, food, and*

literature (language)” are totally different in Afghanistan and Bangladesh. Similarly, P9 in FGD #2, 21.12.2022 believes that some challenges are uncontrollable and students should adjust themselves as she says, “*And about the other challenges that we have, we have to deal with. Like the weather, you know, is uncontrollable. So, we have to just adjust ourselves*”.

Meanwhile, some students pointed to personal growth to overcome some problems in the host country as P6 says, “*Now I know more about their culture. And I developed my networking with them to learn more and more about their traditions and customs and boost my knowledge about them*” he also declares, “*I tried to solve my language challenges by using the words that I have learned, maybe it is right or wrong, and mixing the words [from English] to convey my message*” (FGD #1: 16.12.2022).

In the main time, university members also try to help students if they have any problems in the academic or hostile environment. Regarding this point, P1 points out, “*When we have any problem, we can ask for time from our teacher or we can ask the coordinator to set a time so that we can share our problems and concern regarding our lessons with our teacher*” (FGD #1: 16.12.2022). To confirm this, P14 says, “*I find staff and faculty members quite understanding and accommodating, I would say towards foreign students here to support them and give them more guidance*” (Interview #2: 11.01.2023). Some universities also provide psychological support due to the current situation for Afghan students to reduce their concerns which will affect the learning process P7 says, “*Taliban, they took all over the country and we are hearing lots of like worst things every day... They kind of affected our mental health. So, the [Y] university provided us with some Afghan psychiatrists*” (FGD #2: 21.12.2022).

Furthermore, some self-motivations lead students to accept these challenges and continue their education in Bangladesh, as P10 states, “*For the first years or months it isn't easy to cope. You are just trying to survive but later it depends on your goals. Suppose, I have the goal to have a better education so, it motivates me to accept these challenges and finish my*

studies here” (FGD #2: 21.12.2022). While some students are trying to rely on some activities such as writing journals as a coping strategy as P9 in FGD #2, 21.12.2022 points out;

Sometimes we feel aloneness because we are human and it is the first time we are far from our family. So, when it happens, I write everything in a journal I have and it makes me calm. Like, it opens a window in my mind and puts out all the pressures I have.

