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Motivations, Opportunities, and Challenges of Afghan Immigrant Students in Iranian Universities: A Qualitative Inquiry

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the psychosocial experiences of Afghan immigrant students enrolled in Iranian universities, focusing on their motivations for academic migration, the opportunities available to them in academic and social spheres, and the challenges they encounter in both their educational trajectories and daily lives. This qualitative study employed a conventional content analysis approach and was conducted in Tehran in 2024. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 11 purposively selected Afghan students studying at public medical universities affiliated with the Ministry of Health, as well as universities under the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology, in 2024. The interviews were analyzed using inductive content analysis, following the method proposed by Graneheim and Lundman (2004). Data analysis revealed four main themes and thirteen subthemes, encompassing a total of 43 codes. The primary themes identified were: (1) Motivations for Leaving the Homeland and Pursuing Personal Growth, (2) Socioeconomic Constraints, (3) Psychological Challenges of Migration, and (4) Opportunities and Positive Outcomes of Migration. The findings highlighted the urgent need for enhanced psychological, social, and academic support systems to improve the overall experience of immigrant students. The study recommends the development of comprehensive support programs and the implementation of sustainable policy measures, including expanding educational facilities, reducing tuition costs, enhancing access to residency documentation, and launching public awareness initiatives to counter negative stereotypes and social prejudices against immigrants.

Keywords: Migration, Afghan Students, Psychological Experiences, Social Experiences, University Students

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INTRODUCTION

Migration is a widespread phenomenon that has profound and far-reaching effects on individuals, particularly influencing their psychological and social well-being. It impacts millions of people globally. Among the most affected groups are Afghans, who constitute one of the largest refugee populations in the world. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2023), there are 2.6 million registered Afghan refugees, with approximately 2.2 million residing in just two neighboring countries—Iran and Pakistan. Over 96% of Afghan migrants have relocated to these two nations (Khodaparast and Khodabakhshi-Koolae, 2023). This literature review aims to synthesize existing research on the psychosocial experiences of Afghan immigrant students in Iran, focusing on their psychological well-being, social integration, and the impact of educational and economic constraints. By examining these factors, the review seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by this population and to inform policies and practices that support their integration and well-being.

Immigrant students, who are often in a critical stage of personal and academic development, face distinctive challenges that require focused attention, particularly concerning cultural and educational adaptation. For Afghan students in Iran, many of whom have fled ongoing instability in Afghanistan, the migration experience is often marked by a complex array of hardships that threaten their psychological and social health. These students commonly encounter discrimination, economic hardship, and restrictive legal conditions, all of which heighten the stressors associated with migration (Rahimitabar et al., 2023). The psychological and social difficulties experienced by Afghan students in Iran can be traced back to the early 1980s and have intensified alongside the worsening crises in Afghanistan. The increasing number of migrants, coupled with evolving social dynamics in host communities, has contributed to mounting psychological pressure and uncertainty about the future. These students often struggle with both academic demands and personal challenges, leading to a significant rise in psychological distress in recent years (Deilamizade et al., 2020).

Afghan immigrant students in Iran, while pursuing academic and professional advancement, face a multitude of cultural, linguistic, and social challenges that significantly impact their psychological and social well-being. These adversities often give rise to identity crises (Yarbaksh, 2024; Afrasiabi and Zandi, 2025). Although many of these students have access to higher education in Iran either through scholarships or by self-funding their studies, they continue to encounter substantial difficulties within both academic and social contexts (Hugo et al., 2012). Economic factors further exacerbate their situation. Limited access to appropriate employment opportunities, persistent financial strain, and inadequate income to cover tuition fees and living expenses intensify the challenges they face (Mohseni et al., 2023). These economic issues are directly

linked to increased psychological distress and ongoing anxiety in students' daily lives. Ultimately, the convergence of academic, social, and financial pressures undermines not only students' academic achievement but also their mental health and integration into the host society (Afshani and Shiri-Mohammadabad, 2023). In addition, limited access to psychological services and social support systems within the host community further exacerbates the challenges faced by Afghan students (Farahani et al., 2023).

