

Exploring Academic Experiences of Afghan International Students in Bangladesh

By

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

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Declaration

It is hereby declared that,

1. The thesis submitted is my original work while completing my 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 reference.
3. The thesis does not contain material that has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I have acknowledged all main sources of help.

Student's Full Name & Signature:

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Ramin Nikzad', is shown within a rectangular frame. The signature is stylized with a large loop and a horizontal line extending to the right.

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Ethical Statement

Hereby, I want to assure and acknowledge that this research paper is my original work and that the findings presented are not manipulated in any way. I have followed all of Brac-IED's research ethical principles, procedures and data management, and maintained the maximum possible codes of conduct. Additionally, as I was also one of the Afghan international students, I constantly kept myself conscious of not putting my opinions, biases and prejudices to be totally neutral while conducting the study and discussing the results.

This study involved a sum of 15 participants, of which five were Afghan male students and 10 female ones, from three different universities in Bangladesh. Here, they were coming from various parts of Afghanistan to study at different majors of both Master's and Bachelor's degrees. To adhere to ethical considerations, a consent letter was sent to the participants prior to their participation in interviews and focus group discussions (FGD). The names and personal details are anonymised throughout this thesis paper to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of the participants. Lastly, until finishing this study, all these raw data that were gathered and stored safely will not be deleted or destroyed; and they are not to be shared with anyone, except through the formal procedures.

Abstract

Higher education at universities abroad has become a sought-after practice among students worldwide. Each year, many learners leave their home countries for better educational and career opportunities. Similarly, Afghan international students seek quality education in diverse contexts, including Bangladesh. There has been a dramatic increase in Afghan international students in neighbouring and overseas universities in recent years. However, studies on their experiences, particularly academic experiences, are limited and need to be thoroughly studied. This research, titled ‘Exploring Academic Experiences of Afghan International Students in Bangladesh,’ examines the educational experiences of Afghan international students at universities in Bangladesh, focusing on opportunities, challenges, coping mechanisms, and their influences on their learning journey.

A qualitative research approach was utilised, collecting data through semi-structured individual and focus group interviews with a total of 15 participants. Students’ responses were coded, analysed, and discussed thematically. The results show that Afghan students benefit from university resources, supportive faculty, quality education, full scholarships, and advisors for academic and mental health support. However, they face academic challenges such as language barriers, different teaching methodologies, academic workload, and skill gaps; and sociocultural challenges including lack of social interaction, discrimination, homesickness, food adjustment, weather challenges, and financial constraints.

To cope, students employ mechanisms like building friendships, language acquisition, seeking support, engaging in extracurricular activities, improving self-reliance and time management, and social distancing. These experiences influence Afghan students’ overall learning journey in terms of wellness, academic performance, resilience, social network, and career opportunities. Lastly, students proposed recommendations for support services tailored to

them, including preparatory programs, research workshops, reading clubs, mental health resources, internships, scholarships, financial support, and dietary needs.

Keywords: Academic Experiences, Challenges, Opportunities; Coping Mechanisms; Sociocultural Adjustment and Adaptation

Dedication

I want to dedicate this thesis to my Family, especially my father who dedicated everything to educating all his children. He taught me the value of resilience and hard work and has been a constant source of motivation for me. Furthermore, my mother played a pivotal role in my life, encouraging me with love and support to pursue my worldly and spiritual goals. Last but not least, to all the brave Afghan female students in Bangladesh who seek to obtain education amidst the numerous challenges, including my sister who aims to bring about positive changes to their communities and beyond.

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List of Acronyms

APA: American Psychiatric Association

AUCA: American University of Central Asia

AUW: Asian University for Women

BRAC: Bangladesh Rural and Advancement Committee

FGD: Focus Group Discussion

IED: Institute of Educational Development

M.Ed.: Master of Education

NRC-RIM: National Resource Center for Refugees, Immigrants, and Migrants

P: Participant

S: Student

UG: Undergraduate

US: United State

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Chapter 1

Introduction and Background

1.1 Introduction

This research is a qualitative study to explore the academic experiences of Afghan international students in Bangladesh. Having good academic experiences is a crucial issue for international students who pursue higher education in a foreign country. Nowadays, several universities around the globe have eased their entry requirements for English language proficiency to increase their international student enrolment (Foster, 2015, as cited in Lee, 2021). Many Afghan students are also studying in foreign countries as educational institutions and universities want to raise their international students' enrolment rate; hence, it is crucial to grasp the present experiences of international students in particular aspects of life to enhance their success in academic performance (Avci, 2017).

The rise in international students highlights the need to understand their educational experiences to enhance academic integration and engagement. This understanding can lead to culturally responsive instruction that can benefit both educators and students. As globalisation intensifies, there may be a shift from domestic to international diversity, bringing diverse perspectives (Flynn & Vredevoogd, 2010; Smith, 2011). Globalisation significantly impacts higher education, altering the demographics of institutions and increasing competition in the global academic marketplace.

International students experience different challenges in their adaptation which may influence their learning journey. As an example, Afghan international students encounter challenges adapting to a new culture; they often find it hard to easily acclimate to this wide range of diverse cultures worldwide, which are all distinct (Ahmad et al., 2017). Specifically,

Afghan students in Bangladesh face different challenges, such as language, culture, education system, finance, dormitory, and social interaction (Safa, 2023).

Such challenges can negatively affect international students' experiences and lead to psychological problems such as stress, anxiety, low self-esteem, depression, and suicidal ideation (Hyun et al., 2007, as cited in Koo et al., 2021). Studies show international students experience higher levels of stress compared to when they are studying in their native countries because of numerous factors including varied instructional approaches, increased interaction with professors, an emphasis on group activities and assignments, heightened speech obligations, and extended study hours after class (Zhai, 2002). In this regard, there is a need for thoughtful practice, strategic methods, activities, and interventions by stakeholders where interaction among culturally diverse groups can result in a positive experience (Leask & Carroll, 2011; Volet & Ang 2012).

These circumstances can potentially influence the educational journey of students and possibly their well-being. Therefore, it is crucial to adequately assess such international students' experiences as it is considered a fundamental component of a healthy community. As a result, it is essential to know about the Afghan international students' academic experiences and coping strategies and provide them with sufficient support and resources to ease and improve their academic journey and experiences.

1.2 Research Topic

Exploring Academic experience will serve as a reliable reference for different stakeholders. Studying this concept seems especially significant for international students intending to pursue their education abroad. Those students who plan to move to a new educational environment need a source to know about the challenges opportunities and ways to resolve issues. The number of Afghan students in Bangladesh has been increasing over the

past few years due to the accessibility of scholarships and quality education provided by different institutions. Given the diverse background and growing population of Afghan students who come to Bangladesh, it seems essential that the interested students, newcomers, university leadership and faculties should be provided with sufficient resources regarding the academic and culture living within the new environment to gain a deeper understanding about the student's lives.

This research entitled “**Exploring Academic Experiences of Afghan International Students in Bangladesh**”, aims to gather the experiences of Afghan students currently studying at universities in Bangladesh. Indeed, it will explore their encountered challenges, opportunities and tackling tactics, as well as their effects on the learning journey. There are various factors such as cultural interaction, adaptation, and different personalities which can affect international students (Johnston, 2015). The finding of this research would help the various stakeholders both in and outside Afghanistan to have a detailed knowledge of the academic experiences of Afghan international students at universities in Bangladesh. This can assist them in understanding another country’s education system, opportunities, and challenges to incorporate positive changes and minimise students’ challenges. Lastly, being a reliable source of information, researchers, scholars and readers can find it helpful to analyse data on similar Afghan or international students.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

Universities worldwide partner with international institutions to offer study-abroad programs and serve a growing international student population (Exposito, 2011). Similarly, Bangladeshi universities have been a higher education destination for international students especially from developing and neighbouring countries. Quality education, offering scholarships and experiencing a new culture have been the main reasons behind this growing trend. Nowadays, several universities around the globe have eased their entry requirements for

English language proficiency to increase their international student enrolment (Foster, 2015, as cited in Lee, 2021).

However, as the international student community is expanding, students tend to face more challenges than their local counterparts (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007). Studies show that international students struggle with acculturation and adaptation challenges in Bangladesh. For acculturation issues, language barriers, homesickness, sociocultural issues and academic responses to new life are reported; and in terms of adaptation, students struggle with psychological distress, practical issues, discrimination and social exclusion (Parray, 2020). The main sources of stress can come from issues such as managing time-sensitive tasks, dealing with unorganised and unpredictable academic procedures, feeling out of place, financial constraints, self-doubt, balancing personal life with work, and interacting with faculty supervisors (Cornwall, 2019, as cited in Lee, 2021). Difficulties of such have adverse effects on the academic performance of international students, as well as their health (Kilinc & Granello, 2003). Consequently, leading to reduced productivity, burnout, poorer academic performance, delayed or incomplete coursework, and even illness (Lee, 2021).

Similarly, Afghan students in abroad universities encounter various obstacles to their learning journey. For instance, Afghan students studying at American universities experience academic challenges in teaching and learning approaches, academic pressures, language proficiency, research and educational facilities (Sabri, 2019). However, there are a handful of studies conducted for Afghan students in Bangladesh. Afghan students in Bangladesh face different challenges, such as language, culture, education system, finance, dormitory, and social interaction (Safa, 2023). Safa (2023) explores the overall perception and experience of Afghan students in Bangladesh on the new environment and culture. While considering the general experience of students could give a good understanding of how they perceive their

learning journey, deeply understanding the academic aspect of their journey requires gaining more specific data.

The academic aspect is considered the most elementary aspect that influences the educational progress and adaptation of international students (Shah et al., 2021). Exploring this area seems more crucial since in 2022 a great number of Afghan students started their studies at AUW Bangladesh (Asian University for Women, 2022). It means that they would experience a new academic setting and would try some strategies to overcome their academic challenges. Therefore, this study specifically explores the academic experience of Afghan students in Bangladeshi universities, their challenges and opportunities in an educational context, the mechanisms used to cope with those challenges, and their overall influences on the educational journey.

1.4 Research Questions

Question 1: How do challenges and opportunities faced by Afghan international students influence their academic experience in Bangladesh?

Question 2: How do Afghan international students in Bangladesh navigate academic challenges?

1.5 Purpose of the Study

This qualitative research aims to explore the academic experiences of Afghan international university students in Bangladesh. It focuses on students' opportunities, challenges, and coping mechanisms that influence their academic journey in Bangladesh.

1.6 Significance of the Study

Afghan international students are a growing population on university campuses in Bangladesh. However, this population is understudied, and there is a limited understanding of their experiences and needs.

The findings of this research will be used as a reference for current students and those who will be coming in the future to gain a better understanding of the academic and cultural experience of Afghan international students. This will assist them in their adaptation process and serve as instruction for new students to prepare accordingly.

Not only students, but the faculties working with Afghan students will use the findings to realise students' real needs and demands. Knowing these will help the faculties including instructors, leadership, counsellors and advisers explore ways to improve their services by partnering with them to promote education journeys, build up relations and learn more about students' cultures to help them with challenges.

Moreover, this study can provide useful insights for practitioners and policymakers who work with international students to have a more authentic and broader understanding of issues and to feel responsible for addressing them by informing the development of programs and services to support not only Afghan students but also international students' population as a whole.

Lastly, based on the findings of this study, some implications and recommendations will be suggested to different stakeholders to help and support the academic experiences of Afghan international university students in Bangladesh and other similar contexts.

Chapter 2

Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

An investigation of academic experiences – challenges or difficulties and their influences, positive experiences or opportunities, and strategies for adjustment established the conceptual framework that guides the research process.

2.1 Academic Experience

Epistemologically, experience, like an experiment, is rooted in ‘per’ which means thrilling or testing something (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2021). There is a distinction between experience past and experience present; Experience past means knowledge gained from the past happens, while, experience present refers to a type of consciousness. According to William (1983), the experience present is the fullest and most active type of consciousness which comprises both feelings and thoughts.

In education, student experience refers to different aspects including academic, social and campus life that a student experiences in an educational setting (Crossing, 2018). It also refers to student perceptions of the services provided by the university and interactions with teachers, staff and peers (Matus et al., 2021). Academic experience is the knowledge gained through learning, teaching and research, along with other diverse extracurricular activities that students partake in within the academic settings (Olutokunbo et al., 2013).

On the other hand, a student's academic experience includes opportunities, challenges and coping strategies. According to Adekalu & Oludeyi (as cited in Olutokunbo et al., 2013), international students are those who reside and pursue their education in countries other than their own. International students perceive being foreign learners from multidimensional perspectives from cultural and social to opportunities and personal growth (Kılınç et al., 2020).

2.2 Challenges of Being an International Student

Literature on the challenges of international students demonstrates that they confront numerous academic, language, and socio-cultural challenges. Below, each aspect is discussed in detail, both from international and Afghan international students.

Academic Challenges. International students find themselves grappling with significant academic challenges, often stemming from cultural and linguistic differences, as well as difficulties adapting to a new educational system and environment. According to Elliot, Reid and Baumfield (2016), academic challenges faced by international students involve struggling to use extensive library resources and advanced laboratory equipment. Additionally, the students deal with uncooperative classmates, certain expectations from teachers, different teaching and learning methods (Olutokunbo et al., 2013), like the emphasis on rote memorisation and the requirement for long answers, and an inability to express themselves in class (Ersan and Khalil, 2019).

Considering the Afghan international students' experiences, a study by Shah and colleagues (2021) shows they also struggle with academic challenges. They feel pressure to achieve high marks; face difficulties in understanding lectures and reading materials; fulfil high evaluation standards; have insufficient presentation abilities and limited understanding of the student online portal system (Shah et al., 2021).

Language Barriers. Understanding and communicating in the language of instruction is another problem for international students. While English is used as a prominent language in international universities, non-English native students grapple with its distinct accents (Elliot et al., 2016). The language barrier is particularly challenging for Asian international students, who often face the most hurdles in using the English language (Liu, 2009). For instance, Ersan and Khalil (2019) identified key challenges faced by Turkish international students in Pakistan, including language barriers such as poor English skills, lectures delivered in the local language,

and pronunciation issues. In addition, the language barrier is discussed as a long-standing issue for Chinese international students in the UK (Liu & Zhang, 2022).

Similarly, the Language barrier has been a crucial challenge for Afghan international students. Shah and his colleagues (2021) reported that the majority of international students including Afghan students who encounter English as a medium of instruction for the first time face challenges in their academic progress, with their English language proficiency impacting their performance in tasks such as written assignments and exams, quizzes, class participation, note-taking during lectures, and oral presentations. A study shows that language barriers can result in stress (Luo et al., 2019).

Socio-cultural differences and struggles. International students struggle with various social and cultural challenges in their adaptation process. Culturally, most of them experience culture shock, culture-induced misunderstandings (Elliot et al., 2016) and acculturation stresses (Koo et al., 2021). Likewise, foreign Afghan students struggle to reside in an unfamiliar environment where food is far distinct from their home country and attend student gatherings (Shah et al., 2021).

Furthermore, international students encounter several social challenges in their new environment including a lack of social interaction (Koo et al., 2021) and assistance, feelings of loneliness, alienation and isolation, unrealistic expectations of family and self, poor relationships with host people, and crises back home (Olutokunbo et al., 2013), as well as uncooperative classmates, leading to social isolation and exclusion from group work (Ersan and Khalil, 2019).

Socially, Afghan students studying abroad countries have similar problems. They face issues in their social lives such as being unable to shop easily and grappling with transportation problems (Ahmad et al., 2017).

Limited financial support and university resources and facilities. Another challenge that international students confront in their integration into new academic settings is limited access to university resources and facilities. This issue is highlighted as the most significant barrier to the successful integration of international students into their new academic context (Liu & Zhang, 2022)

Similarly, Afghan international students also encounter several challenges due to a lack of resources and facilities. They face with insufficient basic health and exercise facilities, career counselling, and accommodation services (Shah et al., 2021).

Furthermore, crises also stem from students' monetary difficulties (Olutokunbo et al., 2013). Numerous international students face challenges in meeting the substantial costs of tuition, living expenses, and other educational necessities due to the scarcity of financial aid options and available scholarships (Brooks et al., 2019). The financial issue is a pressuring challenge for many international students because their work outside the university is not allowed (Lee et al., 2004). This led them to take courses in shorter times so that they could ease the financial pressure on their family. As a result, the added stress could cause mental problems such as depression and anxiety (Pitner et al., 2020).