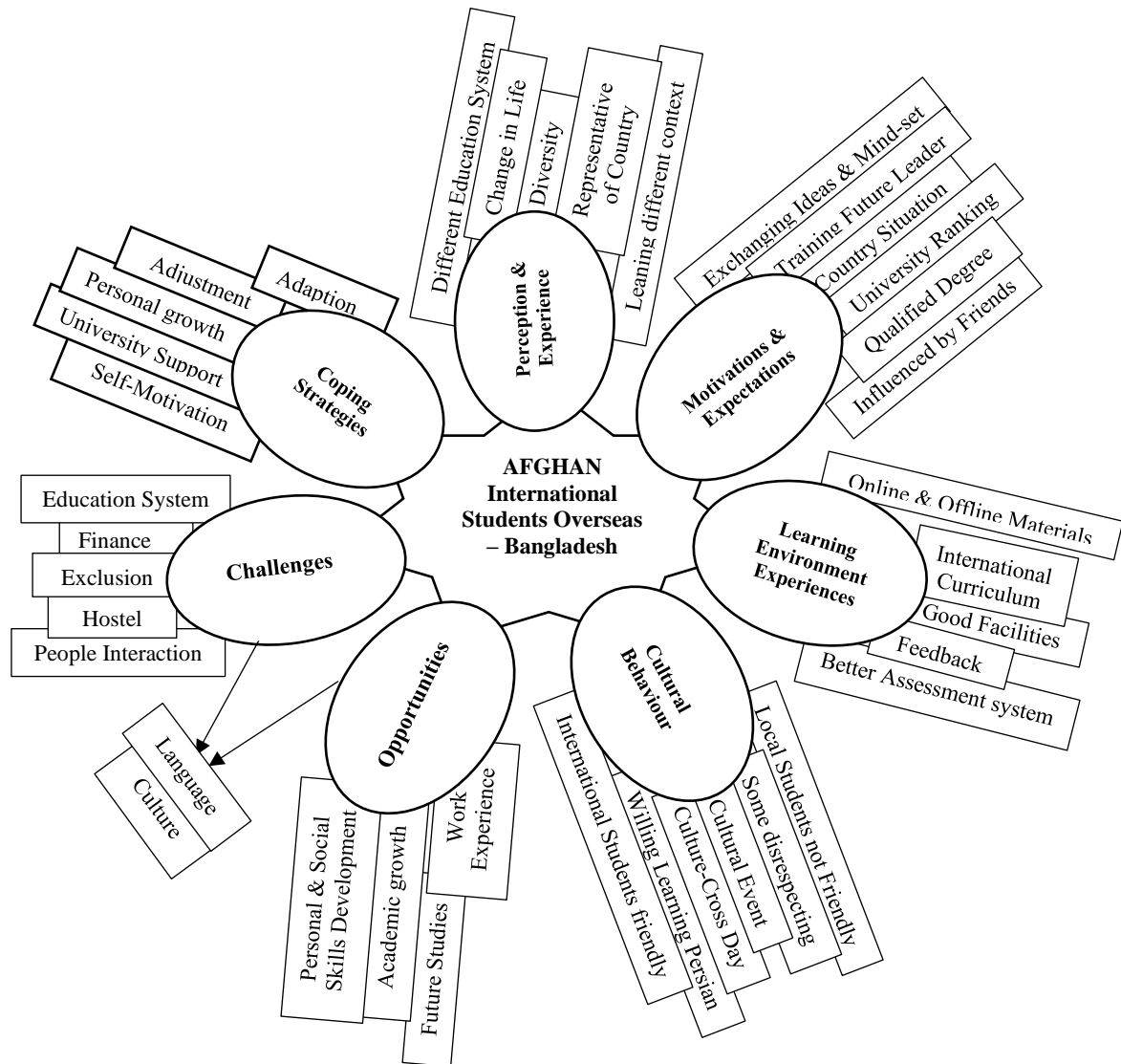


Figure 2: An overall finding of the research from both interviews and FGDs.

Chapter 5

Discussion and Conclusion

In this chapter, the findings of the data based on the research results which have already been presented in the previous chapter will be analysed. This chapter compares the study results with other literatures and related studies. This study mainly focuses on the learning environment and cultural behaviour toward Afghan students at universities in Bangladesh, their opportunities and how these opportunities may help them in the future, and challenges and coping strategies to overcome those challenges. Along with the mentioned themes, students' perceptions of being international students, motivation for selecting these universities, and expectations will also be discussed briefly. Lastly, at the end of this chapter, a few recommendations will be provided based on the conducted study.

5.1 Discussion

The research findings present different perspectives of Afghan students on being international students. As they think of international students, ideas such as 'diversity', learning different countries' contexts, a change in life, being a country's representative, and 'different education systems' come to their minds. Students believe when they are 'international students', they will be in a diverse cultural environment where they can learn different cultures based on different countries' contexts, which causes unconscious changes in their lives while sharing their thoughts and ideas. Interestingly, some students have the idea of country representatives as international students because they will represent their country's culture and values in the host country through which foreigners may judge their country's people.

