

Life and Academic Experiences of Afghan Female Students in two Universities in Bangladesh

By

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A thesis submitted to the BRAC Institute of Educational Development in partial fulfilment 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 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 have acknowledged all main sources of help.

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Approval

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Ethics Statement

I hereby affirm that this paper is my own work. The manuscript titled "Life and Academic Experiences of Afghan Female Students in Two Universities in Bangladesh" presents genuine findings and is free from any form of manipulation. Throughout the research process, I have made a conscious effort to remain aware of my personal biases, opinions, and prejudices in order to maintain a state of complete neutrality.

The study was conducted with fourteen Afghan female students who are pursuing master's and bachelor's degrees in Bangladesh. A virtual focus group discussion through Zoom was conducted with six participants and eight individual face-to-face semi-structured interviews were carried out. To ensure the confidentiality of the participants and educational institution, pseudonyms were chosen, and all recorded data and any related information were encrypted and uploaded to a Google Drive account.

Before beginning the research, the proposal was presented for approval, and a consent letter was sent to all participants, who were made aware of the aim of my thesis and the topic.

I affirm that this paper adheres to all ethical protocols mandated by the institution and upholds the highest standards of ethical conduct

Abstract

This research study aimed to explore the life and academic experiences of Afghan female students studying in two universities in Bangladesh. The study was conducted with fourteen participants, including both master's and bachelor's degree students, from eight different provinces of Afghanistan, namely Bamyan, Faryab, Ghazni, Herat, Kabul, Parwan, Samangan, and Wardak. The participants represented six different ethnicities including Hazara, Tajik, Turkmen, Sadat, Pashtun, and Uzbek, and were selected using purposive sampling. Data was collected through eight individual face-to-face semi-structured interviews and a virtual focus group discussion with six participants.

The study found that Afghan female students choose Bangladesh because they believe that higher education is better than what is offered in Afghanistan and create more opportunities. Moreover, the study also revealed that the participants valued the support their teachers provided, which helped them overcome challenges that have faced in university. Additionally, the study provided insight into the motivation to study in Bangladesh, and the aspirations of Afghan female students after graduation, and highlighted the need for greater support to facilitate their academic success and personal well-being.

Overall, this research study sheds light on the experiences of Afghan female students studying in two universities in Bangladesh and provides valuable information that can be used to improve their academic and personal lives.

Keywords: Higher education; Motivation; life experience; Academic experiences; Aspirations

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my late father who inspired me with his belief in education even though he has never been to school for one day. His legacy lives on through me, and I will honour his memory by striving to positively influence the world.

Acknowledgement

I am grateful for the support and guidance provided by several individuals throughout the research process. First, I would like to express my sincere appreciation to my supervisor, Dr Tabassum Amina and my external supervisor Ms. Hridita Islam their expert guidance and unwavering support. Their valuable feedback and insights were instrumental in shaping the direction of this study.

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List of Acronyms

FGD	Focus Group Discussion
Kankor	A university entry exam in Afghanistan
MoHE	Ministry of Higher Education
OSUN	Open Society University Network
QDA	Qualitative Data Analysis
UNAMA	United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
Zoom	A video conferencing platform

Chapter 1

Introduction and Background

1.1 Introduction

Afghanistan has a complex history, and the experiences of Afghan girls have been particularly challenging. Despite ongoing challenges and barriers, some Afghan women have made significant progress in their academic fields. In recent years, some Afghan female students have enrolled in Bangladeshi universities, looking for educational opportunities that were not available to them in their home country. In this research study, I explored the motivation behind choosing Bangladesh as an educational destination and the life and educational experiences of Afghan female students in two universities in Bangladesh.

Research has shown that access to education can be a vital factor in empowering women and improving their overall well-being (United Nations, 2020). However, the past few decades of violence and conflict in Afghanistan have negatively affected the access of Afghan females to higher education. According to the UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report 2021, the literacy rate for females in Afghanistan was 37.8% in 2018, not 29.8%. The report states that out of the total population of 38.9 million in Afghanistan, 14.7 million women and girls were illiterate in 2018. Moreover, violent conflicts and political crises in Afghanistan have also impacted women's access to education in the country (Ahmadi, 2022). Recently, Afghan female students have been seeking better educational opportunities to pursue higher education abroad. Since the return of the Taliban to power, the current regime has banned higher education for women and restricted the choices for female students in Afghanistan to a few faculties. Therefore, these students are looking for higher education opportunities abroad. Bangladesh is one of the few countries across the globe that annually award scholarships for young women in Afghanistan to empower them. In this study, I investigated the motivation of Afghan female

students in choosing Bangladesh to pursue their higher education, as well as their academic and life experiences as students in two universities in Bangladesh.

1.2 Research Topic

The research topic is “**The Life and Academic Experiences of Afghan female students in Two Universities in Bangladesh**” and the research title is “**A Study of: The Life and Academic Experiences of Afghan Female Students in Two Universities in Bangladesh**”.

A number Afghan female students are studying in Bangladesh. A number of universities in Bangladesh offer a set of scholarships for Afghan females annually. The study focuses on the academic and life experiences of Afghan female students who are studying in two universities in Bangladesh. The study explored the education and life experiences of Afghan female students at two universities in Bangladesh. It also explored the motivations behind their decision to pursue their higher education in Bangladesh, their experiences in the new academic and cultural environment, and their aspirations after graduation. In addition, how higher education in Bangladesh addresses their aspirations. Moreover, through its findings, the study aims to contribute to the discourse on international scholarships and their role in promoting education and opportunities for young women in Afghanistan.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

There has been a lack of higher education opportunities in Afghanistan, particularly for young women. The government of Afghanistan is unable to provide educational opportunities for these youth in Afghanistan. However, there have been significant improvements in girls' higher education, but still, a huge number of female students do not have access to higher education in Afghanistan (Ahmadi, 2021). According to Alam and Haque (2019), Afghan women face significant barriers to accessing higher education in their own country due to poverty, gender-based discrimination, and Taliban rule (p. 22). These barriers limit their opportunities for

personal and professional development and contribute to the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in Afghanistan. Moreover, according to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2020), Afghanistan has one of the lowest literacy rates in the world, with only 29% of the adult population able to read and write, and women are disproportionately affected by this lack of education. Despite some progress in recent years, there is a lack of research on the experiences of Afghan female students studying abroad, particularly in Bangladesh. This study aims to fill the gap in the literature and provide insights into the academic and life experiences of Afghan female students who pursue higher education in two universities in Bangladesh, with the ultimate goal of informing policies and interventions that support their education and empowerment.

1.4 Research Questions

This study has been designed to investigate the topic in greater details by addressing the following main research questions.

1. What motivated Afghan female students to move to Bangladesh for higher education?
2. How do they experience life and education in Bangladesh?
3. What are their aspirations for their future and how does education in Bangladesh address their aspirations?

1.5 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research project is to investigate the life and academic experiences of Afghan female students studying at two universities in Bangladesh. Specifically, the research aims to explore the factors that motivated these students to choose Bangladesh for higher education, as well as their academic and personal experiences during their time in Bangladesh. Additionally, the study seeks to understand the aspirations of Afghan female students after graduation. How higher education in Bangladesh may address these aspirations. The ultimate

goal is to provide insights that can inform programs aimed at providing educational opportunities for women in Afghanistan while contributing to the broader objective of promoting gender equality. By maintaining a clear purpose throughout the project, this research aims to generate findings that will shed light on the experiences and challenges faced by Afghan female students studying in Bangladesh, and contribute to the existing literature on this topic.

1.6 Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its potential to provide a deeper understanding of the experiences of Afghan female students pursuing higher education in two universities in Bangladesh. By exploring the motivations behind their decision to study in Bangladesh and their experiences of academic and social life, this study may contribute to a better understanding of the challenges faced by these students in accessing higher education in Afghanistan. The findings of this study may fill existing knowledge gaps by shedding light on the unique experiences and perspectives of Afghan female students studying in Bangladesh.

Furthermore, this study may have practical implications. By examining the aspirations of Afghan female students for their future and the role that education in Bangladesh plays in addressing these aspirations, this study may inform policies and programs aimed at improving educational opportunities for women in Afghanistan and promoting gender equality. The findings may also provide valuable insights for the two universities in Bangladesh, potentially leading to an increase in the number of scholarships or other support mechanisms for Afghan women.

Ultimately, the results of this study may contribute to the empowerment of women in Afghanistan and beyond. By generating new information and insights, this research may have implications for decision-making at the policy level, leading to informed and evidence-based

strategies for promoting gender equality in education. The findings of this study may contribute to the improvement of the educational situation for Afghan female students and may have broader implications for promoting gender equality and providing more scholarships in other conflict-affected countries.

Chapter 2

Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

2.1 Introduction

This chapter explored themes related to higher education and Afghan female students' motivation and future aspirations. Therefore, several books, research and policy documents, academic websites, articles, books and journals were reviewed related to the study's topic. Throughout the reviewed literature, I have classified the literature into the below categories.

2.2 Girls' Higher Education in Afghanistan

In 2001, when the Taliban regime was ousted from power, the re-establishment of education and higher education was defined as a top priority to Afghanistan's new Government (Roof, 2018). Since then, the government of Afghanistan has made significant attempts to renew the higher education system in the country, and the priority of the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) was establishing public higher education institutions across the country (Adil et al., 2020). Finally, based on the statistics Women's presence in Afghan higher education increased almost 20 times, from 5,000 female students in 2001 to over 100,000 in 2021. Literacy rates for women doubled during the period, from 17% of women being able to read and write in 2001 to nearly 30% for all age groups combined (UNESCO, 2023).

Since 2001 modernizing education institutes and bettering the situation for Afghan female faculty members and students were one of the main focuses of MoHE and as Hayward & Karim (2019) stated that although in the past two decades there was conflict and war in Afghanistan but there has been incredible progress for Afghan girls higher education.

Besides, According to a report by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) in 2021, women in Afghanistan continue to face significant barriers to accessing

education, including cultural barriers, poverty, and insecurity. The report also highlights the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education in Afghanistan, which has disproportionately affected girls and women. Moreover, in public universities, the enrolment of male students is higher than female students. Therefore, due to financial problems, families cannot send their sons and daughters to private universities and do not have any other options rather than getting admission to public Universities, which is difficult for most girls because of cultural norms, lack of budget for higher education, and governmental issues that deter them from continuing their higher education in public universities.

The focus of working on female higher for the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) of Afghanistan was highlighted in 2009 in National Higher Education Strategic Plan(Hayward, 2014). Moreover, it is also emphasized in the Government's National Action Plan for Women of Afghanistan (Mashwani, 2017). To increase the number of females in higher education and their access to it, the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) of Afghanistan suggested the Gender Strategy for 2012-2014 (Reha & Sidiqi, 2018).

Despite the challenges facing higher education in Afghanistan, providing (primary, secondary, and tertiary) education for both women and men has been a significant achievement for the past two decades. As a result of improved access to education, both adult and youth literacy rates increased substantially: In 2001, only 27% of Afghan men and 5.6% of Afghan women were estimated to be literate, while this rate increased to 55% for men and 29.8% for women by 2020 (The New Humanitarian, 2001; UNESCO UIL, 2020).