Chinese students studying in America struggle with numerous problems such as low currency exchange rates, hardships in receiving scholarships, and lack of student loans and job opportunities (Chi, 2023). Furthermore, international students in South Africa articulate that they confront limited support from their families, high-cost living, sometimes having to support their families with small resources and prone to abuse in return for financial returns (Mutongoza & Olawale, 2023).

The common belief that most international higher education students are rich is mistaken; the shortage of adequate funds is among their most frequently stated worries. As visa and immigration rules strictly limit non-Bangladeshi residents' chances for work or government

financial aid, Afghan students' financial issues are harder to solve than those of their local counterparts (Safa, 2023).

2.3 Influences on Academic Journey

According to Shah and his colleagues (2021), international students are prone to experience higher instances of mental health challenges compared to their local counterparts (Koo et al., 2021; Mori, 2000), while showing a lower tendency to seek professional help (Yoon & Jepsen, 2008), being linked to increased risk of developing health problems. Language barriers further compound these difficulties, causing frustration, low confidence, and a decline in motivation (Koo et al., 2021; Zhang, 2024; Xu, 2024), negatively impacting not only their academic progress but also their overall well-being (Xu, 2024).

Encountering cultural differences in tertiary education can result in personal and academic issues that could affect mental well-being and the ability to establish social connections with their local counterparts (Liu, 2009; Mori, 2000). As expected, they frequently form relationships with other international students, resulting in the creation of small cultural subgroups because of ethnic differences and leading to further isolation of some students (Liu, 2009). Liu (2009) also found that a deficiency in social support and connectedness can escalate the risk of mental health issues among international students from cultures that value collectivism.

The desire to perform exceptionally in academics could also result in more time devoted to studying, thereby limiting social interactions (Jiang & Koo, 2020; Liu, 2009). This could lead to international students experiencing feelings of inadequacy, isolation, and exclusion, which could potentially impact their academic achievements (Sabri, 2019; Darwish, 2022). Karakuş (2023) highlights the emotional struggles like feelings of shyness, fear, inadequacy, and lack of confidence experienced by some international students in Turkey that led to their moderate engagement in learning processes. The difficulties of maintaining contact with family

and friends back home can further restrict students' social support networks (Koo, et al., 2021; Liu, 2009).

In addition, international students' lack of experience in writing academic papers, carrying out research, and engaging in class discussions are significant factors that trigger mental health issues (Mori, 2000, as cited in Sabri, 2019) and stress when they relocate to a foreign country. According to Mori (2000, as cited in Darwish, 2022), international students face psychological problems such as stress and anxiety due to difficulties adjusting linguistically, academically, financially, interpersonally, and intrapersonally. While not exclusive to international students, stresses related to academic achievement can affect mental well-being (Liu, 2009; Misra & Castillo, 2004; Mori, 2000). A study discovered that self-imposed stress concerning academic performance was most prevalent among American students, while external pressure was the primary source of stress for international students (Misra & Castillo, 2004). Mori (2000) believes that this pressure could originate from family, friends, relatives, or sponsoring institutions with high expectations.

2.4 Opportunities for Foreign Students

Despite the challenges, international students benefit from opportunities that are available to them. These students not only use the academic opportunities but also cultural and social prospects.

Academic and growth opportunities. Studies have indicated that opportunities for international education can bolster students' self-assurance and facilitate their growth through personal hurdles. These experiences offer opportunities including career progression and the enhancement of personal traits like increased empathy, acceptance, and self-reliance (Lyu, 2023). Additionally, international students were actively engaged in the learning process (Karakuş, 2023).

Likewise, Afghan international students benefit from the standard of education they encounter in their classes throughout their educational journey, learning a new language (the language of the host country), earning a living and working overseas, and preparing themselves for a global future (Bahir, 2021, as cited in Safa, 2023).

According to Bahir (2021, as cited in Safa, 2023), they are also pleased with the quality of education in a foreign country and they endorse the relevance of the teaching-learning materials of the host country compared to their home country. They find the teaching methodology to be more interactive and student-focused than in Afghanistan.

Cultural and social opportunities. Study abroad programs offer international students cultural immersion, enhanced learning potential, the ability to learn new languages, improved communication abilities, social growth (Tamilla & Ledgerwood, 2018) and heightened awareness of diverse cultures (Lyu, 2023).

The diverse cultural experiences gained from studying abroad can stimulate creativity in individuals. As evidenced by Lyu (2023), students who have studied abroad exhibit higher levels of creativity and tolerance compared to those who have not had such an experience. In addition, he also discovered that international students possess a unique and original perspective on diverse cultures; This equips them with empathy, enabling them to engage positively with individuals from various cultures and establish robust social connections (Lyu, 2023).

On the other hand, Afghan students who pursue their studies abroad typically appreciate the cultural etiquette in their learning journey. They perceive their peers as friendly and well-behaved, stating that they respect Afghan students greatly, even at the initial meeting, and value their beliefs in their host country (Ahmad et al., 2017). Afghan students abroad enjoy gaining exposure to a new culture and fostering a cordial relationship between the host and their home country by sharing and respecting each other's culture and beliefs (Bahir, 2021, as cited in

Safa, 2023). Furthermore, Afghan students find it easier to adapt to a new country that follows the same religion (Islam) (Ahmad et al., 2017) because they share religious values and beliefs and have few cultural and customary differences.

2.5 Mechanisms for coping with challenges

As international students experience an educational setting that is different from their home country, they will try ways to adapt to a new academic environment. Here, academic adaptation refers to students' process and result of adjusting to the educational environment, which includes the interpersonal relationships system and educational activities and spaces (Alnajjar and Alacapinar, 2024). This experience involves a strong equilibrium between the educational environment and the individual (Sun et al., 2023). Academic adaptation is influenced by several factors, such as academic expectations, achievement, satisfaction and stress, language proficiency, and the learning environment (Campos et al., 2022; Van Tuan, 2020). As a result, international students use approaches at different levels to successfully cope with challenges and adapt to a new environment.

Individual and intrapersonal levels strategies. According to Berry (1980 as cited in Krsmanovic, 2020), there are four (cross-)cultural adaptation approaches practised by students as individuals or groups who adapt culturally to manage their relationship with the dominant or host cultural group – assimilation, separation, marginalisation and integration. Choi (2006) highlighted the international Asian students studying in U.S. graduate programs' coping strategies that improved their academic adjustment such as self-improvement, seeking help from others, allowing personal transformation over time, resource exploration, celebrating life and self, finding a mentor, hardworking, stress management, finding and maintaining focus or goal, learning the language and culture, building up background knowledge, perseverance, and expressing needs.

Moreover, it has also been discovered that Afghan international students ask their classmates, instructors and staff when they need any help; Some universities provide a health centre to refer to when they need psychological or mental advice as well (Safa, 2023). Furthermore, Afghan students cope with their new environment by engaging in campus activities, focusing on academics, staying connected with loved ones, maintaining a positive outlook, and appreciating the educational opportunities (Panke, 2024). Despite homesickness and future uncertainties, their resilience and determination enable them to adapt and thrive.

Institutional level support. International students, facing unique challenges and opportunities in a foreign academic setting, experience academic adaptation that extends beyond the usual complexities encountered by domestic students (Alnajjar & Alacapınar, 2024). This process involves nuanced factors related to cross-cultural dynamics, linguistic variations, assessment methods, academic writing, and teacher-student interactions (Oyar, 2021; San & Guo, 2022; Snoubar, 2017). Language proficiency is a vital factor in the successful adaptation of foreign students. International students' language competence, especially expressive and written language skills, plays a crucial role in their academic progress and socio-cultural adjustment (Shah et al., 2021).

The literature also highlights the importance of supportive factors that can enhance international students' overall experiences. These include effective orientation programs, academic support services, social integration initiatives, and counselling resources (Cena et al., 2021; Koo et al., 2021; Qiqieh & Regan, 2023). Institutions prioritising the holistic development and support of international students tend to see more positive outcomes regarding their academic performance, social adjustment, and overall well-being (Ning et al., 2023; Qiqieh & Regan, 2023; Xu, 2024).

On the other hand, Afghan students studying at abroad universities also apply different approaches to overcome the challenges of the new environment. Afghan students studying at

Bangladeshi universities reveal that learning the local language and participating in cultural events of the society have assisted them to better cope with cultural differences and language understanding issues (Safa, 2023).

2.6 Conceptual Framework

In this research, the themes extracted from the search on academic experiences of international students are used to guide the analysis and interpretation of the data. This study examines how each theme of students' educational experiences influences their educational journey. The experiences include the participants' stressors or challenges, opportunities, successes or positive outcomes, and coping strategies.

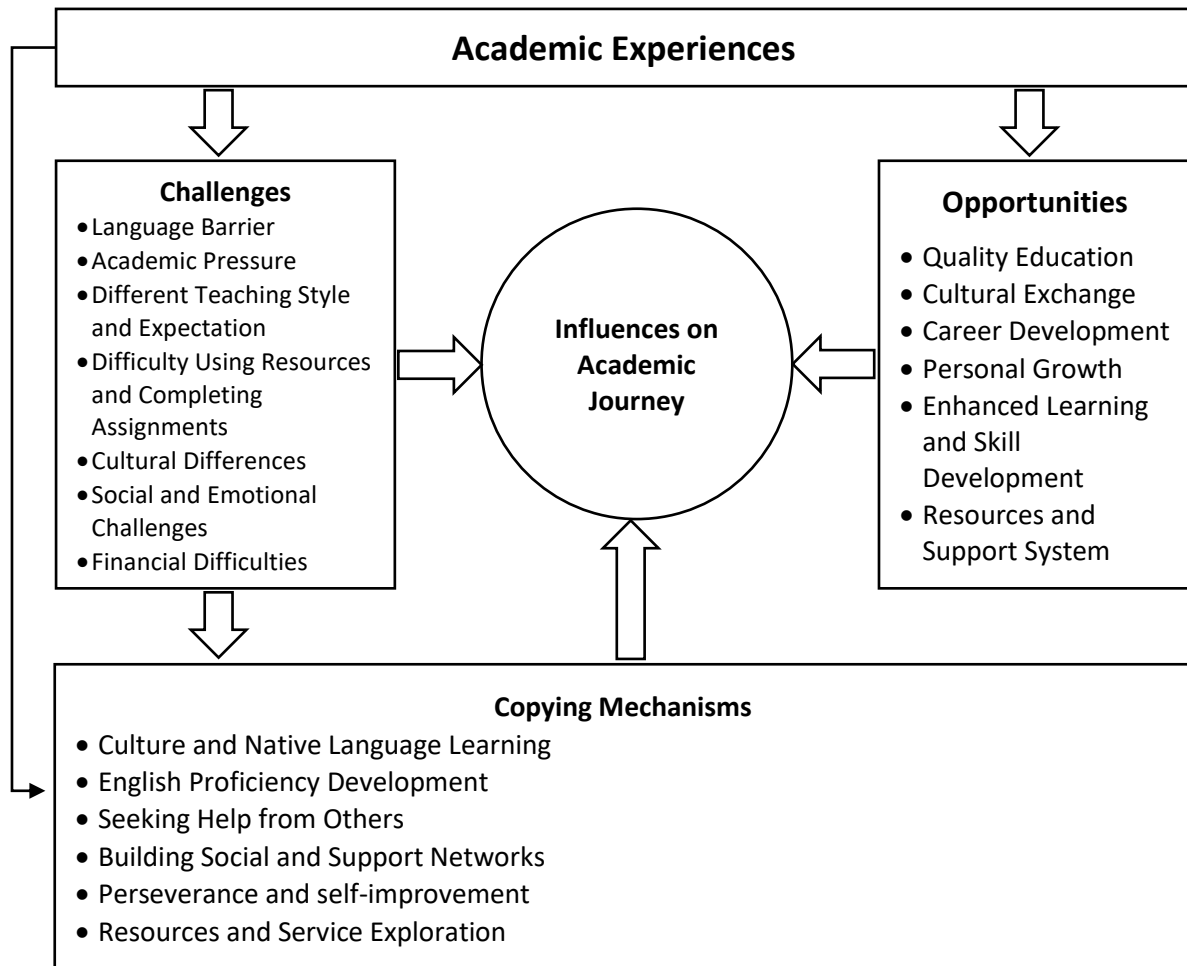


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Study

Chapter 3

Methodology

This chapter of the current study is about the methodology that was undertaken to conduct and prepare this research paper. It covers the implemented design that consisted of the following components such as the research approach, site(s) and participants, sampling procedure, data collection method(s) or tool(s), data collection process, data analysis, the role of the researcher, ethical issues and concerns, credibility and rigour, and limitations of the study.

The study applied a qualitative research method to deeply explore the experiences and perceptions of Afghan students. Those who are living and studying at different levels at the universities in Bangladesh regarding their university or academic life, challenges, opportunities, coping strategies, and their effects on their educational journey.

3.1 Research Approach

A qualitative research method that provides an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon (Anyan, 2013) is used for conducting this research as students' experiences and perceptions are descriptive and explanatory data. In this approach, the emphasis is on respondents' voices rather than gathering and analysing quantitative data, giving a chance to gather data both "verbal and visual than a numeric form" (Devetak et al., 2010, p.78). This helped to find the actual and main information from the participants' academic experiences and knowledge of living, instead of examining their understanding through predetermined categories. So it is an inductive approach where variables evolve from open coding, not from prior knowledge (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Additionally, through the qualitative approach, the review and analysis of the collected data from different angles were possible because there are many views of reality and it can be different from various perspectives (Dodgson, 2017). This research focuses on Afghan international students' educational experiences, cultural

considerations, and impacts on their higher education at Bangladeshi universities since their arrival from a subjective perspective.

3.2 Research Site

The research sites are situated within Bangladesh which are three private universities. They are located in different parts of this country and provide scholarships for international students, including the Afghan students chosen in the current research paper. Every year many Afghans come to such universities to pursue their higher education at both Bachelor's or Master's degrees. Two of the chosen universities are situated in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh. One of which is a top-ranking and famous university among others in Bangladesh that accepts many international students including Afghans from all around Afghanistan. The second one is a public university that offers scholarships based on the respective government's policies. The third university is situated in Chittagong, the southeast of Bangladesh. This international university was chosen as a research site because every year it offers more than hundreds of scholarships for Afghan girls and women, as well as other Asian countries, to accomplish their higher education.

The sites chosen in various divisions of Bangladesh allowed me to select and contact Afghan students who have various years of educational and social experiences in this country. These sites provided more detailed and in-depth data from two different perspectives, corresponding to two geographical locations (Dhaka and Chittagong). The first two universities are in the country's capital, which is more developed and open to foreigners, and the third one is in the country's southeastern part, which is growing toward development. This situation influenced the experiences of Afghan students, as my research participants provided diverse data that allowed me to delve deeper and collect a large amount of data during interviews and FGDs. I did not choose one site – Dhaka city – from just two different universities, because I preferred to select my sites from two different parts of the country to capture the varied

experiences of Afghan students in Bangladesh. This is because all Afghan students from three universities in two different divisions do not have similar experiences, while in a single division, it is most unlikely.

3.3 Research Participants

The participants were Afghan students pursuing their higher education at three different international Bangladeshi universities. There were a total of 15 respondents from Afghan students for seven individual interviews and two focus group discussions each containing four. Research participants were considered based on both genders; ten female students and five male students, all aged between 22 to 31 years old. They were from diverse provinces of Afghanistan; six of them were studying at the master's level and nine of them at bachelor's studies in different majors such as Computer Science, Electrical and Electronics Engineering, Economics, and Education. Their educational backgrounds were also different, mostly from Afghanistan and a few from third countries. Some Afghan students were doing their tertiary education in Afghanistan but because of the low-quality education and political unrest there, they withdrew and joined universities abroad. The new regime prohibited girls and women from education and work. Additionally, I chose those students who had both less than one year and more than one year of experience living and studying in Bangladesh.

3.4 Sampling Procedure

This research implied a purposive sampling methodology for carefully selecting 15 Afghan students from three different universities in Dhaka and Chittagong, Bangladesh. The sampling process particularly involved selecting and contacting four to six Afghan international students from each university, recruiting from master and undergraduate levels. From University 'A', six students were selected – two for interviews, two for masters' FGD and two Bachelors' FGD. As University 'B' did not have any Afghan master students, four were selected for interview and FGD (two for each), while only two attended individual

interviews. From University 'C', with a slight deference to the recruiting process of University 'A', one extra person was interviewed, making it seven.