Afghan students indicated different motivations to choose universities in Bangladesh like; quality of education, university ranking, being a future leader, friend influence, and country situation. Education quality is the main motive of Afghan students which is also

confirmed in Bek (2018), Shaheen et al. (2019) and Bahir (2021) studies as Bek says that the government of Afghanistan cannot provide a better quality of education, students prefer to study overseas. University ranking and friends` influence are other reasons that inspired Afghan students to choose these universities which can be clearly reflected in Amouzeshi et al. (2021) and Özoglu et al. (2015) studies as Özoglu et al. noticed an Afghan student who chose Turkey universities because his uncle suggestion for his higher studies. Contrary to other students` ideas, a student discussed that the current situation in Afghanistan – the Taliban Government – caused her to choose Bangladesh to continue her education because currently, the Taliban banned education for girls who are above grade six and they cannot go to universities or schools. Along with motivation, students also had expectations to be fulfilled for instance; learning new cultures, exchanging ideas with students from other parts of the world, experiencing different education systems, and having international classroom environments. But unlike the developed countries, Bangladesh is a developing country and a few number of international students come to this country for their higher education, therefore, some Afghan students did not find an international classroom environment because a few or no international students except Afghans were in classes.

Findings related to the learning environment of the universities show that Afghan students are satisfied with the facilities, university curriculum, and assessment and grading system. Students found universities equipped with updated facilities needed for the teaching-learning process which matches with Sabri`s (2019) and Shaheen et al. (2019) studies in which Afghan students also claimed to have better facilities in the learning environment of universities overseas. They said that universities follow a global education curriculum in which the assessment system is completely different compared to most universities in Afghanistan which are the same as Sabri`s (2019) finding about Afghan students in the United States (US). Universities, where Afghan students pursue their studies in Bangladesh, use both formative

and summative assessments while most universities follow summative ones in Afghanistan's education system. Afghan students also noticed two uncommon but useful points at these universities; being restricted towards plagiarism and receiving feedback after assessments. It means that in most universities' policies and curriculum in Afghanistan, taking action towards plagiarism and giving feedback to students are inconsiderable issues while universities in Bangladesh are very conscious of them. Considering all the facilities students have in the learning environment, they are still concerned about having a sufficient place for self-study and found universities noisy wherever they want to study.

Besides learning facilities and education systems, both Afghan students and universities member confirmed having cultural events, 'Cultural Show and Cross-Culture Day', where students from different cultural backgrounds can join and show their cultures from around the world and exchange some cultural values with each other. These programs lead Afghan students to understand the diversity of cultures and respect those differences as a part of their education journey and represent Afghan cultures in the university context for other students and university staff.

The findings demonstrate that teachers and staff are friendly, supportive, and respectful towards Afghan students and their culture which is much the same as Sabri's (2019) research findings in which Afghan students found their teachers supportive during their education journey in the US. Even some staff are willing to learn Persian words and sometimes invite international students informally to their homes during some festivals –Eid days – to reduce their loneliness. However, it is different with a few staff and teachers who generalize Afghan students based on one student's behaviour and consider them to be not psychologically fine and it really discourages some Afghan students. Moreover, Afghan students found the university students well-interact and respectful but it seems to differ from local students to international students. They found international students friendlier than local students in the

university environment which sometimes makes it difficult to work in group activities with local students. Even sometimes Afghan students feel disrespected by local students regarding their language when they communicate in Persian – their native language – with each other in the dormitory and it is in contradiction to Ahamd et al. (2017) study findings in which Afghan students found Malay local students much friendlier towards themselves.

The findings prove that Afghan students have had many opportunities and faced some challenges since they are in Bangladesh. Learning a language and familiarity with different cultures are the basic opportunities students have which matches Bahir`s (2021) study as he says that Afghan students who studied in China, learned the Chinese language and their cultural practices. As universities follow the English curriculum, it helps Afghan students to boost their English proficiency which they do not have the opportunity in Afghanistan because most universities follow a Persian curriculum. Similarly, they have classmates considering both local and international students and it helps them learn about different cultures. Meanwhile, language caused challenges for Afghan students as well, therefore, they receive English language courses from the university side. Students found speaking English difficult in the first days and a lack of both English and local language skills lead to communication difficulties. Even some students complained that sometimes in some classes, some teachers teach in the Bangla language which they cannot understand, and sometimes not understanding Bangla caused them to feel excluded in classes. Same as to language, students experienced a cultural shock since coming to Bangladesh. Students found the local people`s behaviour, food, and even weather different to cope that is also reflected in Ahmad et al. (2017), Bek (2018), Muradi et al. (2018), and Sabri (2019) studies in which Afghan students noted differences in food and people`s behaviour compared to Afghanistan and find it difficult to adapt for a while.

