

FROM VILLAGES TO LECTURE HALLS: EXPLORING THE ADAPTATION OF RURAL
AFGHAN STUDENTS TO UNIVERSITY CULTURE AND ITS IMPACT ON THEIR
CAREER TRAJECTORIES

By

Ibrahim Bik Ibrahim

Student ID: 23157020

A thesis submitted to the BRAC Institute of Educational Development in partial fulfilment of
the requirement for the degree of Master of Education in Educational Leadership and School
Improvement

BRAC Institute of Educational Development

BRAC University

August 2024

© 2024. Ibrahim Bik Ibrahim

All rights reserved

Declaration

It is hereby declared that

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

Student's Full Name & Signature:

Ibrahim Bik Ibrahim

23157020

Approval

The thesis titled “From Villages to Lecture Halls: Exploring the Adaptation of Rural Afghan Students to University Culture and its Impact on their Career Trajectories” submitted by

1. Ibrahim Bik Ibrahimimi (Student ID: 23157020).

of Spring 2023 has been accepted as satisfactory in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Education in Educational Leadership and School Improvement on August 29/ 2024.

Examining Committee:

Supervisor:
(Member)

MD Bayezid Islam

Lecturer, BRAC Institute of Educational Development
BRAC University

Program Coordinator:
(Member)

Dr. Manjuma Akhtar Mousumi

Assistant Professor, BRAC Institute of Educational Development
BRAC University

External Examiner:
(Member)

Dr. Somnath Saha

Assistant Professor, BRAC Institute of Educational Development
BRAC University

Head of the Institute

Dr. Erum Mariam

Executive Director, BRAC Institute of Educational Development
BRAC University

Ethics Statement

I hereby assure and acknowledge that this study, titled “From Villages to Lecture Halls: Exploring the Adaptation of Rural Afghan Students to University Culture and its Impact on their Career Trajectories,” is my original work. The findings are authentic and reported without manipulation or misrepresentation. The study complies with research standards, procedures, and ethical principles. I avoided personal biases, relying instead on the voices of my participants and data collected through various research tools.

This study involved 15 participants: 12 students (male and female) and 3 university professors experienced in working with rural students. The students were from public and private universities in Afghanistan, and the professors were from similar institutions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all participants, and 3 students also provided personally written stories about their unique experiences they faced during their university transition to supplement the interviews. To ensure voluntary participation and maintain confidentiality, written consent was obtained from each participant.

This thesis is an original work and has not been submitted or published elsewhere. All sources used are appropriately acknowledged following research standards and accurate referencing styles. Data is securely stored in both soft and hard copies, protected by passwords, and will only be shared upon reasonable request through formal procedures.

Lastly, I declare that this paper adheres to all ethical and legitimate standards and policies of the institution, maintaining the highest quality and attention as per the research requirements and institutional codes of conduct.

Abstract

Rural students globally face significant challenges in transitioning to higher education, particularly in adapting culturally, academically and economically when moving to cities. In Afghanistan, this adaptation is hindered by inadequate preparation, limited university support, socio-political instability, financial constraints, and cultural differences. Despite these hurdles, education remains essential for social mobility and economic progress, particularly in rural areas with fewer opportunities compared to urban regions. This study explored the adaptation experiences of rural Afghan students in universities and assesses how these experiences influence their career paths.

The research employs a qualitative method, conducting 15 semi-structured interviews with rural Afghan students (both current students and recent graduates) and university professors familiar with their experiences. Additionally, personal written stories were collected from some students for deeper insights.

Findings revealed that rural students often struggle with cultural and academic adjustments due to insufficient preparation and support. However, their resilience, strengthened by their backgrounds, helped them persevere, leading to academic success through dedication and hard work. University education significantly enhanced rural students' knowledge, skills, and employability, positively impacting their career aspirations and opportunities. Participants reported substantial personal and professional growth, including earned educational degrees, improved communication, research, problem-solving, and other knowledge and skills, vital for their career development and contributions to their rural communities. Nonetheless, some criticized the limited practicum and context-relevant curricula, which hindered effective application of their education in rural settings.

The study also highlighted the importance of personal resilience, family support, private courses and university interventions as coping strategies for overcoming academic, financial, and socio-cultural

challenges. It concluded that while university education significantly benefits rural students, systemic changes are necessary to bridge the educational gap between rural and urban students. Recommendations include updating curricula to reflect rural realities, enhancing practical training opportunities, and implementing transition programs and investments to better prepare rural students for university life. These changes are crucial to empower rural students, enabling them to contribute effectively to their communities and national development.

Keywords: Rural Education; Afghan Rural Students; University Adaptation; Higher Education Challenges; Coping Strategies; Career Development

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to four important individuals in my life who have been influential supporters and backbone of my life which they supported me throughout my education and life including this journey. Firstly, to my beloved mother Shah Begum who is the most important person in my life which she accepted all the challenges, struggles and hardships of life but encouraged to continue my education and loved me unconditionally which her love, blessings and encouragement to my life is unwavering and continuing. Secondly, to my lovely and supportive brother Jafar Lahly who lives miles away from me but his care, love, and support has always been with me. He works day and night to support his family including me and all relatives so this is a piece of appreciation of his unconditional support. Third, to my cousin Abdul Karim Matin who has been a true and a loyal brother, supportive and great friend which since I know myself, he has been a source of inspiration for me and the entire family. He taught me how to read and write and encouraged me throughout my educational journey. Finally, last but not least is my life partner and my love Dawlat Naz Shadman who we are two bodies but become one soul. Despite, the fact that it is almost two years we got engaged but she showed her true love, support and kindness which she encouraged and supported me in this journey a lot. Although we newly become together which the distance made our lives challenging but she kindly accepted the challenges and understood me and valued the importance of my education as she is eagerly looking forward to my success and celebration of my master's degree graduation.

Acknowledgement

Initially, I would like to express my gratitude and thank to my honourable thesis supervisor MD Bayezid Islam, Lecturer at BRAC Institute of Educational Development (BRAC IED), BRAC University for his unwavering, effective and valuable support he has extended throughout my research process. Indeed, without his guidance, feedback and supportiveness this work has not been successful. In the meantime, I want to convey my wholehearted gratefulness and gratitude to all lecturers, professors, faculty members and other academic and administrative staff at the BRAC IED, BRAC University for their time, knowledge and support they have provided me during this master program. Their contribution and support is appreciated deeply and will be remembered in my lifetime.

Moreover, I want to extend my appreciation and gratitude to individuals who supported me all the way through Post Graduate Preparatory Programme (PGPP) – Online and Master of Education program at BRAC IED in Bangladesh. These individuals include Ms. Rosa Barugh, Dr. Roy Wilson, Mr. Robert Sharples, PGPP Coordinators and Teachers at The Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS). Mr. Aziz Bic Fayeez, Mr. Zohirbek Piltaboev, Fakhrollah Safari at ITREB for Afghanistan, Mr. Salim Jivani at ITREB for Bangladesh, and Mr. Madad Ali Virani at Aga Khan National Council for Bangladesh. The support and contributions of these individuals through institutional programs and their personal and professional efforts, guidance, leadership, support and sympathy are worthwhile to be deeply and sincerely appreciated.

Lastly, I would like to pass my deepest gratefulness to all my research participants both students and university professors who generously devoted their time and knowledge by actively taking part in this study and provided valuable insights and data despite the technological challenges. I would like to thank all my colleagues, friends and field assistants for providing logistical and technical support during this study.

Table of Contents

Declaration	ii
Approval	iii
Ethics Statement	iv
Abstract	v
Dedication	vii
Acknowledgement	viii
List of Tables	xiv
List of Figures	xiv
List of Acronyms	xv
Glossary	xvi
Chapter 1	1
Introduction and Background	1
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 Research Topic	2
1.3 Problem Statement	2
1.4 Research Questions	3
1.5 Purpose of the Study	3
1.6 Significance of the Study	4
Chapter 2	6
Literature Review and Conceptual Framework	6

2.1 Introduction	6
2.2 Rural Education	7
2.3 Transition Experiences of Rural Students to Higher Education	8
2.4 Challenges Faced by Rural Students within Universities.....	9
2.4.1 Academic Challenges.....	10
2.4.2 Financial Challenges.....	10
2.4.3 Social and Cultural Challenges	11
2.4.4 Geographic Challenges.....	11
2.4.5 Limited Access to Resources.....	12
2.4.6 Language Barriers.....	12
2.5 Opportunities Offered by Universities for Rural Students	13
2.5.1 Academic and Career Opportunities.....	13
2.5.2 Personal Growth and Social Engagement.....	14
2.6 Impact of Higher Education on Rural Afghan Students	14
2.6.1 Economic Benefits.....	16
2.6.2 Social Advantages	16
2.6.3 Rural Students’ Personal Development.....	17
2.6.4 Community Engagement and Rural Development.....	17
2.7 Factors Supporting Students’ Adjustment to Universities.....	18
2.7.1 Social Support Networks.....	18

2.7.2 Financial Support	19
2.7.3 Academic Support Services	19
2.8 Conceptual Framework	19
Chapter 3	22
Methodology	22
3.1 Introduction	22
3.2 Research Approach	22
3.3 Research Site	22
3.4 Research Participants	25
3.5 Sampling Procedure	28
3.6 Research Methods	28
3.6.1 Interview	29
3.6.2 Personal Written Stories	30
3.7 Data Analysis Process	31
3.8 Role of the Researcher	36
3.9 Ethical Issues and Concerns	37
3.10 Credibility and Rigor	37
3.11 Limitations of the Study	39
Chapter 4	41
Results	41

4.1	Introduction	41
4.2	Rural Students' Early Encounters and Adaptation Approaches to University	
	Environment	41
	4.2.1 Transitioning from Village to University	42
	4.2.2 Adjustment Approaches.....	43
4.3	The Impact of University on Students' Personal and Career Paths Development	44
	4.3.1 Preparing Students for Societal Contributions.....	44
	4.3.2 Enhancing Graduates' Employability through Skills Development.....	47
	4.3.3 Gaining Real-World Experiences through Apprenticeship	48
	4.3.4 Employment Opportunities	50
4.4	Challenges Faced by Rural Students during their Transition to University	51
	4.4.1 Academic Life Challenges	51
	4.4.2 Biases and Discrimination.....	53
	4.4.3 Economic and Financial Constraints.....	54
	4.4.4 Social and Well-being Issues.....	56
	4.4.5 Lack of Employment Opportunities	58
4.5	Coping Strategies and Mechanisms to Address the Challenges	59
Chapter 5	63
Discussion and Conclusion	63
5.1	Introduction	63
5.2	Discussion.....	63

5.2.1 The Experiences of Rural Students in Afghan Universities	63
5.2.2 Afghan Rural Students Navigate Challenges and Thrive.....	66
5.2.3 Beyond Transition and Adjustment: Empowering Rural Students	70
5.3 Conclusion.....	73
5.4 Recommendations	73
References.....	75
Appendices.....	85
Appendix A: Consent Letter	85
Appendix B: Research Tools	87
Interview Guideline for Students	87
Interview Guideline 2 for University Professors	88
Sample Interview Transcription	89

List of Tables

Table 1: The research field plan for conducting the research25

Table 2: The details of research participants and site with their pseudonyms.....27

Table 3: Research methodology matrix used in this study.31

List of Figures

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Study on From Villages to Lecture Halls: Exploring Adaptation of Rural Afghan Students to University Culture and its Impact on their Career Trajectories.....21

Figure 2: Data analysis technique: color coding and codes extraction for themes and subthemes development.....34

Figure 3: Data analysis technique: revised and finalized themes and subthemes emerged from codes35

Figure 4: The Overall Findings of the Research from Interviews and Personally Written Stories.62

List of Acronyms

BRAC	Bangladesh Rural Association Committee
BRAC IED	BRAC Institute of Educational Development
PGPP	Post Graduate Preparatory Programme
IIS	Institute of Ismaili Studies
ITREB	Ismaili Tariqah and Religious Education Board
MOE	Ministry of Education
MoEA	Ministry of Education of Afghanistan
NESP	National Education Strategic Plan
MHE	Ministry of Higher Education
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
USD	United States Dollars
MJMBU	Mawlana Jalaluddin Mohammad Balkhi University
TV	Television
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
PDF	Portable Document Format
HEDP	Higher Education Development Program

US	United States
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding

Glossary

Dari:	The first national language of Afghanistan which is also referred as Farsi-Dari or Persian.
Pashto:	The second national language of Afghanistan widely spoken among Pashtun ethnic groups.
Afghani:	It refers to the currency of Afghanistan which is abbreviated as AFN.
Sunni:	The Muslims who believe in the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad (sas) and in Afghanistan Sunni Muslims represent the vast majority of population.
Ismailies:	The Shia Imami Ismaili Muslims are the religious minority groups in Afghanistan who follow His Highness Prince Karim Aga Khan.
Tajik:	The second largest ethnic group in Afghanistan after Pashtoon ethnic groups.
Dashti Qurugh:	A district in the central parts of Faizabad town in Badakhshan province of Afghanistan.
Faizabad:	The capital or centre of Badakhshan province in Afghanistan.
Jurm:	A district of Badakhshan province in Afghanistan

Professors: In this thesis this words refers to the professors and lecturers who took part in this study. This term is generally used which include lecturers, head of departments and professors.

Mazari Sharif: Another name of Balkh province in Afghanistan which refers to the central parts of the Balkh province.

Chapter 1

Introduction and Background

1.1 Introduction

Afghanistan has undergone significant political and social transformations in recent decades, creating both challenges and opportunities for higher education (Aturupane, 2013; Baharustani, 2012; Samady, 2001). While access to education has improved, rural students continue to face significant barriers in adapting to the university atmosphere due to poor learning experiences and a lack of resources during their school time (MoE & UNICEF, 2018). Despite these challenges, rural Afghan students are increasingly seeking out higher education opportunities with optimism of support systems which help them to be comfortably adapted to university settings and build their career paths (Yiquan & Wang, 2015). They are motivated by a desire to improve their livelihoods, contribute to their communities, gain employments and challenge traditional roles regarding education (Hayward, 2008). For example, one of the participants in Hayward (2008) research from Afghanistan said, “*I would prioritize education over food*” (p. 6). This is how Afghan students residing in the poorest country of the world value the importance of education as an optimism for their future economic and social development. The quest for higher education has long been recognized as a pathway to social mobility and economic advancement (Esmaeily et al., 2010; Hayward, 2008). For rural Afghan students, who have historically faced significant barriers to accessing education, university represents a unique opportunity to expand their horizons, develop their skills, and contribute to the development of their communities (Esmaeily et al., 2010). However, the transition from rural life to the university environment have been challenging for these students, who must adapt to a new culture, navigate unfamiliar academic expectations, and overcome social and economic obstacles (Muradi et al., 2018; Sabri, 2019). This research aims to explore the experiences of rural Afghan students in their transition to university

settings, focusing on their adaptation to university culture and its impact on their career development paths.

1.2 Research Topic

Afghanistan a country that most of its population are residing in rural contexts and similarly majority of Afghan universities' students are also from rural areas of Afghanistan (Samady, 2001). Despite this majority and the challenges rural students face in other similar contexts outside Afghanistan, there is a literature gap in the study of Afghan rural students within universities of Afghanistan. Therefore, the topic of this research is selected as *From Villages to Lecture Halls: Exploring the Adaptation of Rural Afghan Students to University Culture and its Impact on Their Career Trajectories*. This study explores the transition experiences of Afghan rural students from their village to university settings. The purpose of this study is to investigate how these students adjust to university academic and social environments and how this adjustment may impact their future professional paths. Through an analysis of the obstacles and possibilities encountered by Afghan rural students pursuing higher education, this research aims to offer insights into the kinds of policies and support networks that can improve their time at university and further their career advancement. In order to create a more inclusive learning environment for all students, the research's conclusions are meant to provide guidance to policymakers, educational institutions and other relevant patrons on how to close the achievement gap between rural and urban education.

1.3 Problem Statement

Afghanistan's universities have witnessed a great increase in enrolment, with over 380,000 students as of 2018, a significant portion of these students hailing from rural backgrounds (UNESCO, 2021). This influx presents both challenges and opportunities for rural students during their transition to university. While it reflects the country's commitment to expanding educational access and fostering social mobility (Lyngdoh Nonglait & Myrthong, 2021; Nyatuka, 2019; Samady, 2013; Stone, 2017), it also raises concerns about universities' ability to support students from diverse backgrounds, particularly

those from rural areas with limited academic preparation and financial constraints (Ahmed et al., 2021; Rasmussen & Kelly, 2016) for their university adjustment. Moreover, bridging social, cultural and linguistic gaps, addressing inadequate rural education, and mitigating financial burdens are crucial to ensuring rural students' success during their transition and adjustment to university environment (Baharustani, 2012; Rasmussen & Kelly, 2016; Samady, 2001). Closing the research gap on Afghan rural students' experiences within the country's universities is vital for understanding their specific challenges which help in developing effective support systems to transform the status quo. For the reason that over 75% of Afghan students come from rural contexts (Samady, 2001) and the benefits of the efforts will be beneficial to large number of rural students as more people within Afghanistan have common background which is rural belongingness.

1.4 Research Questions

The entire study seeks the answers to the following questions:

- a) How do rural Afghan students experience their adjustment and integration into university life?
- b) What specific challenges do rural Afghan students encounter during their transition, and how do they cope with these challenges?
- c) How do the university support system and the adaptation mechanisms employed by rural students impact their future career paths?

1.5 Purpose of the Study

Afghanistan is a country that has faced decades of insecurity and instability. This has had a profound impact on the education system, particularly in rural areas (Baharustani, 2012). Despite these challenges, there has been a growing trend of Afghan students generally and including rural students to attend universities pursuing their higher education (UNESCO, 2021) because education is a key element for the development of all societies particularly rural areas which they have limited resources.

This research aims to explore the adaptation of rural Afghan students to university culture and its impact on their career path. The objectives of this study is to:

- To identify and analyse the relationships between the diverse backgrounds of rural Afghan students (e.g., cultural, socioeconomic, educational) and their experiences of adjustment and integration into university life.
- To comprehensively identify and understand the exact challenges faced by rural Afghan students during their transition from village life to a university environment and ways in which they come out of challenges.
- To explore the effectiveness of university support mechanisms and rural Afghan students own strategies in guiding and empowering them in shaping their future career pathways and overall impact on their lives and communities.

1.6 Significance of the Study

This study may provide valuable insights into the experiences and challenges rural Afghan students face while transitioning and adjusting to the university context from rural villages and benefits they get in return. There are several reasons for the significance of this research. Firstly, there is a literature gap on this topic particularly on Afghan rural students' university transition and adaptation challenges inside Afghanistan's universities. Thus, this research might contribute to a broader understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by students from marginalized backgrounds in accessing and succeeding in higher education. Secondly, this research would be beneficial to recommend the development of more inclusive and equitable mechanisms and programs by relevant Afghan educational institutions and other stakeholders to mobilize and leverage resources for preparation and adaptation of rural students in higher education settings to ensure quality and equity in accessing education for all (Unterhalter, 2019). Third, Afghanistan is a poor and landlocked country where its population mainly resides in rural areas by more than 75% (World Bank, 2018). Hence, policy makers

and donors support and attention would be drawn to shape the future of these rural students by providing them facilities and assistance such as financial support, preparation courses and mentoring for their integration into university environment which would have positive impact on their future career development and beyond (Ahmed et al., 2021; Ali et al., 2021; Stone, 2017; Wahab & Khatun, 2015). Lastly, this study could motivate researchers to the expansion of literature in this field as there is hardly research found in Afghan context regarding rural Afghan students' adaptation to university. Responding to the needs of rural Afghan students ensures that Afghanistan is committed to meeting international standards as rural students represent the large number in this country and it facilitates processes to enable the country to have more skilled and educated workforce which ultimately impact people's life positively and national growth at general.

Chapter 2

Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

2.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a comprehensive review of relevant literature to understand the adaptation of rural students to the university environment and the impact of higher education on their career paths. The literature reviewed includes books, book chapters, scholarly articles, master's and doctoral theses, websites, videos, and other significant research. This extensive review provided a thorough understanding of the topic and allowed for the presentation of available knowledge to readers.

The literature review explored researches at global level, developing countries including Afghanistan context regarding how rural students generally adapt to university settings and the subsequent impact on their future lives. Due to limited literature specific to Afghanistan, similar contexts at regional and global levels were reviewed which rural students global share common characteristics except the socio-economic statuses of countries which have differences in terms of opportunities and facilities. In connection to my research topic and problem, I examined various articles, journals, books, online resources, student theses/dissertations, reports, newspapers and more. As a result, the literature review this study is categorised into six main themes with associated subthemes, which are further reviewed and discussed in this chapter:

1. Rural education
2. Transition experiences of rural students to higher education
3. Challenges faced by rural students within universities
4. Opportunities offered by universities for rural students
5. Impact of higher education on rural Afghan students
6. Factors supporting rural students' adjustment to universities

2.2 Rural Education

Education plays a crucial role in fostering economic growth and alleviating poverty in any context including both developed and developing countries (Omodero & Nwangwa, 2020). Modern education, often leveraging technology, allows countries to invest in their human capital, leading to greater economic returns (World Bank, 2018). However, rural communities in developing nations often face significant challenges in accessing quality education for their children. This ultimately affects rural students' ability to adapt to university contexts (Psacharopoulos, 1994).

In Afghanistan, for instance, the same curriculum is implemented nationwide. Yet, rural schools have significant limitations compared to their urban counterparts. These limitations include a lack of resources, infrastructure, qualified teachers, and effective teaching-learning materials. These shortcomings negatively impact rural students' learning outcomes and performance during their transition to university (Ahmadi, 2022).