Beyond financial concerns related to tuition and living expenses, Afghan students often encounter social and cultural discrimination, which reinforces feelings of alienation and a lack of acceptance within academic institutions. Discrimination, local cultural norms, and the extent to which students feel a sense of belonging to the host society are all critical factors influencing their social and psychological adjustment (Khosravi et al., 2023). The experience of inequality and discrimination can significantly impede their social integration and contribute to heightened psychological distress (Abbasi et al., 2008).

Afghan immigrant students in Iran also face substantial social challenges. The broader social and economic environment plays a pivotal role in influencing the psychological well-being of Afghan migrants (Shahmohammadi, 2020). The lack of sufficient psychological and social support within universities and the broader host society leaves these students more susceptible to mental health issues (Adelkhah and Olszewska, 2007).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Psychological Well-being and Social Integration

Afghan immigrant students in Iran often grapple with psychological distress stemming from cumulative stressors such as uncertainty about legal status, family separation, and a hostile sociopolitical environment (Zandi-Navgran et al. 2023). Studies have shown that perceived discrimination is significantly associated with higher levels of psychological distress among Afghan refugees (Khozaei et al. 2024; Alemi and Stempel, 2018). This discrimination can lead to feelings of alienation and hinder social integration, exacerbating mental health issues. Social support and a sense of belonging have been identified as protective factors that can mitigate the negative impact of discrimination on mental health (Khozaei et al. 2024). The study by Alemi et al. (2024) explores how Afghan refugees—and, by extension, Afghan students—face decreased social support and limited access to mental health services in host countries. It concludes that these gaps exacerbate mental health issues and hinder integration processes.

Educational and Economic Constraints

Access to education is a critical factor influencing the psychosocial well-being of Afghan immigrant students. While Iran has made efforts to include Afghan students in its education system, many still face significant obstacles, including high tuition fees and associated costs. Financial barriers can lead to chronic stress and reduced academic performance, further impacting students' mental health (Shahmohammadi, 2020 and Khosravi et al., 2023). In recent years, Iran has undertaken targeted efforts to attract international students, particularly

from neighboring countries. The policies governing foreign student admissions are diverse and include provisions such as scholarships, tuition discounts, and special incentives—especially in fields like Persian language and literature. Despite these incentives, most international students are required to pay tuition fees, which differ based on the type of university (public vs. private) and field of study. For instance, Islamic Azad University typically charges higher fees compared to public institutions, and tuition structures are not uniform across disciplines (Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology, 2020; UNESCO, 2024). Generally, full-time foreign students are expected to cover the full cost of tuition. Economic hardship is compounded by limited employment opportunities for Afghan refugees in Iran. The lack of legal work rights restricts their ability to earn income, leading to financial strain and increased psychological distress. Afghan refugee students identify five main types of barriers within the Iranian educational system: emotional and social, economic and financial, cultural, welfare-related, and political obstacles (Ahmadi Safa and Karbakhsh Ravari, 2024). In another study, the findings revealed that the absence of legal documentation for temporary or permanent residence, along with economic hardships, cultural and linguistic barriers, and inadequate educational facilities, pose significant obstacles to the education of Afghan students in Pakistan (Iqbal et al. 2025). This economic precarity not only affects students' academic pursuits but also their overall quality of life and integration into the host society. These systemic issues highlight the need for targeted support programs that address both educational and economic barriers to improve the psychosocial outcomes for Afghan immigrant students.

Significance and Contribution to Theory

This study advances existing scholarship on migration and international education by illuminating how the experiences of Afghan immigrant students embody the duality of migration—as a source of both empowerment through education and distress due to systemic barriers. While prior qualitative inquiries have addressed psychosocial challenges in refugee populations, this research uniquely contextualizes Afghan students' struggles within Iranian higher education policies and socio-cultural dynamics. Conceptually, the study proposes a model integrating psychological well-being, economic precarity, and social integration as intertwined dimensions shaping migrant academic experiences in restrictive environments. By articulating these interconnected factors, the research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of migrant student identity formation and resilience in contexts marked by both opportunity and marginalization. Furthermore, the findings suggest that addressing these dimensions holistically is essential for policy and practice aimed at improving migrant student outcomes—moving beyond economic or educational support alone to include psychosocial and legal advocacy.