The research topic was discussed by participants who were willing to articulate, express, and reflect on their experiences and opinions (Etikan, 2016). The purposive sampling technique was beneficial in identifying and selecting participants diverse in experience and knowledge from a limited pool of research participants. It also enabled me to choose participants with particular attributes that are crucial to the research objectives as it provided me with the flexibility to select participants in alignment with the research title and purpose (Rai & Thapa, 2015). The selection was based on the degree program they were enrolled in, their length of stay, their academic background, and their academic performance. Furthermore, the use of purposive sampling ensured that the chosen participants were capable of providing insightful awareness of the research topic, thereby facilitating a more thorough and significant analysis of the gathered data.

3.5 Data Collection Methods

In this qualitative thesis research, two different data collection methods were used; semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). They help me organise a set of predetermined open-ended questions along with emerging questions during the interview to collect more in-depth data (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). These formats facilitate an open conversation and allow the respondents' emotions and views on their academic experiences to emerge in a comprehensive manner. As John Lofland (1995, as cited in Frawley, 2016) highlights the open-ended nature of questions lets participants answer in their own way and gives them room to think about their own ideas, emotions, and experiences. It also emphasises the participants' voices and promotes empowerment.

The individual interview approach enables participants to discuss different aspects of their experiences without feeling stigma, fear of judgment, or influence from other participants, as

well as giving the researcher unique perspectives. Besides the seven interviews, the two FGDs were conducted through the Zoom platform with Afghan students from two different universities which allowed for gathering various data from homogenous groups of masters and bachelor students at the same time. Before conducting my FGDs and interviews, I piloted them to assess their appropriateness which was greatly beneficial to me as it allowed me to eliminate some unnecessary questions and incorporate some points that I had overlooked. Furthermore, it also assisted me with sequencing the questions and reducing their quantity. The chosen themes for both interview and FGD data collections are demographic information, perception of and overall academic experiences, challenges and opportunities of studying abroad, coping mechanisms, cultural and language barriers, and their influences on the overall educational journey.

3.5.1 Interview Method

An interview guide or protocol was developed to collect data about different themes of respondents' academic experiences – challenges, opportunities, coping mechanisms and their overall influence on their educational journey. An interview is characterised by Adhabi and Anozie (2017) as a dialogic process that empowers researchers to engage and collect individuals' views on a specific topic for a particular objective. They further highlighted that semi-structured interviews provide researchers with the flexibility to ask more in-depth questions based on the responses of the interviewees. Therefore, in this research, the semi-structured interview was employed as one of the data collection methods, allowing to posing of additional follow-up questions.

I interviewed a total of seven Afghan students virtually using Zoom, two of University A's Afghan students (one master and one undergrad), two students of University 'B' (both undergrads), and three students of University 'C' (one master and two undergrads). The interviews were recorded and notes were taken during the interviews that lasted around 50 to

60 minutes for each participant. Before the interview, I sent an email to my participants to know their available time for an interview with a consent letter to let them know about the goal of the research, ethical concerns, and audio recording issues during the interview. After their confirmation, I scheduled the interviews based on their preference, through Zoom or other online applications. Also, before beginning the interview, brief demographic information and permission to audio record the conversation or discussion were asked from each respondent. The interviews were conducted in English as per participants' preference, while also having the choice of Farsi/Dari (participants' native language) to prevent any language obstacles that may limit the ability to grasp profound experiences (Van Nes et al., 2010).

3.5.2 Focus Group Discussion

Focus group discussions, as described by Creswell (2013, as cited in Adhabi & Anozie, 2017), are a data collection method that employs semi-structured interviews in a group environment, usually led by a facilitator who navigates the dialogue, with varying designs in different focus groups. In this study, I facilitated two FGDs with Afghan students studying in Bangladesh, one with master's students and another one with bachelor's students of Universities 'A' and 'C'. This approach provided the opportunity to compare and contrast the experiences and ideas of participants and identify both similarities and differences (Omar, 2018). In addition, the group dynamic of the FGDs not only influenced the students to remember issues that might have been overlooked by others but also allowed me to generate new themes besides the predetermined ones (Palic, 2015; Boateng, 2012).

The FGDs were also in English through Zoom and lasted for an hour and a half. They enabled the researcher to delve into the group settings and identify points of agreement and disagreement among the participants regarding their academic experiences and their impacts. The FGD format also facilitated a friendly dialogue among the participants, allowing the researcher to capture a spectrum of opinions, both concordant and dissenting, and achieve a

more holistic understanding of the topic. In summary, the FGD emerged as an effective data collection tool that enabled the collection of rich data on the academic experiences of Afghan international students in this research.

In preparation for the FGDs, similar to interviews, I dispatched a consent letter via email to each of the participants. These letters contained pertinent details about myself, the research objectives, ethical considerations, and the use of audio recording. To know their available time, facilitate communication, and address their concerns or queries related to their participation in the research, if any, I created WhatsApp groups for each FGD's participants. At the beginning of each FGD, I reintroduced myself and greeted them to create a friendly atmosphere, encouraging them to freely exchange their ideas and experiences. I took notes of merging themes from their responses to my research questions and recorded the discussions. Upon conclusion of each FGD, participants were requested to share any suggestions or recommendations to the audience of this study and their institutions for helping Afghan students in their academic and social lives in Bangladesh.

3.6 Role of the Researcher

Starting January 31st 2024, I studied the academic, social and cultural experiences of Afghan international students at three Bangladeshi universities abroad. Before conducting the seven interviews and two FGDS, I piloted the instrument with some participants who had similar backgrounds to the potential research participants in order to test their retention capability. Although I also have been an Afghan student in Bangladesh, I tried to be mindful of my own subjectivity and judgment during the collection and interpretation of data. I prohibited any kind of influence by not asking probing questions and not reflecting on my ideas and experiences as an Afghan international student and acted as a neutral facilitator in all the stages of this study.

During my in-depth interviewing process and focus groups, I reminded myself that I am a researcher and my role is to recruit participants, design and conduct interviews and the FGDs, and analyse and report data (findings) in this specific situation. This helped to conduct interviews and FGDs having a neutral and non-supervisory role and not refer to any of my own personal experiences as an Afghan student studying M.Ed. in Education Leadership and School Improvement at the Brac Institute of Educational Development, Brac University (Brac IED – BracU) in Bangladesh while analysing and reporting my findings. Furthermore, in preparation for the current research, I completed two research courses as part studies to ensure I am well-equipped for conducting such rigorous and methodical study.

3.7 Data Analysis

I followed the six steps of data analysis for qualitative research which was introduced by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006) for thematic analysis. It was started by transcribing the recordings and field notes and reviewing the recordings and transcriptions meticulously to ensure a high level of accuracy and to note down the initial ideas (familiarisation). Second, the transcripts were used for generating initial codes by identifying and marking recurring patterns, ideas, or concepts. Third, the codes went to sorting and organising into potential themes that gather all relevant underlying data (searching for themes). Next, the themes were critically examined for being coherent and consistent with the data and for generating a thematic ‘map’ (reviewing themes). Then, each theme went through refining and defining or labelling to capture its essence (defining and naming themes). Finally, the findings of the thematic analysis were presented clearly and concisely by selecting vivid, compelling extract examples, and the final analysis of the selected extracts, while relating them to the research question and literature (writing up / producing a scholarly report).

In the final stages of this thesis, having the research questions in mind, I formulated six primary themes for the research questions. This structure or systematic strategy facilitated a

comprehensive analysis of the data and allowed for a thorough exploration of the data, concluding in a more detailed understanding of the research subject.

3.8 Ethical Issues and Concerns

Ethics, being the most important part of the research, describe the moral standards that direct individual humans or groups of people in their behaviour and decision-making, serving as a regulatory mechanism for their actions and ensuring alignment with recognised principles and values (Agwor & Osho, 2017; Ezigbo, 2012). This dissertation has reflected ethical issues in several ways; first, by obtaining participants' consent by sending consent letters and a brief introduction of the researcher and the purpose of the research, their confidentiality (using Pseudonyms) and anonymity, the use of a tape recorder for voice recording, as well as their roles. Second, by gaining ethical approval from the Brac IED – BracU's respective authorities. From an overall perspective, the ethical issues and concerns have been addressed all over the stages of writing the proposal, collecting and analysing data, and writing up the findings reports.

In this study, there also have been efforts to not mention their identities to ensure and maintain confidentiality and to protect them. Furthermore, in qualitative studies, acknowledging the researcher's biases is crucial, so it is acknowledged that having studied for my master's degree at Brac IED in Bangladesh, I may have been biased toward the results. All attempts have been made to put aside the researcher's subjective beliefs and experiences and to focus on exploring the participants' views and experiences in Bangladeshi universities. That means that I refrained from incorporating any personal reflections based on my own experiences as an Afghan student, and instead adopted the role of an objective facilitator. Lastly, I followed the member-checking procedure (Jackson et al., 2007) as well, which says that when all the notes and recordings are changed to transcripts, I should send them to the participant to look back to the transcripts, validate, and add/remove the data they gave.

3.9 Credibility and Rigor

To make sure of the credibility and rigour of my research, I prepared a research proposal, sent it to my supervisor and presented it to get the approval and expertise of the thesis committee members at Brac IED, BracU. I used different data collection methods or tools (Interview, FGD) and resources as triangulation and gave rationale to all the research parts (themes, questions, ...). I have also stated the researcher's position and used member checking and peer debriefing to ensure high standards (Rossman & Rallis, 2003; Creswell, 1994). Furthermore, I had two research courses as part of completing my master's degree that covered issues such as writing research proposals, identifying gaps and problems, designing research tools and questions, conducting and analysing research and many more topics on validity, credibility, rigour, quality and trustworthiness. As a result of these two courses, I gained enough research knowledge and became aware of those required steps during the course of my research, offering valuable insights to maintain credibility and rigour.

To enhance the trustworthiness and establish the credibility of the study, firstly, consent letters were sent to all the participants for their agreement to ethical issues, anonymity and freedom to withdraw at any time or stage. Secondly, peer debriefing and review were used to avoid any bias; and finally, both the findings and transcription of the participants' voices were sent back to them as Member Checking to confirm the originality of their voices and opinions. Last but not least, it is important to mention that as an Afghan student myself, I have not judged or biased at any step of the research and acted as a neutral researcher.

3.10 Limitations of the Study

This study has had some limitations that were tried to be addressed. The most significant limitation encountered in this study was the lack of literature. The limited number of research studies focusing on Afghan international students, particularly in Bangladesh, caused challenges in the literature review section of this study. To mitigate this issue, some

other related research that seemed applicable to the Afghan context and could address its issues pertinent to this study were examined. Next, around half of the research participants were supposed to have less than one year of experience studying in Bangladesh because they could bring their unique experiences but only four people could be recruited due to a lack of willingness or being too busy with university exams. This also caused the two participants of University 'B' not to participate in the FGD with the Bachelor's students of the other two universities, so I was unable to reschedule the same or another FGD due to time and participant shortage. In addition, from this university, I could not find any master's degree students to compare and contrast their experiences and views with other Afghan students and universities.

Most of the Afghan students who participated in the FGDs of this study were unfamiliar with focus groups, making the context perceived as unnatural. The researcher kept involved in the discussion to pass the questions to other participants, and also the more experienced (expert) students' viewpoints could sometimes sway the less experienced (non-expert) students' ones (Jackson et al., 2007) during the FGDs. To mitigate this risk, I avoided influencing them with routine questions and instead allowed them to share their experiences in response to questions based on their personal experiences.

Furthermore, due to time constraints, financial limitations and political challenges in Bangladesh, the research is conducted online through the Zoom platform from the researcher's home institution in Dhaka. Regrettably, these circumstances prevented the researcher from undertaking in-person interviews or FGDs in Bangladesh. While online research also has its merits, the opportunity to conduct research in person could have provided further insights and comprehension of the participants' experiences, facilitating the collection of in-depth data without any reservations.

Chapter 4

Results

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the research findings have been presented based on data that were collected through interviews and FGDs with Afghan international university students in Bangladesh. Seven interviews were conducted with Afghan students from the three different private Bangladeshi Universities (A, B and C). Along with the interviews, two FGDs were conducted where master's and undergraduate level students participated in separate groups. By triangulating the results from these data collection processes, findings of this research were generated aligning with the research questions and purpose of this study.

A combination of letters and numbers has been used to represent research participants anonymously, for example, P1 (participant 1), P2, P3, and so on for the participants in interviews and S1 (student 1), S2, S3, ... for the FGDs (#1 and #2). Dates were also added to refer back to the day of data collection, for example, P1(17.02.2024).

After data analysis, the findings were classified into six themes followed by some sub-themes to respond to the research questions and purpose of this study:

- ❖ Academic Integration of Afghan Students in Bangladesh
- ❖ Sociocultural Differences and Adjustment Experiences
- ❖ Coping Mechanisms and Support Systems
- ❖ Positive Outcomes and Growth
- ❖ Overall Influences of Academic Experiences
- ❖ Afghan Students' Suggestions for Improvement

4.2 Academic Integration of Afghan Students in Bangladesh

4.2.1 Academic Challenges

Participants shared their experiences at their respective universities, highlighting the challenges of adapting to the English language as a medium of instruction, teaching methodologies, and adjusting to a new country, academic workload and skill gap.

Language and Communication Barriers. The language barrier is a significant factor in hindering communication and learning among Afghan students. Participants reported difficulty understanding lectures and coursework due to accent and language barriers or differences between their native languages such as Dari/Farsi, which is widely spoken in most provinces of Afghanistan and the Pashto language which has prominent use in the south and southeastern parts of the country, and English language. Some struggled with English proficiency, while others found it challenging when professors or classmates used Bangla in group work or explanations or during lectures.

This was seen as a barrier in the academic setting for P5 in interview #5, describing the challenge of participating in lectures and communicating with teachers due to language barriers; *"The main problem is that the study is in lecture; when I don't know English, I cannot speak or ask the teachers if I have a problem."* (Interview #5: 20.02.2024). P1 in interview #1 had difficulty understanding English lectures and materials due to the language barrier so she had to focus on terminology instead of concepts;

The only problem is the terminologies and the terms for example in mathematics we already know the logarithms, limits and functions but we don't know some terminologies and some terms in English instead of being focused on the concept of their lesson or the chapter, we were just searching about the words in a dictionary (Interview #1: 17.02.2024).

P3 in Interview #3, 18.02.2024 discussed the challenges faced due to differences in accents and pronunciation between Afghan students and Bengali teachers. She emphasised the importance of learning accurate English pronunciation for their future academic and personal

development, *"Because it [Bengali teachers' accent] directly influences or impacts us, and the students' lives because we came here to learn, speak fluently, and correct our accent [pronunciation]."* (Interview #3: 18.02.2024). Furthermore, she (P3) struggled with vocabulary development due to limited opportunities to speak and practice English as she felt most of her classmates were Afghan students.

In the same way, accent differences with local professors were also noted as a challenge in FGD #1. P7 in interview #7 also struggled to understand lectures due to the use of Bengali and strong accents, making it difficult to participate in class: *"They [the teachers] speak in a different accent most of the time. And sometimes, they try to teach us or give lectures in Bengali, which we don't understand it though... I changed my faculties 3 or 4 times only because of these issues."* (Interview #7: 28.02.2024). He further added, *"Teachers are nice, but they don't speak English all of the time, almost 75% is English and the rest of 25% of the lectures will be in Bangladeshi, so there I am trying to understand the whole class."* (Interview #7: 28.02.2024).

Moreover, participants of FGD #1, 21.02.2024, who were Afghan students at the master's level in both private and international universities of 'A' and 'C', consistently highlighted the difficulty of transitioning from Persian-based instruction in Afghanistan to English-medium instruction in Bangladesh. This language barrier impacted their comprehension, writing skills, and overall academic performance. Participants 8, 10, and 12 all emphasise the difficulty of comprehending lectures, writing assignments, and expressing themselves clearly due to English being their third language. For instance, S1 in FGD #1 (21.02.2024) said he struggled to transfer his understanding to teachers due to language limitations, *"I couldn't deliver my means and understanding to the teachers although I could understand, reflect on, or analyse something. But whenever I tried to carry or convey to someone else, or I wanted to let him know my key points, it was the issue. Whether it was in*

terms of writing or speaking." (FGD #1: 21.02.2024). It posed difficulties in their academic writing and speaking, particularly in expressing their thoughts and completing assignments.