2.3 Motivation for Higher Education

Motivation is one of the primary conditions on which achievement of the learning process objective depends, whether learning methods, thinking styles, formation or modifying attitudes and values, acquiring information and knowledge, problem-solving skill, or other behavioural

methods that are subject to training and practice (Jaber et al., 2016). Motivation for higher education among Afghan students and the lack of higher educational opportunities in Afghanistan has become a concern among them. From an educational perspective, the essential function of motivation is that it generates specific concerns in students, so they accept the practice of multiple cognitive activities (Jaber et al., 2016). However, the Government of Afghanistan has made some improvements in accessing higher education for girls, and according to the annual report of UNESCO, the number of girls in higher education increased from around 5,000 in 2001 to around 90,000 in 2018 (UNESCO, 2021). Furthermore, as per the annual report of the Ministry of Education (2020), around 400,000 students graduated from school which 39% of them were female and attended the Kankor exam (A University entry exam in Afghanistan) 400,000 students, only 80,000 of the students get the chance of getting admission to Public Universities. There is also a limited supply of qualified faculty, including professors and doctors, as well as a lack of adequate teaching and learning materials, and Government cannot fund or manage the significant investment required in higher education on its own (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2008). Therefore, students try to do their higher education abroad. Furthermore, social and economic issue is another barrier to many Afghan girls attending higher education. As it is stated in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan National Development Strategy (2008), in many cases, women and girls are denied access to education for cultural, social and economic reasons. Furthermore, education is free from the primary level up to a bachelor's degree in Afghanistan, but there is a low quality and low capacity for educational services (UNICEF, 2019). Therefore, the motivation to higher education made these girls do their education in another country.

2.4 Aspiration for Future

Aspiration plays a significant role in our professional and personal growth, and the future of everyone depends on his or her level of aspiration. Some studies find out that the relationship

between aspiration and future planning resulted in people who can develop future scenarios having an acceptable level of motivation (Shouashra, 1994). Moreover, there is a direct relation between the level of aspiration and academic achievement. Students with high aspirations or high expectations have higher school achievement than those with both low aspirations and low expectations (Poudel & Maharjan, 2018). Therefore, the sense of aspiration among students will help them to develop their sense of achievement, and the sense of achievement will shape their future. As Goswami and Rahman (2013) stated in the 'level of Aspiration of Undergraduate Students about their Sex and Solo-Economic Status International' the level of aspiration provides the learner with the stimulus energy that helps her/him to have a sense of achievement. Aspiration is also known to boost a person or even groups or societies from challenging and impossible status to enjoyable and possible achievements (Buheji et al., 2014).

2.5 Bangladesh Higher Education

Bangladesh is one of the developing countries, which is located in south Asia, and it is the world's eighth most populous country. Education is the primary concern of the country, as in other developing countries (Bashiruddin, 2018). He also stated Bangladesh has achieved the universal target initial enrolment in the primary and secondary levels. In the last two decades, it has also been able to achieve gender equality at both primary and secondary levels.

In Bangladesh decades ago, higher education was considered a luxury in a society of mass illiteracy (Monem & Baniamin, 2010). Nevertheless, at the turn of the century, the need for highly skilled human resources for self-sustaining development and poverty alleviation became acutely felt across all spheres of society.

Higher education in the public sector is a legacy of the British colonial education system (Monem & Baniamin, 2010). Five types of the higher education system are available in Bangladesh. These are i. General Education; ii. Science and Technology and Engineering

Education; iii. Medical Education; iv. Agricultural Education; v. Distance Education. In addition, the higher education sector also provides Vocational and Madrasha education (Monem & Baniamin, 2010). Higher education in Bangladesh consists of a three-year pass-course or a four-year course for the bachelor's degree, and the master's degree is for two years.

Bangladesh's higher education system has undergone significant changes and expansion over the past few decades. Historically, the country's higher education system was dominated by public universities, with limited opportunities for private sector involvement. However, the number of private universities has increased significantly, leading to a more diverse and competitive higher education landscape (Alam & Bakar, 2017).

In terms of access to higher education, Bangladesh has made significant progress, particularly in increasing female enrolment. According to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, the gross enrolment ratio (GER) in tertiary education in Bangladesh increased from 6.5% in 2000 to 17.3% in 2019. Female enrolment in tertiary education increased from 3.2% in 2000 to 11.6% in 2019, indicating a significant improvement in female access to higher education (UNESCO, 2021).

However, despite the increase in female enrolment in higher education, there are still significant inequalities in access and outcomes for women. According to a recent study, women in Bangladesh face significant barriers to accessing higher education, including cultural norms and expectations, lack of support from families, and financial constraints (Chowdhury et al., 2021).

Furthermore, there are concerns about the quality of female higher education in Bangladesh. A study by (Hoosain et al, 2016) found that female students in Bangladesh perceived their education to be of lower quality than that of male students. Female students cited inadequate

facilities, lack of resources, and gender-based discrimination as factors contributing to the lower quality of their education.

Despite these challenges, there are also efforts to improve the reputation and quality of female higher education in Bangladesh. The government has implemented various programs and initiatives aimed at promoting gender equity in education, including scholarships and stipends for female students (Alam & Bakar, 2017). Moreover, there are several women's colleges and universities in Bangladesh that have a strong reputation for providing quality education to women (Sultana, 2019).

2.6 Conceptual Framework

Conceptual frameworks are products of qualitative processes of theorization and conceptual framework as a network, or “a plane,” of interlinked concepts that together provide a comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon or phenomena (Jabareen, 2009). Levering (2002) suggested that “the idea that human behaviour can be explained and predicted is roughly based on the concept of external factors being caught in an accidental cohesion, and the idea that human actions can be understood, but not predicted, is based on the concept of freedom” (Levering, p.38). Moreover, “the systems of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories that supports and informs your research” (Maxwell, p.39, 2013).

Furthermore, in recent years, there has been an increasing emphasis on the use of conceptual frameworks in doctoral research across different fields. Conceptual frameworks are defined by Miles et al. (2014: 20) as a way of clarifying the important things to be studied, including key factors, constructs, or variables, and their presumed relationships. Berman (2013) has noted this trend.

In this research, I found out the motivation of Afghan females to higher education as “Most existing research on motivation has applied the push–pull theoretical framework from a macro

perspective” (Jiani, 2017). Moreover, their academic and personal life experiences in Bangladesh. “Most of the empirical evidence shows that the international experience has a positive impact on the personal development of students, and particularly on intercultural understanding and foreign language proficiency, but also on their academic development”(Amendola & Restaino, 2017).

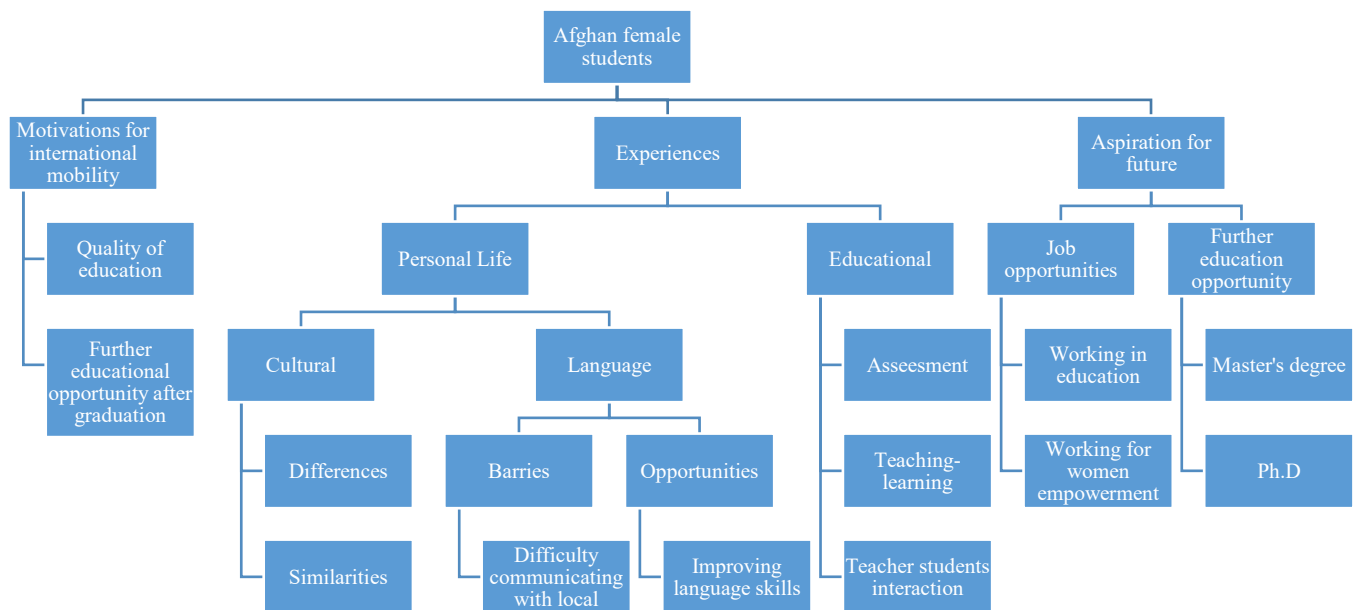


Figure 1: Life and Academic Experiences of Afghan Female Students in two Universities in Bangladesh

Chapter 3

Methodology

The present research investigates the academic and personal experiences of Afghan female students in two universities in Bangladesh. This study employs a qualitative research approach to collect data, semi-structured face-to-face interviews and an virtual focused group discussion were conducted. This chapter will discuss the approach, Research site, Research Participants, Sampling Procedure, Data Collection Methods, and the Role of the Researcher, Data Analysis, Ethical Issues, Concerns Credibility & Rigor and Limitations of the study

3.1 Research Approach

This study employs a qualitative research approach. To collect data, semi-structured face-to-face interviews and virtual focused group discussion were conducted Base on the research title and the nature of my research topic, the qualitative approach was utilized to guide the research process. In qualitative research, the researcher plays the main role in collecting and analysing data (Sandekian et al., 2015). Qualitative research is therefore concerned with aspects of reality that cannot be quantified, focusing on the understanding and explanation of the dynamics of social relations (Almeida et al., 2017). Since my topic is about the life and academic experiences of Afghan female students studying in Bangladesh focusing on their motivation to choose Bangladesh as an educational destination. Maxwell (2013) advocates that qualitative research works with the universe of meanings, motives, aspirations, beliefs, values and attitudes, which corresponds to a deeper space of relationships, processes and phenomena that cannot be reduced to the operationalization of variables. Moreover, the objective of the qualitative methodology is to produce in-depth and illustrative information in order to understand the various dimensions of the problem under analysis (Almeida et al., 2017).

3.2 Research Site

This study is about the life and academic experiences of Afghan female students who are studying in Bangladesh. Therefore, two universities have been selected for data collection. The first site is Shakardukht University, which is located in Dhaka, Bangladesh, and the second site is Roya Mahboob University, which is located in Chittagong, Bangladesh. Both Shakardukht and Roya Mahboob universities are non-governmental organizations. Shakardukht University with 11,200 students in Dhaka is one of the top ranked university in Bangladesh and Roya Mahboob is well-known university in Bangladesh with focusing on women-empowerment that has a diverse of student across the globe with 35 ethnicities, 25 languages spoken and 5 regions and a total 715 students.

I choose these sites for my research because these two universities award scholarships for Afghan female students annually.

3.3 Research Participants

The research participants for this study are fourteen Afghan female students in total who are studying at the two universities in Dhaka and Chittagong and are awarded scholarships. I have used purposive sampling, and I have selected Afghan female students who have the experience of living at least one year in Bangladesh. There are two students at Master's degree one from Shakardukht University and one from Roya Mahboob University and 12 participants studying at Bachelor degree, two participants from Shakardukht University and ten participants from Roya Mahboob University the age range of the participants is 18 to 30 years old.

In addition, the participants are from five different ethnicities of Afghanistan. Hazara, Tajik, Turkmen, Sadat, Pashtun, and Uzbek. Moreover, the participants are from eight different provinces, Bamyan, Faryab, Ghazni, Herat, Kabul, Parwan, Samangan, and Wardak. Furthermore, the participants are doing different majors and are not classmates. For example,

there are doing, computer science, Politic Philosophy and Economics, Economy, Public Health, Computer Science (Coding), Disaster Management and Educational Development.