Ahmadi (2022) found that while examining the challenges of rural education is important, it's equally crucial to understand how this foundational education affects rural students as they transition to higher education, particularly in urban settings. Rural students often experience a pronounced cultural and academic shock when adapting to university life in larger cities. This transition is influenced by several factors rooted in their rural education background.

The disparity in educational resources and opportunities between rural and urban areas means that rural students may enter university with lower levels of preparedness. Limited exposure to advanced technology, specialized academic programs, and extracurricular activities in rural schools place these students at a disadvantage in the highly competitive and resource-rich urban universities (Terenzini et al., 1994). This gap manifests in lower self-confidence, heightened anxiety, and a sense of alienation

among rural students, impacting their academic performance and overall university experience (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

In the Afghan context, these challenges are compounded by the specific socio-political and economic conditions. Rural students from Afghanistan face unique hurdles, such as ongoing poverty concerns, gender disparities in education, and limited support systems both within their families and from educational institutions (Morrow, 2016). Despite these challenges, Afghan rural students often exhibit remarkable resilience and determination to succeed in higher education (Samady, 2013).

2.3 Transition Experiences of Rural Students to Higher Education

Higher education has long been recognized as a key driver of social and economic mobility (Esmaily et al., 2010; Hayward, 2008). For rural students, higher education can provide a pathway out of poverty, access to better employment opportunities, and the chance to contribute to their communities in meaningful ways. In recent years, there has been a growing body of research exploring the impact of higher education on rural students' lives, emphasizing improvements in their quality of life through employment opportunities and entrepreneurial endeavours (Schafft & Jackson, 2010; Hektner, 1995).

Generally, the transition from rural education to university life has been a subject of extensive study. Research highlights the transformative potential of higher education for rural students, offering them new opportunities and broadening their horizons. The literature suggests that while the benefits of higher education are substantial, rural students often face a complex transition due to differences in academic culture and the availability of resources compared to their urban counterparts (Ali et al., 2021; Xiulan, 2015). This transition period is critical and can significantly influence their overall university experience (Byun et al., 2012).

Looking at the developing world, the transition experiences of rural students to higher education often reflect broader socio-economic and cultural contexts. These students frequently encounter a stark

contrast between their rural backgrounds and the urban university environment. The literature indicates that rural students benefit from higher education through improved employment prospects and social mobility, but their transition is marked by significant adjustments to new academic expectations and social settings (Masaiti, 2020; Sabri, 2019; Tinto, 1993). The university experience for rural students in developing countries is thus a mix of challenges and opportunities, with the potential for substantial personal and professional growth.

In Afghanistan, the transition experiences of rural students to higher education are particularly noteworthy due to the unique socio-political and economic conditions. Studies emphasize that higher education offers Afghan rural students a vital opportunity to break the cycle of poverty and contribute to the development of their communities. However, the transition to university life involves navigating a vastly different academic and social environment (Muradi et al., 2018). Despite these challenges, higher education remains a crucial avenue for rural students in Afghanistan to achieve personal and professional development.

The transition from rural education to higher education is a multifaceted experience that varies across different contexts. While this theme has explored the general transition experiences of rural students globally, in developing countries, and specifically in Afghanistan, it is important to delve deeper into the specific challenges they face. The next theme will provide a comprehensive review of these challenges, including academic, cultural, financial, and more, offering insights into how they impact the university transition experiences of rural students and what rural students do to overcome these challenges.

2.4 Challenges Faced by Rural Students within Universities

Rural students face a unique set of challenges in the university context, often rooted in their socioeconomic backgrounds, geographic isolation, and cultural differences. By addressing these

challenges, universities can empower rural students to succeed in higher education, which help them contribute to their communities and drive national growth. Several studies have explored the challenges faced by rural students in global and developing contexts (Ahmed et al., 2021; Ali et al., 2021; Ontiveros, 2020; Sabri, 2019). These studies found that rural students face a range of challenges, including those listed below, and if these challenges are addressed by universities, it would have a profound impact on the rural students' academic success and their ability to transition into the workforce effectively.

2.4.1 Academic Challenges

Rural students often enter university with lower academic preparation than their urban counterparts due to factors such as limited access to quality secondary education, limited teaching-learning resources and a lack of exposure to advanced coursework. These can lead to difficulties in keeping up with the demands of university-level work and can contribute to lower graduation rates for rural students (Sabri, 2019). For instance, in Afghanistan, rural schools often lack qualified teachers and resources, leading to significant gaps in foundational knowledge. Guzmán et al. (2021, September) found that rural students were more likely to drop out of university than urban students were and were less likely to be employed after graduation. This trend is particularly concerning in developing countries, where education is a critical pathway for them to get them out of poverty.

2.4.2 Financial Challenges

Many rural students come from low-income families and face significant financial constraints in attending university. These financial challenges affect their ability to afford tuition, housing, and other necessary expenses, leading to stress, anxiety, and even dropping out of university (Guzmán Rincón et al., 2021; Ontiveros, 2020). In the Afghan context, where rural economies are predominantly agrarian and incomes are often unstable, these financial pressures are exacerbated. Sabri (2019)

explained that rural students were more likely to experience financial difficulties than urban students were and were more likely to report feeling isolated and unsupported. Scholarships and financial aid are crucial for these students, yet often remain insufficient or inaccessible.

2.4.3 Social and Cultural Challenges

Rural students experience social and cultural isolation in the university environment, as they are unfamiliar with urban life and do not have a strong support network of peers and mentors. This can lead to feelings of loneliness, alienation, and a sense of not belonging (Ahmed et al., 2021). In Afghanistan, cultural differences between rural and urban areas can be stark, with rural students potentially facing discrimination or prejudice. Ahmed et al. (2021) and Lo (2022) conclude that rural students have lower levels of self-efficacy than urban students do and were more likely to report feeling anxious and stressed about their studies. This can be particularly true in societies with rigid social structures, where rural students may feel marginalized.

2.4.4 Geographic Challenges

Rural students often face long commutes or the necessity to relocate to attend university, adding to their financial burden and making it difficult to participate in extracurricular activities and campus life (Arooje & Burrige, 2021). In Afghanistan, the mountainous country and lack of reliable transportation infrastructure can significantly hinder students' ability to attend classes regularly. This geographic isolation can also mean limited access to academic support services, further disadvantaging rural students. Unless they do not move to the city and town centres, they might not have access to preparatory resources and classes.

2.4.5 Limited Access to Resources

Rural students have limited access to resources such as libraries, computers, and internet access both when they are in school in rural areas as well as when transitioning to university. Khan et al. (2020) and Sabri (2019) reveal that rural students were less likely to have access to such resources and often lacked the skills to use technology effectively due to inadequate resources and training in their schools in rural contexts. In Afghanistan, where rural schools lack basic facilities, this digital divide is particularly pronounced. Rural students were also less likely to have the support of family and friends when they were at university, as they come to a context that is very new to them and feel the lack of immediate supporters compared to the urban students.

2.4.6 Language Barriers

Many rural students come from areas where local languages which are different from national languages are the primary means of communication, and they struggle to learn and use national languages such as English, which is the language of instruction at most universities. According to Ahmed et al. (2021), rural students were more likely to struggle with the language of instruction. This issue is especially prevalent in Afghanistan, where students from rural areas primarily speak Pashto or Dari and find it challenging to transition to English-medium instruction. They were also more likely to have difficulty adjusting to the university culture, which can be dominated by urban norms and expectations.

For rural students to succeed academically and generally, it is imperative that the issues they face are addressed. To assist these students in overcoming obstacles related to their education, finances, social lives, cultures, geography, resources, and language, universities need to put in place focused interventions and support networks. Through this action, universities can effectively contribute to closing the achievement gap and ensuring that all students, regardless of their backgrounds, have equal

access to higher education.

After identifying the difficulties, it is critical to acknowledge the opportunities which colleges and universities can provide for rural students in order to assist them in overcoming these obstacles and succeeding in postsecondary education; these will be discussed in the theme that follows.

2.5 Opportunities Offered by Universities for Rural Students

The transition from rural villages to university life is usually a challenging one for students from rural backgrounds (Perna, 2005). Factors like limited exposure to diverse social settings and academic resources can contribute to this initial difficulty. However, research highlights the significant benefits that rural students can gain from attending university, making it a worthwhile endeavour (Sabri, 2019). These benefits encompass academic and social opportunities, improved career prospects, and personal growth and development.

2.5.1 Academic and Career Opportunities

Universities offer a wider range of academic programs compared to rural high schools. This allows rural students to explore various fields of study, such as engineering, medicine, law, and business, which is not readily available in their hometowns (Perna, 2005). This exposure opens doors to successful careers in a variety of sectors, something that is limited in rural areas with fewer industry options. A study by Perna (2005) supports this notion, suggesting that universities equip students with the necessary knowledge and skills to thrive in these diverse career paths.

Beyond specific disciplines, universities cultivate essential skills for navigating the complexities of the modern workforce. The rigorous academic environment fosters critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication skills, all of which are highly sought-after by employers (Perna, 2005). This aligns with the findings of Carnevale et al. (2015) who emphasizes the increasing demand for graduates with strong critical thinking and problem-solving abilities in the job market.

2.5.2 Personal Growth and Social Engagement

The university experience offers more than just academic development. It serves as a platform for significant personal growth and social engagement for rural students (Van Hees et al., 2015). Researches by Lyngdoh Nonglait & Myrthong (2021) and Akçay et al. (2024) suggest that university life exposes students to a wider range of cultures, perspectives, and ideas. This exposure fosters tolerance, understanding, and a sense of global citizenship, broadening their worldview and preparing them to interact effectively in an increasingly interconnected society.

Universities also provide numerous opportunities for social engagement beyond the classroom. Extracurricular activities, such as sports, clubs, debates, volunteer organizations and associations, allow students to connect with peers who share similar interests. Participation in these activities enhances leadership, teamwork, and communication skills, all of which are valuable assets for both personal and professional success (Van Hees et al., 2015).

Overall, the university context offers a multitude of opportunities for rural students to grow academically, socially, and personally. While the initial adjustment may be challenging, the vast benefits of attending university make it a transformative experience for students from rural backgrounds. Universities equip these rural students with the knowledge, skills, and experiences necessary to succeed in their chosen careers and contribute meaningfully to society, which the focus of the next theme is to review the overall impact of university experience on Afghan rural students' lives and other similar contexts based on the available literature.

2.6 Impact of Higher Education on Rural Afghan Students

Higher education has a profound impact on rural Afghan students, significantly shaping their futures and contributing to the socio-economic development of their communities. For many rural students, attending university in urban centres offers opportunities for academic and personal growth that were

previously inaccessible. According to Ahmed et al. (2021), the exposure to diverse academic environments and resources available in urban universities enhance the educational experience and open up new avenues for career advancement. This shift is not merely academic but also brings about critical socio-cultural transformations, enabling students to bridge rural-urban divides and fostering a greater sense of national cohesion.

The benefits of higher education extend beyond individual advancement; they catalyse community development. As Arooje and Burrige (2022) highlighted, educated individuals often return to their rural hometowns equipped with knowledge and skills which can drive local development initiatives. These graduates become pivotal in addressing local challenges, such as improving agricultural practices, enhancing healthcare delivery, and promoting education within their communities. Furthermore, Rasmussen and Kelly (2016) emphasized that higher education empowers rural students to become change agents, contributing to socio-economic stability and fostering resilience in their communities amidst ongoing challenges.

Higher education in Afghanistan has undergone significant transformations in recent decades, marked by periods of both progress and setbacks (Easar et al., 2023; Ghulam & Naqawi, 2022). Since the establishment of the transitional government in Afghanistan 2001 by the support of its international allies particularly the United States of America, there has been a renewed focus on rebuilding the higher education system, with international support playing a crucial role in expanding access and improving quality (Easar et al., 2023). The number of universities increased, female enrolment rates rose, and new programs and disciplines were introduced (Ghulam & Naqawi, 2022; Samady, 2013). The recent political chaos in Afghanistan as a result of the collapse of Afghanistan's Islamic republic and taking power by the Taliban has further cast uncertainty over the future of higher education, raising concerns about countries ability to fulfil its critical role in national development through education as

many international supporters and donors suspended their programs and left the country (Easar et al., 2023).

However, higher education has been shown to have a significant impact on the lives of rural students in Afghanistan (World Bank, 2013). This impact can be seen in several areas, including economic, social, personal development, community engagement and rural development (Doyle, 2014; Parsons, 2022; Thompson, 2014).

2.6.1 Economic Benefits

Rural students who pursue higher education are more likely to find employment and earn higher wages than those who do not (Doyle, 2014). A study by Roehrs (2015) found that the average monthly income of a university graduate in Afghanistan is “13500 Afghani (equal to 225 USD), compared to 6500 Afghani (equal to 110 USD) for someone with no education” (p. 5-7). Similarly, the findings of another research on the socioeconomic impact of education on university graduates by Rasouli (2023) revealed that the monthly income of a university graduate is 200 USD dollars compared to 150 USD dollars with no graduate or someone who recently graduated from university. Moreover, higher education also expands employment opportunities for rural students, opening doors to a wider range of professions in industries (Schollie et al., 2017; Thompson, 2014). With a higher level of education, rural individuals are better positioned to secure jobs in the formal sector, which offers greater stability, higher wages, and better working conditions compared to informal employment (Guerrero, 2021). This, in turn, contributes to economic diversification and reduces reliance on traditional agricultural livelihoods.

2.6.2 Social Advantages

Higher education can also help to reduce poverty and inequality in rural Afghanistan (MoEA, 2016). A study by the World Bank found that 35.8% of the Afghan population live in poverty and they are

mainly in rural areas (The World Bank, 2013). Similarly, this issue is also highlighted in the Ministry of Education of Afghanistan's education strategic plan that states 36% of people living below the poverty line and the majority of them are in rural areas (MoEA, 2016). These researches link poverty with poor education and emphasize that quality education helps reduce poverty and improve families' social statuses. Higher education besides contribute to improve social cohesion and reduce conflict (Sahar & Kaunert, 2020). A study by Mashriqi (2016) found that rural communities with higher levels of education are less likely to experience violence (Mashriqi, 2016).

2.6.3 Rural Students' Personal Development

Higher education have a noteworthy impact on the personal development of rural students. Students who attend university are more likely to develop critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication skills (Robiollle-Moul, 2016). They are also more likely to be confident and self-motivated. These skills and qualities can help rural students to achieve their personal and professional goals (Guerrero, 2021). Higher education also plays a vital role in promoting social mobility and reducing poverty in rural communities (Esmaeily et al., 2010; Hayward, 2008). Mashriqi (2016) says that higher education among rural women can lead to increased household income, improved health outcomes for children, and greater participation in community decision-making.

2.6.4 Community Engagement and Rural Development

Higher education graduates play a vital role in the development of their rural communities (Dutta, 2021; Rahman & Hossain, 2006; Schollie et al., 2017; Thompson, 2014). Their knowledge, skills, and leadership contribute to improved agricultural practices, education, healthcare, and infrastructure. Rural graduates often return to their communities to establish businesses, provide essential services, and participate in local governance, driving economic growth and social progress (Dutta, 2021; Thompson, 2014). In addition, higher education has been recognized as a crucial factor in the

development of Afghanistan (World Bank, 2013). In the context of rural areas, attending university can provide students with a wealth of opportunities, including access to knowledge, skills, and resources that are not at hand in their home communities (Rasmussen & Kelly, 2016). For instance, university education can equip rural students with the necessary expertise to contribute to the economic growth and development of their communities (Samady, 2001, December). Furthermore, universities can provide rural students with access to resources and support that they may not have access to in their home communities (Sabri, 2019).

2.7 Factors Supporting Students' Adjustment to Universities

Various studies have underlined the importance of different support networks in aiding rural students' adaptation to university life. These networks provide emotional support, academic guidance, and a sense of belonging, helping students navigate the unfamiliar academic and social landscape of the university (Masaiti, et al., 2020).

2.7.1 Social Support Networks

Social support networks are crucial for fostering a sense of belonging and easing the transition to university life for rural students. A study by Tinto (1993) emphasizes the importance of social integration for student persistence. Masaiti et al. (2020) further highlighted how these networks provide emotional support, academic guidance, and a sense of community. This is particularly important for rural students who may be experiencing feelings of isolation due to being away from familiar surroundings. Social support can come from family, peers, mentors, faculty, or even online communities of students from similar backgrounds (Lashari, Kaur & Awang-Hashim, 2018; Skahill, 2002). Universities can foster these connections by creating mentorship programs, peer tutoring initiatives, or cultural clubs that cater to rural students' needs.

2.7.2 Financial Support

Financial constraints pose a substantial barrier for rural students. Goldman (2019) points out the importance of scholarships, grants, and financial aid in mitigating these concerns. Beyond tuition, rural students often face additional costs for housing, food, and transportation. Programs that addressing these living expenses can considerably reduce stress and allow these students to focus on their studies. Furthermore, research by Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) suggests that participation in extracurricular activities enhances students' learning and development. Financial aid that allows for such participation can contribute to a well-rounded university experiences for rural students.

2.7.3 Academic Support Services

Universities can provide a safety net for rural students by offering academic support services like tutoring, counselling, and preparatory courses. These services, as highlighted by Goldman (2019), bridge the academic gap between rural high schools and universities. Tutoring can address specific learning difficulties, while counselling can provide guidance on study skills, time management, and navigating the university system. Additionally, language programs can equip rural students with the necessary communication skills to excel in their studies (Baklashova & Kazakov, 2016).

These support structures not only improve academic performance but also boost confidence and a sense of belonging within the university environment. Ultimately, this can lead to a wider range of career opportunities for graduates from rural backgrounds, fostering social mobility and contributing to the development of their communities.

2.8 Conceptual Framework

After reviewing different literature about rural students transition from villages to university contexts, its challenges and benefits for their future, it is important to develop a conceptual framework for my study to keep a consistent relationship between my learning from literature, findings of my research

from the field to find responses to educational problem and questions to contribute consistently to the research topic (Leshem and Trafford, 2007). The conceptual framework enabled the researcher to make connections between the international, developing countries and national contexts' definitions of rural students' transition from rural education to higher education by understanding deeply the research participants' views, discussing the literature and my experiences from the field that the published report then can be used as a reliable source for readers and research body.

Thus, development of conceptual framework helped me to explore consistently the transition of rural students from their villages to university in urban contexts. Firstly, during and after transitioning from rural villages to university life, rural students faced numerous challenges such as academically, culturally, economically and beyond (Ali et al., 2021; Goldman, 2019; Masaiti, et al., 2020; Xiulan, 2015) because they come from localities where they had less opportunities than urban areas. Secondly, despite the difficulties of adjusting to university environment and daily challenges, there are many opportunities they benefited including academic knowledge and skills, social and cultural interactions, extra-curricular activities, other soft and practical knowledge and skills provided by their university as well as from their daily encounters with peers and classmates (Goldman, 2019; Lyngdoh Nonglait & Myrthong, 2021; Perna, 2005). Moreover, overcoming the challenges by rural students and providing enough support systems by the universities for rural students, ultimately would have good impact on rural students' future long run progresses. These lead rural graduates to improved socioeconomic mobility, personal and professional growth, more employment opportunities and overall rural development and improvement (Dutta, 2021; Esmaily et al., 2010; Hayward, 2008; Schollie et al., 2017; Thompson, 2014). Finally, having understood the experiences, challenges, opportunities and impact of university periods on rural students, there are different factors and ways which facilitate the adjustment of rural students to university settings (Masaiti, et al., 2020). Afghan universities and other stakeholders can facilitate the smooth and long-term adjustment processes of rural students from their villages to universities through provision of assistance on social, financial and academic endeavours,

which these elements have been considered the most important ones based on findings from researches done in different contexts (Baklashova & Kazakov, 2016; Goldman, 2019; Tinto, 1993).