Findings also indicate that since students enrolled at these universities, students have the chance to boost their personal, social, and academic performance by participating in some

clubs, and programs – very limited exchange programs – and experiencing different life situations in Bangladesh. Besides that, students can have work experience by participating in some ‘work-study’ or applying for internships at the university while it is difficult for some students and they cannot easily get internships. Furthermore, Afghan students were optimistic about their future which Bek’s (2018) and Bahir’s (2021) studies also found a similar result. Afghan students were hopeful about having further education and work opportunities after graduation from these universities as a result of having qualified degrees. However, some of them were concerned about meritocracy in the current government of Afghanistan.

Besides language and culture which have already been mentioned, students also faced difficulties in the education system at these universities. Even for some of them, it was difficult to submit assignments in a limited time which is also reflected in Muradi et al. (2018) and Sabri’s (2019) studies. As Sabri says that Afghan students in the US find difficulties in terms of studying time management, submitting assignments online and on time, and even sometimes they asked for dateline extensions due to unfamiliarity with the education system. Lastly, Afghan students faced some other challenges such as; having crowded hostels and financial issues as a result of receiving low stipends which can be noticed in Bek’s (2018) and Muradi et al. (2018) research findings as Afghan students found living in Turkey expensive and it leads them to have financial issues. Also, Afghan students experienced some social disrespect towards themselves, however, it is not a main concern for all Afghan students in Bangladesh.

To overcome these challenges, Afghan students follow different coping strategies such as; adaption and adjustment, personal growth, relying on unique habits, self-motivation, and university support. They try to adapt and adjust themselves to the new environment as they face some situations that are uncontrollable while entering Bangladesh. Ahmad et al. (2017) claim, “moving into new countries, students are challenged with a new adaptation process, trying to familiarize themselves with new surroundings and new culture” (p.3). They also focus

on their personal growth to learn about the host cultures and customs as Muradi et al. (2018) say, “Afghanistan students cope with these paradoxes, equip them with adequate knowledge of academic discourses, and transcend the culturally framed borders and subjectivities” (p.696). Afghan students are also used to ‘writing journals’ to cope with their stress and loneliness which matches Bek`s (2018) study as he found Afghan students in Turkey rely on their ‘unique habits’ such as reading books, playing games, and doing prayers to reduce their stress and loneliness.

Considering all, Afghan students found the education system of these universities better equipped with modern teaching-learning materials compared to Afghanistan. Students noticed the cultural behaviour of university members and students were interactive and friendly however some students faced some misbehaviour during their educational journey both in society and universities environments. They have had several opportunities while they face some sort of challenges at the same time, therefore, they have gone through many coping strategies to overcome those challenges. In general, Afghan students were satisfied with studying at these universities and considered their higher education a good educational opportunity that facilities them to get the advantage of a better quality of education and have different life experiences.

5.2 Conclusion

This study was conducted to explore Afghan students` experiences doing their higher education at two different international universities in Bangladesh as international students. The findings of this study show that Afghan students had different motivations and expectations to choose universities in Bangladesh. But they emphasized two of them the most which are; receiving a qualified degree and the country`s situation. The quality of education in Afghanistan compared to other developing counties are low and students prefer studying overseas also universities are