P5 in interview #5 (20.02.2024) mentioned struggling with English as their main problem because their previous education was in Pashto. Therefore, he feels the university lacks a program to help international students learn English before starting classes and transitioning to English-medium instruction; *"They don't have a plan for us for one year so that students learn the language first then they enter the university."* (Interview #5: 20.02.2024).

On the other hand, the English language was not much of an academic challenge due to some students' good backgrounds; as for P4 in interview #4, he came from a third country and attended his high school there and got good marks in the international language proficiency test, however felt isolated from local students due to language barriers: *"It was not a big deal because when I came here, I gave I had the IELTS document and it [the score] was eight so I didn't struggle more with the English language; but with the Bangla, we suffered a lot."* And for P6 from 'A' university, unlike P4, English was the predominant use as the language of instruction and communication in both academic and community settings;

We all the time use English as our language of instruction in university courses as well as in the community in which we live; people also communicate with us in English... both in university as well as in the community, so totally, we are used to this and we are using it. (Interview #6: 27.02.2024).

However, despite exposure to an English-language environment, he (P6 in interview #6) reflected that limited English proficiency impedes academic performance and communication skills:

Although we are using this language, it is still not at a very high academic level. Because of the language, we sometimes did not get high marks at university and sometimes even when speaking, we forgot words and sometimes we didn't and were not understood by the second person speaking to us; and in expressing ourselves, sometimes we use the things in a wrong way; so we need to practice it more. (Interview #6: 27.02.2024).

This resulted in difficulty understanding the materials, writing assignments, and keeping up with the fast pace (e.g., needing 3-4 hours to read a 20-page chapter).

Additionally, building friendships and connecting with locals proved difficult for some participants due to cultural differences and language barriers. S1 in FGD #1 added that he felt isolated or excluded when social circles converse in their native languages during gatherings, which are the languages he did not understand, *“For example, last night we were in a gathering and although they involved us and want to include us in their activities, they were just speaking in their own language and I felt I was isolated and sometimes I feel they can speak in English but they speak in Urdu or Bangla.”* (FGD #1: 21.02.2024).

Academic System. Participants from FGD #1, 21.02.2024, generally praised the quality of education, access to resources, and competence of professors. However, some of them expressed concerns about the language barrier with local professors and the need for more support for international students.

P1 in interview #1 also had concerns about instructor qualifications, lack of experience and the overall quality of academic programs at ‘C’ University compared to Afghanistan, as she says: *“Instructors are the students of ‘C’ University. I mean the postgraduate students of ‘C’ University, and they really don't have any experience. Even their behaviour is not like a teacher, I can say.”* (Interview #1: 17.02.2024).

One of the participants (P3) in Interview #3, 18.02.2024 reflected on the quality of education in Bangladesh and compared the proficiency of foreign and Bengali teachers, indicating a preference for fluent instructors, *"Some teachers are good, and some are not good, especially when we have foreign teachers, we have high quality like they are fluent, and we can learn the accent very well."* (Interview #3: 18.02.2024).

In FGD #1, 21.02.2024, Afghan master students discussed about quality of professors and teaching language variation between universities. S2, who had the experience of previously studying at ‘C’ University and then leaving and coming to ‘A’ University, in FGD #1 said, *“The professors of ‘C’ University are of high quality compared to ‘A’ University because at*

‘A’ University most of the professors are national, which means the locals.” (FGD #1: 21.02.2024). Similarly, this was also noted by P3 in interview #3 that in ‘C’ University:

Some teachers are good, and some are not good, especially when we have foreign teachers, we have high quality like they are fluent... I think they are good and I'm really interested to stay in their classes and I'm enjoying that, but not in Bengali teachers... because their pronunciation is different and the methods are different, they are using some kind of old methods and it's not interesting for all of us. (Interview #3: 18.02.2024).

Adapting to Teaching Methodologies. Students in FGD #1 talked about being accustomed to rote learning methods in Afghanistan and struggled to adapt to the critical thinking and analysis emphasised in Bangladeshi universities.

The differences in teaching styles and educational systems compared to the home country were seen as a challenge for most Afghan students. For the P2 in interview #2, teaching methods and expectations were very different from Afghanistan, saying: *"In Afghanistan, our professors just used to give us chapters to like memorise them and then they call us for an examination..."* which was a completely different teaching style compared to ‘C’ University, where more emphasis was on participation, critical thinking, and self-research; *"Here, we have the freedom to have our own idea, to have what we have learned like to give the professors or to tell our purpose based on our own ideas..."* (Interview #2: 18.02.2024).

Another student (P6) in interview #6 pointed out challenges regarding adapting to different teaching styles, *"Sometimes some teachers teach with a very teacher-centred approach. They did not engage much the students, but some of them were good at that. So those who did not engage us, the lesson was not effective or we were not active."* (Interview #6: 27.02.2024).

Similarly, a participant (P7) in interview #7 compares the post-secondary education and university teaching-learning methods between countries. He said that in Afghanistan, there is a high school structure where there are no separate departments for different subjects and all

subjects are taught altogether. He added that the teaching and learning methods are lecture-based and theoretical, using a single textbook as a reference.

However, he (P7) said that students in Bangladesh study at college after finishing secondary school, where they study in specific departments. He also mentioned that the teaching and learning methods in Bangladeshi universities are multi-approach; the students are expected to use different resources such as slides, reading references and conducting research.

Academic workload. The pressure to perform well in a demanding academic environment led to stress, anxiety, and even physical health issues for some students. P3 in Interview #3, 18.02.2024 talked about time management and academic pressure and described her struggle with managing multiple responsibilities and tasks, leading to stress, sleep deprivation, and time management issues that affect their ability to focus on their studies; *"It's so hard for me and sometimes when I start my day, I'm just planning to do this task and these tasks, and when I list it, it's more than 13 or 14 tasks."* (Interview #3: 18.02.2024).

One of the participants (P6) in Interview #6, 27.02.2024 said about the challenges of academic pressure, deadlines, and adaptation to a new academic environment:

We were under pressure and overwhelmed because there were different assignments from the university ... so previously I hadn't done such extensive and highly academic studies abroad... So overall, it was very intensive... I was not comfortable; So sometimes I missed the deadline and sometimes the classes were a little bit difficult as well because we (students) did not have much time to study or read the materials. (Interview #6: 27.02.2024).

P6 also identified ongoing challenges in language proficiency and academic writing skills (despite improvement) and their impact on meeting deadlines and academic performance;

Still, I have challenges in the English language at the academic level; I spent almost one year, taking some online courses, still, I am facing a lot of difficulty in how to write an academic article, and nowadays I am working on my thesis and I am struggling a lot, still this is not solved, and it has a very bad effect on me because I am not meeting the deadlines, and it became very difficult. (Interview #6: 27.02.2024).

This is supported by P7 in interview #7 by describing the academic challenges of adjusting to frequent assessments, assignments and language barriers in class in the

Bangladeshi education system, and contrasting it with previous experiences, *"So we're facing a lot of challenges or difficulties from the faculty side, from our teachers. So every day, we have new quizzes and assignments and presentations and all that stuff. We never had them before in my country."* (Interview #6: 28.02.2024).

Academic Skills Gap. In FGD #1, participants noted a lack of emphasis on reflective and analytical skills in Afghan education, *"that was something that in Afghanistan, there was not so much effort made on us; we didn't have this opportunity to work on reflective or analytical skills [like Bangladesh]"*, S1 (21.02.2024) mentioned. It made it challenging for them to evaluate concepts in Bangladeshi universities critically. As an example, S1 in FGD #1 said:

I think the skills that are required for running an effective educational journey in Bangladesh and at 'A' University are reflecting or analytical skills... especially we consider a point from one aspect or two aspects but there might be several aspects that we had to consider that. (FGD #1: 21.02.2024).

P2 in interview #2 reflected on the academic freedom to think critically and express personal ideas compared to memorization-based learning in Afghanistan: *"In here we have the freedom to have our own idea... based on our own thoughts."* She further indicated the shift towards participation and self-research in lectures in the academic setting – compared to passive listening in Afghanistan: *"Here, our lectures are based on participation, based on self-research."* (Interview #2: 18.02.2024).

Similarly, the emphasis on academic writing in English posed a significant hurdle for students, especially due to the difference in thinking patterns between Dari/Pashto and English. S1 agreeing with S3 in FGD #1 said, *"In my experience, whenever I was thinking, thoughts come in Persian. But whenever I'm trying to write down something, it becomes very confusing for me because my thoughts are in Persian. And I'm writing, or trying to write in English."* (FGD #1: 21.02.2024).

Correspondingly, for P3 in interview #3, transitioning from a rote memorisation style in Afghanistan to a writing-intensive curriculum requiring critical thinking and research skills was challenging so she felt unprepared for the writing demands of the program compared to her education in Afghanistan; *"In Afghanistan, we haven't much practice in writing essays, different kinds of essays, how to organise or how to make coherence in your essay."* Also contrasting: *"But here, you have to try it and your teacher wants the perfect thing from you. Their expectation is high, but you are not that much like qualified for that."* (Interview #3: 18.02.2024).

One of the students (P6) in interview #6 pointed out challenges regarding academic writing (referencing sources and writing in an academic style), *"The written assignments were very difficult because we had to reference and back up our ideas with literature. So writing academically was another challenge that we did not have that many skills in."* (Interview #6: 27.02.2024).

In addition, he (P6) discussed the problem of inadequate academic background and language proficiency on academic performance and adaptation to new academic environments, *"I did not have a good academic background. In Afghanistan, the quality of education was very poor and also the language of instruction was Persian, so I did not have that many English levels."* (Interview #6: 27.02.2024). P6 in interview #6 also talked about a lack of research skills and their negative impact on academic performance and overall learning outcomes:

In Afghanistan, we did not have and no one taught us how to do research, for example, qualitative or quantitative research. It was very new and difficult for me. As a result, in that final assignment... I got a very bad Mark... it had a very bad effect on my performance. (Interview #6: 27.02.2024).

P4 in interview #4 mentions that he feels Afghan students lack guidance and opportunities to participate in research activities like conferences and paper publications. He further adds they are unaware of opportunities (if any) to publish research papers and attend

meetings or conferences due to a lack of information sharing from Bangladeshi professors and peers.

4.2.2 University Resources and Support

Writing Centre. Unlike universities ‘A’ and ‘B’, ‘C’ University has a ‘Writing Centre’ that ... along libraries ... that are also available to students in other universities. P2 in her interview #2 (18.02.2024) talked about the availability and usefulness of resources like writing centres and libraries at ‘C’ University, *“We have a Writing Center here. We have the greatest writers of ‘C’ University working voluntarily to help out the students. So, yeah. Luckily I had them and with the help of them developed my writing skills.”* (Interview #2: 18.02.2024). P1 also supported this in interview #1 by saying; *“We have a library; we have a Writing Centre that they can help students who are not really good at writing or mathematics. They provide free facilities for them. And I think it's really helpful for students”* (Interview #1: 17.02.2024). The Writing Centre provides free support with writing projects, access to Wi-Fi, computers, and printers, and offering one-on-one sessions to strengthen writing and study skills. However, she (P1) personally preferred self-directed learning via YouTube, *“I'm not really good at going to learning centres or getting help from others. Personally, whatever I have a problem with, I just go to YouTube and follow the related channels.”* (Interview #1: 17.02.2024).

Supportive Professors. Most participants discussed the support received from faculty and peers. P4 in interview #4 values the accessibility and helpfulness of his professors, particularly their willingness to answer questions outside of class, *“Even sometimes we have a problem we just WhatsApp them and easily without any hesitation we ask and this is a good thing.”* (Interview #4: 19.02.2024). He further adds that in ‘B’ university:

Well, they do their best. And even it is amazing that we never find in other universities that professors have time. But here, all the professors, have time for students, as they keep in touch as like friends, and talk about our academic problems, we can share with them and they will solve of course. (Interview #4: 19.02.2024).

P5 in interview #5 supports this by noting positive interactions and support from faculty members, particularly towards Afghan students, "*The teachers... have a good relationship with us... They have good behaviour with us... especially with Afghanistan.*" (Interview #5: 20.02.2024). In the same way, P6 in interview #6 utilised and acknowledged institutional support through access to instructors, online resources, and specialised academic programs to address language and academic challenges:

The university instructors or professors were always available by email and WhatsApp; if we needed any clarification or any support... another thing is the online platform where they put all the resources there, including the presentation and suggested materials... And the institution that supports our program financially also supports us in terms of academic, English for academic purposes. (Interview #6: 27.02.2024).

P1 also mentioned the availability of teacher assistants (TAs) along with instructors "*At the 'C' University, we have teachers and assistants.*" (Interview #1: 17.02.2024).

Academic amenities or opportunities. All the Afghan students mentioned that they are grateful for the opportunity to continue their education in Bangladesh, especially given the current situation in Afghanistan. They appreciate the quality of education at their universities and the chance to learn from experienced professors.

P5 in interview #5 highlights and acknowledges positive aspects of campus life such as food quality, sports facilities, a mosque, a library, and a monthly stipend, "*They give us good food... we have a good environment for sport... they give us a monthly stipend.*" (Interview #5: 20.02.2024). He also praised the 'B' university's excellent healthcare facilities, a benefit not offered by many other universities in Bangladesh; "*They have very good facilities, like all Bangladeshi Universities, don't have such facilities, but 'B' University does. Anything you have a problem with, they will do it for free. Anything. So this is the good part of us, for students.*" (Interview #5: 20.02.2024).

One of the participants (P6) in Interview #6, 27.02.2024 described various academic opportunities, including courses, presentations, access to library materials, and online resources provided by 'A' University.

The main academic opportunity was the courses that we were taking. And then we also did some online courses on English and grammar, and IELTS preparation... Additional courses like the OSUN [Open Society University Network]... presented different presentations and papers. These overall very helped me and also I had access to the library and materials using the online platforms they have. (Interview #6: 27.02.2024).

On the other hand, P7 in interview #7 talked about the supportive international office at 'A' University that has been helpful in addressing challenges due to language difficulties, such as changing classes to find better instructors, *"The international office is really helpful to us. Whenever we face any kind of challenges or problems... I went to them and they said, ok we'll change the section. Then I changed the classroom from one class to another section."* (Interview #7: 28.02.2024). Moreover, he chatted about the exposure to a better education system compared to the war-torn situation in Afghanistan and believes the education system in Bangladesh is better than Afghanistan's. It was perceived to be due to the focus on research and practical application and offers of more opportunities to learn and develop skills.

The opportunity to pursue higher education on a full scholarship was highlighted as a major benefit by these Afghan students, many of whom would not be able to afford to study abroad otherwise. For example, S5 in FGD #2, 24.02.2024, said, *"The first one was having full free scholarships, which all the students here don't have this opportunity to have full free scholarships, especially in an international university."* (FGD #2: 24.02.2024).

In the first FGD, 21.02.2024, the availability of counsellors and advisors for mental health and academic support was brought up by Afghan master's students. They also said that 'C' University provided opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities (running club, student art projects), a part-time job, and leadership roles.

4.3 Sociocultural Differences and Adjustment Experiences

4.3.1 Social Difficulties

One of the Afghan students in FGD #2 talked about the physical layout of 'C' University and hostels saying it hinders their social interaction with students of other year

levels like Pre-Undergraduate, Undergraduate, and Masters. There, S5 in the second FGD mentioned that students from different programs are separated geographically and hierarchically: *"We can't see UG students because they are on another campus here. it is like a kind of level for students [hierarchy separation]"*, leading to less social connection and learning, *"So these things really impact the social connections between the instructors and between the students... we can't learn anything from a UG, see them around and understand their experiences because they already know about everything."* (FGD #2: 24.02.2024). P4 in interview #4 even observed physical separation in the classroom between local and international students, *"Even in our class, we international students sit on one side and local students sit on the other side..."* (Interview #4: 19.02.2024).

On the other hand, P6 in interview #6 talked about the limited social network and its negative impact on academic performance and student engagement; *"We did not have other classmates from the university... so, with the teachers, we had a very formal relationship and we could not become friends with them... that's why even I did not learn about them and their local language."* (Interview #6: 27.02.2024).