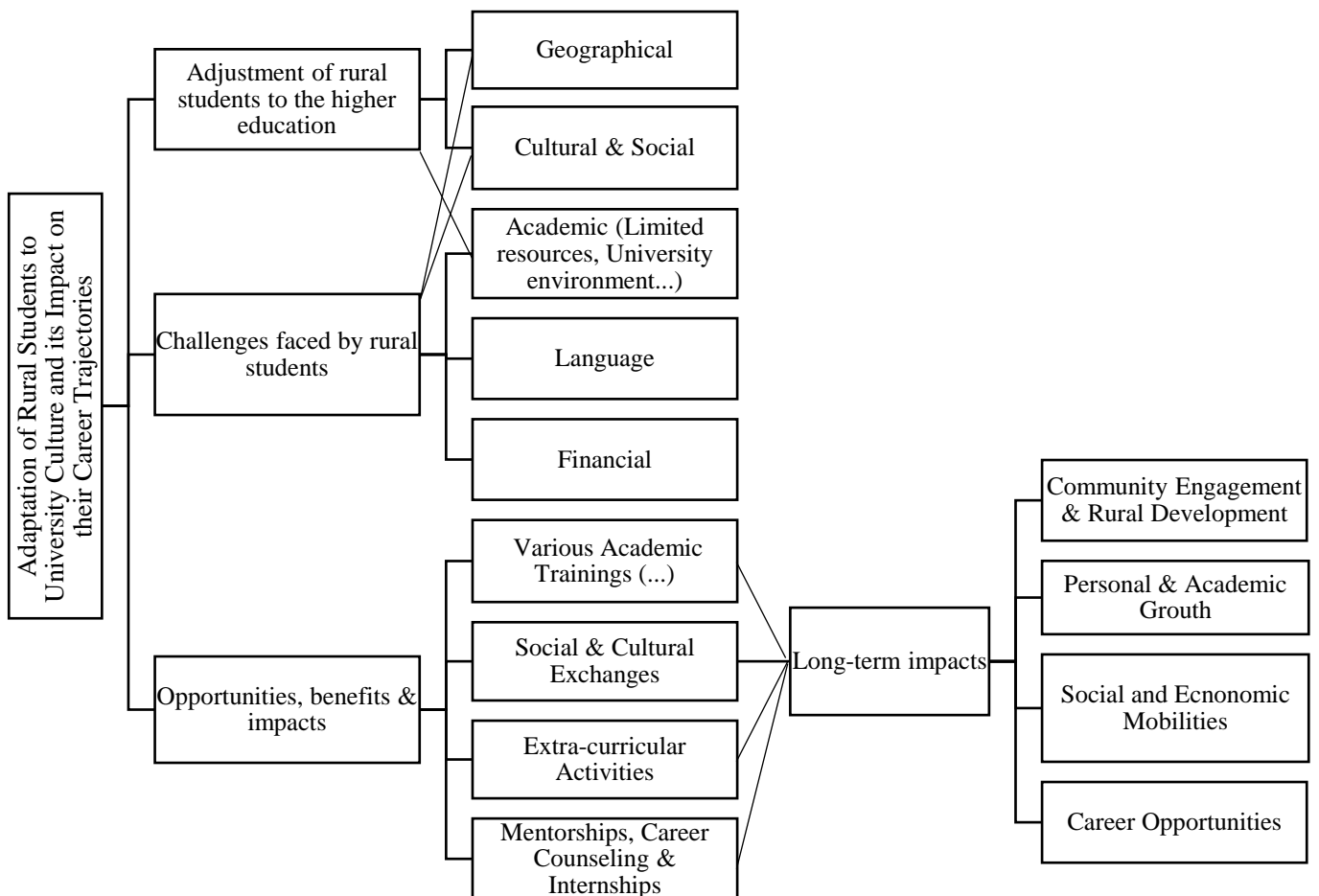


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Study on From Villages to Lecture Halls: Exploring Adaptation of Rural Afghan Students to University Culture and its Impact on their Career Trajectories.

Chapter 3

Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a detailed description of the methodology of this study, comprising various sections such as research approach, participants, sampling procedures, data collection methods, data analysis, the role of the researcher, ethical issues and concerns, credibility and rigour and the limitations of the study. It focuses on accounts by the Afghan rural students with exploration on their perceptions, thoughts, experiences and the challenges they faced during their transition into their university and city life. In this section, a comprehensive methodological approach is illustrated, concentrating on the value of a qualitative study design and elaborating the most appropriate methods to collect and analyse data.

3.2 Research Approach

In this study, the researcher applied a qualitative research approach to deeply study the lived experiences of Afghan rural students in university contexts, challenges they encountered and how their experiences at university shaped their personal and professional life further (Patton, 2002). Rural students represent a vast number of students in Afghanistan and they usually face countless challenges yet it is hard to find qualitative researches within this context to understand the real situation of these students to know how they cope with those challenges. Bogdan and Biklen (1992) believe that to understand the real problems and experiences of someone, it is important to study their lives within the context they are experiencing their realities and they provide real-life meaning of their situation.

3.3 Research Site

This study was conducted in 11 public and private universities located in seven different cities of Afghanistan where mainly majority of students of these universities are rural students from different

rural areas. Data was collected from current male students who are were presently studying at these universities during data collection and male and female recent graduated rural students from these universities as well as university professors who had extensive experiences of working with rural students. The universities where data was collected are: 1) Badakhshan University (Public) located in the centre of Badakhshan province, 2) Jowzjan (Jawzjan) University (Public) located in the centre of Jawzjan province, 3) Mawlana Jalaluddin Mohammad Balkhi (MJMB) University (Private) located in the centre of Balkh province, 4) Farah University (Public) located in central Farah province, 5) Takhar University (Public) located in the centre of Takhar province, 6) Kabul University (Public) located in Kabul city, 7) Albiruni University (Public) located in Kapisa province, 8) Salam University (Private) located in Kabul city 9) Gawharshad University (Private) located in Kabul city, 10) Ruyan University (Private) also in Kabul city and 11) Dunya University (Private) located in Kabul capital of Afghanistan. A summary of the research field plan is displayed in the following table with more information regarding the implementation of the research plan.

The research field plan for conducting the research in the field.

Participants								
No.	Activity	Date	Site	Strategy/Methods			Remarks	
		11.01.202	MJMB	Zoom	Recording	&	Writing	&
1	Interview #1	4	University	Note-taking			Transcription	
		12.01.202	Farah	Tape	Recording	and	Writing	&
2	Interview #2	4	University	Note-taking			Transcription	
		12.01.202	Takhar	Tape	Recording	and	Writing	&
3	Interview #3	4	University	Note-taking			Transcription	

		13.01.202	Gawharshad	Tape Recording and Writing &
4	Interview #4	4	University	Note-taking Transcription
		13.01.202	Salam	Tape Recording and Writing &
5	Interview #5	4	University	Note-taking Transcription
		14.01.202	Jawzjan	Tape Recording and Writing&
6	Interview #6	4	University	Note-taking Transcription
		15.01.202	Badakhshan	Tape Recording and Writing &
7	Interview #7	4	University	Note-taking Transcription
		16.01.202	Kabul	Tape Recording and Writing &
8	Interview #8	4	University	Note-taking Transcription
		16.01.202	Badakhshan	Tape Recording and Writing &
9	Interview #9	4	University	Note-taking Transcription
		17.01.202	Badakhshan	Tape Recording and Writing &
10	Interview #10	4	University	Note-taking Transcription
		18.01.202	Ruyan	Tape Recording and Writing &
11	Interview #11	4	University	Note-taking Transcription
		18.01.202	Albiruni	Tape Recording and Writing&
12	Interview #12	4	University	Note-taking Transcription
		15.01.202	Dunya	Tape Recording and Writing &
13	Interview #13	4	University	Note-taking Transcription
		17.01.202	Badakhshan	Tape Recording and Writing
14	Interview #14	4	University	Note-taking Transcription
		18.01.202	Badakhshan	Tape Recording and Writing
15	Interview #15	4	University	Note-taking Transcription

		Personal			
	Written Story	18.01.202	Albiruni		
16	#1	4	University	Personal Written Story	
		Personal			
	Written Story	18.01.202	Jawzjan		
17	#2	4	University	Personal Written Story	
		Personal			
	Written Story	18.01.202	Takhar		
18	#3	4	University	Personal Written Story	

Table 1: The research field plan for conducting the research

3.4 Research Participants

Participants in this research were mainly rural Afghan students who are either currently studying in public and private universities in Afghanistan, recently graduated from these universities, or are currently in the labour market. Moreover, some university professors both from public and private universities were also selected to study their experiences of being familiar with experiences of rural students. In this research, there were a total of 15 research participants which 12 of them were students and 3 of them were university professors. Out of the 12 students 6 of them were current students studying in public and private universities which all of them came from different rural areas and had unique experiences and challenges during their transition and university experiences. These students were studying in different fields of study and are in different academic years and terms but they mostly had common experiences and challenges because of belongingness to rural contexts despite being from various location. There were six graduated rural students in this study who recently graduated from universities of Afghanistan which most of these graduates are currently employed, and some of them created their own incomes. These graduates provided comprehensive data about their experiences as well as the impact of university in their career and life. Moreover, for the triangulation of the data and

cross checking the responses of rural students, 3 university professors who had up to ten years of experiences of working with rural students were also selected and they participated in this study. This helped the researcher to understand the universities' adjustment strategies and support systems, which helped rural students to succeed in their studies despite limitations and ensured that university impacted rural students' career development and improved their quality of life.

In addition, since majority of participants were male but three female participants graduated from university before 2021 were also included in the study as females have more unique and personal experiences and this contributed to study to understand the issue from different participants points of view and experiences. The reason for less female participants was that after August 2021 universities and work banned for girls and women by the Taliban government and it was hard to find more female participants as they were under tight restrictions by the current regime in Afghanistan. For each university and participant, I used pseudonyms to protect their identity.

The table below shows the details of research participants, site using their pseudonyms.

No	Participants (Pseudonym)	Gender	Identification	Field of Study	University (Pseudonym)	Type of University
	Marhamat		Graduate		MJMB	
1	Taqizada	Male	Student Current	Dari Literature English	University	Private
2	Noor Mohammad	Male	Student Graduate	Literature	Farah University Takhar	Public
3	Ulfatmah Baheej	Female	Student	Dari Literature	University	Public

			Graduate		Gawharshad	
4	Janbek Sharifi	Male	Student	BBA	University	Private
			Current	Islamic Law		
5	Qais Ahmadi	Male	Student	(Sharia)	Salam University	Private
			Current	English	Jawzjan	
6	Milad Parwa	Male	Student	Literature	University	Public
			Graduate		Badakhshan	
7	Mukhtar Salimi	Male	Student	Chemistry	University	Public
	Imam Nazar		Current			
8	Khursani	Male	Student	Psychology	Kabul University	Public
			Current		Badakhshan	
9	Abdul Jabar	Male	Student	History	University	Public
	Sayed Hussain		Current		Badakhshan	
10	Hussaini	Male	Student	Economics	University	Public
			Graduate	Law & Political	Ruyan	
11	Ziagul Nazari	Female	Student	Sciences	University	Private
	Manzalmah		Graduate		Albiruni	
12	Nusrat	Female	Student	Journalism	University	Public
	Sayed Ahmad			Law & Political	Dunya	
13	Sadat	Male	Professor	Sciences	University	Private
					Badakhshan	
14	Jawed Sharifi	Male	Professor	Agriculture	University	Public
	Ahmad Fazayil				Badakhshan	
15	Fazlumand	Male	Professor	Sociology	University	Public

Table 2: The details of research participants and site with their pseudonyms.

3.5 Sampling Procedure

In this study, I employed purposive sampling (Creswell, 2015) for choosing the location and participants due to the selective and non-probable characteristics of purposive sampling, which enabled me to choose participants based on the objective of the study (Rai & Thapa, 2015). Moreover, for this research, homogenous sampling was also applied in the selection of rural students from different locations and universities, which had similar characteristics and experiences (Shaheen & Pradhan, 2019). Since there was limited research on this topic in the context of Afghanistan, thus I utilised expert sampling to find in-depth data as advocated by Rai and Thapa (2015). As a result, all participants of this study were selected from rural villages which they had lived experiences relating to the research topic and on the other hand university professors also provided some expert insights in the broader impact of transition and adjustment on rural students during their transition and entire university life.

3.6 Research Methods

The data was collected through semi-structured interviews and personal written stories written by participants and submitted to the researcher. Before the actual research, I conducted pilot interviews with some of my research participants to revise my interview questions and familiarize participants with the dynamics of interviews as most of these students had not participated in such official research before. Both research tools; interviews and written stories helped to collect saturated data from current male students, male-female graduates, and university professors. During the semi-structured interviews, the researcher asked follow-up questions to dig deep the issues but personal written stories from some of the participants helped to deeply understand rural students' experiences and feelings they had during their transition to university and beyond transition because it enabled them to think and write their experiences and feelings at their own pace and time. Using both research tools, the researcher got an interpretative understanding of Afghan rural students' transition and adaptation experiences to university, the outstanding challenges they faced and the benefits that university brought to their professional and personal lives (Adhabi & Anozie, 2017; Anyan, 2013).

3.6.1 Interview

Interview is the common tool researchers use to understand the experiences of participants and using semi-structured interview, the researcher has the flexibility and possibility to ask more probing and follow-up questions to get in-depth insights about the phenomenon (Adhabi & Anozie, 2017). The design of interview main and follow up questions in this study were done and articulated in sequential and chronological manner that helped the participants to narrate their stories from their transition and adjustments to university and from challenges they experienced to the impact of university on their careers routes. The first three questions of interview focused on rural students' personal experiences they faced while moving from their remote villages to enter university and the importance of support systems in their transition, which for these rural students mostly were their own self-strategies and efforts to adapt to the university culture. The next three questions were asked particularly about outstanding challenges and difficulties rural students faced during their adaptation and adjustments to university context and the coping mechanisms they used to overcome those difficulties. They shared numerous challenges they faced but applied various techniques to combat the challenges. The last 3 to 4 questions of this research tool gathered data about university support systems and students' personal plans and actions for their future career development and how the university impacted their life overall. Moreover, the last questions also enabled them to recommend and suggest university stakeholders better ways to support rural students based on their personal experiences and learning. All 15 interviews helped the researcher to get an in-depth understanding of rural students' transition and adaptation to the university context, the challenges they encountered and the impact of the university on their future careers (Adhabi & Anozie, 2017; Anyan, 2013).

The interviews were conducted virtually through Zoom and WhatsApp applications due to travel limitations to the context of Afghanistan. All interviews were recorded using tape recorder with the written permission of participants, each interview took between 50 to 70 minutes to enable the

participants to express their experiences and feelings as well as the researcher to gather enough data to meet the objectives of the study and find responses to the research main questions.

3.6.2 Personal Written Stories

Hayman et al. (2012) notes, “Story-sharing is a data collection method that enhances the depth and amount of data collected in qualitative research (p.285)”. Thus, 4 out of 15 existing participants were requested to write their personal written stories about their experiences of transition to university, what circumstances they faced and how university experiences affected or transformed their lives further. However, only three participants wrote and submitted their personal written stories which added further details and data to the research besides their interviews. The reason for using this research method was the importance of personal experiences and feelings about the educational problem as during the interview, participants might not had enough time and or confidence to share their sensitive feelings but in their own time and pace, they did. Similarly, Pretorius (2023) in her blog at Basil Cahusac de Caux's website said, “I now believe that stories matter and that individual experiences should be valued. I also now advocate for researchers to allow individuals to tell their own stories, as they are the experts in their own experiences”. As a result, the personal written stories by participants enabled the researcher to know the unique and sensitive stories, which Afghan rural students faced during transition to university and daily life at university environment. The purpose of both the interviews and written stories was to gather perceptions of students, graduates, and professors about the transition and adjustment of rural students to university contexts and how it helped them in their career development.

This table details out the methodology matrix used in this research.

No.	Research Questions	Data source	Sampling Technique	Research tools	Nature of data
-----	--------------------	-------------	--------------------	----------------	----------------

1	RQ 1: How do rural Afghan students experience their adjustment and integration into university life?	Primary	Purposive, homogeneous and expert groups	Semi-structured interviews and written stories	Qualitative
2	RQ 2: What specific challenges do rural Afghan students encounter during their transition, and how do they cope with these challenges?	Primary	Purposive, homogeneous and expert groups	Semi-structured interviews and written stories	Qualitative
3	RQ 3: How do the university support system and the adaptation mechanisms employed by rural students impact their future career paths?	Primary	Purposive, homogeneous and expert groups	Semi-structured interviews and written stories	Qualitative

Table 3: Research methodology matrix used in this study.

3.7 Data Analysis Process

The researcher employed thematic analysis protocols to analyse the collected data through interviews and personal written stories (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Braun and Clarke, 2006; Creswell, 2015; Lester et al., 2020). Thematic analysis was chosen for its flexibility and depth, allowing iterative and sequential patterns to thoroughly examine participants' experiences. Lester et al. (2020, p. 98) state, "We thus view thematic analysis as a useful starting point for learning and doing rigorous qualitative analyses". The researcher followed the six steps of thematic analysis outlined by Attride-Stirling (2001), Braun

and Clarke (2006), Creswell (2015), and Lester et al. (2020), which encompass the entire data analysis process from data preparation to reporting. The first step, termed collecting and preparing data for analysis by Creswell (2015) and Lester et al. (2020). It was in this initial step that individual interviews were conducted using Zoom and WhatsApp in the participants' native language, Dari. Additionally, three personally written stories were also collected to add more detailed data to the research. The 15-recorded interviews then were transcribed verbatim, resulting in over 80 pages of text. Before translating the data, the transcribed interview forms were shared with research participants for member checking and revising any data they wanted which then they approved the final transcription of the interview forms without changing any data. Upon approval of the transcribed data by the participants, the researcher then translated the transcribed interviews and written stories from Dari language into English to be ready for reading and data analysis. In the second step, the researcher spent enough time to read all translated and original versions of the interviews and stories to familiarize with the data and gain a deeper understanding of participants' responses (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After gaining an overview and meaning of the collected data, I started initial coding manually using Microsoft Word tabular formats, with columns for each interview and coded responses separately. Codes were refined and merged where necessary because the amount of data were much and the responses had relevancy between participants in some areas. Inspired by Kriukow (2024) on his YouTube channel, "Research with Dr. Kriukow", the initial codes were highlighted in three colours based on their relevancy to the research questions. The third step involved categorizing the codes to form themes and subthemes. Vaismoradi et al. (2016) distinguish the difference between explicit categories and implicit themes. Learning from this scholarly work helped me to apply this method in my analysis because there were many initial codes emerged from data, which needed to be categorised based on relevancy and similarities of participants' responses. Consequently, the researcher categorized initial codes into sub themes and then created themes relating to rural students' early experiences at university, challenges faced, mechanisms they used for overcoming challenges, and the impact of university life on students.

Subthemes were created by merging and cross checking the codes and ordering them into relevant categories, which resulted in formation, defining and naming the main themes according to refined codes and participants' responses (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Creswell, 2015; Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the fourth step, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), themes were revised and reviewed to make them final in order to be used in the report writing. The researcher refined the themes through constant back and forth reference to the original data, eventually finalized four main themes with related subthemes. This ensured that the created themes accurately represented participants' voices and experiences and were interpretive. In the fifth step, the themes were defined and named for the final report and write-up (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The final themes were comprehensive, reflecting participants' responses and aligned with the research questions. Vaismoradi et al. (2016) asserted that a well-defined theme fits well into the whole data set concerning the research questions. The four themes emerged from the extensive data, illustrating the rural students' adjustment experiences, the university's impact on their lives, the challenges encountered during transition to university, and the strategies they used to overcome these challenges. The final stage involved writing the final report using the finalized themes and subthemes, consistent with the final data analysis stage of Braun and Clarke (2006). The findings were described and interpreted with direct reference to participants' responses, as emphasised by Attride-Stirling (2001) and Creswell (2015). Further revisions ensured the validity and coherency of the themes and participants' responses. To ensure validity and transparency, the findings and drafts were shared with participants and faculty for peer review and member checking. This step ensured the trustworthiness and rigor of the research, meeting the study's purpose and objectives (Creswell, 2015; Lester et al., 2020). The data was validated with participants and relevant faculty to incorporate their feedback or revised the data as it is important to produce a qualitative research which through this process the researcher ensures that the findings of this research is only come from participants' perspectives and there is not any biases and interpretation from the researcher.

The following figures represents the data analysis techniques used by the researcher from coding to theme development manually.

Data analysis technique: color coding and codes extraction for themes and subthemes development

RQ1: How do rural Afghan students experience their adjustment and integration into university life? **Color code - yellow**

Interviews 1 to 6

Interview 1 - XX,XX	Interview 2 - XX,XX	Interview 3 - XX,XX	Interview 4 - XX,XX	Interview 5 - XX,XX	Interview 6 - XX,XX
I was a student and my free time was school free time, and before that we did not have enough information about university and these things, and free time and going to university was a completely new thing for us and other residents of the village. (unfamiliarity with university context)	Most of the parents are illiterate so if we compare it with urban life or urban education at universities, people who live in the cities are supportive and they try all their best for their children to get adapted to new situations of learning. (Importance of educated parents) Actually public universities in Afghanistan do not have any plan to facilitate the rural students to get adapted to the new environment, but the	When you enter the university, you see that it is a completely academic environment and it is a challenge for you in the beginning or a life where you think that you have just been here and you have to build with this life and it is very difficult and challenging for you in the beginning. (Consequence of not having prior experience) There was a free internet club, we went to the internet club and searched	My family used to punish me during school. We have to study, but the difference in the university period was that I tried to study by myself and adapted myself to the environment, people and new culture. (Self autonomy and adaptation) We have to adapt to the environment, we have to try ourselves, but	Everything here is different, it is a good and academic classroom environment. In the villages, there are less experienced teachers with low education level and in the city, and there are many disappointed and experienced teachers. (Professionalism of university teachers) Because I am studying in a private university and most of my fellow classmates are from distant areas like Herat, Kandahar, universities do not have any special support	When we went to the city or to the university, when we really experienced a different environment where different people and through the education, people can spend their day and have a good life. (Valuing education for quality of life) We were studying a course here, the professors we saw were at the master's level, and the course they taught us in the right way and in a good way, and they could guide us to the future to be prepared for life.

RQ3: How do the university support system and the adaptation mechanisms employed by rural students impact their future career paths? **Color code - blue**

Interviews 1 to 6

Interview 1 - XX,XX	Interview 2 - XX,XX	Interview 3 - XX,XX	Interview 4 - XX,XX	Interview 5 - XX,XX	Interview 6 - XX,XX
We participated in a teaching methodology course and in the program, we observed the teaching style of schoolteachers and we might demonstrate practical classes as well. Also, experienced and professional teachers gave feedback on our	Most of our urban classmates have part-time jobs and they are busy with shopping and other things. (Getting work experience) I was interested in education field so I selected that field and I was admitted on that field in one of universities because of my future career, I selected English	The only thing that the university helped us was that it created an internet club inside the university campus for students who did not know how to go outside the city and solve their problems. (Learned soft skills) Prepare their own chapters and seminars.	I think only those who entered the university, for example, who had excellent grades from the school period, were included in the city and solve their problems. (Learned soft skills) Prepare their own chapters and seminars.	They give us a lot of research assignments, for example, they give us a topic and tell us to research this topic, and this is so that we can familiarize ourselves with various external sources and books. And they give us a topic and we come after the research and present it in the class, and it is usually because of jobs and employment. (Important)	When we were in the university presidency, a lot of programs were provided from the university for students, for example, there were internships and educational programs. I was in charge of controlling a program called expression skills program in which we did a lot of activities. They gave us shares to do the same way we live in a city, which we got a lot of experience.