banned for girls in Afghanistan due to Taliban restriction so, girls came to Bangladesh for higher education even some of them withdraw their previous degrees. Afghan students experienced a totally different education system at these universities taking from the teaching curriculum and assessment system to the facilities they have been provided. They found the education system more effective and standard than Afghanistan`s universities education system. Similarly, the cultural behaviour was more positive toward Afghan students. But they lack some facilities and expectations that they had like not having a place for self-study and an international environment due to the low number of international students in classes. As a part of their education, they had many opportunities such as learning language and culture, personal, social, and academic growth, and having work experiences which is difficult for some students, notably finding internships. These opportunities plus the university degree cause them to feel optimistic about their future studies and career life. Moreover, they faced some challenges, noticeably the language and culture, the different education system, dormitory, finance, and social interaction. But it was not much difficult for students to cope with as they applied different strategies like; adaption and adjustment, personal growth and motivations, and university support. Considering all, based on the research findings, overseas education can be a precious experience for students both in terms of life and education, therefore, the government of Afghanistan should provide more scholarships to let students benefit from better education quality and equip themselves with global standards of education.

5.3 Recommendations

Some recommendations have been given based on this research on the experiences of Afghan students studying in Bangladesh as international students.

- As most international students face acculturation and adaptation issues in the universities in Bangladesh, universities in this country should have some introductory

programs to give international students an overview of the culture, lifestyle, and education system of these universities.

- As international students including Afghans come from different language backgrounds and Bangladesh is not an English-speaking country, universities in this country should have Bangla language courses for international students at the beginning of the program.
- Universities should create a platform to get connected with students even after their graduation because students may need universities support after graduation, for their further studies and career.
- As this research paper is written based on only Afghan students` experiences and perspectives, further research is recommended on a mix of all international students studying at universities in Bangladesh to enhance in-depth knowledge about these universities` environments and social interactions towards international students coming from different countries.

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Appendix One. Consent Letter

Dear Sir/Madam

This is Mohammad Hashim Safa one of the Afghan master's students at BRAC University, Institute of Educational Development in Dhaka, Bangladesh. It would be my pleasure if allow me to meet you and have your cooperation and help in my research for data collection.

My research topic is "*Higher Education Abroad: Experiences of Afghan International Students in Bangladeshi Universities*" and the purpose of my research is to collect data from Afghan students who are doing their higher education in Bangladesh to know their perceptions and experiences about being international students. This research will also aim to reach data about students' international learning environment and universities' interaction with the diversity of students' cultures. Participation in this Focus Group Discussion (FGD) will be optional and you have the right to accept this interview or not. Moreover, this is voluntary participation and you will not receive any reward for your participation, also, there will not be potential challenges if you participate in this research. Your participation will help me to collect data and your information will be used in this thesis.

I will use a tape recorder in this interview to record your information. It is also important to mention that your confidentiality will be kept and your personal information will not be published or mentioned in any part of the research. The allocated time for this FGD will be 60 minutes but in the case of need, I will have more minutes to get more information. I appreciate your willingness to give me your time to help me with my research. Please feel free to ask any questions you have by phone number +88(0)1847555463 or by email at Hashim.safa244@gamil.com.

Thank you,

Mohammad Hashim Safa

I have read the above consent letter and understand the study and I agree to participate.

Signature:

Date:

Appendix Two. Interview Guide

Interview Tool for teachers teaching Bangladeshi universities

Interview details:

Participant's name: Age: Education Level:

University: Designation: Interview Time:

Location:

Questions:

- What motivated international students to come and join this university?
- How is the learning environment for overseas students at your university?
- Why does this university provide scholarships for international students and how can it affect and benefit the university's educational environment?
- How is foreign students' performance in the teaching-learning process?
- Does the learning environment in your university fulfil the different educational needs of international students as they are coming from different educational backgrounds? How?
- How do teachers and other university staff interact with different students and their diverse cultural backgrounds?
- How international students' cultures and customs are considered in your university?
- How students are engaged (motivated) to live and study in a diverse cultural environment?
- What opportunities may international students have while studying at your university?
- What are the common challenges that international students are facing while joining this university?
- What are your coping strategies to help students to overcome their challenges and acculturate in the new educational environment and community?
- How does studying at this university enhance international students' capacity and skills, and will it help them in their future studies?
- Do you think studying at this university may affect students' career development? How?