3.4 Sampling Procedure

In this qualitative research, my targeted population consists of Afghan female students from different ethnicities and provinces of Afghanistan. To select my sample, I used purposive sampling, which is appropriate for qualitative research as it involves selecting participants based on specific characteristics or criteria relevant to the research topic (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

I used several criteria to select my sample. Firstly, I selected Afghan female students who were studying in Bachelor's or Master's degree programs for my eight individual interviews. For instance, three participants from Shakardukht University, one student at master's degree and one from Bachelor's degree. Then, five participants from Roya Mahboob University mainly one participants from Master's student and four participants from Bachelor's students. Secondly, for my virtual Focused Group Discussion, I chosen six participants from Bachelor's students one from Shakardukht University and five from Roya Mahboob University because the number of students in Roya Mahboob University were from different provinces and ethnicities so that's why I have majority of my participants from it. I ensured that the participants were from different ethnicities, including Hazara, Tajik, Turkmen, Sadat, Pashtun, and Uzbek, and from different provinces of Afghanistan, namely Bamyan, Faryab, Ghazni, Herat, Kabul, Parwan, Samangan, and Wardak.

The criteria for sampling selection were important in ensuring that I obtained rich and diverse data from the selected participants, which will enhance the validity and generalizability of the findings to the target population. As Creswell and Poth (2018) note, the sampling criteria

should be carefully selected to ensure that the sample represents the diversity of the population of interest.

In qualitative research, the purpose is to gather an in-depth understanding of the social context, human behaviours and the reasons that shape the context and guide the behaviours (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Therefore, there is no need for statistical sampling, and the sampling criteria should be based on the research objectives and the characteristics of the population of interest.

Overall, the purposive sampling procedure that I used in this qualitative research allowed me to select a sample that was diverse in terms of ethnicity and province, and which would enable me to obtain rich and detailed data on the experiences and perspectives of Afghan female students in Bachelor's and Master's degree programs.

3.5 Data Collection Methods

The research methodology for this qualitative study involved conducting eight semi-structured interviews and one online focused group discussion (FGD) with six Afghan female students. Face-to-face semi-structured interviews are a commonly used technique in qualitative research (Clarke, 2009) and were used in this study to gather rich and in-depth data on the motivation of Afghan female students to pursue international mobility, as well as their academic and life experiences in Dhaka and Chittagong. This method allows for the collection of more accurate data, particularly when capturing the feelings and body gestures of respondents in addition to what they verbally express (Muhibul, 2022).

In addition to interviews, a focus group discussion (FGD) was conducted online to gather data on experiences, feelings, opinions, and reactions that may not be revealed in one-on-one interviews, but may be elicited through participation in a social gathering and interaction with others in debating issues and exchanging views (Vishnevsky & Beanlands, 2004).

The research tools used in this study were an interview guide for the semi-structured interviews and a focus group discussion guide for the FGD. Both tools were prepared in the English language, and the interviews and FGD were conducted in English as well. The central theme of this study was the life and education experiences, motivations, and aspirations after graduation of Afghan female students. The data was collected through eight individual interviews and one online FGD.

In summary, this study utilized a combination of semi-structured interviews and a focus group discussion to gather rich and in-depth data on the experiences and motivations of Afghan female students pursuing higher education in Shakardukht University and Roya Mahboob in Chittagong and Dhaka/Bangladesh. The use of these methods allowed for the collection of both individual and group perspectives, providing a comprehensive understanding of the topic at hand.

2.5.1 Interview Method

“The most commonly used technique in qualitative research is face-to-face semi-structured interviews” (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007; Press, 2005). Interviews helped me to gather rich and deep data about the motivation of Afghan female students to choose international mobility and their academic and life experiences in Dhaka and Chittagong.

For this study, overall eight face-to-face interviews were conducted with Afghan female students who were studying at Shakardukht and Roya Mahboob universities. Two participants were from Shakardukht University, students in masters and bachelors six interviews were with Roya Mahboob University one participant student with a master’s degree and five students at Bachelor’s degree.

An interview guide was used, which contained open-ended questions in English. These questions allowed for the gathering of more in-depth. Each face to face interviews last for 30-

40 minutes. I interviewed my participants in Dhaka, at the university classroom, which the International Coordinator Office in Dhaka at the Shakardukht University arranged the class. Moreover, I conducted six interviews in an Ismaili Centre in Chittagong.

To ensure accuracy, I recorded the interviews using two devices and promptly transcribed them. The interviews were conducted using a comprehensive interview guide that had been prepared beforehand. It is important to note that the questions were designed in an open-ended manner to capture the participants' perspectives and viewpoints.

2.5.2 Focus Group Discussion

I used an FGD guide to conduct a Focus Group Discussion because Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) are a widely used qualitative research method for the collection of data from a group of participants on a specific topic. According to Krueger and Casey (2015), FGDs are a "carefully planned series of discussions designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment" (p. 13).

Another advantage of FGDs is that they can be particularly useful for exploring the social and cultural context of a particular phenomenon or experience. According to Morgan (1997), "FGDs can provide insights into the ways in which social norms, values, and beliefs shape people's experiences and perceptions, as well as reveal the diversity and complexity of these experiences" (p. 3). As my topic was about the life and academic experiences of Afghan female students and their perception of Bangladesh higher education and classroom interaction. Therefore, FGD helped me to gather rich data about the Afghan female students' perception.

There was one Focus Group Discussion through Zoom Meeting in English because these Afghan female students were living in two different cities Dhaka and Chittagong, it was financially challenging for me to bring all students in one place to conduct face-to-face FGD. Therefore, it was challenging me to bring all Afghan female students together to conduct face-

to-face FGD. Therefore, for my convenience, I conducted the FGD through Zoom Meeting. However, before conducting the FGD, I had created a WhatsApp group to communicate with my participants and conduct the FGD at their convenient time. For Focus Discussion, there were six participants, one from Shakardukht University and five participants from Roya Mahboob University. Moreover, one of the main advantages of using FGDs for data collection is the ability to explore group dynamics and interactions. As Krueger and Casey (2015) noted, “FGDs allow for the exploration of group norms, values, and experiences that may not be apparent in one-on-one interviews, as participants can build on each other's ideas, challenge assumptions, and provide feedback, leading to a more in-depth understanding of the topic at hand” (p. 13). Therefore, this Focus Group Discussion helped me to get rich data for my research question.

3.6 Role of the Researcher

In this study, I used the prior knowledge I gained while doing my Monograph Bachelor's degree which was about *A sociological perspective on oppositional movements during the reign of king Amanullah*. I worked with the French Medical Institute for Mothers and Children, and I was the Supervisor of the Health Information Management System, where the records of all patients were kept. Moreover, I helped numerous researchers in data collection between 2017 to early 2022. To ensure the study's credibility, first, I piloted the tools with two students from my classmates, and I shared my research step-by-step with my research supervisor.

3.7 Data Analysis

Data analysis is a critical aspect of qualitative research, as it allows researchers to make sense of the data they have collected and uncover meaningful insights. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), the key principles of qualitative data analysis include being systematic, using a process of reduction, and ensuring trustworthiness and credibility.

In this study, I followed a systematic approach to data analysis, starting with a review of the data and memos to determine their origin. This step is crucial in establishing the context of the data and ensuring that it is relevant to the research question being investigated (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Next, I transcribed the audio records of Afghan female students' interviews and focused group discussion. Transcription is an essential step in qualitative data analysis, as it allows the researcher to transform spoken language into written text (Patton, 2015).

Once the data was transcribed, I proceeded with coding with the help of QDA Miner Lite Software, where the data was segregated into meaningful units (Christensen, 2004). This step allowed me to identify patterns and themes in the data, as well as to develop a deeper understanding of the experiences and perspectives of the participants.

In the next step, I derived categories from the codes by the use of QDA Mine Lite. Categories are groups of codes that share a common theme, allowing for the identification of broader patterns and trends in the data (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014). Finally, I derived themes from the categories driven by the data. Themes are overarching ideas or concepts that emerge from the data and capture the essence of what the data is telling us (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

By following a rigorous and systematic approach to data analysis in this study, I was able to generate rich and nuanced insights into the experiences of Afghan female students and contribute to the advancement of knowledge in the field of education.

3.8 Ethical Issues and Concerns

In this study, to ensure that this research was conducted in an ethical and responsible manner, I obtained consent from each participant prior to conducting the study. Informed consent letters were provided to all Afghan female students through Google Form before conducting

interviews and focus group discussions, which outlined the purpose and procedures of the research and gave participants the opportunity to ask questions and withdraw their participation at any time. By obtaining informed consent from all participants involved, my researcher ensured that the rights, voluntary, and dignity of participants were protected throughout the research process.

This study adheres to ethical principles and practices in research, whereby the anonymity and confidentiality of participants have been strictly maintained. The study refrains from disclosing the names of the educational institutions, participants' personal information such as name, ID number any other related data. This ensures that the personal data of respondents who participated in the study are kept confidential. Furthermore, the study made every effort to maintain the highest level of ethical compliance, without any bias or prejudices. Fortunately, no ethical concerns were encountered throughout the study. These measures are in line with ethical guidelines that aim to safeguard the welfare, dignity, and privacy of research participants, and ensure that research is conducted in a responsible and transparent manner.

3.9 Credibility and Rigor

As the researcher, I took several measures to ensure the credibility and rigour of this study, which aimed to investigate the academic and life experiences of Afghan female students in two universities in Bangladesh with a focus on their motivation to choose international mobility and their aspirations after graduation. Firstly, I presented the research proposal to a committee for approval before commencing the study. Secondly, I employed two research tools, namely interviews and FGDs, to collect data from participants, and piloted with two of my classmates ensuring the credibility of the study. The data were collected through both face-to-face interviews and virtual FGDs, with participants' consent obtained prior to data collection.

To further ensure the rigour of the study, I drew on my previous research experience, having conducted research during my bachelor's degree at Kabul University, and having studied two well-articulated modules as part of my M.Ed. Additionally, the guidance of my supervisor provided further quality assurance for the research. By employing these measures, I enhanced the credibility and rigour of the study, ensuring that the findings are reliable and valid.

3.10 Limitations of the Study

Every research study comes with its own set of limitations and challenges that researchers must navigate. In my study, I faced several challenges that impacted the research process and made the data collection process lengthy. One of the major challenges I encountered was scheduling interviews and focus group discussion (FGD) with the participants because my participants were enjoying their winter vocation. This challenge is not uncommon in qualitative research, as participants may have busy schedules or competing priorities that make it difficult to find a suitable time for research activities (Mason, 2018).

To overcome this challenge, I worked closely with the participants to identify a time that was convenient for them. This required flexibility and adaptability on my part, as I needed to be able to work around the participants' schedules and accommodate their preferences. By being flexible and accommodating, I was able to conduct interviews and FGD that were of high quality and produced valuable data.

A second challenge I faced in my study was the geographical distance between the participants, who were located in two different cities in Bangladesh, Dhaka and Chittagong. This made it impossible to conduct face-to-face FGD with both university participants. To address this challenge, I used technology to facilitate virtual FGDs through Zoom meetings. Virtual FGDs have been shown to be an effective alternative to face-to-face FGDs, as they can overcome

geographical barriers and facilitate the participation of a wider range of participants (Wasserman et al., 2019).

Despite these challenges, I was able to successfully conduct my study and generate valuable insights into the experiences of the participants. By being proactive and creative in addressing the challenges that arose during the research process, I was able to ensure the quality and credibility of the research findings.

Chapter 4

Results

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents detailed research findings based on the collected data. Data is collected through a mix of methods: eight interviews, a virtual focus group discussion with six students, and field notes from Afghan female students studying in Bangladesh at postgraduate and undergraduate levels and a virtual format was chosen to because the participants were from two different cities. The data collection process was carried out over three different days, with the first two interviews taking place in a university classroom in Dhaka, facilitated by the International Office Coordinator. The remaining six interviews were conducted in Chittagong, at a religious place called the "Ismaili Centre", with the help of a senior Afghan girl who assisted in scheduling the interviews and introducing the participants. Lastly, the online-focused group discussion was conducted. However, the data collection process was not without complexities, including logistical challenges such as travel arrangements and coordinating with participants in different locations. Despite these challenges, the collected data are analysed and the results of the research are closely related to the aim and purpose of the study.