Objectives

Given that academic migration often serves as a precursor to long-term residence—due to economic, social, or political factors—and considering that previous studies have primarily focused on the negative aspects of Afghan

migration, this study seeks to examine both the educational and social opportunities, as well as the psychological and social challenges faced by Afghan students in Iran. It particularly aims to examine the psychosocial experiences of Afghan immigrant students in Iranian universities. It also aims to investigate their motivations for academic migration, the opportunities available to them in both academic and social contexts, and the challenges they face in their academic and daily lives. By analyzing the individual and collective experiences of these students, this study seeks to gain a deeper understanding of the key factors that influence their adaptation process, academic success, and psychosocial well-being. Ultimately, the study aims to offer actionable recommendations to strengthen educational and social support systems for this group of students. This study seeks to explore the lived experiences of Afghan immigrant students in Iran through the following two research questions:

- (1) How do Afghan immigrant students in Iran describe their psychological and social experiences during their academic journey?
- (2) What educational and social resources do Afghan students perceive as supportive, and how do these resources influence their integration and well-being?

METHOD

Participants

This study was conducted in Tehran in 2024 using a qualitative content analysis approach (Graneheim and Lundman (2004)). Participants were selected through purposive sampling, consisting of Afghan immigrant students currently residing in Iran. The sample was chosen to maximize diversity in terms of age, gender, and academic background. Despite cultural constraints in Afghanistan that often limit women's access to higher education, efforts were made to ensure the inclusion of female students. We recognize the gender imbalance in the sample (eight males and three females), which reflects, in part, gendered patterns of access to higher education among Afghan immigrant students in Iran. This imbalance was taken into account during data interpretation, acknowledging that male and female participants may experience distinct challenges due to sociocultural and structural factors. We have reflected on how gendered access and societal roles may have shaped the findings and limited the generalizability regarding female students' experiences. We suggest that future research focus explicitly on female Afghan students to deepen understanding of gender-specific dynamics within this population. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The inclusion criteria were enrollment in an Iranian university, holding Afghan citizenship, being over 18 years of age, having completed at least one academic semester, and being capable of articulating their experiences. The exclusion criteria were having dual citizenship, being of Iranian descent, or refusing to continue with the interview process.

Data Collection and Data Analysis Strategies

Following the identification of participants and an explanation of the study objectives, informed consent was obtained, and interviews were scheduled at the participants' convenience. All interviews took place in university settings. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim

immediately after completion. Each session lasted between 30 and 70 minutes, with an average duration of 45 minutes. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, a method appropriate for qualitative research aimed at selecting individuals who can offer rich, relevant, and diverse perspectives on the phenomenon under investigation (Palinkas et al., 2015). The recruitment strategy involved reaching out through university networks, student associations, and informal referrals, aligning with snowball sampling techniques to access a wider range of Afghan students. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved—that is, when no new themes or insights emerged that would contribute further to the research framework (Charmaz, 2014).

The interviews were guided by a semi-structured format based on the five-step content analysis approach proposed by Graneheim and Lundman (2004). The first step involved asking open-ended questions such as: “What do you think about migration?”, “Why did you choose to study in Iran?”, and “What motivated you to pursue higher education here?” These were followed by more specific questions, for example: “What challenges did you face entering Iran or university?”, “Have you experienced discrimination or exclusion?”, and “What helped you feel secure or included at university?” Probing questions were also used to deepen understanding, such as: “What aspects of university life helped you feel a stronger sense of belonging?”

The data were manually analyzed, without the use of qualitative data analysis software. Audio recordings were listened to multiple times, and transcripts were reviewed repeatedly to ensure immersion in the data. In the second step, the text was divided into meaning units. These were then condensed and abstracted into initial codes. In the third step, similar codes were grouped into subcategories and broader categories based on patterns and contrasts in the data. Through ongoing comparison and refinement, these categories evolved into overarching themes that captured the core experiences of the participants.