S4 in the first FGD, 21.02.2024, highlighted the issue of discrimination faced by Afghan students, particularly from Bangladeshi classmates who perceived them as receiving preferential treatment in the University 'C'. She also reported having faced stereotypes and negative attitudes, particularly related to nationality and language proficiency:

Because the number of Afghan students is increasing every day, other nationalities do feel jealous of the Afghan girls being praised or being taken care of more than others. So that has created a kind of jealousy and unhealthy competition between the two nationalities [Bangladeshis and Afghans]. So mostly the Bangladeshi girls have problems with students from Afghanistan. And the first thing that they tell Afghan girls is 'Go learn English first!'. So that really hurt me. (FGD #1: 21.02.2024).

S3 in FGD #1 added that they were also labelled as refugees instead of students by institutions, which was perceived as a form of misrepresentation and politicisation of their status and as a tool for publicity purposes;

One of the leading universities in the United States had called us refugees. But, we [choose to] came here; I saw the curriculum, the whole program and then I applied and came here, so this was a personal choice I made when I came here. I did it voluntarily to study for my master's degree, not to seek refuge in Bangladesh." (FGD #1: 21.02.2024).

P5 in interview #5 expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of recognition and support for foreign students compared to local students and felt a lack of respect *"They don't mind if you are a foreigner or a Bengali; You are equal... So I think this is not good because we are foreigners, we face lots of challenges."* (Interview #5: 20.02.2024). He further notes perceived disparities in treatment as Bengali students have advantages in English background, education quality, and teachers, compared to Afghan students *"We have a lot of rights in university. Bengali students have other privileges; They have English background, quality education, and teachers."* (Interview #5: 20.02.2024). On this point, P6 noted differences in academic culture between Afghanistan and Bangladesh, including study habits, extracurricular activities, and overall approach to education. He felt that Bangladeshi students had a significant advantage due to their upbringing in a culture that emphasised reading, exercise, and a balanced approach to studies. This was seen as a disadvantage for Afghan students who lacked such a well-rounded academic background.

If I compare students of Afghanistan to students of Bangladesh... Bangladeshi students are very talented because they were brought up or were educated and nurtured with very high-quality education... they keep balance, and try to enjoy their life a lot... In Afghanistan, students are just sticking to school studies or helping their parents, but they don't care about sports or video games or going to the library to read and all these things. (Interview #6: 27.02.2024).

P5 in interview #5, 20.02.2024, also feels a lack of connection and describes challenges in building relationships between foreign and local Bangladeshi students due to social barriers, *"Foreigner students have a good relationship between themselves. But not with Bangladeshi people, lots of Bengalis don't want to enter into a relationship with foreigners."* But also recognises positive interactions with Bengali classmates, highlighting exceptions to perceived social barriers, *"The teachers, most of the students, and Bengali students have a good*

relationship with us [Afghans]." (Interview #5: 20.02.2024). He mentioned his attempts to raise this issue with university officials who were not receptive " He told me we don't have that much budget for this issue; if we have a budget, we should do it, we know this problem so that's it." (Interview #5: 20.02.2024).

Correspondingly, P6 in interview #6 described challenges in social interaction, relationships and acceptance due to ethnic and cultural differences. He felt excluded and perceived a lack of support and interaction, or perceived attitudes towards foreign students from the local community.

Although we have a lot of similarities... people still do not like us because we are ethnically different, we have different colours and come from a different country... with us, they try to compromise and show verbally some support, but in fact, they do not do that. (Interview #6: 27.02.2024).

S3 in the FGD with master's students perceives differences in social norms, respectful behaviour, and communication styles compared to Afghanistan. *"The city not being clean, some people not having that culture of cleanliness and also behavioural differences, like we saw less respect in the way people talk and behave, was not a little bit but much different than what we experienced in Afghanistan."* (FGD #1: 21.02.2024).

However, it is worth mentioning that all the Afghan students spoke about the importance of social connections for their academic success and wellness. They also mentioned that they have made friends with other Afghan students and Bangladeshi students and that these friendships help them to feel supported and motivated.

Homesickness and Loneliness. Being separated from family and familiar surroundings led most of the Afghan students to feelings of homesickness and social isolation. As also discussed in FGDs #1 and #2, they expressed feelings of longing for home and family: *"Being far away from family is so difficult, especially for all the Afghan people that we used to live all together [in big families]."* Explained S5 (FGD #2: 24.02.2024). S2 in the first FGD viewed this as a normal phenomenon and said, *"Of course when we move to a new or different place*

or environment, some issues can happen like the homesickness and also feelings of isolation or being away from family and the families surroundings that we had previously.” (FGD #1: 21.02.2024).

One student (P2) initially struggled with loneliness and missing family; *"I was very alone. I don't want to participate or engage with other activities inside the university... I was homesick and I was not willing to make friends and like sit with them or those things."* (Interview #2: 18.02.2024). Others like P1 (17.02.2024) mentioned, *"When I was joining in a class, physically I was there, but mentally I was not. I was very distracted and disfocused... I could not concentrate and my academic performance got down after maybe four or five months and it was really stressful for me."* (Interview #1: 17.02.2024).

4.3.2 Cultural Differences and Adaptation

Participants of FGD #1 experienced varying degrees of culture shock upon encountering a new environment, language, and social norms. Afghan students highlighted both cultural similarities and differences between their home country (Afghanistan) and the host country (Bangladesh). Some noted encountering fewer culture shocks due to the presence of fellow Afghan students and shared cultural backgrounds. However, other participants in the first FGD, 21.02.2024, also mentioned encountering diverse cultural experiences within their university communities. This was supported by P1 in interview #1 who observed religious diversity and discussed adapting to a new culture, customs and social norms; *"When I came to Bangladesh at the 'C' University, we have maybe students, uh, with different – five or six or seven religions."* (Interview #1: 17.02.2024); and P2 in interview #2: 18.02.2024 added about religious tolerance and coexistence among different religious communities in Bangladesh. *"There is no discrimination between Muslims and those who have different religions."* Furthermore, P2 in interview #2 noted similarities and differences in culture between Afghanistan and Bangladesh, *"We share the same religion... there are some specific differences*

in terms of clothes, traditional dresses, and especially food." (Interview #2: 18.02.2024). This student (P2), similar to others, valued the multicultural environment at 'C' University, appreciating the opportunity to learn from classmates from various backgrounds.

P3 in interview #3 also identifies cultural differences between Afghanistan and Bangladesh regarding social norms, such as sitting posture, and highlights the need for adaptation to new cultural norms;

When you sit in a formal place in front of a person with one leg above another [crossed legs], it's kind of disrespectful to the person in front of you. This was a funny thing to me, like, it's normal in Afghanistan and every culture, but here it's quite impolite to sit in that way. (Interview #3: 18.02.2024).

Food and Dietary Differences. Adjusting to Bangladeshi cuisine was also a significant challenge for most of the Afghan students. The food served at the universities was different from what the students were accustomed to at home. This was challenging, especially for those students with dietary restrictions or allergies. S3 in FGD #1 said, *"I also agree with 'S2' because food and nourishment were the things that we just changed 180 degrees from what we had to what we have here. So it was not a little bit, but a lot, because what we put inside it affects us, what we do, how do we function."* (FGD #1: 21.02.2024).

P3 in interview #3 also mentions finding spicy food difficult to adjust to and feeling culture shock at some social norms and attire, like unfamiliar customs (greeting etiquette), and everyone particularly teenagers being drug addicted; *"Like, I don't like drugs that they are using, especially cigarettes. I didn't like it in Afghanistan as well, but they are mostly the kids and the younger generation, they are using cigarettes and also Paans [betel leaves]."* (Interview #3: 18.02.2024). However, some Afghan students were also excited about trying new foods at cultural events in Bangladesh, *"And we are tasting many delicious foods of every country."* (S5 in FGD #2: 24.02.2024).

P7 in interview #7 also believed that the spicy Bangladeshi foods were different from Afghan cuisines and were difficult for him to digest, *"People here don't eat anything without*

spice. They're delicious, but still spicy for us. So that's why I cannot eat anything from outside, so that's all I have to say." (Interview #7: 28.02.2024).

One of the Afghan students (P4) also noted differences in cultural norms, particularly regarding hospitality, between Afghanistan and Bangladesh (along with spicy food and different social norms that took time to adjust to): "*The hospitality is that Afghanistan people, we have, they don't have.*" (Interview #4: 19.02.2024). However, other participants in FGD #2 appreciated the hospitality and open-mindedness of the Bangladeshi people and noted their acceptance and willingness to engage with foreigners.

Weather and Environmental Challenges. P1 in interview #1 found the insects and hot and humid climate distracting, showing discomfort said: "*At first, it was very annoying and very distracting for us, the weather was very hot and the humidity is very high.*"; and expressed fear of pests like "*cockroaches and lizards that girls are very afraid of them.*" (Interview #1: 17.02.2024).

The student (P2) initially struggled with adapting to the Bangladeshi climate and had difficulty adjusting to the hot and humid Bangladeshi climate compared to Afghanistan's four seasons; "*The weather gets very hot here and we do not experience a very cold weather. So the weather was the only challenge...*" (Interview #2: 18.02.2024).

S3 in FGD #1, 21.02.2024, expressed discomfort with what she perceives as a lack of cleanliness in Bangladesh compared to Afghanistan. "*For me, the cleanliness, like the city not being clean, the people not having that culture of cleanliness was a huge, huge problem.*" (FGD #1: 21.02.2024).

S4 emphasises hygiene as a major cultural difference experienced while sharing a room with a Bangladeshi student. She shared the challenges she faced regarding hygiene and the need and importance of accepting differences and finding ways to coexist peacefully. Agreeing with S3 on cleanliness, she said;

They do not know anything about hygiene. So that was the major problem we had and one of the easiest ways of living with them, since we can't actually ignore their existence, is accepting the fact that they're not able to change and we could live separately and she could mind her own business and I can mind my own business. (FGD #1: 21.02.2024).

Similarly, P7 in interview #7 discusses cultural adjustments in Bangladesh, particularly regarding adapting to spicy food and weather and highlights the discomfort faced due to the hot and humid weather in Bangladesh compared to the colder climates of Afghanistan and neighbouring countries; *"So, the weather is not good for us because we have been in a cold environment in our country. So, I have been to Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, and Turkey, the weather is nice and it has a cold environment."* (Interview #7: 28.02.2024).

Financial Strain. The limited stipend provided by universities or supporting institutions made it difficult for some students to cover living expenses and the cost of visa extensions. Except for some students at 'A' University who were sponsored by a private institution and had no financial burden, others were not satisfied with the monthly money they received. For some Afghan students, especially 'B' University students, high visa renewal costs and limited work permit opportunities create financial burdens. As P4 in interview #4 considers visa fees and the limited ability to work legally as significant financial burdens for Afghan students, *"As a student we have, to ask our family to send money. Though our university is supporting it, like 'B' University is giving 50%. But still, as a student 50 US dollars is very hard."* (Interview #4: 19.02.2024).

Another Afghan student (P5) describes a system of re-examinations (refer exams) leading to backlog exams with fees *"If a student cannot pass the exam, they give a re-refer, and then comes the backlog exam; when the backlog exam comes they ask for money. We must pay to take another exam; so for students, it is very difficult to pay ..."* (Interview #5: 20.02.2024). This created financial strain for students on scholarships *"So when we come here for free, we cannot pay the money for exams; but in 'B' University, you should pay the money*

for the exam ..." P5 in interview #5 shared his own personal experience of paying a high amount due to missing exams during a visit to Afghanistan;

For my first semester's exam because on that time, I went to Afghanistan due to the quarantine in Bangladesh, during the Coronavirus times. As I live in a village, there is not good quality internet so I couldn't attend the exams; so I told the issue to my university – my head of the department and they told me that it is your problem, why you went to Afghanistan. So then I paid \$300 which was very difficult for me. (Interview #5: 20.02.2024).

4.4 Coping Mechanisms and Support Systems

Participants shared various coping mechanisms to deal with academic and socio-cultural challenges, as well as to address mental concerns or maintain wellness.

4.4.1 Social Networks and Support Systems

Building friendships with classmates, both Afghan and international, offered emotional support and a sense of belonging. Participants described how friendships provided emotional support, motivation for studying, and opportunities for cultural exchange. For example, S4 in at FGD #2 said:

I can't agree more with 'S3' that the friends, the gatherings, the surroundings that you make, and the people that you're comfortable with; when you surround yourself with them, I think that helps a lot with the depression or dealing with any kind of stress, be it academically, socially, or economically. (FGD #1: 21.02.2024).

Afghan students found forming friendships with other students to be a crucial coping mechanism. P1 in interview #1 mentioned "*being surrounded with a wider range of people*"; she further adds about the opportunities to learn from different backgrounds: "*We have different clubs. We have work-study programs, we have events related to different practices.*"; and about their social interaction with classmates, she highlights the peer review: "*Whenever we just contact them to help us or to just have a peer review about our assignments, they have wonderful feedback and wonderful comments, and complementations.*" (Interview #1: 17.02.2024).

Many students also developed relationships with Bangladeshi people who were welcoming and offered help and support. To combat loneliness, P2 formed friendships with classmates, especially international students; *"Being alone is not the solution. So if you accept your friends as a family then everything is going to be there..."* (Interview #2: 18.02.20124).

First FGD's participants, who were master's degree Afghan students, talked about seeking support from professors and advisors as a coping mechanism. In addition, P2 in interview #2 emphasised the importance of faculty support in adjusting to new academic environments and coping: *"It was very difficult for me to cope up with this system but with the help of my professor... I could easily cope up with the system."* (Interview #2: 18.02.2024). Therefore, reaching out to professors and university support services for academic help was another strategy employed by participants.

One of the participants (P3) in Interview #3, 18.02.2024 discussed various coping mechanisms she employed to manage stress and challenges, including engaging in hobbies, seeking support from family, and keeping busy with activities;

It affected me in different areas; I learned how to manage as my work is to manage a shop and the money and the products as well. So I knew how to manage my time, and my money and learned to use technology and it helped me with my communication; like now, I can do better communication with people, and I have a good relationship with my teachers and the students around our campus. (Interview #3: 18.02.2024).

Some universities provide writing courses and resources to help students improve their English language skills. S4 commends 'C' University for providing English language classes and mental health counselling (including Persian-speaking counsellors):

'C' University does provide extra classes for their students who fall behind with language, and other subjects like computer or mathematics. They also take care of their mental health by providing them with counsellors or psychiatrists from different countries and to make them more comfortable, they provide Persian-speaking counsellors. So they're actually being supportive in terms of mental health and academically. (FGD #1: 21.02.2024).

Furthermore, P2 in interview #2 added she initially faced a language barrier, but she improved her English with available resources, utilising the university's writing centre and

psychologists for academic and emotional support; *"a place where you become or there are people that you can go to them and ask them for advice..."* (Interview #2: 18.02.2024). S2 also agreed on the availability of counsellors who could support students experiencing homesickness and other emotional challenges.

Family Support. P3 in interview #3, 18.02.2024, mentioned maintaining regular communication with family (particularly being in contact with her mother) as a coping strategy for emotional support; *"My mother is my big supporter, and she means a lot to me. So every day, I'm just talking one or two times a day, like one or two hours... When I'm stressed or feeling anxious, I'm just calling my mom and talking with her to manage it."* (Interview #3: 18.02.2024).

Talking to siblings was also seen as a *'Big therapy'* by P2 in interview #2, *"I called my sister and we didn't talk very much, only for about ten or 15 minutes. Then my mood totally changed. It gave me the feeling that we still have each other on good and bad days... Like, I felt very relaxed and comfortable."* (Interview #2: 18.02.2024).

4.4.2 Resilience and Adaptation

Many students demonstrated resilience by accepting the challenges as inevitable and developing coping strategies. They viewed these challenges as opportunities for personal growth and independence and drew on personal determination and resilience. Some even emphasised the importance of personal responsibility in overcoming challenges *"We are and we should try for the best quality of our future. Nothing is coming from outside for us. So we have to try on our own, accept all these challenges, problems, only because of our education [development]."* Indicated by S5 (FGD #2: 24.02.2024). P2 maintained a positive, flexible and adaptable mindset to turn challenges into opportunities for growth; *"I said [to myself] that it's not only for one week or two weeks. I should change this habit and I should use this chance to grow up my network..."* (Interview #2: 18.02.2024). She also demonstrated resilience in

overcoming challenges and turning them into opportunities for personal growth and adapting to new environments: *"I have the skill to turn every challenge into a chance to develop myself."* (Interview #2: 18.02.2024).