I classified it into four themes and some of the themes have been divided into subthemes.

- Afghan Girls' Motivation for Choosing Bangladesh for international Mobility
- Academic experience of Afghan female students in universities in Bangladesh
- Life experiences of Afghan female students in two different cities in Bangladesh
- Aspirations of Afghan female students after graduation

4.2 Afghan Girls' Motivation for Choosing Bangladesh for international Mobility

Numerous Push-Pull factors motivated Afghan female students to choose Bangladesh as an educational destination. For example, the lack of opportunities to continue their higher education in Afghanistan motivated these Afghan girls to choose international mobility. As G1 stated “Well, as I mentioned, I did not have any other options” (Interview#4:05.01.2023) to support her statement G3 also mentioned that lack of opportunity was the reason that I came here. She mentioned that “I told you like, it was just, there on that time there was not, I couldn't find any other scholarship except this”(Interview#8: 3:05.01.2023). Furthermore, as G6 mentioned that “I had not any other options [laugh]...so there was not any other options” (Interview#3:05.01.2023). Another factor that motivated some of these Afghan girls is the political changes in Afghanistan since August 15, 2022, when the Taliban got control over Afghanistan and restricted access of Afghan girls to higher education causing Afghan girls to choose international mobility and come to Bangladesh to continue their higher education. As G1 Said,

“I didn't have any opportunities to continue my education in Afghanistan. As you know, based on the current situation, girls are banned from pursuing higher education or even attending school. Therefore, I didn't have any other options left. It was my last resort to come here.”(Interview #4: 19.12.2022)

Furthermore, to support her statement G4 also stated that she was not interested in doing her higher education abroad but the instability and the current situation in Afghanistan that is going on and the Taliban has restricted higher education for girls push her to come to Bangladesh and she said that:

“did not initially plan to study abroad, but after the political changes that occurred in Afghanistan on August 15th, 2021, the situation worsened. The Taliban imposed restrictions on girls' education, leaving me with no other options. The Shakardukht University scholarship was my only hope to leave Afghanistan and pursue higher education.” (Interview #7: 19.12.2022)

Moreover, G6 also emphasized that due to political turmoil in Afghanistan pushed her to choose Bangladesh as an education destination as she said:

“The situation got worse in Afghanistan and I was just graduated from school after the Taliban took the power. Therefore, I cannot see any other opportunities to do my higher education in Afghanistan, no opportunity so because of that, it motivated me to apply for this scholarship and I realized if I stay in Afghanistan, I cannot achieve anything. I need to get educated, do my studies so I cannot stay in Afghanistan and like our previous generation in the 1990s give up, and continue my life like them. Therefore, these things motivated me to come to Bangladesh and continue my education.” (Interview#4:05.01.2023)

However, some respondents said that the reputation of the university that they are studying at was the reason that they come to Bangladesh. As G7 mentioned

“Since 2017, I have been looking for an opportunity to do my further studies at a university that should be the best in the field I want to study. Therefore, after my research... the first was Japan and the second one was Bangladesh... I had many other options...I choose Shakardukht University because it was the only university which meet my expectation. For instance, Pakistan, India and other countries but Bangladesh was the best option for me to do the disaster management course” (Interview#2:19.12.2022)

Continuing with G5 said, “I come to Bangladesh because I checked the website of Shakardukht University and I found it a member of the Open Society University Network (OSUN) that give you further opportunity and it is the top-ranked university in Bangladesh”.(interview#1:19.12.2022).

Some of the participants mentioned experiencing being an international student and being in a diverse community was the reason that they choose Bangladesh for social mobility. As G2 stated

“Since childhood, I have always dreamed of living in a community or environment that includes people from different nationalities and religions. I have always wanted to attend a liberal arts university with an international community.” (Interview #6: 05.01.2023)

Moreover, G11 also mentioned that “the main reason for me was the environment in that Roya Mahboob is an international university in which the students are from 15 different countries” (Online focused group discussion: 13.01.2023). Further, the language of the university in English is another factor that motivated some of the Afghan girls to come to Bangladesh, as G12 said “there were two reasons that I choose Roya Mahboob University and I come here. First, the language of the system is English and in Afghanistan, it is Persian” (Online focused group discussion: 13.01.2023).

Respondents also said that they choose Bangladesh for international mobility because it paves the way for further studies in developed countries G12 “it paves the way for our Master’s degree and PhD” and G5 “Because I Choose Bangladesh. So, I want to have enough opportunities after my graduation to do my further studies abroad, like at European and American universities”(interview#1:19.12.2022) also G6 added

“there is the opportunity to go abroad, like applying to an exchange programme, the opportunity of having to improve ourselves because it is an international university”(Interview#3:05.01.2023). Adding to G11 “the opportunities that girls at Roya Mahboob have because even after graduation Roya Mahboob helps the students to continue their further education in developed countries”.

4.3 Afghan Girls’ perception towards Bangladesh Higher Education

Afghan female students who are studying in Bangladesh have different perceptions towards Bangladesh’s higher education. They believe that both countries are developing countries however; Bangladesh has a better quality of higher education than in Afghanistan. For instance, as G1 said:

“Okay. As per my experience, the education quality is quite good, uh, in Bangladesh than, uh, Afghanistan. Uh, it's depend, we can say in Bangladesh also, uh, I had classmates from Bangladesh and those who studied in private schools, their, their education level is much more better than those who [studied]are studying in public school. Therefore, we can say, uh, the quality of education is depend on the school that they were enrolled” (Interview#4:05.01.2023).

Moreover, G4 said:

Education is better here than Afghanistan because in Afghanistan the education system is very different from Bangladesh education system. For example, in Afghanistan, the teachers at university only give lecture but here the method is different for example, after the teacher give is their lecture then we need to do our research in library. The professor is like a assistant they only give direction and we follow so we are independent. Therefore, I can say the Bangladesh higher education is better than Afghanistan based on my own experiences. (Interview#7:05.01.2023)

Furthermore, G5 also said that the quality of education is good and she added “Based on my own experiences, when we see Bangladesh, like the road, the city is not well constructed, and from an education perspective, they developed a lot” (interview#1:19.12.2022) adding to her point G7:

“It is very good and great. The facility they have, the method they follow at universities, the materials they used and their system. It is very good and they have well-known international universities. Most of their universities are linked to other countries’ universities” (Interview#2:19.12.2022)

Moreover, G8 agree that Bangladesh’s higher education is good and she mentioned that:

“The good thing about Bangladesh higher education. Moreover, they study most of their schools, their English medium school. So, they do not need to, you know worry when they come to university. Therefore, they are already familiar with the English language. They are being taught in English, or they have very, you know, lots of their subjects they're studying in English. Therefore, they don't have any challenges when they come to university” (Interview#5:05.01.2023).

Furthermore, G6 also said that the quality of higher education is good. For instance, G6 said “it is good. I think it is good but not highly standard. Not high and not worse” (Interview#3:05.01.2023).

4.4 Academic Experiences of Afghan Female students in Bangladesh

Through the interviews and focused group discussion, the Afghan female students in Bangladesh were asked about their academic experiences and they expressed as follows.

4.4.1 The Administration

Exploring their experience with the administration staff the respondents have different opinions about the management system and based on the findings respondents from Shakardukht

University have a positive experience. However, the majority of participants from Roya Mahboob have negative experiences from Roya Mahboob. For instance, G7 from Shakardukht University stated “when I have any problem and approach the university they follow and solve the problem. They respect our suggestions and recommendations, which I feel good about it”(interview#2:19.12.2022). Moreover, G5 from the same university has the same experiences and she mentioned that:

“What I have noticed is that everything is well scheduled. Every section has its own staff and they follow everything based on their calendar and follow the deadline. Honestly, I love the Shakardukht University system, because they give enough information, instruct you well... the staff are very respectful, and help us to get the course. The system is well organised. (interview#1:19.12.2022)

In addition, respondents from Roya Mahboob University had different opinions about the administration office. Some of them describe that the administration works well however, some of them do not think so. For instance, G4 stated “because the number of students increased. The management of Roya Mahboob lost the quality” (Interview#7:05.01.2023). Moreover, in a focused group discussion, G12 stated that “they provide scholarships for students but when we arrived at the campus then they do not care and do not solve our problems” (Online focused group discussion: 13.01.2023). In addition, also agreed with G12 in the focused group discussion and said:

“The admission office they do not reply to our emails when we have some problem so I need to go to the office and tell them many times to reply to my email and after some days and even weeks they reply”(Online focused group discussion: 13.01.2023).

Continuing with low-quality administration in the focused group discussion FA agreed that “overall, the management system has issues... they did not solve it (Online focused group

discussion: 13.01.2023). G2 also believe that the quality of administration has lost its quality and she mentioned that

“Since I came to Bangladesh so the systems at Roya Mahboob changed a lot because I can say before we had the management, everything was much better than today we have. Because the people who were in the management and the authorities, I feel like they were much stronger [professional] than authority right now”
(Interview#6:05.01.2023)

In addition, G8 mentioned that:

“As I said earlier, the management system was much better when I joined in 2018 but now, yeah, the management system has changed. There hired new people in the management system that they are experienced and there are new to the system. In addition, many times, students faced problems, you know, but in our time, the management system was much better. We had the, you know, let us say, expert people. We were not facing that much problems that students are facing now. In addition, nowadays, as I can say, that, you know, more focusing on the quantity, not the quality. So the quality has changed, the quantity is, you know, increasing [Number of students who get scholarship], but the quality is decreasing” (Interview#5:05.01.2023)

However, G6 who also study also at Roya Mahboob and said “overall Management system is good” (Interview#3:05.01.2023).

4.4.2 The Curriculum and Syllabus

Respondents' perceptions toward the curriculum and syllabus are positive and they believe that the curriculum and syllabus are well designed and the professors follow the syllabus during the whole course accordingly. As G6 said “at the beginning of every course and we receive the syllabus and curriculum” (Interview#3:05.01.2023). G8 also said that the curriculum and

syllabus are good. She mentioned that “the syllabus that they are teaching, and it's based on liberal arts syllabus” (Interview#5:05.01.2023) and G1 also stated:

“So I think, yeah, the curriculum and syllabus are helpful for they're quite good. Because before starting our first semester Roya Mahboob provide us with some courses to get better in English and math and the subjects we study is related and helpful”(Interview#4:05.01.2023)

Moreover, students in focused group discussions agreed that the curriculum and syllabus are well designed and G9 stated “overall the syllabus and curriculum are good. At the beginning of the course, we receive the syllabus and the teachers follow and complete them” (Online focused group discussion: 13.01.2023). In addition, G10 from FGD added “yes, the curriculum is good and I am satisfied... They send the curriculum before the class and I am satisfied with the teachers because they follow the guideline” (Online FGD field note: 13.01.2023). Continuing with that G3 also mentioned that “Curriculum and syllabus, it's good. They are saying it's highly standard to like the United State of America, but it's overall good, the curriculum and the syllabus”(Interview#8:05.01.2023) and G4 said

“The curriculum and syllabus is fine. I am studying almost one year. I had some professors, at the beginning every professor is assign for a subject or course and everyone has followed their syllabus which was presented at the beginning of course. So I can say the curriculum and syllabus are fine for me” (Interview#7:05.01.2023)

In addition, G5 from Shakardukht University where she has experience studying in Afghanistan. Her perception is toward the curriculum and syllabus positive and she emphasized:

“At Shakardukht University they give the syllabus at the beginning of the course and everything is clear that what will be the first, second, ... last course and in Afghanistan

it was not the same. The curriculum and the syllabus is very good at Shakardukht University, and I do not know which is system they follow, based my own experience, I can say is very helpful...” (Interview#1:19.12.2022)

Furthermore, G7 from the same University added:

“The curriculum and courses offered in my program are good and relevant to my field of study. Unlike my previous bachelor's degree, we do not have any extra or irrelevant subjects. The level of education is high and the strategies and policies we study are well organized and presented. We begin with national policies and then move on to international policies. We compare and relate them to see how they can be implemented in our country.” (Interview #2: 19.12.2022)

4.4.3 Assessment and Feedback

The Afghan female students’ perception towards the assessment and feedback is different and based on their experiences it differs from professor to professor and also depends on it the newly hired professor or is experienced. As G8 stated

“When the semester is over and even in the middle of the semester or whenever we need feedback, our professors will be more than happy to help us. So for this, there are some exceptional professors that do not provide much feedback, but most of the professors, they provide feedback when the semester is over”
(Interview#5:05.01.2023)

Moreover, as G4 said:

“The feedback provided by professors varies from person to person. Some professors give us very constructive feedback and clearly highlight where we have made mistakes and why points have been deducted. They provide us with detailed feedback to make it

clear to us. However, some professors do not give much feedback, and some even do not provide any feedback and only announce the results.” (Interview #7: 05.01.2023)

Furthermore, some of the respondents believe that the feedback are general:

“The feedback we receive is unclear and they do not mention in which area I have made a mistake. So, to know our weaknesses area to focus on them to make them our strengths” (Online FGD field note: 13.01.2023).