Appendix Three. Focus Group Discussion (FGD) Guide

Focused Group Discussion Tool for Afghan students currently doing their studies in Bangladeshi universities

Focus Group Discussion (FGD) Details:

Participants` names: Age group: Education Level:

University: FGD Time: Location:

Questions:

- What is your perception about being an international student and studying at overseas universities?
- Why and what motivated you to select university?
- What did you expect when you enrolled at this university? And could the university fulfil your expectations?
- How is the learning environment at Bangladeshi universities for Afghan international students and how do you evaluate it?
- Is there any similarity or difference between Afghanistan`s educational environment or not? How?
- How did you find cultural consideration in the university environment in general?
- How are teachers and other university staff interaction in the diverse cultural community (Afghan Students)?
- How do you feel and consider cultural differences while facing new culture?
- What opportunities do you have as an international student since you are enrolled in this university?
- Do you think opportunities in Bangladeshi universities are better than in Afghanistan universities? Why/why not?
- What challenges have you faced since coming to Bangladesh for your higher studies?
- What are your coping strategies to help you to overcome these challenges and acculturate the Bangladeshi community?
- Will studying at Bangladeshi universities develop your social skills? If yes how?
- How do your studying experiences and education at this university create opportunities for your career?
- How useful could your studies and experiences in Bangladeshi universities be if you want to pursue further studies? Give an example

Appendix Four. Sample Transcript of Focus Group Discussion #01

Researcher: Mohammad Hashim Safa

Participants: P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, & P6

Education level: Master's and Bachelor's

FGD Date: 16.12.2022

Location: Dhaka, Bangladesh

Abbreviations: 'Researcher=R' 'Participants=P'

R: What is your perception and feeling about being an international student and studying at overseas universities?

P4: I think a person who wants to go abroad and wants to pursue her higher education has lots of responsibilities. First, you are the representative of your country and people will judge your country based on what you will be doing. Secondly, you should try hard to do your studies and adapt yourself to the community.

P3: Being an international student has different areas to be focused on if we think about it. As P4 pointed out, firstly, it is important to adapt yourself to the culture, food, and literature [language]. Because we have different languages, cultures, and traditions and they are totally different in Bangladesh and sometimes we face problems with how to interact with Bangladeshi people. And we should be ready for those differences and we are representative of our country. We should try our best to represent the beauty of our country and if we do something bad, they [Bangladeshi people] will think all Afghans are like this.

P2: When we receive an opportunity to outside and do our higher education, we became very happy and we have some expectations to be fulfilled. Firstly, personally wanted to go somewhere I can learn English properly and have new experiences. Moreover, we are with other international students and can learn other languages rather than English. We can enhance the teaching and learning experience in a foreign country which can

be more effective. The quality of education is not good in Afghanistan`s universities, except in the centres and I have this experience because I graduated from one of those universities in the northern part of Afghanistan, Badakhshan. I am to some extent happy about studying at Bangladeshi universities. More importantly, we can find different friends from around the world, be in contact with them, and learn about their cultures and traditions.

P1: When you come to a new country, you will bring many changes to yourself. Because you are always surrounded by a common culture and language in your surroundings and when you are in a new culture, you are unconsciously forced to bring some changes to yourself and it is a really good experience. When you leave your home country for the host county, you see many differences and it makes you think of those differences and consider them as a part of your life. If they were good, you will learn and if they were not, you will ignore them. Personally, it is a good experience that I am doing my studies here. Coming to lessons, it is an opportunity because in Afghanistan as P2 said, there are no good educational opportunities except in the big cities. I have done my Bachelor`s in Economics at Bamyan University. Although we had teacher which had master`s from India and France, we did not experience the quality of education we have at X University. Overall, it was a good opportunity.