Moreover, S3 and S4 in FGD #1 discuss the importance of accepting cultural differences and adapting to their new environment, rather than trying to change them. S3 emphasises accepting cultural differences for a smoother experience;

I've come to an ending point to just accept what they are, what we are, accept the changes, and the differences, and carry on with what it is. because we can't change a whole nation, as that's how they grew up, and have been taught to be, so we should not try to change them as well because it would be a hectic solution to take on. I do not expect that much respect or behaviour here, that I had in Afghanistan. (FGD #1: 21.02.2024).

Self-reliance. Afghan students talked about developing independent study skills and time management strategies. P5 in interview #5 credits overcoming language difficulties through self-study *"By studying, self-study can solve your problem, I solved by self-study; no one can help."* (Interview #5: 20.02.2024). Similarly, P6 in interview #6 explored strategies such as utilising technology and seeking peer support to overcome academic challenges and enhance learning; *"I used technology, the internet and also asking the previous students... using YouTube and Google and other platforms also helped me; for example, when I didn't know something, I searched there, I read there and, that helped me a lot."* (Interview #6: 27.02.2024). He further talks about exploring other coping strategies such as physical exercise, religious practices, and seeking academic support to manage stress and academic challenges:

One was doing sports in the gym, another one was going and doing some praying or 'Zikr' (remembrance). And also doing some yoga... in terms of academics, self-studying or reading and then doing exercises and asking from the teachers, sharing experiences with friends helped me. (Interview #6: 27.02.2024).

Self-care Practices. Participants emphasised the importance of prioritising and engaging in self-care activities like exercise, healthy eating, and sufficient sleep for maintaining physical and mental well-being. S2 in FGD #1 said so: *"One other thing that I could adjust with was prioritising self-care; the activities that I did were regular exercise,*

eating healthy, and especially having sufficient sleep. it could maintain my physical and also my well-being, my mental wellbeing.” (FGD #1: 21.02.2024).

P1 in interview #1 talked about increased energy levels and motivation by joining a club *"The thing that really helped me to do great in my routine is joining one of the clubs ... we have forty team members and I am the coach of the students."* (Interview #1: 17.02.2024).

P3 in interview #3, 18.02.2024, talked about staying busy as relaxation and stress relief through art and hobbies like painting and embroidery; *"Like doing embroidery or painting keeps my mind free."* (Interview #3: 18.02.2024).

Time Management Strategies. P3 in interview #3 said she uses a diary (Journaling) to improve her writing skills and plans her day to manage responsibilities (prioritise tasks), and express feelings; *"I have made a diary for me and for my writing practice. So every day, or sometimes after two days I'm writing my daily diary and it's kind of helpful for me for solving my writing issues or problems."* (Interview #3: 18.02.2024).

Language Learning. Participants described putting in extra effort to improve their English language skills and some even learned basic Bangla to facilitate communication outside the university. P4 in interview #4 learned Bangla to improve social interaction on campus and emphasised the importance of language proficiency for effective communication and social interaction with Bangladeshi students, *"It is very hard for them [other Afghans] because I know Bangla, I can speak with them but others can't."* (Interview #4: 19.02.2024). It was also discussed in FGD #2 that students who learn some Bangla language were better able to communicate with locals. As a result, some students found improvements through coping mechanisms like learning Bangla or relying on friendly classmates for translation.

Social Distancing. One Afghan student (P3) describes social isolation as a coping mechanism in response to negative experiences (a falling out) with friends that helped her refocus on studies, *"I just blocked everyone that I know from every social media like my*

WhatsApp, Telegram, Facebook, Instagram, and everything." (Interview #3: 18.02.2024). She shifted focus from social to academic pursuits and used challenges as motivation to become more independent and focus on academics. Similarly, P4 comments on the perceived gap between local and international students' relationships on campus and says, *"I don't think our relations should be [that] good with local and international students; always there is a small gap."* (Interview #4: 19.02.2024).

4.5 Positive Outcomes and Growth

Overcoming challenges and adapting to a new environment contributed to the Afghan students' personal and academic growth.

4.5.1 Academic Growth

The opportunity to pursue higher education and gain valuable knowledge and skills was a major positive outcome. For example, despite the initial challenges, most Afghan students reported significant improvement in their English language proficiency. S4 talked about her experience saying, *"Now, I voluntarily teach the newcomers English; I tried to help them teaching them English, and as I did psychology in my undergrads, so I try to give them more emotional support."* (FGD #1: 21.02.2024).

Likewise, P2 in interview #2 talked about the challenges and opportunities for improving English language proficiency as an important factor for academic and social integration through interaction with peers: *"I had very problem with speaking... so it was the greatest opportunity to practice my speaking with my roommates."* (Interview #2: 18.02.2024). She also reflected on her improvement in language skills, particularly in writing and communication, through support from the university: *"At the beginning, I even didn't know what is thesis statement... now I can communicate easily."* (Interview #2: 18.02.2024).

The Bangladeshi educational system offered access to a wider range of academic resources and exposed students to new teaching methodologies. S2 in FGD #1 added;

The method of teaching and the educational system is totally different from Afghanistan. Here, I could access diverse academic resources, facilities and also other research opportunities and some networking opportunities with other students, as it [‘A’ University] was a diverse university with other international students from different countries and also from various cultural backgrounds. (FGD #1: 21.02.2024).

Students also appreciated the exposure to diverse perspectives and teaching methods.

For instance, P2 in interview #2 appreciated the multicultural environment at ‘C’ University and the opportunity to learn from classmates from different backgrounds and felt empowered by the university's focus on women's education and gained skills to help other women in Afghanistan; *"And these skills are very important for a woman to manage and lead her personal and professional life both..."* (Interview #2: 18.02.2024).

Students talked about how studying in an English-speaking environment can help students to improve their English language skills. So being immersed in an English-speaking environment for an extended period significantly enhanced the Afghan students’ English proficiency. Furthermore, one of the participants (P6) in Interview #6, 27.02.2024, discussed the impact of academic opportunities on enhancing understanding and knowledge in education, leadership, and learning processes as well; *"It enhanced my understanding and knowledge about education, how education should be managed, what the leadership styles are, how education leaders should behave, how learning happens, and how teaching-learning should be looked like."* (Interview #6: 27.02.2024).

Participants of FGD #1, 21.02.2024, noted the importance of developing reflective and analytical skills for academic success in the new educational environment, emphasising the need for critical thinking and analysis. Others like P4 in interview #4, 19.02.2024, felt academically successful and added that he felt he had not faced major academic challenges due to strong English language skills and readily available resources in English. Lastly, all Afghan students agreed that being well-prepared for the academic rigour of Bangladeshi universities is important.

Last but not least, P6 in interview #6, 27.02.2024, highlighted the positive outcomes of obtaining a degree from the university, including enhanced language skills, expanded opportunities for further studies and international experiences, increased job prospects, and potentially enabling further studies in Western countries.

I will get a degree from this university. It will enable me to study in Western countries because previously my degree was not considered a bachelor degree. So this is one thing that I'm happy about. And also I improved my language skills and then visited a new country and met new people. So overall, I have a good feeling. (Interview #6: 27.02.2024).

4.5.2 Personal Development

Participants described increased self-reliance and independence due to their experiences. They also highlighted the development of intercultural communication skills and increased self-confidence and resilience. P2 in interview #2 discussed the positive impact of interacting with international students on their networking and communication skills: *"It helped me develop my networking skills; it helped me develop my communication skills with international students."* (Interview #2: 18.02.2024). She also stressed the importance of leadership skills for personal and professional success: *"These skills are very important for a woman to manage and lead her personal and professional life both."* (Interview #2: 18.02.2024).

P4 in interview #4, 19.02.2024 acknowledged the positive aspects of cultural diversity and personal growth opportunities and said, *"It's still a good experience because we can live with diversity and we can do good with people and communicate everything; it is a good experience as a student we will learn leadership and communication skills and ..."* (Interview #4: 19.02.2024).

Additionally, P2 learned valuable skills like communication, leadership, and critical thinking through group work and presentations. She described personal growth and

development through participation in group work with international peers as the positive impact of academic experiences on personal and professional development;

These systems give me the opportunity to discover the goal. Like, I should step out of my comfort zone. So, I can see, expect, and get experiences from other students' work... helped me develop my communication skills with international students... helps me develop my leadership skills... (Interview #2: 18.02.2024).

P6 in interview #6 reflected on the personal and academic growth and the positive outcomes of achieving a master's degree and enhancing language skills, "*Overall, it influenced us in a positive way because we developed our capacities and our knowledge, and we become or will be receiving a master's degree in this field that academically helped us.*" (Interview #6: 27.02.2024).

Networking Opportunities. Interaction with international students from various backgrounds provided valuable networking opportunities for most Afghan students. Building friendships and professional connections with international students broadened their horizons. For instance, P2 developed a network of international friends and contacts, broadening her professional horizons, "*I have that opportunity to make a network or communicate with international students all over the country... I will be and am that much empowered now that I can apply my knowledge to people or other different practices.*" (Interview #2: 18.02.2024).

P7 in interview #7 mentioned that has made and gained friends from various cultures and backgrounds, which has helped him learn (about different cultures) and grow;

Having friends abroad from different cultures, people, and environments, really affects everyone's academics, so we learn new things from each other, and we understand them... So, it's nice to learn things from different cultures, to share and to have an argument with the group, to discuss about the culture, the food and other stuff from different people and have different friends. (Interview #7: 28.02.2024).

Job Opportunities. P1 in interview #1 mentioned the potential for career development by talking about her experiences with part-time jobs on campus: "*At the 'C' University, I do have two part-time jobs... one was because of my academic performance... I can say that that academic experience could successfully find me a job.*" (Interview #1: 17.02.2024). Another

student (P3) from the same university said, *“I’m working a part-time job here; I am a part of a project and work in a shop... they give me this opportunity to show my talent, as I can do some creative work... they appreciate us in a better way, encourage, support and sometimes they are funding us.”* (Interview #3: 18.02.2024).

The programs at ‘A’ University allowed the interviewee (P6) to connect with professors who could serve as references in the future, as well as gain experience using various software programs:

We became friends or became familiar with some very renowned people or professors at this prestigious university, which always we can refer to or use as our reference... also I enhanced my English language skills and some soft skills, using different software. That is what was effective and helped me. (Interview #6: 27.02.2024).

4.6 Influences of Academic Experiences

P1 in interview #1 mentions the influence of academic challenges – unqualified instructors lead to frustration and a decline in academic performance. Furthermore, she talked about the effect of various factors on adjustment as well, such as homesickness that had a negative influence on her psychological wellness and focus saying, *“I became really homesick. I really missed my family and it really affects my mental health.”*; this led her to *“became very stressed”*; she also emphasised that *“Communication is one of the important things in a student or college or university life.”* (Interview #1: 17.02.2024).

One interviewee (P3) discusses the health impacts of stress, including insomnia and fatigue, which affected her academic performance and overall wellness: *“I couldn’t get enough sleep during the night, most of the time I just slept three to four hours in a 24-hours day... during the day, I was just with less energy and felt fatigued during my classes, and I couldn’t get all of the things teachers said.”* (Interview #3: 18.02.2024). However, P1 in interview #1 mentioned *“being surrounded with a wider range of people”*, emphasising the importance of building healthy social connections and interaction for overall wellness and fostering a sense of belonging.

S6 in FGD #2 discussed the negative impact of struggling with a difficult subject and highlighted the importance of addressing academic challenges. P6 in interview #6 talked about the impact of academic challenges on physical and emotional well-being, alongside academic achievements and coping strategies:

So, the negative effect was on our physical wellbeing and also our social and emotional wellbeing because we are physically very far from our family, and friends from Afghanistan. Here, you do not have someone to share with them your stories or your problems. But the good thing is that we academically improved, but in these aspects physically and emotionally, I was sometimes disappointed and felt pressured and overwhelmed, but we managed and survived, and we will do our best. (Interview #6: 27.02.2024).

4.7 Afghan Students' Suggestions for Improvement

Participants suggested various support mechanisms to address their challenges and improve their academic experience.

Teaching quality improvement. P1 in interview #1 suggested improvement of the academic system for students, "*All the things that they [the teachers] can do is working on their, um, academic qualities.*" Also asserted that "*They [the university managers] are not really taking care of the academic system, and they are not hiring qualified instructors and professors.*" And lastly said: "*If they really work on their management skill and also their academic system, it would be very helpful for students to realize and fulfil their dreams.*" (Interview #1: 17.02.2024).

Participants proposed that professors should be encouraged to speak primarily in English during lectures. P7 in interview #7 suggests improving and prioritising clear English-language instruction at the university for international students, "*I do have a suggestion for them to tell their faculty to explain or give lectures in English properly, as I think that would be helpful for us and for the local students as well.*" (Interview #7: 28.02.2024).

Increasing the Number of Scholarships. Moreover, students express gratitude for the opportunity to study abroad and encourage the universities to accept more Afghans, especially

female students. As S8 in FGD #2 besides expressing gratitude for the scholarship opportunities, also suggested universities provide more scholarships and encouraged more Afghan female students to apply; *"I'm grateful for having these opportunities to come to 'A' University. And I would suggest and request that if possible, they bring more girls here to have this opportunity to study here and explore more, especially the Afghani students."* (FGD #2: 24.02.2024).

Workshops on Research. P4 in interview #4 advocated for seminars and conferences to enhance academic and personal development opportunities. He suggests workshops within each department to educate students on research paper writing and conference participation led by Bangladeshi professors to inform Afghan students about research opportunities, conferences, and paper publication:

I think they have to take at least small seminars in every department regarding these things and they should encourage students that they have to do at least one [research] as bachelor students or as masters they have to do more... I would like they have to share their own experiences with Afghanistan students (about journals and conferences) ... (Interview #4: 19.02.2024).

Internship Opportunities. P2 in interview #2 believes universities should provide more internship opportunities for international students to gain practical experience; *"Especially, for masters to contract or to sign contracts with companies, very famous companies in Bangladesh to give them the internship programs..."* (Interview #2: 18.02.2024).

Similarly, P4 also advocates for allowing Afghan students to obtain work permits, thinking other universities permit: *"Regarding the work permits for international students, at other universities, there are many contracts; international students have part-time these things [job opportunities]. I think they have to follow international rules since we are an international student."* (Interview #4: 19.02.2024). He recommends creating internship programs specifically for Afghan students as well, *"The government of Bangladesh to give more internships for Afghanistan students if it is possible because I believe internships make the career, the personality and everything."* (Interview #4: 19.02.2024).

Cultural Exchange Programs. Universities can create programs or events that encourage interaction between international and local students. S1 at first FGD suggested including Afghan students in university-organised events because he feels Afghan students are not included in university events, *“They [‘A’ University’s main campus] have to include Afghan students in the events as well because we, not all other students but our program’s students, are not included in the events that the university hold [there].”* (FGD #1: 21.02.2024). He also requested integrating their program’s Afghan students into classes with Bangladeshi students to increase interaction and cultural exchange. Many other Afghan students also believe in fostering more cultural orientation programs and suggest universities offer more cultural exchange programs for international students. Some Afghan students in FGD #2, 24.02.2024, also said that universities can work to create a more inclusive campus environment that encourages interaction between students from different backgrounds.

However, P3 in interview #3 recommends an exchange program with universities in different countries to broaden student experiences and perspectives (both cultural and academic), *“So, universities should contract with institutions in European countries like we [our university] have connections with universities in America, Japan and maybe some other countries I just know about these two countries...”* (Interview #3: 18.02.2024).

Preparatory programs. Most of the participants believed that universities should offer preparatory programs to improve English language skills and introduce academic writing before students begin their studies. As P5 in interview #5 mentioned challenges regarding the lack of preparatory programs, P6 in interview #6 advocated for preparatory programs, mentorship, and specialised support for foreign students, including English language instruction and academic skills development: *“Universities should have some preparatory programs like an English language program, and also on how to do the homework, academic*

skills... there should be some mentors or some specialized support for them whenever they need." (Interview #6: 27.02.2024).

Reading Club. One of the participants (P3) in Interview #3, 18.02.2024, proposed creating reading clubs (spaces for discussing books and improving communication skills) as a form of institutional support for Afghan students to enhance academic and social experiences, *"My suggestion would be for the university to make clubs for students, like a reading club, I don't know if it exists or not, but I suggest making a club where once a week, students will meet with each other ..."* (Interview #3: 18.02.2024).