Extracted codes from responses related to RQ2

Interview 1	Interview 2	Interview 3	Interview 4	Interview 5	Interview 6
Contextual difficulty/challenge	Low language skills	Isolation	Unfamiliarity with academic environment	Lacked of orientation and adaptive activities	Self confidence and isolation
Bias and discrimination	Language barrier	Efforts to adapt to urban environment	Fail to adapt the new environment	Efforts and hard work	Smart educational decision making
Resistant to challenges	Absenteeism consequences	Personal difficulties for girls	Academic concerns	Struggles	Struggles to change habits
Academic challenges	Cultural shock and narrow-mindedness	Challenging habits	Importance of learning life skills	Struggling with university expenses	Strong family ties
Ways to combat problem	Effects of wrong teaching at school in university	Negative feeling	Respect diversity	Private university condition	Negative impact of low economy
Financial struggles during studies	Language and ethnic biases at university	Struggle with academic engagement	Inconvenient accommodations	Worry for special situations	Worries about modern educational tool

RQ2: What specific challenges do rural Afghan students encounter during their transition, and how do they cope with these challenges? **Color code - green**

Interviews 1 to 6

Interview 1 - XX,XX	Interview 2 - XX,XX	Interview 3 - XX,XX	Interview 4 - XX,XX	Interview 5 - XX,XX	Interview 6 - XX,XX
want to share personal story with you. When we lived in the room, I found expenses and all the basic needs of a student being that we had to pay for school with money, so I did not have money to pay there. I called my uncle who was in the city to help me for money because I could not talk	I faced lots of problems at university for example we had an English teacher during our school, he was pronounced words in a way that was completely different to what I saw at university. He taught us grammar in a way that structure was totally wrong, we understood it was prescribed for us but during the semester I faced lots of	being away from family and relatives brings a lot of mental and emotional effects to a person which can be very difficult until we get used to the environment of urban life. (Homeless) Sometimes when I was talking in the class, the teacher	The way of teaching that I might not be used to at university, still they organize and culture barriers in the environment. (unfamiliarity with academic requirements) From the last semester, they are	We are not given any kind of information in order to learn and get to know the city or the urban environment. And they should give us information about books, study materials and the environment of urban universities for a week. I missed of orientation and adaptation	The effects were that when I was the way of expression in class, that is, we did not have the courage to have a proper chat or discussion with the teacher to talk about our problems until we got used to it. I understood that we did not answer questions with the teacher and all the teacher about our problems, but in the village, this was not a life like, this was very

Extracted codes from responses related to RQ2

Interview 1	Interview 2	Interview 3	Interview 4	Interview 5	Interview 6
unfamiliarity with university context	Prejudice	Consequence of not having prior experience	self autonomy and adaptation	Professionalism of university teachers	Valuing education for quality of life
difference between rural and city students	Importance of educated parents	Valuing the basic facilities	goal-oriented	Lack of extra support	Satisfaction from qualified teachers
unfamiliarity with university context	lack of support & impact of context	Accepting changes/transformation	Engaging in university activities	Complaining about unethical actions	Autonomy in learning journey
Hard work and efforts	Learning and making friends		Mutual respect	Request for financial support	Valuing rural culture
Gradual progress	Lack of orientation learning through interactive		Special attraction and support	Dependency on parents/guardians	Role of academic preparation

Extracted codes from responses related to RQ3

Interview 1	Interview 2	Interview 3	Interview 4	Interview 5	Interview 6
Applied theory into practice	Getting work experience	Learned soft skills	Appreciating the high achievers	Positive environmental effect/Networking	Appreciating university practicum
Job satisfaction	Desired profession	Increased knowledge	Interpersonal skills	Efforts and hard work	Becoming responsible citizens
Education transformed lives	Ineffective practicum	Supported rural students	Empowerment additional sources	Important skills for career development	Empowering programs
Lack of job opportunities	Suggestion for university	Free medical treatment	Learning and Practice	Appreciating practicum	Positive takeaways from university
Universities' weaknesses	Limited job opportunities	Become independent learner	Independent learners and decision makers	Professional behaviors	Particular attention to rural students

Figure 2: Data analysis technique: color coding and codes extraction for themes and subthemes development

Data analysis technique: revised and finalized themes and subthemes emerged from codes

Finalized Themes and Subthemes after Coding Process



Themes	Sub-theme
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rural students' early encounters and adaptation approaches to university environment 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Transitioning from Village to University 2. Adjustment Approaches
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The impact of university on students' personal and career paths development 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Preparing Students for Societal Contributions 2. Enhancing Graduates' Employability through Skills Development 3. Gaining Real-World Experiences through Apprenticeship 4. Employment Opportunities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Challenges faced by rural students during their transition to university 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Academic Life Challenges 2. Biases and Discrimination 3. Economic and Financial Constraints 4. Social and Well-being Issues 5. Lack of Employment Opportunities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coping strategies and mechanisms to address the challenges 	No Sub subthemes



Figure 3: Data analysis technique: revised and finalized themes and subthemes emerged from codes

3.8 Role of the Researcher

From January 11 to 18, 2024, I conducted the interviews with 15 participants, which included Afghan rural students who were studying or studied in different public and private universities of Afghanistan and university professors. Moreover, by 18th January 2024, I also received the three requested written stories, which voluntarily were written by three of the interviewed participants to find more unique and personal experiences related to the purpose of the research. Despite the fact that, I had similar experiences to the research participants because I was also belong to rural areas of Afghanistan but in this research, I did not use my personal experiences and voice at any point and instead I focused only on perceptions and experiences of my research participants. In addition, as the research focused on Afghan rural students experiences, the personal and unique experiences of participants were very significant for this study. This required the researcher to develop the best and reliable research tools to gather data on the outstanding experiences and feelings rural students regarding their transition to university, their overall university experiences and long-term impact. Thus, semi-structured interviews and personal written stories were the most suitable tools to conduct the study because interviewees were given the freedom to express themselves freely and asked them follow up questions to delve deeper into the issues they experienced. To ensure the effectiveness and validity of the research tools, I conducted seven pilot interviews in advance with some of the participants, which helped to ensure the effectiveness of the interview questions by revising and refining the interview questions accordingly to ensure that interview questions are highly relevant and help in gathering relevant data. On the other hand, before conducting this research, I took two research and report-writing courses at the BRAC Institute of Educational Development (BRAC IED) as part of my Master of Education studies. These two research courses equipped me with sound research knowledge, skills, and practicum, which allowed me to conduct this study confidently and maintained the research rigor and standards as per the requirements.

3.9 Ethical Issues and Concerns

Johnson and Christensen (2004) emphasized that ensuring the ethical issues and concerns of participants in any research is part of moral practices and valuing the participants' dignity. Moreover, it was the sole right of the participants that they should have been assured that their data and details are not used in such a way that is harmful to them or used against their will (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Therefore, I took several considerations to ensure ethical concerns. Firstly, the researcher communicated with participants in advance and conducted pilot interviews, which helped the participants to know the role and purpose of this study and researcher answered their unclarified concerns and questions of the participants regarding the study. Secondly, a detailed informed consent letter was prepared in participants' local language and sent for their readership and signing off. In the consent letter, researcher included clauses such as introduction of researcher, purpose of research, volunteer participation of research participants, their confidentiality and anonymity through using (pseudonyms), permission to tape recording and their withdrawal without any cost whenever they wanted so all participants signed the consent forms and returned back to the researcher. Third, as a formal process of the study, the researcher obtained and signed the ethics application form of BRAC IED before starting data collection and he considered all those points as mentioned in the ethics application and thesis manual. Lastly, the findings of the research were written and shared with some participants and supervisor for member checking and peer review before final submission. For the reason that to avoid any personal biases and misinterpretations except relying on the collected data from participants.

3.10 Credibility and Rigor

To ensure the credibility and rigor of this study, several meticulous steps were followed. Rossman and Rallis (2003) emphasize that the trustworthiness of research hinges on competent execution. Thus, activities were systematically planned to meet qualitative research standards and adhere to Braun and

Clarke's (2006) 15-point checklist for effective thematic data analysis. First, the researcher's personal experience with the educational challenges faced by Afghan rural students was invaluable. Having grown up and studied in rural Afghanistan, the researcher possessed a deep understanding of the issue. This background informed the thorough research proposal, which included a detailed methodology matrix and field plan outlining the approach, methods, and tools for systematic execution. Second, effective research tools such as semi-structured interviews and personal written stories were developed. The interview questions were piloted and refined based on participants' feedback. The researcher defended the proposal and a professional thesis committee, which afterwards incorporated their feedback before data collection began, approved it. Third, data was collected from a diverse group of participants, including Afghan rural students from public and private universities, graduates, male and female participants, and university professors. The data was fully transcribed and shared with participants for member checking, allowing them to make revisions. Participants endorsed the transcriptions, which were then translated from Dari to English for analysis, ensuring accuracy and removing bias. To ensure credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, three strategies were employed: triangulation, member checking, and external audit, as advocated by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Creswell (2015). Triangulation involved selecting participants from various geographical locations and educational backgrounds, and using both interviews and personal written stories for data collection. Member checking ensured accuracy by sharing transcriptions with participants in their local language and verifying draft findings through interviews. External auditing involved sharing the draft with the thesis supervisor for feedback, which his feedback was incorporated iteratively to ensure high-quality and credible findings. These rigorous steps ensured that the voices of Afghan rural students were accurately represented, with findings that are valuable to broader contexts, addressing common challenges faced by rural students in Afghanistan.

3.11 Limitations of the Study

Almost every study has limitations which sometimes constrain the researcher. The University of Southern California (2024) describes study limitations from two perspectives: methodological limitations and researcher-related limitations. Methodological limitations include factors like selecting an appropriate sample size. Researcher-related limitations encompass issues such as researcher biases and access to participants (University of Southern California, 2024). Despite being neutral, it is crucial to explicitly state these limitations, explain how they were addressed, and suggest areas for future studies. This research also faced limitations due to the virtual nature of the study caused by travel restrictions. The first limitation was the sample size of 15 interviews and 3 written stories. Boddy (2016) notes that a large sample size in qualitative research can hinder gathering in-depth insights. Although 15 participants seemed large, the researcher used semi-structured interviews and personal written stories to obtain insightful data. The flexibility of semi-structured interviews allowed for probing questions to get focused data. Future studies might benefit from fewer participants to allow deeper exploration of responses. The second limitation was the lack of research in the local context of the study which is Afghanistan. Although the issue was studied in other countries, this study focused on how rural Afghan students experienced their university transition. To address this, the researcher utilized studies on Afghan students in foreign universities and research on rural students' adaptation in various countries, including Bangladesh, China, Pakistan, India, the US, Australia and African countries. These studies provided valuable insights to support this research. This study highlights the need for more research on Afghan rural students, who face significant challenges during their transition to university. The third limitation was related to data collection tools. The semi-structured interview questions were extensive: 10 for students and 11 for professors. Some interviews exceeded one hour, leading to participant fatigue. During interviews, some questions were skipped as they were answered through participants' detailed responses. Future studies could benefit from fewer, more critical questions (around 5-6) to allow for follow-up questions and deeper insights. The final limitation was

the researcher's access to participants. Due to security and financial constraints, the study was conducted virtually via Zoom and WhatsApp. Participants faced internet connection issues, particularly with Zoom. WhatsApp was used as an alternative, though it also faced disconnections in some occasions. To mitigate this, the researcher provided participants with better internet facilities and requested multiple sessions to cover the questions. Additionally, personal written stories were collected to supplement the interviews. While virtual methods had limitations, they were necessary due to circumstances mentioned before. Future studies would good to be done by in-person interviews and collecting more personal written stories.

Chapter 4

Results

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the findings of the research on the adaptation of Afghan rural students to university culture and its impact on their career path are presented according to the data gathered through interviews and written stories. The data were collected from a diverse body of rural Afghan students studying or studied at public and private universities, belonging to different rural locations, studying in various fields of studies, including both gender and university professors.

After analysing the collected data, the emerged themes are classified as the following:

- Rural students' early encounters and adaptation approaches to university environment
- The impact of university on students' personal and career paths development
- Challenges faced by rural students during their transition to university
- Coping strategies and mechanisms to address the challenges

4.2 Rural Students' Early Encounters and Adaptation Approaches to University Environment

Rural students initially seem happy from entering the university because this journey enable them to understand the world around them through interaction with resources and knowledge seeking. Manzalmah Nasrat, a female rural graduate from Alberuni Public University described her initial experiences at university in her personal written story:

When I went to the university for the first time, the university environment was very interesting and pleasant for me, university students from different provinces, with different cultures gathered together and studied together in a different academic environment. And I was able to get to know people who came from different parts of the country and learn more about their culture and customs.

However, the first-year experiences changed based on support systems and university surroundings' behaviours day by day and their experiences had a zigzag line of explanation, which will be reported in the following sub-themes.

4.2.1 Transitioning from Village to University

The experience of rural students during their transition year was different from those of urban students because they did not come with enough preparation to adjust themselves easily. The first year of university for rural students was usually a difficult moment because they moved from small villages surrounded by their family and relatives to an environment where they did not know anyone. They only relied on the help and support of university but usually in Afghanistan, universities do not provide more support other than teaching. As Noor Mohammad one of the rural students studying at a public university, from Interview #2, 12.01.2024, shared his experience, "University does not do anything that involves students' personal life, what they do is just teaching their subjects and deliver their content for students and in terms of students' personal life there is no specific program". He further explained that by personal life, he means the uncertainties, which they face during the transition year, which university lacked interest in them. For instance, some students got upset and depressed or faced illnesses; but there was not a dedicated responsible person or section other than the students themselves to provide them support. This kind of experience was also reported in other universities but some students used their self-driven approaches and inspiration to adapt instead of waiting for the university to engage. Milad experienced that rural students did not have access to technology before but during university, they had to learn and use it. It was because most university assignments and tasks required the use of technology so he said, "Universities should encourage rural students to use and learn technology". (Personal Communication: Interview #6, 14.01.2024). Similarly, Sayed Hussain a third-year student at Badakhshan University seemed he had an unsatisfactory experience during his transition years and he suggested that the university should address these issues in the earlier time:

Universities should have programs for students before they come from the village because they have fewer motivational programs. And encourage students by having a good program for them so that they will be aware of the university environment as well as the good and bad things they have so that the educational system of the university is not only based on theory, it should also focus on practice as well.

It was evident that rural students during their transition did not have a satisfactory experience and they compared themselves with urban students and sometimes felt disappointed about their situation. This was what Marhamat Taqizada, Zoom Interview #1, 11.01.2024, a student who from graduated from Mawlana Jalaluddin Mohammad Balkhi's Private University described his experience, "If we lived here before and found ourselves aligned with urban students so that I could have alignment with my urban classmates. We suffered a lot from this area at the beginning of the university".

4.2.2 Adjustment Approaches

Rural students had different approaches during their transition at university to keep themselves aligned with the complexities of university settings and norms. Usually, the adjustment process for females was more difficult than for male students as they faced tripled barriers. However, the open-mindedness of girls for change and accepting the new context was part of their self-efforts, which made them resilient. Ms. Ulfatmah Beheej, studied at Takhar University, explained:

Adapting yourself means changing yourself but it is not an easy task to change yourself. Change from what you used to be to what the society wants you to be, where you are and should be. They expect you to behave like them, to speak like them, this is a very difficult task and it takes a lot of time to get used to it.

Hard work and personal efforts were some of the main characteristics of each rural student in their adaptation process, which enabled them to combat unexpected situations and burdens. Mr. Marhamat expressed that the notion of collaboration and social interaction were some of the key strategies for the

success of rural students as rural and urban students were studying together. Enrolment at university opened various ways of preparing for the challenging atmosphere of the university because beside university, rural students also enrolled themselves in private courses to empower themselves academically to make a smooth transition into academic setting. Using the private courses, Ms. Ziagul Nazari, Interview #11, 18.01.2024, shared her experience and suggested that upcoming students should use such opportunities to solve their problems. She emphasized, “They (upcoming rural students) should be more prepared for university because when they get out of school, university is a place that has higher lessons and studies than school. They can prepare themselves by studying and taking courses”.

The adaptation attitudes used by the rural students, resulted in significant progress in both their knowledge and skills as well as their overall improvement. Milad Parwa, Interview #6, 14.01.2024, mentioned, “We had classmates from different rural areas: from Faryab province rural areas, he got the first top grade, from Jawzjan province rural village became second and I was from Badakhshan province and I came third”. This illustrates that, rural students even sometimes surpassed urban students in terms of their academic achievements as they seemed more committed to their studies than the students from urban areas.

4.3 The Impact of University on Students' Personal and Career Paths Development

Research participants in interviews and written stories described the impact of university experiences on their career directions. These impacts mostly have been positive in terms of employment and learning knowledge and skills but they reported drawbacks as well.

4.3.1 Preparing Students for Societal Contributions

University experiences significantly had an impact on rural students' lives, shaping their beliefs, behaviours, skillsets, and even their roles within their communities. While some students faced challenges in adapting to university life, findings from this research suggest a generally positive

influence, which helped them to contribute to their societies positively (Milad, Interview #6, 14.01.2024; Mukhtar, Interview #7, 15.01.2024).

One of the most prominent impacts reported was a shift in students' perspectives. Coming from rural areas with limited opportunities, university exposed them to new possibilities and ignited a drive for personal growth. University professors and resources played a crucial role in this transformation, as showed by Mr. Milad's experience (Interview #6, 14.01.2024). He described the encouragement and motivation instilled by professors, leading him to believe that university graduates will find employment to serve his family and community. This sentiment resonates with students across universities, highlighting the overall positive impact on their outlook and aspirations.

Universities equipped students with knowledge and skills that empowered them to address social issues within their communities. Qais Ahmadi, a student majoring in Islamic Law, reflected on how university transformed his approach to social interactions (Personal Communication: Interview #5, 13.01.2024). He emphasized the importance of guidance and positive reinforcement, contrasting his past behaviour of forceful intervention with the refined communication skills honed at university encouraged, guided and paved the way for him in tackling social issues constructively. The potential to contribute to rural development emerged as another significant theme. Janbek Sharifi, an economics graduate, recognized the abundance of natural resources in his village but acknowledged the need for skilled personnel to manage them effectively. His university education equipped him with the knowledge to utilize these resources scientifically and improve the village economy (Personal Communication: Interview #4, 13.01.2024). This perspective highlights the potential for universities to bridge the gap between rural potential and its actualization.

University experiences were particularly empowering for women in rural communities. Ulfatmah from Interview #3, 12.01.2024, one of female participants described a newfound independence and the ability to make her own decisions, a stark contrast to the lives of her non-university peers. Her acquired

communication skills empowered her to advocate for her rights as well as other girls rights, as evident in her confidence to challenge potential forced marriages. While the overall impact seemed positive, some students expressed dissatisfaction with certain aspects of their university experience. Mr. Imam Nazar, a graduate of Kabul University, criticized the curriculum's lack of context-relevance for students from rural backgrounds (Personal Communication: Interview #8, 16.01.2024). He argued that the focus on fields like hotel management, tourism and agriculture with more applicability in rural areas are the fields which need greater practicum are more valuable for rural communities so they suggested that universities should focus on these fields for rural students. However, universities might be addressing this concern as Professor Ahmad Fazahil from Badakhshan University described a curriculum update process after each five years based on market and societal needs (Personal Communication: Interview #15, 18.01.2024). He explained how regular reviews and surveys informed the addition of relevant courses to meet the demands of the labour market and supplied graduates for success.

Despite these efforts, some students remained sceptical. Mr. Sayed Hussain, a student at Badakhshan University, questioned the effectiveness of the current systems at universities, emphasizing the lack of practical application opportunities (Interview #10, 17.01.2024). He contended that a heavy focus on theory without practical experience hindered students' ability to translate knowledge into action, like creating a business. This highlights the ongoing need for universities to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. Ensuring students are equipped to thrive not just in academia, but also in the real world, especially upon returning to their rural communities to serve effectively and professionally.

University life had a multifaceted impact on rural students. While challenges existed, the overall experience of rural students seemed to foster personal growth, social awareness, and the potential to contribute to rural development. However, ensuring curriculum relevance and providing practical

application opportunities remained crucial aspects to consider for universities aiming to fully empower rural students and maximize their positive impact on their communities upon return of students to their villages and play their role to develop the society.