Additionally, G10 agree that the feedback is general

“In total, we can say that they are giving us feedback but it is not specific, like in which specific part I need to work a lot or less. They do not provide any feedback on our submitted paper but after we go to them at the office verbally they tell us what is our problem which I think is not accurate”. (Online FGD field note: 13.01.2023)

Interestingly G5 mentioned that Student Teacher (ST), a senior student from their faculty check their paper.

“The Student Teachers (STs) who check our assignments are very strict. They read our papers line by line and provide us with detailed feedback. In order to score well, we need to be very well prepared and ensure that we cover all parts of the questions in our assignments. It is not enough to just write and submit; we need to provide full details. I am pleased with the assessment and feedback I receive, but I have noticed that the STs can be quite restrictive.”(Interview #1: 19.12.2022)

However, there are some respondents who emphasized they had never had any feedback after one year of studying at the university. For example, G7 said:

“To be honest. I had never had any feedback in the past two semesters. We have a professor who is good, with the method, and the assignment is great. The presentation

that we present in the class provides feedback on our presentations. Even in the past two semesters when I submitted my assignment and wrote them to provide me with feedback, so do not repeat the same error in the future but they did not provide any feedback. Even I upload the assignments on the system and after the announcement of results they do not provide any feedback'' (interview#2:19.12.2022)

In agreement, G12 said:

''The feedback we receive is unclear and they do not mention in which area I have made a mistake. So, to know our weaknesses area to focus on them to make them our strengths'' (Online focus group discussion: 13.01.2023).

4.4.4 Professors' Interaction

Through individual interviews and focused group discussions, respondents have a variety of experiences with novice professors and experienced professors. Overall, the participants have good experience in classroom interaction with lecturers and found them friendly and supportive because they believe that as they are international students the professors' interaction is different with them over Bangladesh students. However, some of the students experienced discrimination of students because there are not from Bangladesh. For instance, as G5 stated:

''It differs from teacher to teacher and based on my experiences, I found them very friendly and some of the professors are very strict, I cannot ignore them. Their interaction with me is different because I am an international student so they try to be supportive and friendly with me'' (interview#1:19.12.2022)

Moreover, G3 added:

''Professors? They are friendly. I can say, they are quite good with us. They are trying their best to help for now, especially now since we are graduating, and then they are

just trying to help us in the class as well. I can say they are quite okay. Like you can say you're okay, not that good, not that bad'' (Interview#8:05.01.2023)

However, some students believe that the teacher discriminates between local students and international. They said that the newly hired teacher admire local students over international students and they support them a lot and have good interaction with them. For example, G4 stated:

''The professor's interactions sometimes, some of the Bengali professors have discrimination. For example, sometimes I felt some of the Bengali professors praise the local students more than other students which are not from Bangladesh but this is not true with foreign professors''(Interview#7:05.01.2023)

Furthermore, G3 added:

''Sometimes we can say there is kind of biases; we can say one because they are mostly from Bangladesh. They are taking sides sometimes, and supporting more their own [Bangladeshi student], you know, their nationals compared to our'' (Interview#8:05.01.2023)

In agreement with G9 mentioned:

''The experience with teachers' behaviour is mixed; some are good, and some are not. I have noticed that some of the local Bangladeshi teachers discriminate against non-Bangladeshi students and prefer to give higher marks to Bangladeshi students. This has been disappointing, as it feels unfair in an academic setting. Some teachers also make fun of students who ask questions when they are struggling to understand basic concepts, which shows that they are not experienced in teaching. This can be embarrassing and can discourage students from asking questions in the future. However, not all teachers are like

this. Some are very good, and I appreciate their positive attitudes, teaching methods, and the way they handle the class.” (Online focused group discussion: 13.01.2023)

4.4.5 Students’ Interaction

Regarding the Afghan female students’ experience, the respondents mentioned that they are in a diverse community and some of the Bangladeshi students are friendly while others are not. As G3 stated:

“They don't have any scholarship. They are just studying at Roya Mahboob self-funded. Then these students are always like this. They are not being connected with any students except the day scholars. They have a different group always, and they are not making friends with other students. Then the rest of that, Myanmar and Nepal, whatever country, Syria, we all had a very good friendship and communication. We were communicating, and having fun all the time. Still, we are there”
(Interview#8:05.01.2023)

Another student in focused group discussions mentioned G13 “The Bangladesh students do not like us, maybe they are racists...because they only hang out with local students...” (Online focused group discussion: 13.01.2023). She explained that they might see as our competitor, we have scholarship, and they do not. However, some respondents experienced good interaction with Bangladeshi and other students as G1 said:

“The interaction with other students is amazing that it's a diverse community, it's good, it's not that bad (laugh) but you know, it's diverse. So we need to be more careful in terms of respecting others' cultures and perspectives and ideas”
(Interview#4:05.01.2023)

In agreement, G8 mentioned:

“So in our classrooms, we were quite in a diverse community. In addition, I had classmates, from Bhutan, Vietnam, Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, Syria, and from Yemen. So, every one of us is very much kind to each other. We are friendly to each other” (Interview#5:05.01.2023)

4.4.6 Extracurricular Activities

Afghan female students have a variety of extracurricular activities within their university. For example, clubs and organizations, sports teams, and volunteer work depending on their interests and passion helped them to develop important skills such as leadership and teamwork. For example, G8 stated:

“Yeah. So for the extracurricular activities, yeah, we do have many extracurricular activities in Roya Mahboob, we have different clubs. We have maybe more than 30 club, and then just few a month ago yeah. I resigned from a club. Therefore, I was the president of the woman across border club. So and I like joined clubs. I was the member and organizer of clubs. And some events we used to organize events and we all the time, our main focus is not all the time or hours, the main focus of Roya Mahboob, not like just to come to the class and go back home”(Interview#5:05.01.2023)

In agreement, the extracurricular activities G5 said:

“At Shakardukht University there are a lot of opportunities if you want. However, the pressure of reading and overload assignments will not let you do any extra activities (Laugh). For example, at the beginning of my journey, I was playing volleyball. There are many extracurriculars you can attend and participate if you want. Even I have some plans to do in the future but my priority is my studies and till now I am unable to overcome my studies of the challenges that I have”(interview#1:19.12.2022)

Additionally, G6 mentioned:

“The opportunity that I have is that I can attend the extra courses... Right now, we have a winter break. Fortunately, I have taken a music course to learn to play an instrument”

(Interview#3:05.01.2023)

Moreover, in the focused group discussion, G9 stated “we have a leadership course where we can build our leadership skills” (Online focused group discussion: 13.01.2023) and G11 mentioned

“There are volunteer opportunities in which you can empower yourself and help others. Even, I have the opportunity to volunteer outside the camp... How to raise self-confidence and how to be motivated. The focus of the instructors is to empower us and to trust the time and move” (Online focused group discussion: 13.01.2023)

4.5 Life Experiences of Afghan Female Students

The research revealed that Afghan female students studying in Bangladesh encountered both cultural similarities and differences. Most of the students reported experiencing a cultural shock, possibly due to the disparities in social norms, customs, and expectations. Despite both countries being Islamic, there are notable differences in various aspects, including the practice of religion, levels of freedom granted to women, public interaction, living expenses, and weather and environment. It is important to note that the experiences of Afghan female students in Bangladesh may be influenced by these cultural similarities and differences, which can shape their perceptions and attitudes towards their academic and social environments.

4.5.1 Cultural Similarities and Differences

Through individual interviews and FGD, students mentioned similarities and differences they have experienced since beginning their academic journey in Bangladesh. Respondents

highlighted cultural similarities and differences. For instance, some students stated that Bangladeshi people are friendly, similar to Afghans. As G1 mentioned, "I don't know all of them, but my roommate is a Bengali girl. She is so nice and behaves so well. I think it's similar to people in Afghanistan, the way they behave"(Interview#4:05.01.2023). Moreover, G8 stated, "friendly people, happy to help, and hospitable, just like us"(Interview#5:05.01.2023). Some students believe that both countries are Islamic and conservative, making them the same. As G3 said, "I guess it's like we are from the same religion, so it's quite okay, and everything is similar"(Interview#8:05.01.2023). In agreement, G2 also stated, "I can say that some Muslims are similar in their conservatism because Muslims in Bangladesh are also quite conservative"(Interview#6:05.01.2023). Furthermore, G4 said, "there are some language similarities; there are some words in both languages. For example, Darwaza (door) and Gosht (meat) are the same in both languages, with only a slight difference in pronunciation"(Interview#7:05.01.2023). Finally, because both countries are Islamic, the Islamic occasions are the same. As G11 stated in the FGD, "Ramadan or these two Eids, Eid al-Adha and Eid al-Fitr...the students from Bangladesh or Afghanistan celebrate together because we have the same cultural days"(Online Focus Group Discussion:13.01.2023).

In contrast, students also revealed the differences that they experienced. For instance, G6 mentioned, "the food, we do not eat spicy food but they do" (Interview#3:05.01.2023) and she also stated about the wedding culture "wedding expenditure on the bride and the boys have value than girls. Once at a wedding, the groom was waiting in the car and the bride opened the door of the car and welcome him. I was shocked". Moreover, G14 in FGD revealed "in weddings they wear yellow cloth on Henna night but in Afghanistan is green. In Henna night the girl's family dances and in the marriage the boy's family dances in Afghanistan but here is different"(Online Focus Group Discussion:13.01.2023). Finally, G8 believe that the Bangladesh people are open-minded and she stated:

“Cultural differences, I think in this country they are more open-minded, especially in terms of clothing. In Bangladesh, from what I have seen so far, people wear whatever they feel comfortable. Those who want to wear a Hijab wear it and those who do not want to wear one, do not wear it. It is a matter of personal choice. It is not mandatory, just like in Afghanistan. It depends on the families, as some are very conservative while others are okay with their children's everyday style choices. However, for us, we have to follow the rules that our society puts upon us. Previously, I had to wear a [Chadar] scarf, but nowadays the situation has changed. However, here in this country, it is different.” (Interview#5:05.01.2023)

4.5.2 Living Expenses

Students have found Bangladesh to be an expensive country to live in. The majority of Afghan female students receive around 4,200-5,000 Taka along with accommodation, three meals a day, and snacks provided by their respective universities. However, they face difficulty adjusting to the spicy food and experience a shortage of money because they believe the stipend they receive is insufficient for a girl to survive. For example, as G1 mentioned, "It's kind of hard for us to manage the expenses of a whole month with 4,200 TK"(Interview#4:05.01.2023). In agreement, G9 in the FGD stated, "I agree with others, everything is expensive, and the stipend that we receive is nothing compared to the prices"(Online Focus Group Discussion: 13.01.2023). Additionally, some Afghan female students revealed that they have not bought any fruit since their arrival in Bangladesh due to its high cost. For instance, as G5 said, "If I want to buy fruit from the given stipend, there will be nothing left for pocket money, so I never tried to buy it, and even I do not want to see them."(Interview#1:19.12.2022) In agreement, G7 said, "If I compare the expenses to Afghanistan, they are very high...I face many financial challenges because the university gives us only 5000 TK, which is not enough for a student. For example, 1 kg of apple costs 400 TK" (interview#2:19.12.2022).