Rigor

Data validation and the verification of scientific rigor were conducted in line with Lincoln and Guba’s (2011) criteria for trustworthiness. To ensure credibility, interview transcripts and corresponding extracted codes were returned to participants for member checking. Participants reviewed and provided feedback on the accuracy and interpretation of the data, allowing us to revise codes as necessary to align with their perspectives. To enhance coding reliability, all researchers independently coded a subset of the transcripts. Intercoder agreement was assessed through discussion and consensus on any discrepancies, resulting in a refined and consistent coding scheme. This collaborative approach strengthened the trustworthiness of the data analysis.

The participants in this study consisted of 11 Afghan immigrant students residing in Iran and enrolled in public universities affiliated with the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology and the Ministry of Health. Given the qualitative nature of the study, the participants were selected through purposive sampling, aimed at identifying individuals who could provide rich and diverse insights into the phenomenon in question. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached, meaning that no new information emerged to

contribute to the research framework. Of the 11 participants, 8 were male and 3 were female. The relatively low number of female participants reflects the traditional context and limited educational opportunities available to women in the participants' country of origin. The participants' ages ranged from 22 to 28 years, and all were unmarried. The participants were pursuing studies in various fields, including nursing, architecture, computer engineering, statistics, arts, and medicine. The participants were completing bachelor's, master's, and doctor of medicine (MD) programs, with the majority enrolled in bachelor's programs.

Table 1: The Participants' Demographic Characteristics

Participant code	Gender	Age	Academic level	Field of study	Marital status	Interview type
1	Male	23	Bachelor's	Nursing	Single	Face-to-face
2	Male	28	Bachelor's	Nursing	Single	Face-to-face
3	Male	25	Master's	Nursing	Single	Face-to-face
4	Male	24	Bachelor's	Architecture	Single	Face-to-face
5	Male	27	Bachelor's	Architecture	Single	Face-to-face
6	Male	23	Bachelor's	Computer Engineering	Single	Face-to-face
7	Female	23	Bachelor's	Statistics	Single	Face-to-face
8	Male	25	Bachelor's	Statistics	Single	Face-to-face
9	Male	22	Bachelor's	Nursing	Single	Face-to-face
10	Female	23	Bachelor's	Arts	Single	Face-to-face
11	Female	25	Ph.D.	Doctor of Medicine	Single	Face-to-face

RESULTS

This section presents the key findings derived from the qualitative content analysis of interviews with Afghan students enrolled at Iranian universities. Four overarching themes emerged from the study: (1) motivations for migration and aspirations for personal growth, (2) socioeconomic constraints, (3) psychological challenges of migration, and (4) opportunities and positive outcomes of migration. Collectively, these themes illustrate the dual nature of migration—marked by profound hardship and remarkable resilience.

1. Motivations for Migration and Aspirations for Growth

Participants described a range of motivations for leaving Afghanistan, influenced by factors such as security, education, social context, and personal development. Migration was often seen both as a necessity for survival and a means of self-advancement.

Seeking Safety and Stability

The search for physical and emotional security was the most frequent motivation for migration. Participants cited war, political instability, and threats to personal safety as critical drivers for relocation.

“For me, being in Iran for many years, the goal was to have the family in a relatively peaceful state.” (Male, 23, Nursing student)

Pursuit of Educational Opportunities

Education was another primary reason for migration, particularly access to stable academic environments and respected programs such as medicine and engineering.

“Afghan and Tajik students are coming to study in Iran, especially in medical fields, because the educational conditions in Iran are better.” (Female, 25, Medical student)

Dissatisfaction with Home-Country Conditions

Students expressed deep frustration with Afghanistan’s political instability and restrictions—especially gender-based educational barriers.

“As an Afghan girl studying in Iran, migration for me has been more of a necessity than a choice.” (Female, 23, Statistics student)

Aspiration for Self-Actualization

Migration also reflected a desire for growth, achievement, and personal progress beyond the limitations of the home context.

“Success means getting better than yesterday... when your homeland does not provide success for you, migration helps overcome the negative burden.” (Male, 24, Architecture student)

Socioeconomic Constraints

Despite their strong motivation to succeed, Afghan students encountered significant material and institutional barriers that impeded social and economic integration.