Some participants in the first FGD #1, suggest that Bangladeshi locals become more accustomed to interacting with international students and be more welcoming and understanding.

Mental Health Resources. A student (S5 in FGD #2, 24.02.2024) mentioned that ‘C’ University does not have many professional doctors and that they may sometimes provide incorrect medication, *"Sometimes they give us the wrong medicines that may cause many other challenges."* (FGD #2: 24.02.2024). P3 in interview #3, 18.02.2024, believes the university should offer more support services for students' mental health, especially considering the challenges of cultural adjustment to help students cope with anxiety and stress; *"Because of the environment if they don't protect themselves so they may get anxiety and their health issues so bad..."* (Interview #3: 18.02.2024). In addition, in FGD #1 the importance of providing counselling and psychiatric services was emphasised to address emotional and psychological challenges. S1 in FGD #1, 21.02.2024, recommended organising workshops or sessions focused on mental health for Afghan students. S1 suggests mental health support could be beneficial, *"I think holding some sessions on mental health could be very useful, especially for our program, because we have felt overwhelmed."* (FGD #1: 21.02.2024). Also adding that the

university should connect students with healthcare providers and mental health professionals when needed.

Financial Support. P4 in interview #4 requested discounted visa renewal fees for Afghan students, "*...but I don't know why the expense is very high. For the student, they have to give a discount for the visa. Discount is only the solution.*" (Interview #4: 19.02.2024). Similarly, others suggested that universities consider covering visa extension fees to alleviate financial strain as S7 in FGD #2, saying, "*If the university helps us to extend our visa and help us economically like paying for our visa; it will be very good.*" And S8 also agreed saying "*And if the university can cover that, it would be best for us.*" (FGD #2: 24.02.2024).

Another student (P7) discussed the need for financial assistance as he has to cover some of his educational expenses and expressed gratitude for the partial scholarship received, "*So I'm not a full scholarship student, I joined 'A' University from Bangladesh, and I requested that because the situation in my country is kind of different, they should give me a scholarship of at least over 50%.*" (Interview #7: 28.02.2024).

Dietary Needs. It was discussed in FGD #2 that universities can improve the quality and variety of food options available to students. S4 in FGD #1 suggests universities consider the dietary needs of Afghan students and offer more protein-rich options to ensure they receive proper nutrition for better health and development; "*They could focus a bit more on students' diet and on what they feed them because, at the end of the day, they need to fulfil all the protein as they're going to stay here for like five years. So I think food and what they get to eat plays a major or key role in their personal development.*" (FGD #1: 21.02.2024).

Chapter 5

Discussion and Conclusion

5.1 Discussion

In this chapter, the results are compared and discussed with other related literature and studies reviewed for this research. As this qualitative research aims to explore the academic experiences of Afghan international university students in Bangladesh, the main focus is on the educational experiences, opportunities, challenges and coping strategies, as well as how they influence the academic journey and success of Afghan students at Bangladeshi universities. Finally, by the end of this chapter, some recommendations will be provided for the universities, respective people and related governmental or non-governmental agencies to better serve and support international students, particularly Afghans. These suggestions are based on students and the analysis of their experiences and collected data, as well as on the conducted research's findings.

5.2 Challenges Faced by Afghan Students

Afghan international students in Bangladesh face a variety of academic challenges during their educational journey. These challenges included language barriers, cultural differences, academic workload and skill gap, unfamiliarity with the Bangladeshi education system, financial constraints, homesickness and loneliness, and difficulties with social interactions.

This research shows that Afghan international students in Bangladeshi universities reported difficulty understanding lectures and coursework due to language barriers. Language barriers pose a significant obstacle for Afghan students pursuing education, particularly in academic settings outside their home country. They encounter language barriers, as not all of them are proficient in the languages used in the universities, such as English and Bengali. This

hinders their ability to engage in classroom discussions and understand course materials fully. Some students struggled with their English language proficiency, while for others it was challenging when the professors or classmates used the Bangla language in their group work or explanations. Similarly, for some Afghan students, the inability to comprehend local languages like Russian and Kazakh posed a significant barrier to continuing their studies at universities in neighbouring nations, further exacerbating their educational challenges (Princeton School of Public and International Affairs, 2023). This issue is particularly prevalent for Afghan students studying in countries like Bangladesh, where language barriers have been identified as a key challenge for these individuals (Safa, 2023).

Language barriers stand out as a prominent hindrance to their learning experiences, impeding their academic progress in universities outside their homeland (Princeton School of Public and International Affairs, 2023). The different language of instruction posed a significant challenge for Afghan students who previously learned in their native languages such as Farsi/Dari and Pashto. Some students mentioned that they could not understand properly what the teacher said due to the rich accent of instructors and using of their native language (Bangla) while teaching. As a result, it was observed that these problems led to distracted attention and overloaded studies. Students had to spend a considerable amount of time repeating the lessons they had been taught in the classroom to keep up with the pace. In addition, it was also found that disrespect towards their native language is sometimes encountered by Afghan students in these environments, adding to the challenges they face (Safa, 2023). This challenge is particularly pronounced for Afghan girls seeking refuge in neighbouring and regional countries, as they grapple with financial constraints and numerous other obstacles in their educational journey (Princeton School of Public and International Affairs, 2023).

The increase in applications from Afghan women to universities such as the Asian University for Women (AUW) and the American University of Central Asia (AUCA) underscores the potential significance of language barriers for these students (AUCA, 2023). Institutions like the AUW and the AUCA have been actively educating Afghan women since 2021 (the school closure due to the new regime policy), indicating a recognition of the need to address language barriers through language programs or support services (AUCA, 2023). By acknowledging and actively working to overcome these language barriers, educational institutions can create more inclusive and supportive environments for Afghan students striving to achieve academic success. Academic achievements encompass successfully fulfilling coursework and projects, being accepted in the academic community, having published research in academic journals, and presenting their scholarly efforts at conferences (Bista, 2011). Therefore, proficiency in the target language can help them engage in the academic environment, interact with peers and professors, and develop a deeper cultural understanding.

Afghan international students also experience unfamiliarity with the education system and cultural differences in Bangladesh, which is quite different from the system they are accustomed to in Afghanistan. This research's findings put forward that Afghan students in general do not come from a quality education background. This led to difficulties in adapting to the new academic and social environment for Afghan students. As Sabri's (2019) study states Afghan international students in the US find difficulties because of unfamiliarity with the education system in studying, online and on-time assignments submission, time management, and meeting datelines. Similarly, Bangladesh's teaching methods, expectations, and academic rigour vary greatly from Afghanistan. First, the differences in teaching and learning styles and educational systems compared to Afghan international students' home country presented to be challenging. Here, the academic structure is up-to-date and educators use multiple approaches of teaching such as teacher-centred, blended (and/or hybrid), active teaching and learning, and

inquiry or research-based teaching; but in Afghanistan, the classic or traditional education system (lecture-based or teacher-centred method) was prevalent for them.

Second, Afghan international students faced high academic pressures and expectations. They felt pressure to succeed to validate their decision to study abroad, meet their families' expectations, and secure a good job after graduation. Third, the pressure to perform well in a demanding academic environment, unlike previous academic experiences in Afghanistan, led to stress, anxiety, and even physical health issues for some students. As Benjamin and Muhammed (2023) similarly presented that social factors such as parental and educational pressures and societal norms can heighten anxiety levels and subsequent tension, which may negatively impact students' academic achievement. So these were another significant adjustment issue for many Afghan students.

On the other hand, Afghan international students also faced challenges related to cultural adjustment and identity formation. They experienced culture shock, loneliness, and isolation, as well as struggled with their sense of belonging and identity. For many Afghan students, it was difficult to build friendships and connect with local students due to cultural differences. They lacked strong social support systems and networks and had difficulty making friends and finding communities that they belonged to. Furthermore, Afghan students report facing social interaction challenges, finding it difficult to build connections and networks with their Bangladeshi peers. This resulted in feelings of isolation and homesickness. As it was also seen by Kristiana et al. (2022) that international students often experience breaks with their family and peer support systems back home, which can contribute to social and emotional challenges. Some of the Afghan students were reluctant to reach out for mental health support due to stigma and traditional beliefs. Some were even unaware of the mental health resources at their disposal. According to Forbes-Mewett and Sawyer's (2016) study, students from abroad often encounter more mental health issues compared to domestic ones, dealing with

various psychological difficulties such as feeling alone, separated from others, and experiencing significant stress. The lack of strong institutional, family, and community networks can make it difficult for international Afghan students to navigate the challenges they encounter while studying abroad.

Consequently, social interaction should be considered as a coping way for adaptation issues. It can ease the adoption of students who come from different societies. This is particularly important to be considered as an effective coping mechanism for students to find friends from the host society to help them adapt easily to new environments. A domestic student is more informed about the education system than international students which can make them a potential companion for supporting outside students. Thus, international students need to find support and advice not only through their institutional networks but also through their family and community networks in order to be socially anchored in the host country (Mandell et al., 2022).

The study by Bista (2011) found that services like student financial services, housing, Cooperative Education, dining, and transportation received the lowest satisfaction ratings among international students, with females being the most satisfied yet least dissatisfied group. In this current research, it was also revealed that Afghan students in Bangladesh come across: weather and environmental challenges, such as the hot and humid climate, and the overwhelming number of pests or insects; food and dietary restrictions like struggling to digest spicy foods or cuisines; and accommodation issues.

Financial constraints are additional challenges faced by Afghan international students, along with the challenges of adjusting to unfamiliar Bangladeshi cuisine, as some of them struggle to cover the costs of tuition, living expenses, and finding suitable housing. Some Afghan students expressed issues regarding the limited stipend provided by the scholarships that made it difficult for them to cover their living expenses and the cost of visa extensions. As

a result, all these challenges impact their education journey and require them to employ different coping strategies to navigate through their studies successfully.

5.3 Opportunities, Support Systems, and Amenities

In light of the recent events in Afghanistan, where the Taliban abruptly banned women from schools and universities, international institutions, including Bangladesh, have taken steps to support Afghan (female) students seeking educational opportunities. Despite the many challenges and hardships faced in their education process, Afghan international students in Bangladesh had access to various opportunities, such as scholarships, quality education, supportive teachers and staff, and access to university resources and support such as writing centres, libraries, clubs, counsellors and advisors, as well as extracurricular activities or events and job opportunities or internships offered by Bangladeshi universities.

There is a growing number of scholarships offered to Afghan students to study in Bangladeshi universities which reflect the efforts to support the education of Afghans, especially girls. The AUW in Bangladesh has played a significant role in supporting Afghan international students. AUW and AUCA in Kyrgyzstan have enrolled Afghan women students since 2021 and made their programs more accessible to this population due to the availability of student visas in these countries (The Feed, 2023). For example, AUW provided scholarships for 500 Afghan female students to pursue their tertiary education degrees. It is also committed to educating 600 new Afghan students, focusing on recruiting women from all 34 provinces in Afghanistan, and has already received nearly 10,000 applications (AUW b., n.d.). Furthermore, AUW offers full scholarships to women whose countries restrict higher education, providing a supportive environment for Afghan international students in Bangladesh. These students were expected to graduate with undergraduate degrees, becoming a valuable resource for the future development of Afghanistan. They can bring this expertise into the field upon returning to the country as they have access to quality education and experience updated practices and skills.

The most significant point is that they study the majors and fields in high demand for developing a country's fundamental sectors, including education, health, politics and economics.

Similarly, in response to the recent Taliban takeover of Kabul, educational institutions such as Bard College, Arizona State University, and Pomona College have extended support to Afghan students by welcoming them into their academic communities and participating in initiatives like the Global Student Haven Initiative to assist students affected by global crises, including those from Afghanistan (The Feed, 2023). Recognising the hurdles faced by Afghan students impacted by cultural and humanitarian crises, initiatives like the Global Student Haven Initiative, a collaboration of U.S. colleges, have been established to provide access to higher education for these individuals (The Feed, 2023).

The opportunity to pursue higher education and gain valuable knowledge and skills was from the major positive outcomes. Afghan students also appreciated their exposure to diverse perspectives and teaching methods, and some reported improvements in their English language proficiency. However the different language of instruction posed a significant challenge for the Afghan students (previously learned in their native languages), it also provided an opportunity for immersion and rapid language learning. As Akhmetova et al. (2021) and Mukai (2017) believe that classroom activities, discussions, and interactions with peers and instructors in the target language force students to actively engage with and practice the language, leading to faster development of proficiency and motivation to fully immerse themselves in the language learning process due to the need comprehend lectures, participate in group work, and complete assignments in the target language.

The academic support systems provided by international colleges and universities aim to address these challenges and provide Afghan students with a conducive learning environment. Afghan students who have had the opportunity to study abroad, particularly in

Bangladesh, have found better learning resources and support compared to what was available in Afghanistan. Most of these students reported finding both people and students in Bangladesh to be more supportive and welcoming than in their home country (Safa, 2023). For some, it was perceived to be dependent on the condition of if they were willing to help. Furthermore, even though the Afghan students who had supportive and respectful relationships with faculty and peers, reported a lower incidence of emotional stress, which emphasises the significance of a strong support network (McCarthy, 2023). This result shows how a support network is important in preventing emotional issues. Therefore, universities especially international universities should provide more opportunities for strengthening the social connection and integration of diverse students so that psychological distress is reduced among students.

Many Afghan students reported that studying abroad leads to increased self-awareness, adaptability, and problem-solving skills, also fostering independence and resilience. This follows Halley and colleagues' (2013) findings that regular participation in group activities strengthens the sense of community in educational settings, increases self-confidence, improves critical analysis capacity, and encourages teamwork. However, there are still improvements to be made concerning their adaptation and integration as not all universities provide preparatory programs (like 'C' University) or have the same facilities and opportunities.

Despite the Taliban's oppressive actions, Afghan women value education, but historically, schooling has been a source of conflict in the region due to violence, discrimination, and security threats (Qargha, 2022; Naqawi & Rajath D, 2022). Online learning platforms and partnerships with international universities in neighbouring countries are being utilised to help reduce barriers to education for Afghan women and other refugee students (The Feed, 2023). Moreover, external organisations also provide various social support mechanisms and programs, including mental health and social support programming tailored to the needs

of Afghan newcomers, to help them adapt to the cultural and academic environments (NRC-RIM, 2024).

The research participants also pointed out that ‘C’ University offers mental health seminars or informative sessions and referrals to counsellors to provide culturally appropriate support and promote overall wellness. There, students have the opportunity to share their problems, burdens, and concerns in a safe environment. Moreover, as some Afghan students also mentioned, the university has various student clubs, organisations, and activities such as the Book Club, Martial Art Club, Music Club, Bicycle Club, and The Echo (online campus newspaper) that allow students to explore new interests, develop skills, and connect with peers (AUW a., n.d.).

Studying abroad, in a foreign country like Bangladesh, provided opportunities for cultural exchange that broadened Afghan students’ perspectives and networking to make connections with people from around the world. This can lead to a deeper understanding of other cultures’ perspectives which can be beneficial both personally and professionally. Students at AUW have the opportunity to develop career skills and earn income while studying on campus (AUW a., n.d.). One student found that it provides an edge in the job market (career opportunities), saying employers in Afghanistan often value the skills and experiences gained from studying and working in a foreign country.

As a result, initiatives should promote community engagement for Afghan students and focus on creating safe and culturally relevant environments, engaging youth through community activities, and providing guidance on higher education and vocational training opportunities. Some universities already provide opportunities for Afghan youth to co-lead and take responsibility for the programs, enhancing their sense of agency and belonging. Thus, by addressing the socio-cultural, linguistic, and academic needs of Afghan students through such

tailored interventions, the educational programs can support their successful integration and overall positive outcomes in their new communities.

5.4 Coping Mechanisms

Despite these challenges mentioned above, Afghan international students exhibited signs of resilience and adaptability in adjusting to their new study environment. To navigate their educational journey in Bangladesh and cope with difficulties, they employed various strategies. They viewed these challenges as opportunities for personal growth and independence, developing coping strategies to tackle them. These strategies involve adapting to the new cultural norms and accepting differences, developing language skills, building support networks with fellow international students, seeking solutions online, forming friendships or relationships with others, seeking support from professors and advisors, seeking support from family and friends, and utilising universities' resources. Using the support services and resources provided by their host universities, such as language classes, academic advising, and counselling services, can help Afghan students navigate the challenges of studying abroad.