4.5.3 Public Interaction

The experiences of Afghan female students regarding public interactions vary significantly. While some students found public interactions to be friendly, others have reported negative and disrespectful interactions. Respondents have indicated that since August 15th, 2021, there has been a shift in public behaviour, resulting in a negative perception of Afghanistan and its people. Several students have even reported concealing their identities to avoid unfavourable interactions and unfavourable questions in public. As a result, they claim to be from Tajikistan or Iran, as all three countries speak Farsi. For example, G10 in the focused group discussion stated:

“Since the collapse of the Afghanistan government on the 15th of August 2021 when we say we are Afghan their behaviour has totally changed. They say Afghanistan, wow, yeah Taliban and bomb, and suicide attackers... to avoid their bad behaviour so we say we are from Iran or Tajikistan. They say yeah they speak Persian and the behaviour will be good and do not say anything to insult us or we feel insulted”

(Online focused group discussion: 13.01.2023)

In agreement, G13 in the focused group discussion said “when I go to someplace shop or restaurant. Most of them come to us and ask about our country, if they know I am from Afghanistan, they start laughing”(Online focused group discussion: 13.01.2023). Moreover, G3 indicated, “I was in Dhaka... I'm from Afghanistan. They said, [Explosion], this is what, like, you know, they only think that all Afghans are only thinking about bomb blasting and these things. Their perspective towards Afghans hurts me a lot”(Interview#8:05.01.2023). In addition, she explained that she has faced this kind of behaviour even from professional and educated people. For instance, she indicated:

“It was a very big party in Dhaka. We were invited to Queen Elizabeth’s birthday at British High Commission. There were all the ambassadors, one Bangladeshi came and said, oh, you are from Afghanistan? ...And, oh my goodness, are you enjoying your freedom in Bangladesh? Then, you know, I started crying there. That is why he said something like that. In addition, he start laughing, heheheh ha, something like that. In addition, I did not get it full. And it is still like I was, you know, did not cope with that sentence”

Furthermore, G4 revealed “when we landed at Bangladesh airport of, hmmm the stare of people at us, all people both male and female. The public is good but they stare in a way, which make me annoying, and I feel annoyed or insulted” (Interview#7:05.01.2023). However, some students found their interaction friendly and helpful. For example, as G8 explained, “Friendly and helpful. They all are hospitable. They helped whenever I needed help. Whenever I asked people for help, they always help me. And I have a good impression of the public”(Interview#5:05.01.2023) and G7 also stated that “when they notice that I am from Afghanistan, the first thing that they ask is about the Taliban and they have friendly interaction” (interview#2:19.12.2022).

4.5.4 Safety and Climate Changes Experiences

Based on the collected data, Afghan female students encountered several difficulties associated with unfamiliarity with the new environment and changing weather conditions in Bangladesh. Nonetheless, the female students from Afghanistan expressed a sense of safety and security while pursuing their studies in Bangladesh. Moreover, the Afghan female students had the opportunity to attend classes outside the campus premises without encountering any security-related concerns. For example, G6 stated, "It is difficult, harder living here than in Afghanistan. If I compare it to the situation in Afghanistan weather, for example, the extreme heat, I struggle a lot"(Interview#3:05.01.2023). Similarly, G4 reported, "I suffered a lot and faced too many

challenges regarding weather. I had an allergy, and the city is not clean, like pollution"(Interview#7:05.01.2023). Additionally, during a focused group discussion, G13 revealed, "In Bangladesh, the environment is not always pleasant, and it is hard for me to adjust. The traffic is another challenge because it creates noise pollution"(Online focused group discussion: 13.01.2023).

In addition, respondents expressed a positive experience regarding security. G8 mentioned, "I always felt safe, and I never imagined a situation in which I felt insecure"(Interview#5:05.01.2023) and G3 said, "The freedom I have is related to my appearance, behaviour, and language. It's my own freedom, and I decided to be like this. Nobody tells me why... yeah, safety"(Interview#8:05.01.2023)

4.6 Aspiration after Graduation

The collected data indicates that the aspirations of Afghan female students after graduation vary depending on their individual goals and the political situation in Afghanistan. Eight students aspire to pursue further studies, such as postgraduate degrees and PhDs. Additionally, four students want to return to Afghanistan and work towards improving girls' education. Moreover, two students aspire to establish their own businesses.

For instance, as indicated by G2, "if I get admission to an international university in European or America, I will pursue my master's degree" (Interview#6:05.01.2023). In agreement, G4 stated, "I want to pursue my master's degree in a non-Asian country, preferably in an American or European country"(Interview#7:05.01.2023). Furthermore, some students desire to secure employment after graduation. As stated by G3, "I have been pursuing my bachelor's degree for seven or eight years, and I am tired. I do not want to pursue further studies. I wish to start working" (Interview#8:05.01.2023).

In addition, some students have concerns about returning to Afghanistan, as they believe that the circumstances for women are unfavourable. As G7 pointed out, "the situation for women in Afghanistan is not good, and I will only return if conditions get better because I aim to work with women, and that is why I came here to studies"(interview#2:19.12.2022). In agreement, G5 also emphasized, "I will return to my hometown if the situation was suitable. However, I am not optimistic about the situation getting better in Afghanistan for women" (interview#1:19.12.2022)

However, some students envision owning their own businesses. For example, G6 mentioned, "my dream is to achieve financial independence, and I want to establish my own business, such as a restaurant, a bank, or a company"(Interview#3:05.01.2023). Similarly, G8 expressed that "I would love to start my own business since I have studied economics"(Interview#5:05.01.2023) Moreover, in the focused group discussion, G14 mentioned, "I aspire to establish my own business, and thinking about this motivates me to study harder"(Online focused group discussion: 13.01.2023).

4.7 Afghan Female Students' Aspirations in Bangladesh's Higher

Education

The collected data shows two noteworthy findings related to Afghan female students pursuing higher education in Bangladesh. The quality of academic programs and availability of exchange programmes were crucial factors in determining their choice of university. The Afghan female participants preferred universities with academic excellence and programs that aligned with their academic and career aspirations. Furthermore, exchange camp opportunities are vital for students who aim to enhance their knowledge. An exchange camp is a program that brings students together to share their skills and experiences to tackle a particular issue.

Most students reported that their universities would support them in finding international exchange camps to participate in and improve their skills and knowledge.

For example, as G9 expressed “by completing my bachelor’s in Bangladesh. I will have a good future because the quality of education is good than in Afghanistan”. Similarly, G3 stated “so as I told you Roya Mahboob is a much known university. This is the first thing that helps me to do further studies” (Interview#8:05.01.2023). Moreover, G13 in focused group discussion mentioned “The University also help us in finding the opportunities. Like, exchange programmes or international conferences to join and help us to continue our master’s degree” (Online focused group discussion: 13.01.2023). Furthermore, the students have good academic support from the university as G6 indicated “our professors help us to find scholarships and guide us in filling out the application and motivational letter” (Interview#3:05.01.2023).

Afghan girls have been choosing Bangladesh as an educational destination due to various push-pull factors. While some students are motivated to come to Bangladesh because of the lack of opportunities for higher education in Afghanistan and the Taliban's restrictions on girls' education, others come to study at a university with a good reputation, and diverse community, and to improve their English language skills. All students believe that the quality of higher education in Bangladesh is quite good compared to Afghanistan. They appreciated the facilities, materials, and methods, of the English language is used in universities in Bangladesh.

Despite having a positive perception of the quality of higher education in Bangladesh, the Afghan female students had varying opinions on the administration system of the universities. Two respondents had positive experiences, stating that Shakardukht University follows deadlines, respects their suggestions and recommendations, and has well-organized staff. However, the majority of participants had negative experiences with the administration staff at Roya Mahboob University.

In terms of assessment and feedback, the Afghan female students' perceptions varied depending on the individual professor. Some professors provide constructive feedback with details, while others provide general feedback or none at all. However, most students found their professors friendly and supportive. Still, some students reported discrimination, with some professors favouring Bangladeshi students over international students and giving higher marks.

Afghan female students in Bangladesh face several challenges, including language barriers, financial difficulties, and negative perceptions by some members of the public. These students have reported struggles with managing their expenses due to high prices and have even had to hide their identities to avoid negative interactions. However, some students have also reported friendly and helpful interactions with the public. Moreover, the unfamiliarity with the new environment and changing weather conditions in Bangladesh have been challenging for these students, but they have expressed a sense of safety and security while pursuing their studies.

In conclusion, Afghan girls have been choosing Bangladesh as an educational destination due to a range of factors. The quality of higher education in Bangladesh is perceived to be quite good compared to Afghanistan. However, the students face various challenges, including language barriers, financial difficulties, and negative perceptions by some members of the public. Despite these challenges, the students are committed to pursuing their studies and have expressed a sense of safety and security in Bangladesh. It is crucial to address these challenges and create a more inclusive and welcoming environment for international students in Bangladesh.

Chapter 5

Discussion and Conclusion

5.1 Discussion

The education system in Afghanistan has been disrupted due to years of conflict and political instability, resulting in a lack of opportunities for higher education for women (Khalid, 2019). This has led many female students from Afghanistan to seek higher education opportunities abroad. Bangladesh has emerged as a popular destination for Afghan female students due to various factors, such as the reputation of universities, the availability of higher education opportunities, and the language of instruction being English. This paper aims to discuss the findings of my research study that investigated the life and academic experiences of female Afghan students studying in Bangladesh. The study centres on how individuals perceive the quality of education, their interactions with faculty and peers, cultural similarities and differences, as well as their aspirations for further studies. It also explores how higher education in Bangladesh can help these individuals achieve their goals.

The results suggest that Afghan female students have chosen to pursue higher education in Bangladesh due to a lack of opportunities and insecurity in Afghanistan. The inadequate availability of higher education opportunities in Afghanistan significantly influences their decision and motivates them to study abroad. Mashwani (2017) found that gender inequality is more prevalent in higher education than in primary, secondary and high school because Afghan women are not given enough opportunities to pursue higher studies in Afghanistan. This finding is consistent with studies conducted by Mansfield (2017) which identified limited educational resources in Afghanistan, particularly for girls. These challenges have pushed Afghan female students to seek higher education opportunities outside Afghanistan because

there is a direct relationship between motivation and higher academic achievement. As Editor et al. (2019) stated, motivation significantly affects academic achievement.

Furthermore, the data indicates that political changes in Afghanistan in August 2021, which led to restrictions on girls' education, have influenced students' decisions to study in Bangladesh. Mashwani and Ahadi (2017) reported that the insurgent groups that are currently in power in Afghanistan are against girls' education and are making efforts to restrict it. They also stated that these groups oppose female education and continue to impose restrictions on it. Additionally, security has been a significant threat to education in the country over the past twenty years, with attacks on schools in rural areas, murders of teachers and education staff, and the banning of women and girls' access to education in remote areas by the Taliban. ISIS forces have also challenged educational progress (Yazdani, 2020, p.131).