2. Cultural Misunderstandings and Discrimination

Participants frequently encountered prejudice and low expectations

from peers and community members, resulting in social exclusion and diminished self-esteem.

“People in the Iranian community have a lower view of people from Afghanistan... they were surprised and did not believe I was a student.” (Male, 23, Computer Engineering student)

Residency and Legal Barriers

Navigating bureaucratic systems and maintaining valid residency documents were major stressors. Students described complex, time-consuming procedures that hindered their academic and personal stability.

“We had problems with our residency, so I went to Afghanistan, got a passport, and returned.” (Male, 28, Nursing student)

Educational Access Challenges

Financial and institutional constraints limited students’ academic mobility, choice of programs, and access to financial support.

“We can’t choose any field of study... tuition fees are beyond our ability. Even getting a student loan is difficult.” (Female, 25, General Medicine student)

Economic Hardship and Financial Insecurity

Financial strain was a universal challenge, particularly due to work restrictions and limited access to formal banking.

“Most of our time has gone into trying to cover living expenses... we can’t open a bank account or access many services.” (Male, 28, Nursing student)

3. Psychological Challenges of Migration

In addition to financial and institutional constraints, participants reported significant psychological pressures resulting from their migration and study experiences.

Alienation and Identity Conflict

Students described persistent feelings of disconnection from both Afghan and Iranian communities, resulting in identity tension and emotional fatigue.

“The feeling of exile is always there... it might manifest in many aspects of life.” (Male, 22, Nursing student)

Need to Prove Oneself

Many expressed a heightened need to excel academically to counter negative stereotypes about Afghan students.

“Sometimes I feel like I have to try twice as hard as others to show that I can succeed.” (Female, 23, Art student)

Responsibility and Emotional Pressure

The dual burden of academic expectations and family responsibilities contributed to ongoing stress and emotional exhaustion.

“Even when I am mentally exhausted... I can’t tell anyone. There’s always a burden on my shoulders.” (Male, 25, Statistics student)

4. Opportunities and Positive Outcomes of Migration

Despite these obstacles, students emphasized the positive aspects of migration, which fostered personal growth, resilience, and access to new educational and professional opportunities.

Personal and Social Development

Migration encouraged maturity, adaptability, and a deeper appreciation of diversity and social responsibility.

“Many things, such as ethics, social matters, and spirituality, have improved during this process.” (Male, 22, Nursing student)

Access to Resources and New Opportunities

Participants noted access to better educational environments, more reliable employment, and improved quality of life.

“Migration was a gateway... a place where I was able to access better education, stable employment, and a higher quality of life.” (Female, 23, Statistics student)

Overall, participants portrayed migration as a complex experience involving both struggle and empowerment. While material and psychological barriers limited their academic and social engagement, migration also served as a transformative process for building resilience, self-efficacy, and intercultural competence.

DISCUSSION

This study examined the psychosocial experiences of Afghan migrant students enrolled in Iranian universities, with a particular focus on their motivations for migration, as well as the opportunities and challenges encountered in academic and daily life contexts. The findings reveal that Afghan students are primarily driven to migrate due to protracted conflict, insecurity, and the deterioration of educational infrastructure in Afghanistan. Iran, with its comparatively advanced academic system, offers a degree of safety and educational opportunity; however, students simultaneously encounter social discrimination, restrictive residency

regulations, economic hardship, psychological strain, and identity-related challenges (Zandi-Navgran et al., 2023). The duality of Afghan students' migration experiences resonates with broader patterns observed among international and regional student populations. For instance, Bayraktar and Yorganci (2025), examining Muslim students' motivations in Northern Cyprus, highlight how religious and cultural proximity, affordability, and perceived safety strongly influence students' choices of destination. These findings parallel Afghan students' decisions to study in Iran, where linguistic commonalities, geographic proximity, and lower migration barriers function as significant pull factors. Such contextual similarities reinforce the view that academic migration is not only a response to structural deficiencies in the home country but also a calculated pursuit of culturally familiar and accessible opportunities abroad (Bayraktar and Yorganci, 2025). These findings underscore the dual nature of academic migration as both an avenue for development and a source of psychosocial complexity.