4.3.2 Enhancing Graduates' Employability through Skills Development

University education fortified rural students with knowledge and skills crucial for their career development in today's job market. University coursework fostered valuable skills sought by employers. Qais Ahmadi (Interview #5, 13.01.2024) highlighted how assignments enhanced presentation and research abilities – essential for navigating external resources and delivering effective presentations frequently emphasized in job postings (Qais, Interview #5, 13.01.2024). University environments also nurtured interpersonal skills. Ahmadi (2024) emphasized professors' guidance in fostering respectful communication and peaceful conflict resolution. University education deepened understanding within a chosen field and broadened overall knowledge. Mr. Sayed Hussain underlined the importance of theoretical knowledge for practical application. Citing economics as an example, Sayed Hussain argued that theoretical understanding empowered individuals to manage finances, run small businesses, and make informed decisions (Personal Communication: Interview #10, 17.01.2024). Universities promoted technology utilization for enriched learning. Milad Parwa, a rural student, advocated for parental support in providing technological tools like smartphones and laptops. He emphasized the benefits of technology for current studies and future career prospects (Parwa, Personal Written Story #2, 18.01.2024).

University nurtured individual initiative and facilitated peer interaction. Ms. Manzalmah's written story (Personal Written Story #1, 18.01.2024) exemplified success through hard work and dedication, leading to academic achievement and recognition among classmates. Professors like Mr. Jawed Sharifi highlighted the value of scientific research projects. These projects empowered students with theoretical and practical knowledge alongside research skills, preparing them for employment in

academic and research institutions (Sharifi, Interview #14, 17.01.2024). Sharifi (2024) further highlighted the importance of specialized knowledge gained through university education. This specialized knowledge furnished graduates to excel in the workplace compared to those lacking such expertise. Mr. Ahmad Fazahil, a university department head, acknowledged the university's responsibility to effectively develop students' knowledge, skills, and attitudes. He expressed concern that universities might not always fulfil this commitment (Personal Communication: Interview #15, 18.01.2024). This study demonstrated that university education played a critical role in empowering rural students with the knowledge and skills necessary for career success in the modern world.

4.3.3 Gaining Real-World Experiences through Apprenticeship

Interviews and written stories revealed both positive and critical perspectives regarding the current state of practicum programs at university. Participants widely recognized the importance of practical work for future employability. Graduates like Mr. Marhamat (Interview #1, 11.01.2024) credited his university practicum with developing his teaching skills through observation, demo classes, and feedback from experienced educators. Similarly, Milad a second-year student at Jawzjan University, highlighted the value of internship programs such as the “*expression skills program*”, which provided rural students with opportunities to gain practical experience alongside their urban counterparts (Personal Communication: Interview #6, 14.01.2024).

Janbek Sharifi, Interview #4, 13.01.2024, a successful economics graduate, described his university's practical approach, including seminars on leadership, accounting, management, and marketing held in real-world settings such as Pakistani related companies operating in Afghanistan. These experiences, he explained, equipped students with essential skills for instance customer interaction. Students who were interested in media and communication fields also benefited from practicum initiatives. Ms. Ulfatmah, a former university student in Takhar province, shared her experience as a TV presenter gained through practical work during her studies. Universities facilitated such opportunities by

organizing programs where students interested in presenting could participate and showcase their skills. (Personal Communication: Interview #3, 12.01.2024)

University professors echoed the importance of practical learning. Mr. Jawed Sharifi (Interview #14, 17.01.2024) from Badakhshan University described workshops designed to transform theoretical knowledge into practical application. Additionally, collaboration with institutions, corporations, industries and scientific projects further strengthened students' specialized skills. However, some students expressed concerns about limited practicum opportunities. Ms. Manzalmah, a graduate from Albiruni University (Interview #12, 18.01.2024), criticized the lack of equal distribution of practicum opportunities across all departments. She pointed out that engineering and medical students benefited more compared to other fields. Students at Badakhshan University, who felt their education lacked practical elements, voiced similar concerns. Mr. Sayed Hussain (Interview #10, 17.01.2024) illustrated this sentimentality by highlighting their reliance solely on theoretical textbooks in economics courses. This perspective contrasted with faculty claims about introducing students to fieldwork. Mr. Mukhtar Salimi, another graduate student, emphasized the crucial role of practicum in shaping future careers. He argued that a lack of practical experience during university left graduates ill equipped for the job market and contributed to youth unemployment (Personal Communication: Interview #7, 15.01.2024). To address these concerns, Mr. Sayed Hussain from Interview #10, 17.01.2024, proposed a balanced approach, suggesting that students in fields like literature or education could spend more time in practical teaching environments alongside theoretical coursework. For instance, studying 3 days at university and teaching 3 days in nearby schools.

This study underscored the importance of practicum programs in Afghan universities for student development and future employability. While positive experiences were shared, concerns regarding uneven distribution of opportunities and a theoretical bias in some fields highlighted the need for improvement.

4.3.4 Employment Opportunities

University experiences and personal efforts of rural students impacted the lives of rural students positively as all graduated students who participated in this research were employed and some of them even established their own businesses. Moreover, even those who are currently students created some income sources to support their studies. As an example, Mr. Marhamat, Interview #1, 11.01.2024, studied Language and Literature at University, currently working as a Teacher Educator in a renowned non-governmental organization (NGO) so he described his job satisfaction. He says, “My field of study is compatible with my work and things I learned at university helped a lot here in the village in the career path that I am currently working on”. According to the female participants, in Afghanistan, the female employment rate has been usually lower than males but rural female students during university even they secured positions based on their personal efforts and university support programs. Ms Ulfatmah, Interview #3, 12.01.2024, narrated how she found a job during her university time in Takhar province, she stated, “I had job during university, I was studying and working at the same time, and after graduating from university, we had to make our way. We were finding out what we are good at and what we can do”.

University’s complexities also urged rural students to be hardworking and creative in finding income sources to support their studies as well as become entrepreneurs in the future. Mr. Imam Nazar, Interview #8, 16.01.2024, told how some of his classmates from other rural areas created income sources for themselves. He reported what he saw, “We also had other rural classmates, for example, from Maidan Wardak province, who after university lessons in trolley sold different items so that they could pay for their education expenditures because their family's economy was weak”. From university professors’ perspective, people of Afghanistan mostly live in rural areas and there are less professional people working in different sectors. University programs helped rural students to close these gaps in these areas. It was what expressed by Mr. Sayed Ahmad, one of the University Professors at Dunya University as he mentioned:

Because most of the universities especially those focusing on fields of business management, financial management, banking, educational management, education, training, language learning and health sector (nursing, pharmacy, stomatology, public health...) have more job opportunities. Rural students can study these fields and have more high paid jobs because there are fewer professional people in the villages.

The importance of formal education degrees and transcripts among Afghan employers is high. Whenever any post is announced, minimum qualification is written as having at least a bachelor's degree from university. Before the regime changed in Afghanistan (fall of previous Afghanistan Islamic republic to the current Taliban government), girls who graduated from universities were employed by public and private organizations and it was because of their education and skills they got from university. However, the situation changed due to political transformation. Manzalmah is a rural female university graduate in her personal written story wrote about the importance of her education and how it supported her to be employed. She transcribed:

The documents that I obtained from the courses during my studies were very effective in my life and career, and I was able to get the job I wanted after graduating from university, but unfortunately, after the regime changed in my country, like other girls and women I became unemployed in Afghanistan.

4.4 Challenges Faced by Rural Students during their Transition to University

Almost all of the research participants in interviews and some also in written stories explained that during their transition to university and during their four years of studies, they faced numerous challenges that made their transition and university experiences challenging.

4.4.1 Academic Life Challenges

Being unfamiliar with the university's academic culture and convention was the first constant theme that all of the research participants talked about and said that they faced many troubles. One of these

rural students, Mr. Marhamat from Interview #1, 11.01.2024, who studied at a private university said, “Pedagogy at university was lectures and we were unfamiliar with this system, professors provided us with large amount of information in short time. Due to prior unfamiliarity, we could not understand the concepts. Everything was very difficult”. Another student Mr. Noor Mohammad, Interview #2, 12.01.2024, also faced academic problems and he linked the challenges to wrong teaching at school, which lack of qualified teachers was one of the significant reasons. He added, “Our English teachers at school pronounced words wrongly and taught grammar incorrectly, which were different to what I saw at university. So I faced various challenges and professors always corrected and showed us accurate pronunciation and structure”.

University life surprised many rural students with unfamiliar academic methods. As an example, assignments required technology access but rural students often lacked. Ms. Ulfatmah, a student at Takhar University, struggled with these challenges, unsure what a seminar was or how to prepare one on a computer. Through observation and perseverance, she learned from classmates and eventually mastered the tasks. Most rural students who study at public or private universities faced difficulty in utilizing technology in university-related projects and responsibilities. This is probably because they did not have ‘*access to technology*’ in their school and village. Janbek Sharifi, Interview #4, 13.01.2024, stated, “In addition, rural students have more problems in terms of access to technology for preparing seminars, homework, revising lectures slides than students in urban areas”. Moreover, he elaborated that some rural students even have less self-confidence when speaking in front of more people and it is because in the village they did not have the opportunity to speak in big gatherings.

Afghanistan's diverse population speaks numerous local languages in addition to the national languages such as Dari and Pashto. Rural students spend their schooling in their local tongue, creating a barrier when they enter university. Professors, primarily from urban areas, use academic Dari or Pashto, leaving rural students struggling to translate and understand concepts. This, as Professor Sayed

Ahmad confirmed creates a significant academic hurdle (Personal Communication: Interview #13, 15.01.2024). While some believe fluency in national languages can be achieved within university years, accents and pronunciations persist. Ms. Ulfatmah demonstrated this, highlighting the difficulty of changing ingrained speech patterns (Personal Communication: Interview #3, 12.01.2024). Conversely, Professor Jawed Sharifi suggested allowing presentations in local dialects to avoid ridicule and encourage participation (Personal Communication: Interview #14, 17.01.2024). This, however, might not be commonly accepted, highlighting the ongoing debate about language accommodation in Afghan universities.

4.4.2 Biases and Discrimination

This study revealed concerning experiences of systematic discrimination faced by rural students, particularly those students from religious and ethnic minorities in Afghan universities something that was not a big concern in other countries as per the literature I reviewed. While universities are envisioned as spaces for intellectual development, these findings depict a harsh reality for many students transitioning from rural backgrounds into the university context.

The research highlighted religious bias as a significant challenge. Sunni Muslim dominance in the education sector of Afghanistan led to marginalization of students from minority faiths. Mr. Janbek (Interview #4, 13.01.2024) described facing religious discussions and arguments due to his faith. Similarly, Ms. Ulfatmah (Written Story #3, 18.01.2024) narrated facing harsh treatment from professors and classmates due to her Ismaili faith. An Islamic culture professor even threatened to bar her from exams based solely on her sect (Personal Communication: Interview #3, 12.01.2024). These experiences highlight the need for religious tolerance within academic institutions. Language and ethnicity are other factors contributing to a discriminatory environment something new in the findings of this study than the literature reviewed. Noor Mohammad, a Tajik student at a Pashto-dominant university (Interview #2, 12.01.2024), faced difficulties due to language barriers. He described

instances where university staff prioritized those who spoke the local dominant language which in his case was Pashto. Furthermore, both professors and classmates mocked his rural accent, highlighting the prejudice against ethnic minorities. Rural students also experienced criticism regarding their clothing choices. Ms. Ulfatmah defined facing disapproval for dressing differently from urban students who adhered to stricter religious attire (Personal Communication: Interview #3, 12.01.2024). Similarly, Mr. Noor Mohammad was criticized for wearing jeans and a t-shirt, deemed 'western' by his peers (Personal Communication: Interview #2, 12.01.2024). These experiences highlight the need for greater cultural sensitivity within universities. The study found a heightened vulnerability for female students, particularly those from rural areas. Professor Ahmad Fazahil (Interview #15, 18.01.2024) acknowledged the challenges faced by female students transitioning from rural backgrounds to urban universities. Ms. Ulfatmah's experience is an instance of this, as she faced verbal threats from classmates and professors due to her religious minority status and clothing choices (Personal Written Story #3, 18.01.2024).

The discriminatory environment based on religion, language, ethnicity, culture, and gender created significant challenges for Afghan rural students' academic success and well-being. Participants suggested that universities in Afghanistan must strive towards inclusivity and create a safe space for all students, regardless of their background.

4.4.3 Economic and Financial Constraints

The other most burning issue faced by rural students, they described frequently in interviews, and written stories was economic and financial problems that affected their university life significantly. The matter of finance was even more severe for students who were studying at private universities which all processes needed money. Mr Qais Ahmadi studying at Salam Private University said:

Even some students cannot buy study materials or phones, to take their lessons in Portable Document Format (PDF) shared in study groups. In addition, most of the students who come

from the village have an economic problem. Sometimes urban students cooperate and share course materials and seminars with us, sometimes they buy the materials for us.

Private universities put every condition based on payment and if students are unable to make their payments on time, they are not allowed to take their exams or continue the next semesters. Some rural students who did not have stable economic means hence they tried to find part-time jobs to pay their university fees. However, occasionally they did not receive their salaries and wages on time, which again created problem for them as the transition between semesters was based on timely payment of fees. Mr Janbek Sharifi, Interview #4, 13.01.2024, who studied at Gawharshad University in Kabul, explained the problem he faced, “Financial concerns weighed heavily on me. Balancing work to afford university was a challenge. While grateful for the opportunity, income delays caused difficulties, including meeting semester fees”.

Unstable financial support made rural students' transition to university life hard. They often relied on family or relatives support who were usually working abroad or in the army far from their homes for income. Mr. Marhamat, a student in Faizabad, Afghanistan, exemplified this challenge.

I want to share a personal story with you. When I lived in rented the room, I needed to pay my university expenses, which included all the basic needs of a human being that can be solved with money, but I did not have money to pay. Once I called my uncle who was in the army in Helmand province to send me some money. He said I will talk to one of my friends to give you some money and you go to him and get it. His friend was in the old city of Faizabad and I was in the Dashti Qurugh area of Faizabad where our college was located. I called his friend and he said that if you do not arrive within half an hour, I am leaving towards Jurm district. Because I did not have a taxi fare, I ran for more than 3-kilo meters in that scorching sun. This was one of the most difficult moments of my student life.

Economic challenges even sometimes put such pressure on rural students that they stopped university. For example, Sayed Hussain, Interview #10, 17.01.2024, told an instance where some of his friends stopped university because of economic instability, he described, “some students left university and immigrated to Iran and some other countries due to economic problems such as unable to pay room rentals, food, stationary and etc.”

4.4.4 Social and Well-being Issues

This section points out the struggles rural students encountered during their university transition, focusing on social and well-being issues. The findings emphasized the psychological and emotional strain caused by adapting to new norms, pressures, and distance from family.

The contrasting environments between rural villages and universities created significant challenges. Students reported feelings of depression, loneliness, and inadequacy upon entering university (Hussain, Personal Communication: Interview #10, 17.01.2024). The pressure to succeed academically, coupled with a lack of prior experience and limited support systems, contributed to these negative emotions. Abdul Jabar (Personal Communication: Interview #9, 16.01.2024) described his initial fear of participating in class due to self-doubt. Sayed Hussain (Personal Communication: Interview #10, 17.01.2024) further emphasized the immense stress and difficulties faced during the first semesters. The emotional toll of transitioning to university life can have severe consequences for students' well-being. In extreme cases, students stated experiencing mental breakdowns requiring medical intervention (Ziagul, Personal Communication: Interview #11, 18.01.2024). Imam Nazar (Personal Communication: Interview #8, 16.01.2024) stressed the disparity in addressing physical and mental health concerns. While physical ailments might have quicker solutions, depression can take considerably longer to manage. Furthermore, Ulfatmah (Personal Communication: Interview #3, 12.01.2024) emphasized the emotional and mental anxiety caused by being away from family and loved ones.

Rural students faced the additional burden of adapting to unfamiliar social and cultural norms in urban settings. Marhamat (Personal Communication: Interview #1, 11.01.2024) described city life as completely different from his village upbringing. Abdul Jabar (Personal Communication: Interview #9, 16.01.2024) acknowledged the challenges of navigating a new social environment and the need for flexibility to adapt. He emphasized the importance of interacting with others and integrating into the new community. Female students faced specific difficulties due to cultural norms and limited support networks in urban environments. Ulfatmah (Personal Communication: Interview #3, 12.01.2024) expressed worries about being in a new, open environment far from her village and family. The combination of geographical distance and societal expectations regarding gender were identified as significant contributors to psychological problems.

The physical distance from family restricted access to immediate support for rural students. Jawed one of the university professors (Personal Communication: Interview #14, 17.01.2024) highlighted those urban students have the advantage of family proximity, allowing them to readily address academic, financial, and personal issues. Rural students, on the other hand, often lacked this support system. Additionally, limited access to communication technologies further isolated them from their villages (Jawed, Personal Communication: Interview #14, 17.01.2024). Furthermore, accessing educational resources online was challenging for rural students due to limited internet connectivity in rural areas (Abdul Jabar, Interview #14, 17.01.2024; Janbek, Interview #4, 13.01.2024). The high cost of travel between rural villages and universities restricted students' ability to visit their families. Imam Nazar (Personal Communication: Interview #8, 16.01.2024) gave an example of this challenge, explaining that traveling home twice a year is financially prohibitive for many students. This limited physical contact with family further exacerbated the emotional and social difficulties faced by rural students.

4.4.5 Lack of Employment Opportunities

Despite the tremendous challenges rural students faced during transition and university time, participants labelled job security after graduation one of the most concerning and worrying problem for them. This sentiment stemmed from the country's dependence on international aid and limited career opportunities in rural areas.

Noor Mohammad, a graduate, underlined the mismatch between university education and rural job availability (Noor Mohammad, Personal Communication: Interview #2, 12.01.2024). He put emphasis on the lack of relevant job opportunities in villages, forcing graduates to take unrelated positions in small agencies. This feeling is echoed by the lack of opportunities in specialized fields like agriculture and tourisms upon returning to villages. Janbek Sharifi, a graduate who opened a shop in Kabul, identified limited English language proficiency as a barrier to employment in both public and private sectors (Janbek, Personal Communication: Interview #4, 13.01.2024). He argued that while the Ministry of Agriculture of Afghanistan aimed to place rural graduates in agriculture-related jobs, a focus on foreign languages created a disadvantage for rural students with limited English skills.

On the other hand, participants understood that job insecurity is a national concern, but it is particularly acute for rural graduates due to limited access to job markets. Even employed rural graduates for example Imam Nazar worried about losing his job (Imam Nazar, Personal Communication: Interview #8, 16.01.2024). He underscored the constant threat of job loss, underlining the overall instability of the job market. Ms. Manzalmah, a rural female graduate, identified a critical mismatch between university programs and job market realities (Manzalmah, Personal Communication: Interview #12, 18.01.2024). She gave emphasis to the lack of specialized jobs within the country, particularly in rural areas, creating significant challenges for graduates seeking employment in their fields. Participants acknowledged the need for adaptability and diverse skillsets to secure jobs. Ms. Ziagul provided instances of this approach. Despite studying Law and Political Sciences, she currently works as a

teacher, demonstrating the flexibility required in the Afghan job market (Ziagul, Personal Communication: Interview #11, 18.01.2024). In addition, Mr. Ahmad Fazahil stressed the importance of acquiring relevant knowledge and skills for specialized jobs. He highlighted the value of computer skills and other soft skills for career development, particularly in fields like computer science, economics, and education (Ahmad Fazahil, Personal Communication: Interview #15, 18.01.2024).

Job insecurity also posed a significant challenge for Afghan graduates, particularly those from rural areas. Limited job opportunities, language barriers, and the mismatch between university programs and job markets contributed to this concern. Developing adaptability, diverse skillsets, and 21st-century skills are crucial for rural graduates to navigate the challenging Afghan job market. The transition to university life presented significant challenges for rural students, affecting their social and emotional well-being. Understanding these challenges are crucial for developing support systems and interventions that could help students navigate this critical period in their lives.

4.5 Coping Strategies and Mechanisms to Address the Challenges

The participants to manage financial limitations adopted several strategies. Notably, students displayed remarkable diligence and perseverance, working part-time jobs to supplement their income and meet university expenses (Janbek, Interview #4, 13.01.2024). Mukhtar Salimi (Interview #7, 15.01.2024) illustrated this approach, emphasising his commitment to hard work and frugality as key coping mechanisms. There were different techniques and strategies utilized by the participants to address academic challenges. Particularly, some students enrolled in private courses to enhance their knowledge and academic skills (Marhamat, Interview #1, 11.01.2024). Some participants, allowing them to capture key information from lectures and enhance their understanding of the material (Noor Mohammad, Interview #2, 12.01.2024), he also implemented effective note-taking techniques to internalise the concepts. Collaboration with urban students emerged as another valuable strategy. By leveraging the technological proficiency and academic experience of their urban peers, rural students

were able to gain valuable insights and support in completing academic assignments (Ulfatmah, Interview #5, 14.01.2024). Additionally, actively participating in lectures, seminars, and seeking direct guidance from professors proved beneficial for many participants (Qais, Interview #8, 15.01.2024).

Research participants employed various strategies to overcome language-related obstacles. Especially, some students opted to learn the dominant languages used at the university, finding this approach to be helpful in navigating social interactions and academic tasks (Noor Mohammad, Interview #2, 12.01.2024). However, access to foreign language improvement programs was not always equitable. Instances of nepotism and unequal access to university-provided free language courses and resources were reported by some participants, highlighting the challenges faced by rural students in obtaining language learning opportunities. Consequently, some students shouldered the additional financial burden of enrolling in private language courses to bridge the language gap (Ulfatmah, Interview #3, 12.01.2024).