P5: It was my first time having a trip to an oversea country and that is for my education. It was a good experience being an international student and learning different cultures, languages, and behaviour. The education system is very good and effective and we learn a lot especially when they share YouTube links related to the lesson. But the first days were difficult because everything was different; methods, lesson format, and language, therefore, I was always with P1 to use her guidance and experiences at X [University] education system. I see many changes in myself and the experiences were

effective. But the language is sometimes an issue as I am the only international student in our class and most of the lessons will be explained in Bangla but teachers can help us in this regard if we ask any questions.

P6: I feel proud studying at Bangladeshi universities. My experience consists of both opportunities and challenges. The opportunity is this I can boost my knowledge, make my personality, and enhance what I expected. The challenge is adaption to a new culture and new environment directly and it will take time. I am really proud because I have learned a lot from their experiences, knowledge, culture, and language and it taught me what to do and what to not do in the context of this country. Moreover, the environment was so informative and I learn a lot compared to its education system.

R: Why and what motivated you to select X University?

P2: Good, I want to share my idea. I was not 100% interested to come to Bangladesh and chose this university. When I first heard about this [X University] scholarship through the Ministry of Higher Education, I tried applying to this university. I directly contact X [University] authorities for scholarships and hopefully, I could succeed. My main motivation was to use this opportunity and do my studies. Although there were other opportunities in other countries, I might not try that much. Finally, I wanted to get the advantage of this scholarship and chose X University in Bangladesh.

P1: Personally, the reason for choosing this university is really interesting. As my sister was studying at Asian University for Women in Chittagong and it was also Covid time, she suggested I apply for X [University] scholarship because her education was two years left and my master`s will also be finished within two years. I did not have a special motivation to come to X University. The only reason that I have chosen X University was the lockdown time. As every educational centre was closed and X University

classes were online, I wanted to use this opportunity and get the advantage of my free time and do my higher studies.

P6: Well, motivation! Several things motivated me. One of them was the university ranking. Secondly, its connection and partnership with other big organizations, for example, the Open Society University Network. I have already checked them and I was in contact with them. But I found X [University] better in ranking, teaching standards, and being student-centred. X University can provide better opportunities for its students through its international partners. Especially, the only thing that X [University] has more focus on is its connection with other organizations. For example, X University is not only here it has students from other countries where its branches are working there. Therefore, the university ranking and its connection with other organizations were very important to me.

P4: I select this university because one of my sister`s friends was studying at AUW and she suggested I select this university if I want to choose Bangladeshi universities. I also have already known that this is a high-rank university and its lessons and teaching quality is very different from Afghanistan. This is why I choose this university and started my studies here. But I did not know more about X university and it was my friends` advice.

P5: Since 2018 and 2019, I was interested to have my master`s. I had applied to ICCR and Sharp Scholarship of India but due to some issues with my transcript, I could not succeed. Then in 2020, I checked some universities in disaster management. I check countries like India but I found this country that has a high rank in this area. And among universities in Bangladesh, only X University has a high rank in this major. And that caused me to choose this university.

P3: Starting my education at X University has several reasons. I set for the Konkor exam and succeed at the Faculty of Economics, Kabul University. But because of security issues, we were supposed to leave the country for Turkey. When we get to Turkey, my father told me to go to Bangladesh and stay there for one year and learn the English Language and return. When I came here and stayed for a year, I wanted to set for IELTS and receive its certificate. Then my father suggested I do my Bachelor`s in Bangladesh at some private university because in Bangladesh we can finish our university earlier between three to three and half years. I did not have any decision. One of my friends whose name is Shadab finished his Master`s in Electricity advised me to have my bachelor`s at X University. To some extent, it was accidental. One of the characteristics that X University have is that it has relations with other international and foreign universities in Turkey and in the fourth semester, I can change my university to one of Turkey universities. Because of that, I wanted to start [university] here. I started my studies here to learn English properly. It also creates opportunities for me to learn new cultures and people`s behaviour in a new country. Due to these reasons, I choose this university and I think this university is better than other universities in Bangladesh. My program is self-funded and I did not get any scholarship. But after the 13th credit, they will give a discount in percentage and may have some options to change my program to a scholarship.