Moreover, most students actively participated in different clubs and extracurricular activities available on campus such as sports, reading and writing groups, and other sociocultural events. This helped them improve their mental wellness and adjust to the new environment. Some students sought solace in creative activities or artistic pursuits like journaling, painting, and reading, though stress often hampered their motivation. On the other hand, students maintained strong connections with their families (parents and siblings) and friends back home, which provided them with emotional support and a sense of belonging during their studies in Bangladesh. While few students sought mental health support, the pervasive stigma among Afghan international students made it challenging for some of them

to openly discuss their issues. These findings are in accordance with what Panke (2024) discussed in her interview with Fatima Ameri, an AUW Afghan student, on her master's thesis.

Despite the persistent challenges, students displayed a determination to focus on their studies and social interactions, underscoring their ability to adapt positively and find hope amid difficult circumstances in the new study environment. Afghan international students in Bangladesh found forming friendships with other Afghan students as a crucial coping mechanism. They also employed the strategy of reaching out to professors and university support services for academic help and support.

Afghan students studying in Bangladeshi universities find improved experiences in their new surroundings by: engaging in extracurricular activities and hobbies such as doing physical exercises and religious practices; maintaining connections with family and friends; receiving mental health counselling; focusing on their studies and social interactions; and adapting and finding hope amid difficult circumstances, showcasing their ability to accept the challenges as inevitable by displaying a determination to maintain a positive and flexible mindset. This is aligned with the findings of Saad and Dhanoa (2020) who found that building a support network or forming connections with other international students, particularly those from similar cultural backgrounds, can provide a sense of community and a source of emotional support for Afghan students in Indian universities.

What's more, having similar cultural characteristics between Afghanistan and Bangladesh can play a critical role in facilitating the adaptation process for Afghan students. For instance, some students mentioned both countries are Muslim, hospitable, and caring, as well as having somewhat similar customs, clothing, and food. They help them adjust or become accustomed to the dissimilarities and support them in coping with struggles and issues. In addition, many Afghan students also developed relationships with Bangladeshi people who were welcoming and offering help and support.

Furthermore, Afghan students described putting in extra effort to improve their English language skills and some even learned basic Bangla language to facilitate their communication outside the university in Bangladesh. The language learning process, specifically the acquisition of the target language, is essential for these students to overcome linguistic challenges and enhance their overall adaptation experience in Bangladeshi universities. As Tajik and his colleagues (2022) also confirmed this in their research on students' struggles with English language proficiency, saying that proactively improving their English language skills, through additional language courses or self-study, can help Afghan students overcome communication barriers and perform better academically.

Overall, the experiences of Afghan international students in Bangladeshi universities reflect the academic, cultural, and social hurdles they face, which require them to develop resilience and adaptive strategies to succeed in their educational pursuits. Therefore, factors such as cultural similarities, learning the target language, attitudes toward students, and religious and cultural proximity played crucial roles in their adaptation to the new academic and social environment.

5.5 Influences of Academic Experiences

In their beginning months of educational pursuit, Afghan students' initial challenges such as academic pressure and rigour, unfamiliar teaching and learning methods, assessments, academic culture and environment, and poor language proficiency led to problems such as stress, anxiety, isolation, distraction or absentmindedness, demotivation, disappointment or pessimism, eating and sleeping disturbance (insomnia), and fatigue or burnout.

Over time, Afghan international students in Bangladesh developed intercultural communication skills and increased self-confidence, resilience, self-reliance and independence to benefit their overall educational journey and success. All these positive influences were possible through getting relevant support from respective universities, putting more focus on

themselves and their studies, self-care practices, and keeping consistent contact with family members. Additionally, although it is not supported by this research, economic instability, family stress, and the need to work to support their families can also negatively influence or distract Afghan students, making it challenging for them to focus on their studies (Faiez, 2023).

Moreover, most students from ‘B’ and ‘C’ universities report developed wellness due to having access to sports facilities and extracurricular activities, encouraging Afghan youth to thrive emotionally, mentally, physically, and socially. Importantly, participating in sports teams and activities can provide Afghan students in Bangladesh with physical exercise, social interaction, and a sense of community (Panke, 2024). Simply engaging in creative hobbies and activities, like playing an instrument, doing embroidery or crocheting, or solving puzzles, in the various student clubs and organisations available can positively influence and help relieve stress and anxiety, and better self-reported mental health (American Psychiatric Association, 2023). For example, writing groups affected Afghan students to process their experiences, emotions, and thoughts by engaging in creative writing, poetry, or journaling, providing them with a means of self-expression and coping. The influence of creative writing, through self-expression and mindful self-reflection, can be seen in managing mental health issues, promoting understanding, reducing stress, and improving overall wellness (Barry, 2024). Thus, the power of writing, poetry, and storytelling has been instrumental in promoting healing and psychological wellness among Afghan students, especially women, who have faced immense challenges and disruption to their education and wellness. In other words, expressive, reflective, and creative writings allow individuals to process emotions, increase self-awareness, and constructively communicate difficult experiences, leading to emotional improvement (Thatcher, 2021).

Generally, such extracurricular activities help Afghan students at ‘C’ University adjust to their new study environment, find hope, and showcase remarkable resilience and adaptability

in the face of adversity by providing avenues for active engagement, and social interactions. In a sense, they influence their ability to overcome setbacks, find hope in their educational journey, and create healing spaces that promote a sense of control, self-worth, belonging, healthy relationships, and intellectual engagement.

Furthermore, preparatory programs, sessions on coping strategies for new and overloading situations and a supportive learning environment can impact and improve students' emotions and educational objectives. Similarly, adequate preparation, managing workload and financial stress and robust community support influence international students' psychological wellness and are crucial factors that require attention to mitigate the risk of mental health issues (Ingraham & Mason, 2023; McCarthy, 2023). Although most Afghan students struggle with language proficiency, only one university, among three universities, holds a pre-university preparation program for its new students.

The findings also represent students who could not communicate in the language of the instruction, they were not able to build a connection with others or inquire about a point from the instructor; this led to feeling isolated and shy, and not comprehending the lessons. Suppose they are provided with language support before starting their main courses. In that case, it will influence their ability to gain the required skills and knowledge in different parts of language including reading, writing and speaking, and to run effectively their academic journey.

Furthermore, the lack of sessions on mental health and coping mechanisms, intensive studies and assignments led to feeling stressed, overwhelmed, and time-consuming. Social and cultural constraints also led students not to prefer visiting mental wellness counsellors. Hence, providing mental health sessions for students will remove the stigma of referring to therapists.

As stated in previous chapters, some students' peers are not accepting and welcoming toward certain communities which leads to separation, disappointment, and missing the advantages of social interactions. To prevent these circumstances, universities should ensure

no one is treated irrespectively and biasedly and feels left out. To support students, universities should consider several key factors including encouraging social connections and support, quality of relationships, optimism, purposeful living, skilfulness, and self-esteem (Ryff and Singer, 1998, as cited in Miller & Foster, 2010).

5.6 Conclusion

This qualitative research entitled “Exploring Academic Experiences of Afghan International Students in Bangladesh” has explored the educational experiences of Afghan international students, focusing on challenges, opportunities, supports, coping mechanisms and their influence on the overall academic journey. Seven interviews and two FGDs were conducted with Afghan international students from three private universities in Bangladesh. After collecting the data, some interesting and multidimensional findings were demonstrated.

Overall, the participants reported both challenges and positive outcomes associated with studying abroad, encountering sociocultural, financial and academic challenges, along with opportunities and support systems. There are several challenges in terms of academic and new education systems including language barrier, unfamiliarity with teaching methodologies and education systems, workload pressure and academic skill gap. Socially, they face with poor networks and support; culturally, different social norms, new environment, language and Food. Also, insufficient monthly allowance was noticed as a financial constraint.

To cope with these challenges, students used different ways and university resources. Personally, they enhance their self-reliance or self-care practice, and time management skills, and develop their language proficiency and social network with other students. Referring to the facilities available at universities, such as writing centres, sports clubs, libraries, health centres and extracurricular activities (events, workshops and celebrations) students utilised them to overcome the challenges. Besides, a wide range of creative pursuits, from visual arts to music,

dance, and writing, have been found to positively impact their experiences and support recovery for individuals experiencing various mental health challenges.

Generally, these experiences profoundly influence their journey in complex ways, both positively and negatively. Studying in Bangladesh offered Afghan students a multitude of positive influences. Initially, grappling with academic pressure, unfamiliar teaching methods, and language barriers led to isolation, stress, and even anxiety. Over time, however, various factors help Afghan students overcome these hurdles. Academically, they gained valuable knowledge and skills, with their English proficiency significantly improving due to the language environment. Diverse teaching methods and resources broadened their horizons, while an emphasis on critical thinking sharpened their minds. University support, including preparatory language programs and mental health resources, also plays a crucial role. Additionally, self-care practices like staying connected to family and engaging in hobbies have positively contributed to their experiences and wellness. Extracurricular activities like sports teams, student clubs, and creative outlets like writing provide social interaction, stress relief, and a sense of belonging, and create a supportive environment that fosters academic success and overall wellness for Afghan students. Lastly, students reported increased self-reliance and independence, along with honed intercultural communication skills as the influences of their academic experiences. It is worth mentioning that participating in group work and presentations also fostered leadership and critical thinking, while interacting with international students provided a valuable network, further enriching their personal development.

Finally, students made several suggestions to university management. Importantly, promoting preparatory programs is suggested to respond to academic and language needs. In addition, they recommended setting up workshops on research methods. Furthermore, programs for culture exchange, reading clubs, and internships should be provided. Improving the quality of health services should be considered. Some students recommended that more

financial support should be provided for international students. Last but not least, improving teaching and teacher quality was another suggestion mentioned. Therefore, the findings suggest that universities can significantly support these students by providing resources to address language and academic barriers, sociocultural difficulties, and financial strain. Support from institutions plays a crucial role in empowering these students and preserving their educational aspirations. Creating a more inclusive and supportive campus environment would benefit all students, promoting overall wellness and academic success, and fostering intercultural exchange.

As a result, developing supportive policies, comprehensive interventions and resources tailored to the unique needs of Afghan students is crucial to ensuring their educational and personal growth. Employing a holistic worldview is essential for understanding and addressing the multifaceted needs of these students, ultimately supporting their personal and academic success.

5.7 Recommendations

Based on the results of this study, some recommendations have been given in accordance with the academic, sociocultural, and overall wellness experiences of Afghan international students in Bangladesh. It should be ensured that the support services are culturally relevant and sensitive to their experiences.

- Universities should encourage professors to use English as the primary language of instruction during lectures by investing in their faculty development programs to enhance teaching skills and content delivery, particularly in English. As students face a lot of language barriers, this will benefit both international and local students by creating a more consistent learning environment.
- The universities should implement preparatory programs or workshops, such as language classes, academic tutoring, and newcomer programs to equip Afghan students with the

necessary English language proficiency and academic knowledge before commencing their studies. Furthermore, they could offer workshops and research opportunities within departments led by Bangladeshi professors to share their experiences and educate Afghan students on research methodologies, paper writing and conference participation.

- Universities should address the issue of limited interaction between Afghans and other students. This can be achieved by integrating Afghan students into classes with more local and international students, as they felt socially isolated, and by organising cultural exchange programs. Creating such programs and events will encourage interaction and promote cultural understanding and inclusivity.
- The universities should consider establishing more accessible mental health programs to provide resources and support services for Afghan students. This could include awareness workshops, counselling sessions, access to counsellors, and connections to qualified professionals to address the wellness of Afghan students during their academic journey.
- Further research is needed to explore the long-term impact of studying abroad on Afghan students, including their careers, and their contributions to Afghanistan's development, and comparatively analyse the effectiveness of support programs in enhancing their academic success and well-being.
- Policymakers in the government of Bangladesh are recommended to advocate for increased scholarship opportunities, particularly for Afghan women, and facilitate visa renewal processes for Afghan students. This would enhance access to education and discounted visa renewal fees would alleviate financial burdens on international students.
- Universities should explore the possibility of collaborating with companies (e.g., IT firms, engineering firms, NGOs) to create internship programs specifically for Afghan students. This would equip Afghan students with valuable practical skills and boost their employability after graduation.

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Appendices

Appendix One. Consent letter

Dear Student(s),

I hope this message finds you well.

My name is Ramin Nikzad, one of the Afghan master's students at BRAC Institute of Education Development – IED (BRAC University). I am conducting a research study titled "Exploring Academic Experiences of Afghan International Students in Bangladesh". The purpose of this study is to understand the academic experiences of Afghan international students like yourself in Bangladeshi universities and how these experiences influence your different educational aspects.

It would be a pleasure to invite you to participate in this research study which involves an online individual interview or focus group discussion (FGD), which will take approximately one hour. The interview/FGD can be conducted in either English or Farsi/Dari, based on your preference, and can be scheduled at a time convenient for you. Please note that your participation is completely voluntary, and you can withdraw at any time.

I will record the full interview/FGD using a tape recorder, and you will have the right to go through the transcribed audio file. The information you provide as a participant will be kept strictly confidential and anonymous and will only be used for the purpose of this research. Your insights will help me collect data for this thesis and significantly contribute to our understanding of the academic experiences of Afghan international students in Bangladesh and could inform the development of programs and services to support them accordingly.

There is no potential risk or challenge to you in participating in this research and you will not receive any reward for your participation. If you are interested in participating in this research study or have any questions please contact me, I would be glad to have your invaluable insights and answer them. You are welcome to contact me anytime at Raminnikzad786@gmail.com or +8801872271513.

I look forward to hearing from you. Thank you for considering participating in this research.

Best regards,

Ramin Nikzad

Appendix Two. Semi-Structured Individual Interview Guide

Name:

Age:

Gender:

Home province in Afghanistan:

Previous educations:

Date: ____/____/____

Time: _____

Location: _____

Length of time in Bangladesh:

University Name:

Level of study:

Academic Major:

Language(s) spoken:

Questions:

1. Can you describe your overall academic experience as an Afghan international student at your university in Bangladesh?
 - o Can you tell me more about *that* experience?
2. What opportunities have you encountered during your academic journey here?
 - o How have these influenced your academic experience?
3. What challenges have you faced academically since you arrived in Bangladesh?
 - o Can you share some specific examples of those challenges in your academic life?
 - o Why do you think that was a challenge?
4. How have you coped with these academic challenges?
 - o Can you share some specific strategies or mechanisms you have used?
 - o How have these coping mechanisms influenced your academic experiences?
5. Can you describe your experience with using English in your daily academic life?
6. Can you share any experiences where language proficiency impacted your academic experiences?
7. What are the cultural differences between Afghanistan and Bangladesh?
 - o How have cultural differences influenced your academic experiences?
 - o Can you share any specific instances that were influenced by cultural differences?
8. How have your social interactions and relationships shaped/influenced your academic experience?
 - o Can you share your experiences regarding social integration within the university and local community?
9. How have your academic experiences influenced you (emotionally/ socially/ physically/ intellectually/ occupationally)?
 - o How do you think the impact was on you?
10. Do you have any questions or anything else that you would like to add?

Appendix Three. Focus Group Discussion Guide/Protocol

Participants' names: Age group:

Education Level: University:

FGD Time: Location:

Questions:

1. Can you all share your overall academic experiences as Afghan international students at your respective universities in Bangladesh?
 - a. How has your academic journey been at [X] University?
 - b. Can you discuss some of your personal/ unique academic experiences?
2. What are some opportunities you have encountered during your academic journey here?
3. What are some of the challenges you have faced academically since you arrived in Bangladesh?
 - a. Can anyone share a specific instance where they faced a significant academic challenge?
4. How have you coped or dealt with these challenges?
 - a. Can you share some strategies or mechanisms you have used to overcome your academic challenges?
 - b. Has anyone used a unique or effective coping strategy that they would like to share?
5. How have your academic experiences influenced you overall?
 - a. Can you share any specific instances?
 - b. How have your academic experiences influenced your social and emotional?
 - c. Can you share any/more specific instances?

Additional Questions:

- What are the most difficult things that you are going through as an Afghan international student studying and living in Bangladesh?
- What are some of the things that the universities could do to better support Afghan students? (*What do you think needs to be done to?*)
- Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences as an Afghan international student in Bangladesh?