Those who took part in this study employed various strategies to manage stress and maintain their well-being. Engaging in physical activities such as sports and walking emerged as common coping mechanisms (Milad, Interview #6, 14.01.2024; Janbek, Interview #4, 13.01.2024; Abdul Jabar, Interview #9, 16.01.2024). Additionally, some students found solace in social connections, joining associations or student groups to build a sense of community and belonging (Sayed Hussain, Interview #10, 17.01.2024). One prevalent approach involved cultivating patience and tolerance. Mr. Marhamat (Interview #1, 11.01.2024) underscored this, stating, “The first way to cope is patience and tolerance” (Marhamat, 2024). This approach allowed them to maintain composure and avoid escalating situations. Another strategy contained internalizing discriminatory experiences to build resilience. Ms. Ulfatmah described how negative comments from classmates “you are a village girl, stay silent” became a catalyst for personal growth. She explained, "To be the more I thought about this issue, the bigger it became and it was better to work on myself so that it becomes a strong point” (Ulfatmah, Personal

Communication, Interview #3, 12.01.2024). This demonstrated how adversity can be transformed into a source of strength.

Respecting diversity and fostering positive relationships were crucial for these students. Janbek, from a rural village, emphasized the importance of building bridges: “We learned how to deal with people and how they dealt with us. This is something that if you respect someone, you will be respected. If you do not respect, you will be treated badly” (Janbek, personal communication, Interview #4, 13.01.2024). This highlighted the power of mutual respect in fostering understanding and creating a more inclusive environment. Adaptability was another key strength displayed by these students. Qais, a student from a rural village, acknowledged the need to adapt to urban culture, including clothing and communication styles. He said, “We should be inspired according to the urban culture, when we return to the villages we can live with our own culture” (Qais, personal communication: Interview #5, 13.01.2024). This adaptability allowed them to integrate into their new environment while retaining their own cultural identity.

The challenges extend beyond cultural differences. Rural students often faced social isolation due to being far from their families and communities. Abdul Jabar defined the need for self-reliance: “You have to work by yourself including cooking and other social issues...it is a matter of opinion and beliefs that we have to interact with other people” (Abdul Jabar, personal communication: Interview #9, 16.01.2024). This underlined their determination to overcome social challenges in pursuit of their academic goals. Many students found support from their seniors who have already navigated the transition to university life. Mr. Sayed Hussain (Interview #10, 17.01.2024) described the value of this support: “seniors cheered us up and sat with us that we were the same. This is not a problem” (Hussain, 2024). Knowing they are not alone and having access to guidance from experienced peers provided comfort and encouragement. Professors viewed the rural students' willingness to embrace urban culture positively. Mr. Ahmad Fazahil saw this as an opportunity for long-term social change: “This

will create a cultural transformation which at least cause them to go to change and facilitate their family's lifestyle and create at least one cultural and social transformation in the village for the long term” (Fazulmand, personal communication: Interview #15, 18.01.2024). His perspective showed the potential for these students to act as agents of positive change in their communities.

Overall Findings of the Study

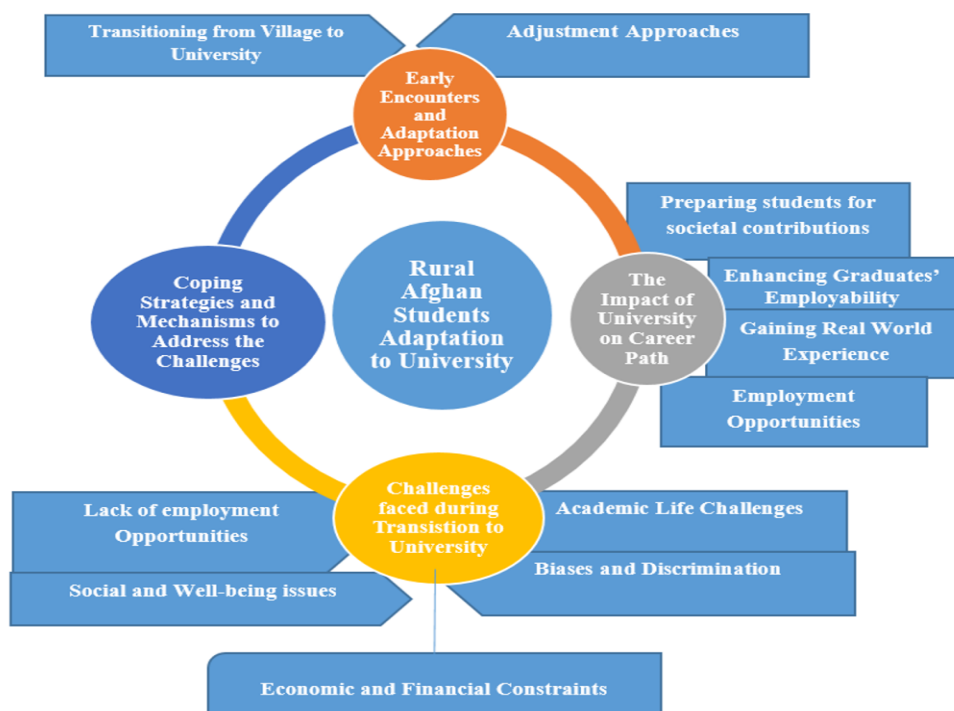


Figure 4: The Overall Findings of the Research from Interviews and Personally Written Stories.

Chapter 5

Discussion and Conclusion

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a thorough discussion of the analysed data gained through multiple data collection methods. This chapter majorly discusses the perceptions of Afghan rural students and university professors on rural students' transition to the university environment, challenges rural students faced during their adaptation, some coping strategies they utilised for adjustment and the impact of the university on rural students' future career development, aligning the findings from data with relevant literature and researcher's conclusion of the study. At the end, a few recommendations are provided for policymakers, relevant ministries and other stakeholders to address ongoing challenges to facilitate a smoother transition for rural students to university life to maximize the impact of university on rural students' career paths in order to improve their quality of life and overall rural development.

5.2 Discussion

5.2.1 The Experiences of Rural Students in Afghan Universities

Access to equitable and quality education for all is the core mandate of the United Nations Sustainable Goals (SDG) Number 4 as it says, "inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all" (Owens, 2017, p. 414 as cited in Safa, 2023). Afghanistan is a permanent member state of this organization and is required to meet these goals and objectives. Moreover, according to Samady (2001, November), rural students in Afghanistan represent many students compared to urban students, with nearly 75% of university students coming from rural villages. In the meantime, a significant amount of money more than 50 million dollars donated from international allies to support the Higher Education Development Program (HEDP, 2015-2020) to ensure that all students including those from rural villages have access to quality higher education (Adil et al., 2020). Similarly, Ministry of Education of Afghanistan by

support of international community and NGOs prepared National Education Strategic Plans to ensure quality education for all children. For instance, having access to relevant and quality school education was the core focus of their recent NESP III (MoEA, 2016). However, the findings of this research revealed that rural students experienced uncertainties during their transition to university due to a lack of preparation and the unavailability of university support systems for rural students despite the commitments and investments mentioned above. To illustrate this, Noor Mohammad (Interview #2, 12.01.2024), argued that there are no university adjustment programs for rural students. He further added, “University does not do anything that involves students’ life, what they do is just teaching their subjects and deliver their content for students and in terms of students’ life there is no specific program”. The Ministry of Education of Afghanistan listed improving ‘quality’ and ‘relevance’ of education as their number one priority in their recent National Education Strategic Plans. Ministry of Education in NESP III says, “The priority for the Ministry and its partners is to improve education quality and relevance” (MoEA, 2016, p. 3). Thus, majority of the rural students remained in their isolated villages and from there they transitioned to university, which faced difficulty in adjusting to university contexts. Transitioning to university and then experiencing the uncertainties, hardships and the unavailability of university-supported activities in Afghanistan maximised the worries and anxieties of most rural students. Yet, rural students applied different methods and ways to align themselves to the complex and culturally different university environment. Concisely, sometimes even rural students' performance was better than that of urban students, as they came from isolated areas and dreamed to have a bright future through employment and further studies so they excelled at university and the outcomes of their efforts were better than urban students. The findings of this research proved this claim as participants showed their eagerness and hard work to achieve their goals. Marhamat was one of such participants who said, “We rural students had more interests and enthusiasms in acquiring knowledge, and the urban students seemed less interested in their lessons than the rural students” (Personal Communication: Zoom Interview #1, 11.01.2024). Putting more

efforts repaid the results of rural students' hard work and later they became proud of their successes. This was clear in the sentiments of Manzalmah, a female rural student who stated, “I strived for excellence, earning a spot on class honour list amidst 100+ students. Maintained top grades throughout, graduating from university successfully (Personal Written Story #1, 18.01.2024). Even the resiliency of rural students was confirmed by Mr. Sayed Ahmad one of the University Professors without mentioning the university interventions. He acknowledged that rural students adjusted to the university during the initial semesters; he mentioned, “My experiences have shown that most of the rural students can leave all the traditions around them and fully prepare themselves for the university environment within one to two semesters”. (Personal Communication: Interview #13, 15.01.2024). Relevant researched also endorsed the adjustment of rural students to the new environment and culture when they put themselves in that context and gradually made progress and enjoyed the advantages of the new environment. A study by Muradi et al. (2018) supports this finding, revealing that rural students adapt and enjoy their education. The researchers further added, “Generally social adaptation of the students contributes positively to the social adaptations of participation in social, cultural and sportive activities and they are satisfied with their education” (p.697). Another study by Ali et al. (2021) on adaptation challenges and coping strategies of rural students in Bangladesh’s urban universities had similar findings, which said, “Majority of the respondents (75%) said they fully adapted to the lifestyle of the university”. Rural students in countries where there are fewer adaptation programs do not have any more chances than students own self-strategies to adapt. This was proved in the findings of Goldman's (2019) study on rural students' success and adaptation strategies to university life, he said, “students talked about the importance of resiliency and how they could fight through struggles to receive a degree (p.22)”.

Considering the experiences of rural students during their transition based on the findings of my research and similar experiences of other rural students in different countries plus my personal experiences of being from rural context, rural students face struggles during their initial years at

university. Universities in Afghanistan do not have adaptation programs for rural students, which put these students in difficult situations, however, rural students used their personal strategies to overcome the situation but this sometimes does not apply to all students, as some of the students cannot tolerate the struggles which lead them to stopping university. This was evident in the findings of this study as Sayed Hussain one of the participants said, “Even we saw students who stopped university unfinished and went to Iran and some other countries. Due to economic problems, they could not study as they had to pay room’s rent, books and other issues” (Personal Communication: Interview #10, 17.01.2024).

5.2.2 Afghan Rural Students Navigate Challenges and Thrive

Findings of this research indicated that Afghan rural students faced varied challenges during their transition from rural villages to university contexts. Participants described varieties of challenges which affected their transition as well as their overall university life, even some of these challenges were in commonality with rural students in different countries according based on the review of literature for this study. Living in a village and studying only in a school with just teachers, books and students is not enough for preparation of rural students for university transition because there vast differences between rural schools education and universities contexts. For example, students found the pedagogy of university something new and challenging for them which they had to adapt to a totally new university context which uses modern pedagogy along with technology when delivering classes and doing assignments. Marhamat (Interview #1, 11.01.2024), one of the participants described his university experience; “University lectures surprised us. Professors gave us tons of information quickly, a system we were not used to. We were unprepared for this teaching style and we struggled to grasp the concepts. It was overwhelming”. This is not just Afghan rural students who faced academic difficulty at universities of Afghanistan but Afghan students both rural and urban ones in other countries faced similar issues. For instance, findings of a study about Afghan students' academic experiences in the United States (US) universities indicated that Afghan students in US universities

faced hurdles due to different teaching styles between their home country and the host country. Research by Sabri (2019) also highlighted these challenges, including unfamiliar methods like group work and research which are common in US universities. This stems from the educational gap between the two countries. Studies showed that Afghan students struggled with research, a core aspect of US graduate programs (Esmaily et al., 2010 as cited in Sabri, 2019).

Likewise, rural students in Afghan universities struggled with new university teaching methods as this experience was described by one of the female graduates at Takhar university, “Unprepared for seminar, I struggled: what is it? How to prepare it? I could not ask. The teacher said 'type it.' I panicked no computer! The days were bad. I tracked a classmate to learn” (Ulfatmah, Personal Communication: Interview #3, 12.01.2024).

Moreover, research indicates that rural students faced social challenges when transitioning to a university context and urban students discriminated against them because of their background. Findings of one study about Chinese rural students studying at urban universities found that rural girls faced discrimination in universities because their behaviour and speech, seen as unsophisticated, lead to mockery and assumptions of inferiority (Mu, 2021). Similar to rural students at Chinese universities, participants of my research also encountered discriminative behaviours based on rural-urban differences. One such discrimination was about the language and accents of Afghan rural students, which were different from urban people. For instance, Noor Mohammad participant in the research faced such behaviour at Farah University, he described, “We were from the rural districts of Badakhshan and our accent was very different. When we started to speak using our accent, others started to say how you are speaking and they were insulting us so it is important for the university to have transition programs to avoid such problems” (Personal Communication: Interview #2, 12.01.2024). These things usually happen to rural students when they go to university but they should have tolerance and the ability to adapt themselves to the new environment. Abdul Jabar was another participant of my research who found social life something challenging but still flexible to adjust

himself. He emphasised, “Solo living (cooking, social) in a new, culturally diverse environment requires navigating social complexities. Integration takes time, but cultural flexibility is key to avoiding isolation and thriving in the community (Personal Communication: Interview #9, 16.01.2024).

Afghanistan is one of the poorest countries in the world where access to quality education for rural students both girls and boys due to economic problems is one of the significant challenges (Arooje & Burrige, 2022). It is because Arooje and Burrige (2022) believe that rural students sometimes have to work during their school and university to support their studies and parents by getting a surviving income through working on the farm or pulling trolleys in the city. Students, who went to university and did not have support from their parents, started selling items in the city to support their studies. In the same way, economic and financial limitations were the most frequent findings of this research about the lives of rural Afghan students during university. The relationship between a stable economy and success in studies is close because students need to have the required resources and facilities which need money to buy and failing to do this affects their studies. One of the research participants highlighted the lack of financial support as a barrier. He said, “Some students, including those from villages, lack resources for study materials or phones to access PDFs shared in groups. Urban peers occasionally assisted by sharing or purchasing course materials and seminars, recognizing economic challenges” (Personal Communication: Interview #5, 13.01.2024).

The findings of this research also indicated that rural students used a variety of techniques and activities to keep themselves healthy and support their studies financially. Janbek, Imam Nazar and Ulfatmah described that they found part-time jobs and some of their friends worked in the city by selling items to pay their university expenses. On the other hand, other students like Milad, Janbek and Abdul Jabar said they used to join sport clubs, exercise and walking to manage their stress levels and keep themselves healthy whenever they felt homesick or felt pressured from studies (Abdul Jabar, Interview #9, 16.01.2024; Janbek, Interview #4, 13.01.2024; Milad, Interview #6, 14.01.2024).

The findings of the research showed that rural students despite encountering constraints during their transition to university and limited university support system applied various techniques and ways to adapt themselves to the complex academic and city environment. Personal efforts and preparations during university were some of those strategies most rural students used to cope with challenges relating to their studies and academic preparation. In relation to this, Mr Marhamat (Interview #1, 11.01.2024) a rural student who studied in Mazari Sharif City (Balkh Province) described his method, “We coped with patience and hard work. To adapt academically, we took private courses to succeed alongside our peers”. In addition, rural students who are currently studying at universities have further methods to overcome academic challenges. For instance, Noor Mohammad used effective and smart note taking as a key strategy to learn the lectures, which later he referred to and revised his notes as needed. Similarly, Ulfatmah another student collaborated with her peers and classmates on how to prepare university assignments digitally. Both Noor Mohammad and Ulfatmah learned the local and national languages to improve their academic skills and build bonds with local people (Noor Mohammad, Interview #2, 12.01.2024; Ulfatmah, Interview #3, 12.01.2024). The strategies and efforts of rural students in Afghanistan are similar to those of Bangladesh rural students, which they applied almost similar techniques to adapt academically. For instance, Ali et al. (2021) said, “A combination of pre-departure preparation, individual effort, and support from the institution and peer groups may contribute to academic adjustment and successful adaptation to the new environment”. Although, the two points ‘pre-departure preparation’ and ‘institutional support’ were something lacking in the status of rural Afghan students but my participants used the other mentioned points. Moreover, another study by Xiulan (2015) about the adaption of rural students in Chinese universities also found that rural students' academic success would be increased if they were engaged with a learning community in the university, placed with urban peers and other support systems. Similar to the rural students of China, one of the participants of my research also valued membership in student unions and associations as a way to overcome challenges (Sayed Hussain, Interview #10, 17.01.2024).

5.2.3 Beyond Transition and Adjustment: Empowering Rural Students

Literature on the impact of the university on students' lives particularly rural students found that the university experience despite the challenges and uncertainties develops the capacity of these individuals, which later they can contribute to their communities through their active participation in their societies and working professionally as knowledgeable and skilled people (Stone, 2017). Although the expectations are, in such a way that rural students should return to their villages and contribute locally but Stone (2017) found that higher education enables rural students to find employment both inside their rural community as well as in the cities when migrating there. Another impact of the university on rural students mentioned in the literature is on their career development of students, which improves the socio-economic status of these students (Abu-Saad, 2016). Similarly, the World Bank (2013) underscores the role of education in improving the quality of life of all people including those living in rural and urban areas. World Bank, therefore, emphasises and supports the provision of higher education at all levels for all citizens. In Afghanistan, the importance of having an education degree at least a bachelor's plus having the knowledge and skills significantly contributes to the employability of the citizens. Doumet (2018) says people who hold an education degree will likely have better jobs and futures than those who do not. Therefore, in, Afghanistan mostly the younger population have access to a university degree as an obvious impact of university on students and this can help the country to have a more strong and energetic workforce. Moreover, in today's jobs market, either online or in-person jobs, knowledgeable and skilled graduates are more attracted by employers and they also bring changes to their personal and community life as advocated by Momeni (2019). In addition, similar studies done in the region also confirm the impact of higher education on developing rural communities and people. A study in one of the rural areas of India by Dutta (2021) shows that higher education improves the socio-economic of rural inhabitants and contributes as a catalyst for rural development. According to the World Bank (2013), those who have university degrees and relevant knowledge and skills have highest percentage of economic welfare with 36% and higher

education has a direct impact on rural communities' development. Similar to what literature evidenced about the impact of university on rural students, the findings of my research proved more impact on different aspects of rural students' development including their career paths, knowledge and skills and increased employment. However, the findings also found some dissatisfaction and critical points about less impact of Afghanistan universities by some participants but generally, the impact has been significant since all graduates of the universities who participated in this research were employed and had growth mind-sets and mentality towards development. It discovered that besides experiencing struggles in transition to university and facing numerous obstacles, university experiences generally had different kinds of impact on rural students' current and future lives. The first impression was a change in beliefs and behaviours of rural students, who came from deprived rural areas and did not have any clear plans for the future. Through university experience, Mukhtar Salimi changed the village habits and transformed his behaviours when he started university as he mentioned, "University boosted our performance and development habits. Professors' guidance, facilities, and a focus on learning empowered us to improve, grow, and progress" (Mukhtar, Personal Communication: Interview #7, 15.01.2024). University impact was not a single aspect but it had a wide range of roles in developing an individual who, through knowledge and skills could be able to solve social issues easily. Qais another participant in the research used to punish people to solve problems but after university, he learned how to solve social problems. He said, "I was an arrogant freshman, constantly criticized others. Professors taught me communication and positive reinforcement. Now I see force does not work, collaboration does" (Qais Ahmadi, Interview #5, 13.01.2024). Rural students gained specific knowledge, skills and awards from university experience, which are necessary for employers to employ them. They mastered both theoretical and practical knowledge and skills based on their field of study, which helped them in gaining employment as well as made improvements in their jobs. For example, upon their graduation they knew how to communicate with people effectively, and learned research skills and teaching methodology, which are practical experiences (Qais, Interview #5,

13.01.2024; Sayed Hussain, Interview #10, 17.01.2024; Manzalmah, Personal Written Story #1, 18.01.2024). Practicum and employment were the two important impacts of the university on rural students' personal and professional lives. Students who had chances to practice at university found them supportive in their daily work. In this research, participants appreciated the practicum and internships provided by the university and they found them useful in their workplaces and their current personal lives. This claim also confirmed by University professors like Jawed who said that their university signed different Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with corporations and organizations to boost the practical skills of their students. However, some participants criticised universities' lack of practicum and said that university just imparts theoretical knowledge without providing hands-on activities and internships. Employment of rural students on the other hand was one of the obvious and significant impacts of university. It is because all graduated participants had jobs and they reasoned that their current success was because of their university education. Moreover, even students who are currently studying at university found part-time jobs and creates their incomes but the participants of this research cannot be generalised to wider students, as circumstances of each person might be different. Contrary to what most of the participants said about the positive impact of the university on their lives, some participants have had unsatisfactory experiences from what they have experienced. One such less impact was the irrelevancy of the field of studies to rural contexts' realities, which affected rural students' employability. Therefore, there should be more context-relevant education fields in universities of Afghanistan because more than 75% of people are living in rural areas (Samady, 2001, November). On the other hand, professors claimed that their universities updated the curriculum regularly to meet the needs of graduates and employers. Mr. Ahmad Fazahil (Interview #15, 18.01.2024), one of the interviewed professors explained that Afghanistan universities update their curriculum every 5 years based on data collected through surveys.