Academic Migration as a Dual Experience

Participants described their migration experiences as inherently paradoxical. While Iran provides an environment conducive to academic growth and intellectual engagement, students grapple with emotional stress, cultural displacement, and limited social inclusion. Migration was not perceived as a voluntary pursuit but rather as a necessary escape from systemic violence, poverty, and gender-based educational exclusion in Afghanistan. Despite this, students maintained a sense of purpose and aspiration, viewing academic migration as a vehicle for self-improvement and professional advancement. Similar themes have been observed in other studies, particularly regarding the emotional cost of social exclusion and uncertainty about the future (Farahani et al., 2024).

Financial difficulties were also prevalent, particularly in relation to tuition fees and the limited availability of student financial aid (Pishghadam et al., 2023). Nonetheless, students emphasized the value of the academic environment in Iran, including access to advanced scientific resources, freedom to choose academic disciplines, and engagement with Iran's rich artistic and cultural traditions (Mohammadi et al., 2024). These elements made a meaningful contribution to both personal development and broader cultural awareness.

Psychological and Identity-Related Impacts

A central theme emerging from the data was the psychological burden of migration. Students reported persistent feelings of alienation, loneliness, and dual identity—particularly among younger individuals navigating the formative years of adulthood in a culturally foreign context. Migration was described as a prolonged psychological negotiation in which students constantly felt the need to prove their worth in order to gain social and academic acceptance. This internalized pressure—exacerbated by obligations to support family members and represent the broader migrant community—often led to emotional exhaustion and hidden anxiety.

These findings align with those of Zandi-Navgran et al. (2023), who emphasized the psychosocial implications of forced migration. Furthermore, as Zamperini et al. (2024) argue, despite these psychological pressures, higher education can serve as a transformative experience, promoting resilience, self-confidence, and the development of intercultural competence—particularly when appropriate support systems are in place.

Structural Barriers and Social Discrimination

In addition to personal and psychological challenges, participants encountered structural barriers within the host society. These included delays in residency permit renewals, difficulty accessing banking and legal services, and unequal access to student housing and academic resources. Participants also reported experiencing subtle and overt forms of social discrimination, which contributed to a sense of marginalization and reinforced their status as outsiders. These findings are consistent with prior literature documenting the negative impacts of exclusionary policies and social stigma on migrant well-being and academic performance (Afrasiabi and Zandi, 2025a).

Such barriers do not only hinder academic achievement; they also contribute to chronic stress and undermine students' sense of belonging in the host society (Afrasiabi and Zandi, 2025b). In terms of challenges, the psychosocial stressors and structural barriers identified in this study also mirror international trends. Abdulazeez, Reppa, and Mok (2025), for example, documented how Arab international students in the United Kingdom frequently encountered issues of belonging, discrimination, and uncertainty about their future—concerns that closely resemble the experiences of Afghan students in Iran. These comparative insights underscore the universality of academic migrants' struggles with integration, while also drawing attention to context-specific dimensions, such as restrictive residency policies in Iran. By situating Afghan students' experiences within this wider body of international research, the findings of this study contribute to a more nuanced understanding of academic migration as a phenomenon marked by both shared and contextually unique psychosocial complexities (Abdulazeez, Reppa, and Mok, 2025). Addressing these systemic issues requires institutional reforms and a more inclusive educational framework.

Policy and Institutional Implications

Based on these findings, the following policy measures are recommended for higher education institutions and relevant governmental bodies:

- **Intercultural Education Programs:** Develop initiatives to promote cultural awareness, coexistence, and reduce ethnic stereotyping within universities.
- **Faculty and Staff Training:** Educate academic and administrative staff on the sociocultural backgrounds of Afghan students and the value of diversity.
- **Legal and Administrative Reform:** Simplify and expedite residency and visa renewal processes in collaboration with immigration authorities.
- **Student Identification and Access:** Issue special identification cards to facilitate access to financial, legal, and public services.