Appendix Five. FGDs and Interviews participants` brief details

| Methods | Participants | Details |
|--|--------------|---|
| Focus Group Discussion #1 | P1 | Age: 27 years old Living location in Afghanistan: Bamyan province Higher education in Afghanistan: Bachelor`s in Economics, Bamyan University Current education: Master of Business Administration (MBA), X University, Dhaka, Bangladesh |
| | P2 | Age: 28 years old Living location in Afghanistan: Badakhshan province Higher education in Afghanistan: Bachelor`s in Agriculture Faculty, Horticulture Department, Badakhshan University Current education: Master in Disaster Management, X University, Dhaka, Bangladesh |
| | P3 | Age: 22 years old Living location in Afghanistan: Takhar province Current education: Bachelor`s in Business Administration, X University, Dhaka, Bangladesh |
| | P4 | Age: 22 years old Living location in Afghanistan: Kabul province Higher education in Afghanistan: Bachelor`s in Computer Science, Kateb University (transferred credits) Current education: Bachelor`s in Computer Science, X University, Dhaka, Bangladesh |
| | P5 | Age: 33 years old Living location in Afghanistan: Herat province Higher education in Afghanistan: Bachelor`s in Literature, Arabic Department, Herat University Current education: Master`s In Disaster Management, X University, Dhaka, Bangladesh |

| | | |
|---|------------|---|
| | P6 | <p>Age: 26 years old</p> <p>Living location in Afghanistan: Takhar province</p> <p>Higher education in Afghanistan: Management and Leadership at Rabbani University, Kabul, Afghanistan</p> <p>Current education: Master of Business Administration (MBA), X University, Dhaka, Bangladesh</p> |
| <p>Focus Group Discussion #2</p> | P7 | <p>Age: 21 years old</p> <p>Living location in Afghanistan: Kabul province</p> <p>Higher education in Afghanistan: Diploma in Fine Arts, Kabul Institute of Fine Arts, Kabul, Afghanistan</p> <p>Current education: Bachelor`s in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics, Y University, Chittagong, Bangladesh</p> |
| | P8 | <p>Age: 24 years old</p> <p>Living location in Afghanistan: Kabul province</p> <p>Higher education in Afghanistan: Bachelor`s Mining and Environmental Engineering, Kabul University</p> <p>Current education: Master`s in Education Policy Analysis, Y University, Chittagong, Bangladesh</p> |
| | P9 | <p>Age: 22 years old</p> <p>Living location in Afghanistan: Baghlan province</p> <p>Current education: Bachelor`s in Computer Science, Y University, Chittagong, Bangladesh</p> |
| | P10 | <p>Age: 28 years old</p> <p>Living location in Afghanistan: Ghazni province</p> <p>Higher education in Afghanistan: Studied five semesters in the Faculty of Science, Kabul University</p> <p>Current education: Bachelor`s in Public Health, Y University, Chittagong, Bangladesh</p> |
| | P11 | <p>Age: 23 years old</p> <p>Living location in Afghanistan: Kabul province</p> <p>Current education: Bachelor`s in Economics, Y University, Chittagong, Bangladesh</p> |

| | | |
|------------------|------------|---|
| | P12 | <p>Age: 25 years old</p> <p>Living location in Afghanistan: Kabul province</p> <p>Education background: Bachelor`s in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics, Y University, Chittagong, Bangladesh</p> <p>Current education: Master`s in Education Policy Analysis, Y University, Chittagong, Bangladesh</p> |
| Interview | P13 | <p>Academic level: PhD</p> <p>Position at Y University: Associate Professor in Peace and Conflict Studies</p> |
| | P14 | <p>Academic level: Master`s</p> <p>Position at X University: Director Academic and legal Empowerment in Center for Peace and Justice (CPJ)</p> |

Table 2: FGDs and Interviews participants` brief details