5.3 Conclusion

The research studied how Afghan rural students adapt to university life in Afghanistan, amidst disparities between rural and urban areas. It explored how university experiences and support systems, along with students' efforts, influenced their career paths and post-graduation lives. Rural students faced initial challenges due to inadequate preparation and limited adjustment programs by host universities. However, their resilience, developed through hardships in their villages, aided in their transition. Challenges such as poor prior education, poverty, and social prejudices persist, yet students employed various strategies like private classes, peer interaction, sports, and hard work to overcome them. The study underscored the transformative impact of university education on students' career progression and overall quality of life. Graduates reported acquiring new skills, independence, and employment opportunities, with some even starting their own businesses. Rural students advocated for curriculum alignment with rural needs and technological literacy among parents and schools. They stressed the importance of exposure visits and city preparedness programs for rural students. Recognizing that rural students constitute the majority of Afghan university attendees, stakeholders—policymakers, educational institutions, schools, and parents—are urged to invest in their success. Empowering rural students will not only benefit them individually but also enable them to contribute significantly to their communities and the nation's development through employment, entrepreneurship, and active participation.

5.4 Recommendations

Research found Afghan rural students struggled transitioning to and through university due to limited facilities. Their unsatisfactory experience diminished the university's impact on their lives.

Recommendations aim to address these challenges.

- Addressing educational disparities between rural and urban schools is crucial. The Ministry of Education could allocate more resources and employ qualified teachers for rural schools to better prepare students for university.
- Ministry of Higher Education need to implement adaptation and special programs for rural students at universities to ease their transition and align them with urban students and university norms.
- Afghanistan universities need to provide more practicum, internships, mentorships, and entrepreneurship opportunities during university to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical skills, benefiting all students.
- Universities could offer facilities, orientations, and resources to familiarize rural students with technology and modern pedagogy before university commencement.
- Ministry of Education and Ministry of Higher Education need to mobilize international donors and stakeholders to invest in educational development for rural communities, ensuring equitable opportunities for all students.
- Researchers might conduct further research about transition and university experiences of rural students in more universities and provinces where majority of students are coming from rural areas to cover more population and as it is impossible to study this educational problem in one research.
- Universities should strengthen alumni networks and services at universities to track the progress and challenges of graduates, particularly rural students, and assess the impact of universities on their career trajectories and overall development.

References

- Abu-Saad, I. (2016). Access to higher education and its socioeconomic impact among Bedouin Arabs in Southern Israel. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 76, 96-103
- Adhabi, E., & Anozie, C. B. (2017). Literature review for the type of interview in qualitative research. *International Journal of Education*, 9(3), 86-97.
- Adil, H., Rao, C. V. K., Ayaz, M. Qasim, & Shinwari, A. (2020). Effect of compensation packages on job satisfaction and employees' retention: a case of Jalalabad-based private universities of Afghanistan. *Asia Pacific Journal of Multidisciplinary Research*, 8(2), 26–35.
- Ahmadi, F. (2022). *Higher education opportunities and challenges in Afghanistan: Afghan women's perspective* (Doctoral dissertation, Brac University).
- Ahmed, S., Iqbal, A., Urooj, B., Faisal, M.,. (2021). Higher Education Challenges for Rural Students in Urban Universities: A Qualitative Exploratory Study.
- Akçay, K., Altınay, F., Altınay, Z., Dağlı, G., Shadiev, R., Altınay, M., ... & Okur, Z. G. (2024). Global Citizenship for the Students of Higher Education in the Realization of Sustainable Development Goals. *Sustainability*, 16(4), 1604.
- Ali, S., Sarker, M. F. H., Islam, M. S., Islam, M. K., & Al Mahmud, R. (2021). Pursuing higher education: Adaptation challenges and coping strategies of rural students at urban universities in Bangladesh. *Tertiary Education and Management*, 27, 91-106.
- Anyan, F. (2013). The Influence of Power Shifts in Data Collection and Analysis Stages: A Focus on Qualitative Research Interview. *The Qualitative Report*, 18(18), 1-9.

- Arooje, R., & Burridge, N. (2021). School education in Afghanistan: Overcoming the challenges of a fragile state. In *Handbook of education systems in South Asia* (pp. 411-441). Singapore: Springer Singapore.
- Attride-Stirling, J. (2001). Thematic networks: An analytic tool for qualitative research. *Qualitative Research, 1*(3), 385-405.
- Aturupane, H. (2013). Higher education in Afghanistan: An emerging mountainscape. <https://policycommons.net/artifacts/1513512/higher-education-in-afghanistan/2186476/> on 21. World Bank Group. United States of America
- Baharustani, R. (2012). Comprehensive Study of Higher Education in Afghanistan. <https://docplayer.net/10839146-Comprehensive-study-of-higher-education-in-afghanistan.html>
- Baklashova, T. A., & Kazakov, A. V. (2016). Challenges of International Students' Adjustment to a Higher Education Institution. *International Journal of Environmental and Science Education, 11*(8), 1821-1832.
- Boddy, C.R. (2016). Sample size for qualitative research. *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal, 19*(4), 426-432.
- Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (1992). *Qualitative Research for Education: An Introduction to Theory and Methods*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77- 101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Byun, S. Y., Meece, J. L., & Irvin, M. J. (2012). Rural-nonrural disparities in postsecondary educational attainment revisited. *American educational research journal, 49*(3), 412-437.

- Carnevale, A. P., Smith, N., Melton, M., & Price, E. (2015). *Learning While Earning: The New Normal*. Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce.
- Creswell, J. W. (1994). *Research Design: qualitative, quantitative and mixed approaches*. London & New Delhi: Sage.
- Creswell, W. J. & Poth, N. C. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry & research: Choosing among five approaches*. (4th ed.). Sage
- Creswell, W. J. (2015). *Educational research: planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research*. (5th ed.). Pearson
- Doumet, M. H. (2018, July 16). The economic value of higher education. OCED. <https://oecdeditoday.com/the-economic-value-of-higher-education/>
- Doyle, J. (2014). *Victorian Auditor-General's Report. Access to Education for Rural Students, VAGO, Australia*. <https://www.audit.vic.gov.au/report/access-education-rural-students?section=>
- Dutta, R. (2021). The Impact of Higher Education in Rural Areas- A Case Study. *International Journal of Mechanical Engineering*. https://kalaharijournals.com/resources/DEC_461.pdf
- Easar, F., Azizi, H., Rahmani, K., Moradi, M. & Faqiryar, W.N. (2023). Education in Afghanistan since 2001: Evolutions and Rollbacks. *Research Series of Rumi Organization for Research 1* (1): 46. <https://rumi.academy/10101010101.pdf>.
- Esmaily, A., Pahwa, A., Thompson, J., & Watts, D. (2010, June). Challenges And Opportunities In Strengthening Higher Education In Afghanistan. *Annual Conference & Exposition* (pp. 15-271).
- Ghulam, H., & Naqawi, G.H., (2022). A Brief Study on Education in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2019. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/365615258_A_Brief_Study_on_Education_in_Afghanistan_from_2001_to_2019

- Goldman, A. (2019). Interpreting Rural Students' Stories of Access to a Flagship University. *The Rural Educator*, 40(1), 16-28. <https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v40i1.530>
- Guerrero, J. T. (2021). The influence of dual enrolment on rural student college persistence. <https://doi.org/10.18297/etd/3759>
- Guzmán, A., Barragán, S., & Cala Vitery, F. (2021, September). Dropout in rural higher education: A systematic review. In *Frontiers in Education* (Vol. 6, p. 727833). Frontiers Media SA.
- Hayman, B., Wilkes, L., Jackson, D., & Halcomb, E. (2012). Story-sharing as a method of data collection in qualitative research. *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, 21(1-2), 285-287.
- Hayward, F. M. (2008). Strategic Planning for Higher Education in Developing Countries: Challenges and Lessons. *Planning for Higher Education*, 36(3), 5-21.
- Hektner, J. M. (1995). When moving up implies moving out: Rural adolescent conflict in the transition to adulthood. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 11(1), 3-14.
- Johnson, R. B., & Christensen, L. B. (2004). Educational Research: Quantitative, Qualitative, and Mixed Approaches. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3102/0013189X033007014>
- Khan, S., Shahriar, M.S., Jahan, S., & Zayed, N.M. (2020). The Challenges of Students from Rural Backgrounds in Urban Institutions for Tertiary Education: A Case Study on Students' Migration to Dhaka City. *International Journal of Management*, 11 (5), 2020, pp. 1225-1231. <http://www.iaeme.com/IJM/issues.asp?JType=IJM&VType=11&IType=5>
- Kriukow, J. (2024). Qualitative coding and thematic analysis in Microsoft Word. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XOYhkUC21wQ>

- Lashari, S. A., Kaur, A., & Awang-Hashim, R. (2018). Home Away from Home-The Role of Social Support for International Students' Adjustment. *Malaysian Journal of Learning and Instruction, 15*(2), 33-54.
- Leshem, S., & Trafford, V. (2007). Overlooking the conceptual framework. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International, 44*(1), 93-105.
- Lester, J. N., Cho, Y., & Lochmiller, C. R. (2020). Learning to do qualitative data analysis: A starting point. *Human Resource Development Review, 19*(1), 94–106. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1534484320903890>
- Lincoln, Y., and Guba, E. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage.
- Lo, V. P. (2022). The challenges of Rural Students in Vietnam towards higher education. *International Journal of TESOL & Education, 2*(1), 225-237. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.54855/ijte.222114>
- Lyngdoh Nonglait, F., & Myrthong, D. B. (2021). Rural Students Transition into Higher Education in Meghalaya: Challenges and Coping Strategies. *The Qualitative Report, 26*(5), 1663-1677. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2021.4759>
- Masaiti, G. (2020). Rurality and student transitioning in higher education: An exploration of views of University of Zambia students.
- Mashriqi, K. (2016). Afghanistan women perceptions of access to higher education. *Journal of Research Initiatives, 2*(1), 2. <https://digitalcommons.uncfsu.edu/jri/vol2/iss1/2>
- Ministry of Education, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. (2016). *National Education Strategic Plan NESP III 2017-2021*. <https://moe.gov.af/sites/default/files/2019-12/NESP%20III%20English.pdf>

- MoE, A., UNICEF., & Hall, S. (2018). All Children in School and Learning: Global Initiative on Out-Of-School Children – Afghanistan Country Study. <https://www.unicef.org/afghanistan/media/2471/file/afg-report-oocs2018.pdf>
- Momeni, M. M. (2019). The Impact of Higher Education on the Employment of Women in Afghanistan. *International Journal of Advanced Research and Publications*, 3(6), 10– 16. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315797007-34>
- Morrow, M. (2016). Transitioning. *Nursing Science Quarterly*, 29(2), 177-177.
- Mu, X. (2021). Chinese Rural Female Students' Access to Higher Education. *International Journal of Frontiers in Sociology*, 3(12), 95-108.
- Muradi, A. J., Ismet, B. O. Z., & Azami, M. A. (2018). Study on Adapting of Afghan Students in Universities of Turkey. *International Journal of Scientific Research and Management*, 06(10), 694-700. <http://www.ijstrm.in/>
- Nyatuka, B.O. (2019). Transition and Participation of Rural Students in Higher Education: Barriers and Opportunities. *Journal of Education, Teaching and Social Studies*. 1. p 94. 10.22158/jetss.v1n2p94.
- Omodero, C. O., & Nwangwa, K. C. (2020). Higher education and economic growth of Nigeria: Evidence from co-integration and Granger causality examination. *International Journal of Higher Education*, 9(3), 173-182.
- Ontiveros, J. (2020). Connecting Rural Students to Higher Education. *The Vermont Connection*, 41(1). <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/tvc/vol41/iss1/8>
- Owens, T. L. (2017). Higher education in the sustainable development goals framework. *European Journal of Education*, 52(4), 414-420.

- Parsons, R. (2022). Moving Out to Move Up: Higher Education as a Mobility Pathway in the Rural South. *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences*, 8(3), 208-229.
<https://doi.org/10.7758/RSF.2022.8.3.09>
- Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (2005). *How College Affects Students: A Third Decade of Research. Volume 2*. Jossey-Bass, An Imprint of Wiley. 10475 Crosspoint Blvd, Indianapolis, IN 46256.
- Patton, M.Q. (2002). *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods*. CA: Sage
- Perna, L. W. (2005). The benefits of higher education: Sex, racial/ethnic, and socioeconomic group differences. *The Review of Higher Education*, 29(1), 23-52.
<https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2005.0073>.
- Pretorius, L. (2023). Combining research and storytelling: Using personal experiences as research data. Basil Cahusac de Caux. <https://www.basilcahusacdecaux.com/post/combining-research-and-storytelling-using-personal-experiences-as-research-data>
- Psacharopoulos, G. (1994). Returns to investment in education: A global update. *World development*, 22(9), 1325-1343.
- Rahman, S. M., & Hossain, M. M. (2006). Impact of Education on Socio-Economic Development of Rural People of Bangladesh. *Bangladesh education journal*, 9.
- Rai, N., & Thapa, B. (2015). A study on purposive sampling method in research. Kathmandu: Kathmandu School of Law.
- Rasmussen, P. E., & Kelly, A. (2016). Education sector analysis Afghanistan. Poraus Consult.
<https://www.globalpartnership.org/sites/default/files/education-sector-analysis-afghanistan.pdf>
- Rasouli, N. M. (2023). *Exploring the socioeconomic impact of higher education on private university graduates in Afghanistan: a case study* (Master dissertation, Brac University).

- Robiollé-Moul, T. (2016). *Peace Education in Fragile States: A case study of the influence of global discussions of peace education in conflict settings on national education policy and local NGO efforts in Afghanistan* (Doctoral dissertation, Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy (Tufts University)).
- Roehrs, C., & Suroush, Q. (2015). Too few, badly paid and unmotivated: The teacher crisis and the quality of education in Afghanistan. *Afghan Analysts Network*. <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/too-few-badly-paid-and-unmotivated-the-teacher-crisis-and-the-quality-of-education-in-afghanistan-2/?format=pdf>
- Rossmann, G. B., & Rallis, S.F. (2003). *Learning in the field: An introduction to qualitative research*. London: Sage.
- Sabri, A. (2019). Afghan students' academic experiences and cultural adjustment in the United States. *Capstone Collection*. 3244.
- Safa, M. H. (2023). Higher education abroad: experiences of Afghan international students in Bangladeshi universities (Master dissertation, Brac University).
- Sahar, A., & Kaunert, C. (2020). Higher education as a catalyst of peacebuilding in violence and conflict-affected contexts: the case of Afghanistan. *Peacebuilding*, 9(1), 57–78. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2020.1731123>
- Samady, S. R. (2001, December). Modern education in Afghanistan. *Prospects*, 31(4), 587-602. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF03220042>
- Samady, S. R. (2001, November). *Education and Afghan society in the twentieth century*. UNESCO.
- Samady, S. R. (2013). *Changing profile of education in Afghanistan*. https://www.pedocs.de/volltexte/2013/7798/pdf/Samady_2013_Education_Afghanista_n.pdf

- Schafft, K. A., & Jackson, A. Y. (2010). *Rural education for the twenty-first century: Identity, place, and community in a globalizing world*. Penn State Press.
- Schollie, B., Negroptes, D., Buan, E., & Litun, B. (2017). *Final report : impact of schools on rural communities study*, Schollie Research & Consulting, Negroptes Consulting, CASS.
<http://open.alberta.ca/publications/9781460131374>
- Shaheen, M., & Pradhan, S. (2019). Sampling in qualitative research. In *Qualitative techniques for workplace data analysis* (pp. 25-51)
- Skahill, M. P. (2002). The role of social support network in college persistence among freshman students. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 4(1), 39-52.
- Stone, A. (2017). Texas Education Review, Volume 5, Issue 1: rural students and higher education: an overview of challenges and opportunities. *Texas Education Review*. doi:10.15781/T2R49GD58
- Terenzini, P. T., Rendon, L. I., Lee Upcraft, M., Millar, S. B., Allison, K. W., Gregg, P. L., & Jalomo, R. (1994). The transition to college: Diverse students, diverse stories. *Research in higher education*, 35, 57-73.
- Thompson, A. F. (2014). The Role of Higher Education in Rural Community Development. *Graduate Theses and Dissertations*. <https://scholarworks.uark.edu/etd/2117>
- Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition* (2nd ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- University of Southern California. (2024). Organizing your social sciences research paper: Limitations of the study. <https://libguides.usc.edu/writingguide/limitations>.

Unterhalter, E. (2019). The many meanings of quality education: Politics of targets and indicators in SDG 4. *Global Policy*, 10, 39-51.

Vaismoradi, M., Jones, J., Turunen, H., & Snelgrove, S. (2016). Theme development in qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5430/jnep.v6n5p100>

Van Hees, V., Moyson, T., & Roeyers, H. (2015). Higher education experiences of students with autism spectrum disorder: Challenges, benefits and support needs. *Journal of autism and developmental disorders*, 45, 1673-1688. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-014-2324-2>

Wahab, A., & Khatun, M. (2015). Problems and Challenges of Higher Education in Rural Areas of Darrang District: Assam. *INDIAN JOURNAL OF APPLIED RESEARCH*, Volume : 5 | Issue : 8. [https://www.worldwidejournals.com/indian-journal-of-applied-research-\(IJAR\)/fileview/August_2015_1443519855_01.pdf](https://www.worldwidejournals.com/indian-journal-of-applied-research-(IJAR)/fileview/August_2015_1443519855_01.pdf)

World Bank. (2013). Higher education in Afghanistan (N. 80915). <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/307221468180889060/pdf/809150WP0Afgha0Box0379822B00PUBLIC0.pdf>.

World Bank. (2018). *Implementation completion and results report, Education Global Practice South Asia Region* (Report No: ICR00004493).

Xiulan, Y. (2015). From passive assimilation to active integration: The adaptation of rural college students to cities. *Chinese Education & Society*, 48(2), 92-104. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/282201648_From_Passive_Assimilation_to_Active_Integration_The_Adaptation_of_Rural_College_Students_to_Cities

Yiquan, Z., & Yijie, W. (2015). A qualitative study of the adaptation of rural college students to college life. *Chinese Education & Society*, 48(2), 105-113. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10611932.2015.1014715>

Appendices

Appendix A: Consent Letter

Informed Consent Letter

Dear Mr/Ms:.....

My name is Ibrahim Bik Ibrahim, pursuing my Master of Education studies in Educational Leadership and School Improvement at the BRAC University's Institute of Educational Development (BRAC IED) in Dhaka, Bangladesh. You are being invited to participate in a research study about the adaptation of rural Afghan students to university culture and its impact on their career trajectories. The purpose of this study is to understand the challenges and opportunities faced by rural Afghan students during their transition from their villages to university life. This information will be used to develop strategies to support rural Afghan students and help them succeed in university and beyond. If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in an interview that will last approximately 50 to 60 minutes. The interview will be conducted in your native language (Persian/Dari) for your convenience. During the interview, you (current students and graduates) will be asked questions about your experiences as a rural Afghan student at the university and you (university professor) will be asked questions about the experiences of rural students in the university.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. All information you provide will be kept confidential. Your name and identifying information will not be used in any reports or publications so the researcher will use pseudonyms instead. There are no known risks associated with participating in this study. However, you may find some of the questions asked to be sensitive or personally uncomfortable. If you feel uncomfortable with any question, you are not obligated to answer it. The benefits of participating in

this study include the opportunity to share your experiences with a researcher and to contribute to research that may help other rural Afghan students succeed in university.

Please do not hesitate to contact me at ibrahimbik.ibrahimi@gmail.com or +8801941500885 if you have any queries concerning this study. If you agree to participate in this study, please sign, date this form, and return it back to me.

Sincerely, Ibrahim Bik Ibrahim

I acknowledge having read and comprehended the clauses above, and I consent to taking part in this research.

Signature:.....

Date:.....

Appendix B: Research Tools

Interview Guideline for Students

Details of the Interviewee:

Participant (Pseudonym):.....

University:.....

Interview date & time:.....

Questions:

1. Can you describe the biggest differences between living in your village and living in your university environment? How did these differences initially impact your daily life and study habits?
2. In your experience, what role do Afghan universities play in facilitating this transition for rural students?
3. Can you share an instance where your rural background actually became an advantage or gave you a unique perspective in your university studies or social interactions?
4. What were the biggest challenges you faced in leaving your village and adapting to university life? (social, cultural, gender, economic and geographical)
5. What specific difficulties do rural Afghan students face in terms of adapting to the academic rigors, learning methods, and social dynamics of university life compared to their urban counterparts?
6. Describe some specific coping mechanisms you developed to handle challenges you faced during your transition and adjustment to university?
7. What kind of support services did the university offer to help you explore and plan your future career path? (e.g., career counseling, internships, mentorship programs)
8. Do you see a gap between the career paths supported by the university and the realities of employment opportunities for rural graduates? If so, how can this be addressed?

9. What changes would you recommend to universities or communities to better support and prepare rural students for the transition to higher education and their subsequent career paths?
10. What advice would you give to younger students from rural backgrounds who are about to embark on their higher education journey?

Interview Guideline 2 for University Professors

Details of the Interviewee:

Participant (Pseudonym):.....

University:.....

Interview date & time:.....

Questions:

1. What struggles do rural Afghan students have upon entering the university environment? (Academic, financial, language, gender...)
2. What specific difficulties do rural Afghan students face in terms of adapting to the academic rigors, learning methods, and social dynamics of university life compared to their urban counterparts?
3. How do these challenges manifest in their academic performance, social interactions, or overall well-being?
4. What type of support systems does your university provide for rural students to cope with their adaptation challenges?
5. What personal qualities or coping mechanisms do you see rural students utilizing to overcome the difficulties they face transitioning to university life?
6. How do you see rural students navigating the cultural shift from their village communities to the more diverse and potentially secular university environment?