- Financial and Academic Support: Ensure Afghan students have equitable access to loans, housing, scholarships, and educational resources.
- Academic Inclusion: Remove unnecessary restrictions on course enrollment for students with valid residency documentation.
- Mental Health and Identity Workshops: Provide psychosocial support, particularly in the areas of stress management and identity negotiation.
- Student Participation and Representation: Encourage the involvement of migrant students in academic, cultural, and student governance activities.
- Institutional Collaboration: Foster partnerships with Afghan universities and international organizations for faculty exchanges and joint academic programs (Esfandiari et al., 2024).

Return Migration and Knowledge Transfer

Given the ongoing instability in Afghanistan—especially regarding gender-based educational restrictions and regional insecurity—any consideration of return migration must be undertaken within a framework of voluntariness, safety, and sustainability. Recommended measures include:

- "Brain Gain" Initiatives: Develop programs to facilitate the voluntary return of skilled Afghan graduates who can contribute to national development.
- Employment and Research Opportunities: Offer incentives such as academic employment, participation in national reconstruction efforts, and access to research funding.
- Knowledge and Technology Transfer: Support the transfer of acquired skills and expertise to Afghan institutions.
- Support for Returnee Entrepreneurs: Provide tax incentives and start-up support for businesses founded by returning graduates.
- Legal Protection for Returnees: Ensure adequate physical and legal safeguards, particularly for women and minority groups.

Theoretical Contribution and Comparative Insights

This study offers a more balanced and comprehensive perspective on academic migration, moving beyond the predominantly negative framing often found in earlier research. Unlike studies focusing mainly on undocumented or economically marginalized migrants, this work centers on university students who generally possess greater social and educational capital. This focus enables the identification of distinct challenges and opportunities that are often overlooked, such as cultural, artistic, and identity-related dimensions, rather than limiting analysis to economic integration alone (Gultekin, 2025; McGill, 2013).

Furthermore, shifts in Iranian immigration policies and evolving regional dynamics provide a critical context that helps explain divergences from prior findings. The changing political and educational landscape in Iran has created new possibilities and constraints for Afghan student migrants, shaping their experiences in unique ways (Gultekin, 2025). Importantly, this study highlights that academic migration—even when occurring under conditions of hardship—can catalyze resilience, cultural adaptation, and personal transformation, particularly when supportive institutional and social frameworks are in place (McGill, 2013).

By integrating these broader socio-political and cultural perspectives, the study advances theoretical understanding of academic migration in international education, emphasizing its dual nature as both a source of distress and a platform for growth.

Limitations and Future Research

This study was limited to Afghan university students residing in Iran, which constrains the generalizability of the findings to other migrant populations. Although all participants were proficient in Persian, subtle cultural or linguistic nuances may have influenced the data collection and interpretation. Moreover, with only three women among the eleven participants, the study does not fully capture the gendered dimensions of migration. Future research should focus on more diverse and comparative samples, including students from different national backgrounds, non-student migrants, and a more balanced gender representation, to better understand the complexities and intersections of the migration experience.

CONCLUSION

This study highlighted that migration represents a dual experience of opportunity and adversity for Afghan university students in Iran. On one hand, migration has provided access to reputable higher education institutions, exposure to Iranian culture, and opportunities for academic and professional advancement. On the other hand, Afghan students have encountered significant challenges, including social discrimination, residency issues, high educational expenses, and psychological stress. The findings emphasized the urgent need for supportive policies aimed at improving the conditions of migrant students. The study advocates for educational and social reforms to reduce existing barriers and facilitate the integration of these students into the host society.

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Conflicts of interest/Competing interests: The authors declared no conflict of interest.

Ethics approval: The protocol for this study was approved by the Shahid Beheshti University research committee with code: IR.SBU.REC.1403.114

Consent to participate: To comply with the ethical principles of voluntary participation, written informed consent was obtained from the participants for conducting and recording the interviews. The participants were also reassured of the confidentiality of their information.

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Authors' Contribution

M RK and A Kh-K: Developed the research idea and designed the study; M RK, M P and A Kh-K.: Collaborated on data analysis and manuscript writing; M RK, and A Kh K.: Provided the resources necessary to undertake this study; M RK, A

Kh-K, and MP: Participated in sampling. All authors contributed to the revision, discussion, and approval of the final manuscript.

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