The challenges faced by Afghan girls in accessing higher education have pushed many to seek opportunities abroad. While the trend of international mobility often sees students from developing countries seek opportunities in developed countries such as those in Europe and America, Afghan female students have turned to Bangladesh as a gateway to better educational and living opportunities. For many, this presents a short-term solution to acquiring skills such as English proficiency that may be required to gain scholarships or advance their careers, given that the majority of universities in Afghanistan operate in Dari (Persian) or Pashto. However, as Beine et al. (2014) have noted, international students from developing countries also face significant barriers in accessing higher education in developed countries. For Afghan female students, Bangladesh represents a more accessible alternative to pursue higher education.

The quality of higher education in Afghanistan has been affected due to conflicts, corruption and a low economy. Roof (2018) stated that despite the remarkable growth in education, there is a pressing requirement to enhance the quality of education. Afghan female students in

Bangladesh believe that the quality of higher education in Bangladesh is better than in Afghanistan and they view quality as a notion and a state in which an institution has wider availability of satisfactory resources such as classrooms, laboratories, technology, an appropriate number of teachers, and subjects are to be taught in English. They appreciated the research-based teaching methods, the facility and materials used, and the instruction in English. The students found the curriculum and syllabus to be well-designed and relevant to their field of study. This finding is consistent with a study by Zaman, Hossain, and Begum (2016), which found that the quality of education in Bangladesh has improved over the years, and the education system is more developed than in Afghanistan.

In the context of Afghanistan, the potential implications of inadequate feedback and inconsistent assessment practices for female students are of particular concern. Women in Afghanistan have faced significant barriers in accessing education, and as such, they have fewer opportunities to develop the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in the workforce and further studies. Therefore, providing comprehensive feedback and consistent assessment practices may be crucial to supporting and empowering Afghan female students in achieving their academic and professional goals. The students found that they do not receive continuous feedback, which affects their academic achievement and progress. This is aligned with previous research in Bangladesh, which suggests that there may be a broader issue with the quality and consistency of feedback provided to students in higher education across certain regions.

In Afghanistan, the majority of educational institutes follow teacher-centred and traditional teaching-learning styles, where teachers and students do not have much interaction. However, in both universities, Shakardukht and Roya Mahboob, the teaching-learning style is student-centred. Teachers act as facilitators and guides, encouraging students to take an active role in their learning and providing opportunities for collaboration and exploration, which help the students to have an active interaction. Studies have found that "positive interactions between

professors and students have been shown to increase student's motivation, engagement, and academic achievement. Moreover, Verenikina (2010) suggests that social interaction is a means through which learning takes place. When students feel supported, valued and interaction made by their professors, they are more likely to be actively engaged in the learning process and to develop a sense of ownership over their own academic success" (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2010). Moreover, Kim and Lundberg (2015) have highlighted that student-faculty interactions can have a positive impact on students' perception of academic success. On the positive side, such interactions are associated with higher levels of classroom engagement, which can enhance students' cognitive skills development and academic outcomes (Young & Lundberg, 2016). Afghan female students found the professors in both universities friendly and supportive, which have helped, in their academic success and achievement.

The Afghan female students in Bangladesh encountered both cultural similarities and differences, leading to cultural shock. The students may had assumption that both countries are Islamic and developing countries and the cultural differences would be minimal. However, they soon may realize that significant differences exist in social etiquettes, such as dressing and freedom for women, which they appreciated. The differences in social norms, customs, and expectations can be attributed to the level of freedom granted to women, the practice of religion, public interaction, living expenses, weather, and the environment. These differences may shape their perceptions and attitudes towards their academic and social environments. The students found similarities in friendly and hospitable people, similar religious beliefs, and some common words. This may be because both countries are Islamic country and may share some common practice regarding hospitality. However, differences were noted in food, wedding customs, and more freedom for women in Bangladesh. The students had the preconception that an Islamic country would have similar wedding customs, but they found that the differences resulted in cultural shock, given that Afghan girls come from a country with several restrictions

on women. Ahmed et al.'s (2020) study found that cultural differences could be a source of conflict and misunderstanding between international students and their host country nationals, leading to cultural shock.

These students face a variety of challenges when studying in Bangladesh. One significant challenge is the inadequacy of their monthly stipend, which affects their ability to manage their expenses. The students find the stipend insufficient, as everything in Bangladesh is expensive, and they have difficulties adjusting to the spicy food. Although both Afghanistan and Bangladesh are developing countries, Afghanistan is considered to be less developed than Bangladesh, and living expenses may be lower in Afghanistan. Furthermore, Bangladesh charges higher taxes on imported goods, which may result in higher prices for items. According to a study by Rahman et al. (2021), foreign students, particularly those from developing countries, often face financial difficulties in host countries due to the high cost of living, and this can adversely affect their academic performance.

Based on the findings, it appears that Afghan female students in Bangladesh have had varying experiences with public interactions, particularly since the collapse of the Afghanistan government in August 2021.

"Some students have reported negative and disrespectful interactions, which is concerning and suggests that they may be experiencing discrimination or xenophobia. These negative interactions may be related to the political situation in Afghanistan and the negative perceptions that some people may have towards Afghans due to the war and conflict in Afghanistan, which has made headlines in the news. It is also possible that gender-based discrimination will be a factor, as women may be more vulnerable to mistreatment in public spaces.

The fact that some students feel the need to conceal their identities and country to avoid unfavourable interactions is alarming, as it suggests that they do not feel safe or accepted in

their host country. This may have negative implications for their mental health and overall well-being, as well as their ability to integrate and succeed in their academic pursuits.

On the other hand, it is encouraging to hear that other Afghan female students have had positive experiences with public interactions in Bangladesh. This suggests that there are also individuals and communities who are welcoming and supportive of Afghan students, which is crucial for their sense of belonging, integration, and success in academic and personal life.

Moreover, the findings suggest that Afghan female students studying in Bangladesh face challenges related to unfamiliarity with the new environment and changing weather conditions. However, they expressed feeling safe and secure while studying in Bangladesh, with positive experiences regarding security, personal freedom, and no restrictions on their appearance or behaviour.

The experiences of Afghan female students in Bangladesh are also consistent with the experiences of other international students studying in a host country. For example, a study by Lee and Rice (2007) found that international students in the United States face challenges related to language barriers, cultural differences, and social isolation, which can affect their academic success and overall well-being. However, the Afghan female students do not face any language barriers in the class because they have English class, but they face language barriers when they are outside because they speak Dari and need to communicate in Bangla. Moreover, the study also found that international students who receive social support from their peers and host community tend to have a more positive experience.

Furthermore, the findings regarding the aspirations of Afghan female students in Bangladesh after graduation are also consistent with the experiences of other international students. This is consistent with the finding that “in China, it has been – and continues to be a norm for academically outstanding students to aspire towards further studies in developed countries in

the West (especially the US), which often leads to permanent immigration''(Yang, 2022). Moreover, according to a survey by the Institute of International Education, many international students in the United States aspire to pursue further studies or work in their host country after graduation, while others plan to return to their home country to contribute to their communities (Institute of International Education, 2021).

The concerns expressed by some female students about returning to Afghanistan due to the unfavourable circumstances and restrictions for women under the Taliban regime are also valid and highlight the challenges faced by Afghan women in pursuing education and career opportunities. According to a report by Human Rights Watch, the Taliban have a history of restricting women's access to education and employment, which has had a negative impact on women's rights and gender equality in Afghanistan (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

In addition, the findings suggest that for Afghan female students, the quality of academic programmes and availability of exchange programs are important factors when choosing a university to pursue higher education in Bangladesh. These findings are consistent with other studies that have shown that academic quality and program alignment with career aspirations are important considerations for international students when choosing a university(Yeung & McInerney, 2005).

The study also highlights the importance of academic support in helping Afghan female students navigate the challenges of pursuing higher education in a new country. This support can include assistance with scholarship applications and motivational letters, as well as guidance from professors. This finding is consistent with other studies that have shown the importance of academic and social support for the academic success and well-being of international students(Martirosyan et al., 2019).

The study also found that Afghan female students in Bangladesh face a range of challenges, including financial difficulties, cultural shock, and environmental factors such as extreme heat and pollution because Bangladesh a country which has hotter weather than Afghanistan. These challenges are consistent with other study that have shown that international students face a range of challenges related to adjusting to a new environment and culture(Wu et al., 2015).

In conclusion, Afghan female student choose Bangladesh for higher education for several reasons. Lack of educational opportunities, insecurity and traditional believe about girls education by Taliban which restricted girls education. Moreover, the Afghan female students have good experiences of interactions with peers and professors. However, they faced challenges in Bangladesh highlight the importance of providing academic and social support for underrepresented groups in higher education. Despite obstacles related to cultural and political barriers, these students are able to succeed academically with the help of academic and social networks. Further research can help to identify effective strategies for promoting access to higher education and supporting the success of underrepresented groups.

5.2 Conclusion

The objective of this study was to examine the academic and personal lives of Afghan female students enrolled in two universities in Bangladesh. The study aimed to investigate the students' motivation for pursuing higher education in Bangladesh, their academic and personal life experiences and their aspirations after graduation. The findings of the data analysis indicate that Afghan female students choose Bangladesh as a destination for international mobility due to the lack of higher educational opportunities for females in Afghanistan. Furthermore, they seek to enhance their skills and knowledge to continue their studies in a developed country.

Despite their motivation to pursue higher education in Bangladesh, Afghan female students face several challenges in both academic and personal aspects. For instance, they struggle to

adapt to the hot weather in Bangladesh compared to Afghanistan's climate, and they encounter financial difficulties due to the high cost of living. Nevertheless, they view Bangladesh as a gateway to further educational opportunities, as the universities provide them with the necessary skills and knowledge to pursue their career goals. Additionally, the majority of the professors in these universities are supportive and friendly.

The Afghan female students in this study expressed a strong desire to return to their home country after graduation. However, recent restrictions on girls' education and work permits have left them concerned about their future prospects. As a result, they have also considered seeking opportunities in a third country. Given the challenges, they face, it is crucial for universities and policymakers to take action to support the education and career aspirations of Afghan female students.

5.3 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, I would like to suggest the following recommendations in order to get a vivid idea about the opportunities, motivation, and life and academic experiences of Afghan female students studying in two universities in Bangladesh.

1. Bangladeshi universities should increase their scholarships for Afghan female students to promote access to education, empower women, and improve the health and well-being of females in Afghanistan.
2. Universities can enhance the learning experience of international students, particularly those from developing countries, by improving the quality of feedback provided and increasing stipends to help them manage their expenses while studying abroad.
3. Universities should promote cultural exchange programs, language and trainings, and specific support, including language classes, festivals, and tours, to help international students, including Afghan female students, adjust to their new environment and reduce culture shock.
4. Creating opportunities for Afghan female students to continue their education or establish businesses in Bangladesh can be considered if returning to Afghanistan is not a viable option.
5. Further studies are required to investigate why some Afghan female students feel the need to conceal their identities and do not feel safe in Bangladesh, while others have positive experiences and feel that Bangladesh is safe and secure.
6. Despite considering the diversity of my sampling across Afghanistan and its ethnic groups, further studies are necessary to investigate the motivations of Afghan female students in choosing Bangladesh as their educational destination. This is particularly important due to the significant number of Afghan students studying in Bangladesh.

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Appendices

Appendix A. Consent Letter

Dear [Participant],

I am a student pursuing a Master's degree in Educational Leadership and School Improvement at BRAC University, specifically at the BRAC Institute of Educational Development. My thesis focuses on researching girls' higher education and the experiences of Afghan female students at two universities in Bangladesh: Shakardukht University and Roya Mahboob University.

For this study, I will conduct a virtual focused group discussion (FGD) as well as individual face-to-face interviews. I am interested in gathering your experiences and opinions regarding your life and academic journey in Bangladesh.

The FGD will last for two and a half hours, and the interview will last for one hour. Both will be recorded using a smartphone and laptop. Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time without any negative consequences. I will use pseudonyms to protect your identity, and your name will not be used in any part of the report. All data will be stored in a Google Drive account.