7. In what ways and how the university can support rural students to transition successfully to the university context?
8. How effectively does the university curriculum equip rural students with the skills and knowledge required for success in their chosen career paths, especially in a diverse labor market?
9. What sort of knowledge and skills do rural Afghan students learn from university beneficial for their future job and life?
10. How does attending a university ultimately shape career and professional outcomes of students from rural backgrounds compared to non-university educated individuals?
11. What advice would you give to younger students from rural backgrounds who are about to embark on their higher education journey?

Sample Interview Transcription

Details of the Interviewee:

Participant (Pseudonym): XXXX XXXX

University: XXXX XXXX

Interview date: 12 January 2024 **Interview time:** 10:34 PM – 11:34 PM (Dhaka Time)

Questions:

Interviewer: Can you describe the biggest differences between living in your village and living in your university environment? How did these differences initially impact your daily life and study habits?

Interviewee: In relation to your question, I have to say what I experienced myself, of course I am speaking from my own experience, the biggest difference was the behaviours we used in our village and the way we communicated with the people at the university at the very beginning of the university.

For example, I used local dialects, the teacher kicked me out of the class, while it was something very small and simple. The teacher had asked a question and when I got up, I answered their question, my answer was wrong, that is, I had not understood what the teacher had asked and I had answered something else. When he told me why you didn't answer the question correctly, I Instead of saying, Professor, I didn't understand what you meant by the question you asked, and I answered like this. Instead, I said: Professor, I didn't understand the question you asked, only the difference between the two words "yourself" and "you" is a problem that had created and caused the teacher to expel me from the class and they said that you have some kind of immoral behaviours. They also said that you don't speak properly, the way you speak is not suitable for a literature student, in the case that I had just come to the university and the village was also a place where the words "yourself" and "you" meant no difference. We could very easily call people who are older than us, and we grew up with this word, and I did not know or see any difference between yourself and you, so it created a problem for me.

Interviewer (follow-up question): What are your lifestyles and how are they different from the university environment or the urban environment? Can you talk about a specific example that you mentioned?

Interviewee: Yes, in general, in the places where we live, the villages are usually very small, and those who live around us are those who are known to us, those who we grew up with. We are so close to them that it is easier to live with them than those who we enter the city and live with. Then the same behaviours that we have with them or in the school environment or for example in the wedding circles that we have or for example in the places or in the places where the meetings are held is completely simple and easily. Then, when you enter the university, you see that it is a completely academic environment and it is a challenge for you in the beginning, or a life where you think that you have just been born and you have to build with this life, and it is very difficult and challenging for you in the beginning.

Interviewer (follow-up question): How different was the level of difficulty and method of study from the school you studied to the university environment?

Interviewee: Well, everything had its problems in its time, for example, when you go from elementary school or high school, it has its own problems. But as the school period is very easy and we can easily pass it and get behind it, when we enter the university, I see that the topics that are taught, you have not encountered them at all in your life. For example, the only thing that can be discussed in the university is that when you enter the university, you study very specific courses, but during school, the subjects are different. During the university period, it is only possible to focus on one specific part, always focusing on one thing becomes boring for you. For humans, this is where it causes difficulties and you think it creates bigger problems than during school.

Interviewer (follow-up question): When you go to the university or to the city environment, do you feel any depression, fatigue, or being away from home? If you felt, how did you deal with these?

Interviewee: Yes, one hundred percent, the family is the only people with whom we are comfortable, and home is the place where we feel comfortable and when we leave home, we think that we are from a village where there is intimacy and equality. In addition, we are all on the same level and you come in an environment where you are completely alien. Being away from family and relatives brings a lot of mental and emotional effects to a person, which can be very difficult until we get used to the environment of urban life.

Interviewer: In your experience, what role do Afghan universities play in facilitating transition of rural students to university?

Interviewee: The only thing that the university helped me was that it created an internet club inside the university campus for students who did not know how to go outside the city and solve their

problems. Or prepare their own chapters and seminars. In addition, the university makes books available to students, who can get books very easily, because usually libraries outside the university cost more, but this is not the case in public universities. You can easily get the book you want from library and solve your problems.

Interviewer (follow-up question): Does the university provide these things, for example, library, internet club, to the students free for rural students?

Interviewee: The University, especially the university where I graduated from, has a big library where books from all sections and fields are available, and each department has its own special library, where you can get books by just showing your identification card or student identity card. For example, for a week or so, when they could finish the book, they would take any book they needed, prepare their seminar or solve their other problems. Then deliver it to the university again, or for example, if there was a free internet club, they would go to the internet club and they would search for any topic they wanted and then print the information sheet and give it to you, these were completely free. These were the convenience that the university had created for those who came from the village and those who had a weak economy.

Interviewer (follow-up question): What plans did the university have for maintaining the mental health of the rural students due to being away from their families?

Interviewee: In Takhar University, personally, when I had just entered the university, there was a program created once or twice, which, if I am not mistaken, was called psychotherapy, which was a department in one corner of the university because of the internet club and one corner of a the room was given to someone for psychotherapy. Students who had mental problems and fell ill would go to the psychotherapy and there was someone who would give them a prescription or give them a sheet. He would give them a discount to go to the related hospital and show this sheet, and the problems and

illnesses of the that student would be solved very easily. Either psychotherapy would advise students, because of being away from family, lack of self-confidence, or whatever mental problem they had, they would go to the that psychotherapy, they would help them and their problems would be solved.

Interviewer (follow-up question): I interviewed several other people who said that they did not have these facilities in their universities.

Interviewee: No, I was in the university that I personally studied and I do not know about other universities.

Interviewer: Can you share an instance where your rural background actually became an advantage or gave you a unique perspective in your university studies or social interactions?

Interviewee: There is a strong point here, it is not possible to mention all of them, but let's go back to the first days when the teacher to asked me to go out of the class because of using the word “you”, and after that day, sometimes when I was talking in the class, the girls turned to me and behaved differently. They used to see and say that you are a village girl, stay silent, and this has somehow become my weak point, and this weak point made me find a strong point, and this itself caused me to try a little harder and not let this weak point become more of me. To be the more I thought about this issue, the bigger it became, and it was better to work on myself so that it becomes a strong point.

Interviewer: What were the biggest challenges you faced in leaving your village and adapting to university life? (Social, cultural, gender, economic and geographical)

Interviewee: In Afghanistan, to be clearer, Afghanistan is perhaps the only country that has all these problems, and after my own experiences, I can say that from my point of view, if someone lives in a village, it is difficult for them to get to university. There is a problem both in terms of geography and gender, especially if it is a girl, for example, far away from the Takhar environment or beyond Kabul,

when they are in, for example, Helmand, Balkh, i.e. places far from Badakhshan, they say: you are a girl, where are you going in that corner of the world? How can you live alone with the different people? Either economic problems make you unable to study in the place where you were successful, or according to you, the same geographic problems make you go from this world to study in that corner of the world. It is very difficult to go somewhere without knowing what to do and what not to do, especially if you are a village girl. In general, villages are treasures. A treasure is a place that is hidden. It is always like you are hidden. When you come to the city, it means that you have become clear, you have been known. Then you are afraid. You came from a hidden place to a free and open place. You are very afraid, especially if you are a girl, you say to yourself that I am far from the village. Geographical problems, on the other hand, and gender problems, which are added to these, 100% cause psychological problems as well.

Interviewer (follow-up question): Does this mean that these problems exist, especially for the rural students?

Interviewee: Yes, there is one hundred percent, and I myself witnessed these problems. The girls were deserving and got the first grade and were successful in the entrance exam, but because they were successful in a place far from Badakhshan or far from their own province, their families did not allow them to go to continue their education. For example, in Takhar University, I witnessed that a girl received a scholarship from one of the foreign countries for her best scores, but her family did not allow her to go to study abroad. Why she was not allowed to go to a foreign country? Because she was a girl and it is something that we regret. I believe that she could not go because she was a girl.

Interviewer: What specific difficulties do rural Afghan students face in terms of adapting to the academic rigors, learning methods, and social dynamics of university life compared to their urban counterparts?

Interviewee: When rural students want to adapt themselves to those who live in the city or to students who grew up in the city life, it is a very difficult task. Adapting yourself is actually changing. It is not an easy task to want to change yourself. Change from what you used to be to what society wants you to be, or where you are and should be, and they expect you to behave like them, to speak, this is a very difficult task and it takes a lot of time. . So I have to say from my own experience. For example, in terms of my accent, I had encountered such a problem, and now the same problem is going on with me, but in the four years that I studied at the university, I still could not get rid of it. Because I speak some words in our dialect, or for example I say that in “Kusha” means where, or for example the word dear, I cannot make a difference between A and H, even though I studied literature, but I still could not correct those things in myself. It has even affected my pronunciation. When I was reading the news on TV, our boss have changed my pronunciation several times and told me that you read it wrongly. So far, I have not been able to fix this, so for sure, it is a bit difficult for those who are from the village.

Interviewer (follow-up question): **In the difficult part of the lessons, for example, carrying out daily lessons, homework, seminars, and helping to understand the teacher's lectures, do rural students, including yourself, have faced any problems compared to urban students who have more preparation than you?**

Interviewee: Yes, they were and I was. It is easier if I say that we lived in a village that was far from learning many things that we should have learned at the time, but we did not. Everything has a stage that must be studied or learned at that stage or at its own time, which cannot be done after the time has passed, and it is not known until when it will be achieved. It creates a series of problems. When I came to university, in our first and second semesters, we studied English, they taught us an English subject and I did not understand it. I did not learn English at all, except when the professor taught and lectured. The teacher finished and asked, did you learn? We were lying. Yes, I personally did not understand anything. This is a problem and another problem when we just entered the university and on the first

day, the professor gave me a seminar, at that time the university had a section where the attendance at our university was in alphabetical order of the name and my name was at the beginning of the attendance sheet. I do not know if I should say fortunately or unfortunately we had a classmate called Aria, I don't understand, it was half in the middle of the class, I had come in the first, and every seminar that was held I was given first. I was a person who just came from the village. I knew I had a shame, I did not know, it must have been false pride that I was ashamed to ask someone how to prepare this. When they said seminar, I was wondering what seminar is? How should I prepare this? Even I could not ask the teacher how to prepare, where to get the materials, how should I write this. The teacher said to type, I said again, God, where can I get a computer, from whom can I get a computer, how I should type this. These were the questions and problems, which were created for me in the beginning, and I spent bad days until I got it right, there was even a day when I followed the most active student in our class to see how he prepared his seminar. He was from the city of Taleqan itself. I saw how far he went, what he did to prepare his seminar, until I learned and until I was able to prepare my seminar.

Interviewer (follow-up question): From the point of view of your interactions with your classmates, friends, university administration and president, and the people of the city and the market, what other problems did you encounter?

Interviewee: Yes, exactly, I do not know if one thing can be discussed or not. We should discuss it in the topic, because we came from the village and we came from a relatively free environment compared to the city of Takhar. Here for us, even though it was a city but it was very strict for us, the more urban it became or for example, the more advanced it became, the stricter it became in our opinion. We used to go to class, the other girls wore veil (Hejab), that is, they were covered, and I was uncovered. I and two other girls were from Shughnan district of Badakhshan province is known to you that it is a little freer than Takhar. But the people of Takhar were very religious and when we entered the class, they were aggressive, the professors or students had a different attitude and behaviours. Some of them used

to tell us aggressively “You stand in front of a male teacher with your face open? These were things that were new to us, that is, I did not understand that it is a crime to be open in front of a man. It is true that one should consider the framework of Islam, but it was only open to us and I do not know where there was a problem with this, it was very difficult for us. The other issue was that, especially if I say personally, that caused problems for me; it was the issue of religion. When I don't know how one of our professors found out, that is, our Islamic culture professor told me to stand up when he entered the class, when I got up, he said where are you from? I said that I am from Badakhshan and Ishkashim. He said that you are Ismaili? I said yes... the same professor said in the presence of all my fellow students, do not enter the exam in my course on the Islamic Culture Day. I said why teacher? He said that because you are a girl, to be clear, you are not a Muslim. This confused me completely, I was shocked and I could not face the professor anymore because I did not know what to say. I had never faced these things before, and had not been subjected to any kind of aggression, especially regarding my religion. I did not say anything in front of the teacher; I just stayed and listened to the teacher's words until it was over. Then the exam came and I passed it with some problems, these were the problems that I personally faced at the beginning of the university.

Interviewer: Describe some specific coping mechanisms you developed to handle challenges you faced during your transition and adjustment to university?

Interviewee: In the previous theme, I said that my problem was, not knowing English, I saw that I did not know, I took an English course, and I knew that was the only way to deal with my lack of English, and I said that I have to go to the course, there is no other way. The second was the issue of my hijab or veil. They told us that your faces are open in front of male professors. We had to wear masks. We adapted to those environment as they were. And the third issue was the issue of religion, which the professor had called me irreligious, and I could not say anything, and the conversation went on later that the students who were in this religion decided to protest one day. The conversation led to protests,

and a professor came between who was from Shughnan himself a place where all its population are Ismailies, helped a lot in this work and held a meeting with the professors, they told to that aggressive professor that you should not instigate such issues to the students who enter the university, which will ruin the society. Instead of teaching them unity, you are teaching hypocrisy. For example, saying that no one knew about Ulfatmah, she is an Ismaili, but you told her in front of the students that you are in the dark and don't participate in the exam, that you are an Ismaili and you are a disbeliever . Because you are a teacher and a guide, the others found a different view of her, but whatever it was, you were a guide in the class, and you changed the view of the others towards this student. Later, the students may have other thoughts about this girl and see her in a bad light, and that professor, when he had a meeting with the university professors and the university president, made sure that the same issue of being an Ismaili or the issue of religion is not raised in the class at all. And don't ask at all. For example, do not ask a student what religion you belong to, just see the student from a student's point of view and teach them.

Interviewer (follow-up question): In the dealing with the problems of daily lessons, you mentioned a lot about the English language difficulty. What about other areas such as the professor's lectures, preparation and arrangement of seminars, and then the academic thesis, how did you deal with these problems? What did you do and if you still had economic problems or mental and emotional problems that you had, which coping methods and strategies did you use?

Interviewee: I said that if teaching problems happened to us, when the teacher was teaching in class, for example, we could not understand anything, the only way was to stand up and tell the teacher that we could not understand your teaching. It happened that the day the teacher gave the lesson and said that at the end of the lesson, I will ask all of you, according to some, it was called a lottery. When the teacher asked me, I said a few words and my tongue was tied and I could not say anything more. The

teacher said, "Why are you silent? I said, "I didn't understand what you said in the lesson you gave." He said, Why? didn't I speak Farsi?" I said yes, you spoke Farsi, maybe I did not understand what you wanted to tell us and I could not understand. Then we had a conversation that the professor should teach us in a simple language, because when we first came, even though we student in literature class, we did not understand the words that the professor was saying. For example, he used words that were so new to us that we did not even understand their meaning, and then we said, before you use the word, use its meaning and tell us the meaning of the word so that we understand. Regarding seminars, I said at the beginning that in order to understand the way of preparing seminars, I followed my classmates to see what they were doing and how they were preparing them. Later, those who came from the village to the university came to us and said that you, as the people who came a year or two before us, should advise us. It happened to me, a girl from the same village as ours got into the university. She came to me and said, as someone who came here two years before me, tell me how the seminar will be prepared. Then I told her to inform the first grader or the representative of your class about this issue so that you all get a specific place where you can get your information.

Interviewer: What kind of support services did the university offer to help you explore and plan your future career path? (e.g., career counselling, internships, mentorship programs)

Interviewee: The University facilitated cultural and scientific programs for students, for example, students who were good writers, poets or creatives were included in these programs, which were taken over by the university. Also, if I am not mistaken, there was something called the press section in the university, which was related to the university's media work, and one day I happened to be there and through that I was able to find a job as a presenter on television. There, the students were interested in the field of work, especially in the field of radio or television, where they could conduct interviews or talk shows. For example, students who wanted to be presenters in the programs organized by the university would create this environment for them and they would go there and register, and an

interview would be taken from them, and a few people would be selected from among them and introduced. They could go to the departments they were interested in, including myself, who personally liked being a presenter.

Interviewer (follow-up question): So you say that your university paid attention in this area and did some work?

Interviewee: These were the things that happened during the university, that is, it made the environment favourable because I had the same job during the university, I was studying and working at the same time, and after graduating from the university, we had to make our own way. We were finding out what we are good at and what we can do.

Interviewer: Do you see a gap between the career paths supported by the university and the realities of employment opportunities for rural graduates? If so, how can this be addressed?

Interviewee: The gap is yes, but not so much that it can be a huge gap, because we chose the same field of choice through the entrance exam at the beginning, and when we enter the university, then what you study in the university is different. For example, if I give an example, if I say civil engineering or electrical engineering, it is something that may have the same work opportunity in the village, but the work tools and facilities may not be there, or there are no work tools to do the work in the village. But a person who studied literature, or someone who studied medicine, can work in the same village, it is not a big gap, it is a gap, but you can see, for example, someone who did not study literature professionally can go there and become a teacher, or those who studied medicine can become doctors there.

Interviewer (follow-up question): How applicable are the knowledge and skills you learn at university in your daily life in the village?

Interviewee: It is 100% effective and useful. If I give an example of myself, the girl I am currently and the one I was a few years ago in the village, if I were to compare, I would skip myself or, for example, someone who is my age. She was my friend. I entered university. I came here and studied for four years, but my friend is still in village. She is my friend. It lets you go through it very easily. For example, if my family forces me to marry a person I do not know at all, that is, my father says in any way that you must marry this person, one hundred percent you must marry, I can convince my father with words because I learned this from university. If I hadn't entered the university, I wouldn't have been able to do this, the reason is that now I can convince my father by swearing that he won't be upset with me and I won't be upset myself and I won't be forced to agree to this forced marriage. There is a girl who grew up but did not go to university, her family puts pressure on her that you must marry this person 100%. Even though she was not happy and she says bad things to her father also she could not achieved their satisfaction to change the decision. Overall, she might harm herself and it is also possible for her to commit suicide.

Interviewer: What changes would you recommend to universities or communities to better support and prepare rural students for the transition to higher education and their subsequent career paths?

Interviewee: Families play the first role for students because they are the only family that supports and helps students how they can find their way to universities. For example, the entrance exam courses or in addition, any other course, they should create a favourable environment for their children to go and study. Fortunately, at the moment, the same villages have progressed to some extent, for example, the courses taken there from the offices and authorities of private sector from reputable institutions, families should send their children to these courses to pave the way for their children's progress. The changes that universities should make in themselves is that the main problem of public universities in Afghanistan is the lack of professional professors. For example, the professor has a master's or

doctorate in literature, but he comes here to teach geography or history. In general, they are not professionals, they should teach according to their field, if the profession is something else and teaching something else, then this is not pleasant for either the professor or the student. Private universities should adjust their criteria according to people's economy. For example, the people's economy is very low, they need medical or doctorate departments here because Afghanistan is a country that is very backward in terms of health, so you can see that people have all kinds of physical, mental and psychological illness, which they tolerate these struggles. We see that our society needs more doctors and private universities and they should make their medical departments equal to people's ability and economy. Society needs doctors, but because the economy is weak, they cannot enter private universities. Those who are students also dropped out due to lack of good economics, private universities should pay attention in this field.

Interviewer (follow-up question): Regarding their perspectives for example, the beliefs of people and parents about the education of students, especially girls, what changes should come in your opinion? Second, what changes can the university bring about in the selection of career path and jobs, or in practical work, many theoretical things may be taught, what is your suggestion?

Interviewee: In relation to your first question, I must say that you yourself know that gender plays very interesting role, as we have already discussed, which is almost a ridiculous issue in Afghanistan. For example, the girl cannot get anything she wants. Especially right now, someone who is interested in hosting and TV shows, like myself, but we cannot get it. This is something that the society does not want at the moment, we are not allowed to go and work on television. The second part that you said is theoretical and practical, yes, in the universities of Afghanistan, they teach mostly theory, they teach something that is mentioned in the chapter, or we study the medicine section, I studied midwifery myself, and in the first semester, I solved everything the professor told me. We said that the teacher should show us how to do this simple injection syringe in practice. He said go buy the syringe and I

will teach you. Well, money is needed here, maybe more than the students don't have the same money, but again, because it is private education, we will pay you, but again, they did not give us practical work, most of the lessons in Afghanistan are theoretical rather than practical, even medicine, which needs more practical work. They should do something in this issue and it should be dealt and solved separately.

Interviewer: What advice would you give to younger students from rural backgrounds who are about to embark on their higher education journey?

Interviewee: In the first step, my words are not only for those who come to the university, this refers to all students in general, but also when they choose a field in the entrance exam. Education plays the only very important role in their future and has a great impact. When I studied at the university and graduated, most of my classmates were not people who chose the profession they were studying, they only studied it out of necessity. When I asked you do not like this field, why are you studying? They said that we chose this in order to be successful, this was not what I wanted. They should be careful in choosing the field, choose what they are really interested in and think they can improve in this field. When they want to enter the university or from the village to an urban or academic environment, finding their way to the university or coming to an academic environment does not mean that you were able to reach a place. No, It is just the beginning stage of the work that you have just started. Therefore, you have to consider a lot of things to be able to continue and pass this successfully. The only way is to study not only the specific content of the university. the same chapters of the university and the teaching materials of his profession because this is nothing but just getting a passing mark. This will be forgotten- after some time. The only way to progress is to study any kind of book, but I think that they should not only rely on the university course materials, but also expand their level of studies in every field.