If you are interested in participating, please contact me at nowrooz.ali.mohammadi@g.bracu.ac.bd or nowrooz.mohammadi@gmail.com to schedule the interview or FGD at a time that is convenient for you.

Thank you for your willingness to assist me in learning about the academic and life experiences of Afghan female students in Dhaka and Chittagong, Bangladesh. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me or my professor, Dr. Tabassum Amina, at tabassum.amina@bracu.ac.bd.

Sincerely,

Nowrooz Ali Mohammadi

Appendix B. Interview Guide

A. Motivation to Higher Education:

- a. What motivated you to choose Bangladesh as an education destination? How?
- b. Why did you choose this university?

B. : Experiences:

- i. What is your perception of Bangladesh's higher education?
- ii. How do you experience education at this university?
 1. How do you evaluate the management system?
 2. How did you find the curriculum & syllabus?
 3. How is the quality of education? (critical thinking, learning to work with others and work independently, a broad range of subjects)
 4. How do you experience classroom interaction? (Students/ professors)
 5. How did you find the assessments & feedback?
 6. How do you think of curricular activities?

b. Life:

- i. How do you experience life in Dhaka/ Chittagong? (Challenges and opportunities Facilities)
 1. What opportunities you have in this city?
 2. What challenges you have in this city?
- ii. How did you find the living expenses?
 1. Food
 2. Healthcare
 3. Education materials
- iii. How do you communicate with the public?
- iv. What cultural differences and similarities have you found?

C. Aspiration for future and how Bangladesh Higher education can address them:

- i. What are your aspirations after graduation?
 1. Aspiration for further studies?
 2. Aspiration for a future career?
 3. Aspiration for life?
- ii. How do the higher education in Bangladesh address your aspirations?

Appendix C. FGD Guide

1. What motivated you to choose Bangladesh as an education destination? How?
2. Why did you choose this university?
3. What is your perception of Bangladesh's higher education?
4. How do you experience education at this university?
5. How do you evaluate the management system?
6. How did you find the curriculum & syllabus?
7. How is the quality of education? (critical thinking, learning to work with others and work independently, a broad range of subjects)
8. How do you experience classroom interaction? (Students/ professors)
9. How did you find the assessments & feedback?
10. How do you think of curricular activities? (participate physically and mentally in the learning process)
11. How do you experience life in Dhaka/ Chittagong? (Challenges and opportunities Facilities)
12. What opportunities you have in this city?(Safety, financial, health, ...)
13. What challenges you have in this city?
14. How did you find the living expenses?
15. What cultural differences and similarities have you found?
16. What are your aspirations after graduation?
17. How do the higher education in Bangladesh address your aspirations?

Appendix D. Sample of Interview Transcript

Hi, thank you for filling the consent letter and giving your time to help me in doing my research.

G1: You are welcome.

Okay. I will ask some question, so if you need any clarification, just ask me.

G1: Sure.

1. What motivated you to choose Bangladesh as education destination? How?

G1: The reason that I chose to study in Asian university for a woman was because I didn't have any opportunities to continue my education in Afghanistan, as you know based on the situation, which is now going on in Afghanistan, girls are ban to continue their higher education. Even they are ban, to go to school. Therefore, I didn't have any other option left. It was my, it was my last option to take and come here.

2. Why did you choose Roya Mahboob University?

G1: Well, as I mentioned, I didn't have any other option, but besides that I have seen some ads on Facebook on their website that they were saying that Roya Mahboob University is giving the students the chance to actually improve their skills in leadership and have any other, have job opportunities beside their studies. And

3. Yeah. Yes, if I make it clear, you choose it because of their advertisement. Yes.

G1: Not just because of their advert advertisement, but because of the missions and the goals that they were talking that they would provide for students. Okay.

4. What is your perceptions of Bangladesh higher education?

G1: That is actually not a Bangladesh University that is known as an international university. So the curriculum that they follow is based on US universities, as they are

saying. So I, I have found it somewhat effective for students who are studying here because they are giving the students the ability to actually improve different skills beside studies. Like they get the chance to be the leader in clubs. They get the chance to do work-study, they get the chance to you know show their talents and skills to others if they have any.

5. How do you experience education at Roya Mahboob University?

G1: My experience? Yeah. I am not here like for a long time. It's only about 12-13 months. Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>. Therefore, I have, since I did not have any experience in Kabul universities, in any other universities in Afghanistan, I just did my school there and I truly came here. Therefore, I found it helpful.

6. How do you evaluate the administration of Roya Mahboob University?

G1: The management system is in compare, if we compare it to the years before we came here, as our seniors were telling very like good stories about their experiences that they had many opportunities in terms of management. They had like the all staff management were very friendly and helpful with them. However, since we came here the situation is tough for the university and for the students because the university at that time was not ready to welcome those numbers of Afghan students'. In addition, at the same time, they were not completely recovered from Covid-19 pandemic. So, I think that after Covid-19 pandemic, most of their staff have left and they had to hire new staff that they didn't have actually more (enough) experiences working in that specific position, let's say for admission, they had to hire someone else with, with less experience. Therefore, I think there is changes and they are quite improving, but that is not satisfying.

7. How did you find the curriculum and syllabus?

G1: That's, that is good.

8. Like, can you clarify?

G1: Okay. I think as we are studying in pre UG, the university is providing a chance for students to improve their education level in math and as well as in English, both in written and spoken English. They are they have designed the pre UG courses for students so that they can work on English to get better and math if they are willing to get a major in science. Therefore, I think, yeah, the syllabus are helpful for they're quite good.

9. Okay. How is the quality of education at Roya Mahboob University because as you previously mentioned, that based on their mission and patient and is implementing the American system?

G1: Yeah, so I believe that before Covid-19 and before the time that we came here, that was as if everyone was saying that the university was focusing on the quality rather than the quantity. However, after Covid-19, there have been some changes, as I mentioned, that most of their staff have left and they had to hire new staff for those positions. Moreover, I think now, at the current, at the situation, at the current situation, the university is focusing on the quantity rather than the quality. I feel that the university environment is more like, you know, it is more like immigration (Refugee) camp than the university because most of the, the majority of students are Afghan students. Moreover, after that comes the Rogan students, which their families are living in UNHCR camp in Cox's Bazar, and their girls are here. They are for GS general studies and the Myanmar yeah, like, I believe that's, that the university is mostly focusing on the quantity nowadays rather than the quality.

10. How do, how do you experience the classroom interaction? Like professor to student, student or professor, like student, student, student?

G1: That was like; the interaction between the teacher and the students is good. It differs actually. In some classes that's good, but in some classes, because of the, you know lack of the experience of the teachers, sometimes the students feel that they cannot learn and they are like, you know, very, they, they're, they don't feel very open to share that with the teacher. In addition, the interaction with the students is assuming that it's a diverse community, it's good, it's not that bad (laugh), but you know, it's diverse. So we need to be more careful in terms of respecting others' cultures and perspectives and ideas.

11. How did you find the assessment and feedback from professor?

G1: <Laugh>? [Inaudible]. Really? Yeah. Okay. Yeah. The assessment. That was good actually in, in previous semester it was because of our instructor because she was I, I believe she was well trained and the lessons that we were covering during the classes, the assessments were per, per them mm-hmm. <Affirmative>, but for this semester that I have recently finished, that was kind of I think tough because we had some c-programming classes and other classes. And during the lessons, the teacher was covering pretty easy lessons. However, when it came to the assessment, I was just like asking, what's this? And the feedback I have found this friendly from some instructors like after each quiz when the instructor was seeing that the, that some students got less mark, she was requesting them to meet, meet her in the office behind the classes. Yeah. Meet her in the office and share all the problems. And for the students that they were good. She was giving them like appreciation words or something.

Appendix E. A Part of Sample of FGD Transcript

1. What motivated you to choose Bangladesh as an educational destination? How?

G9: Because I had applied for the scholarship and after the selection at ROYA MAHBOOB UNIVERSITY My teachers motivated me to come to ROYA MAHBOOB UNIVERSITY because in Kabul it was my last semester at the University of Kabul. I discussed it with my family and it was tough for me to make my decision because I was in my final semester at Kabul University.

G10: My motivation to come here is that as you know Bangladesh is one of the developing countries which has progressed rapidly. Politically Bangladesh is good with Afghanistan than our neighbouring countries. So, I decided to come here because there was not any conflict between Bangladesh and Afghanistan as we have with our neighbouring countries. The public is very good with Afghans and that is why I choose Bangladesh. And to choose ROYA MAHBOOB UNIVERSITY because it was my goal to study at ROYA MAHBOOB UNIVERSITY two years ago I tried but I could not make it because of a personal problem, fortunately, I got the scholarship and now I am doing my studies at one of the best universities in the Asia region. I am happy that my family supported the university and me as well. I am thankful. It is an international university and the whole students are female so our family do not have any concern about us whom we stay with. I have a lot of opportunities and the university supports us in every field we can consult with our professor about further scholarship abroad from Bangladesh. We have a leadership course where we can build our leadership skills. At ROYA MAHBOOB UNIVERSITY there is a lot of faculty and we have a variety of choices to choose from. Public Health is one of the best departments that I want to study at it because I want to help Afghan women in Afghanistan and I am fortunate that I got the scholarship. Top-ranked university.

G11: the main reason for me was the environment in that ROYA MAHBOOB UNIVERSITY is an international university in which the students are from 15 different countries. The secure environment that the ROYA MAHBOOB UNIVERSITY has especially for women. Another thing is that, the opportunities that girls at ROYA MAHBOOB UNIVERSITY have because even after graduation the ROYA MAHBOOB UNIVERSITY help the students to continue their further education. The good opportunities at ROYA MAHBOOB UNIVERSITY.

G12: there were two reasons that I choose ROYA MAHBOOB UNIVERSITY and I come here. First, the language of the system is English and in Afghanistan it is Persian and it paves the way for our Master's degree and PhD. Secondly, ROYA MAHBOOB UNIVERSITY is working for women's empowerment and the whole focus of ROYA MAHBOOB UNIVERSITY is on women's empowerment. That is why I choose Bangladesh and ROYA MAHBOOB UNIVERSITY.

2. How do you experience education at the university that you are studying in?

G9: I have a lot of experience at ROYA MAHBOOB UNIVERSITY When I arrived at the university for the first time. The university language is English and the instructors are lovely and friendly. There are volunteer opportunities in which you can empower yourself and help others. Even, I have the opportunity to volunteer outside the camp. I am learning how we can empower women around the world. How to raise self-confidence and how to be motivated. The focus of the instructors is to empower us and to trust the time and move. I learned that to achieve your goals, you need to try hard and have self-belief. There is no need to worry and no hesitation because to achieve the goal you need to invest your time, money and ...

G10: My experience is that with education we learned other skills as well. Like, leadership skills. At ROYA MAHBOOB UNIVERSITY we have the opportunity to learn theories and practically implement them. Even right now, I am in pre-UG and I am learning different types

of skills which prepare me to do my UG. English presentation skills, computer sciences, women's studies, and biology. Which helped me a lot to get prepared for UG. The focus of our university is not only on our field they provide other skilful courses as well. After graduation, the students will determine how much they have learned at ROYA MAHBOOB UNIVERSITY because we learn and we practice. That means learning practically. For example, the university provides opportunities to implement and go into the field. Being in a diverse community also allows sharing and learning from others because as I earlier mentioned that the students are from 15 different countries. I everything regarding the study I was looking for, I found it at this university. The university provides all the opportunities for us and there are faculty members who are available for us so now it depends on us how to use this opportunity.

G11: I think before coming here and when I come here, it was hard for me like how to answer the question and how to treat the teachers and students. Now, I learned many things but in the beginning, it was hard for me. I was not able to answer the questions. How to present our presentation step by step we learned. Now I feel confident, about how to use the computer, and how to present the presentation. I have had a good experience at ROYA MAHBOOB UNIVERSITY Time: 32:38

G12: No.