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A study of Afghan university graduates' perspectives on the relevance of higher education

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Abstract

This study delves into the perspectives of graduates on higher education in Afghanistan. Utilizing a stratified sampling approach, 284 graduates from Samangan Higher Education Institute were surveyed. The sample size was determined using the Cochran method with a 5% error rate. Over three weeks in November 2023, responses from 121 graduates of the year 2021 and 163 graduates of the year 2022 were gathered, with males comprising 64.8% and females incorporating 35.2% of the respondents. The findings highlight that individual preferences were the primary influencers in selecting majors, followed by family and friends. Notable disparities in expectation levels emerged between male and female graduates, with only 30% of male graduates confirming that their expectations were met, compared to 60% of female graduates. Furthermore, an analysis of employment status among graduates, segmented by gender and faculty, revealed significant discrepancies. Around 60% of male graduates from agriculture and economics faculties are employed, whereas this figure stands at 11% for female graduates. Experience, foreign language skills, and connections are identified as crucial factors in securing employment. Over 60% of female graduates who are employed, work in the private sector. Moreover, 44% of female graduates from the economics faculty and 22% from the agriculture faculty are engaged in small businesses. We recommend implementing programs specifically designed to empower female graduates with entrepreneurship skills. These programs should provide training, mentorship, and resources to help them establish and sustain small businesses or ventures from homes or within their communities. Additionally, there should be efforts to create a supportive ecosystem that facilitates access to markets, finance, and networking opportunities for women entrepreneurs.

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Introduction

Following over four decades of conflict and war, the higher education system has faced significant disruption. The aftermath of the civil war and the Taliban era saw the system plunged into a state of devastation and decline. Numerous highly skilled faculty members had fled, been detained, or lost their lives. The majority of buildings lay damaged or in disrepair, equipment was either destroyed or absent, most laboratories lay dormant, and libraries were stripped of their resources (Babury & Hayward, 2013). However, in 2002, the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) undertook efforts to rebuild the system and enhance access and quality of higher education nationwide. This is evidenced by the significant increase in the number of students, rising from approximately 7,890 in 2001 (Babury & Hayward, 2013) to nearly 200,000 in public universities alone by 2021 (Table 1). Furthermore, as of 2021, Afghanistan was home to 133 private universities, with a combined enrollment of over 151,000 students (Table 2).

In addition to expansion, the MoHE prioritized quality assurance and increasing women’s participation as key focus areas. The quality assurance and accreditation process commenced in 2012, and within one year, they reviewed 90 universities (Welch & Wahidyar, 2020). In 2001, there were only a few hundred female students in medical faculties (Hayward & Karim, 2019), while female enrollment in public universities alone reached nearly 60,000 by 2021 (Table 1). This figure indicates that three out of every ten students in public universities were female (Table 3). Despite significant progress, the MoHE faced numerous challenges, including limited budgetary resources (Babury & Hayward, 2013; MoHE, 2015a), inadequate dormitory facilities for female students (MoHE, 2015a), low quality of universities (Roof, 2015), a shortage of female academic staff (MoHE, 2015a; Table 3), conservative family beliefs (MOHE, 2015a), mismanagement, and corruption (Ali, 2014; 2015).

Following the Taliban’s resurgence to power in August 2021, the higher education sector encountered a series of new challenges. Girls were banned from attending universities (BBC, 2022), leading to a significant setback in gender equality and access to education. Additionally, a considerable number of lecturers and educated individuals left the country (Hasht-e Subh Daily, 2023), resulting in a loss of expertise and capacity within academic institutions. Furthermore, financial issues and restrictions compelled several private universities to cease operations (Kawa, 2023), further exacerbating the already strained higher education landscape.

In the domain of research focusing on university graduates’ perspectives on higher education and employment, a significant gap is evident. While some studies have explored students’ views on education and career pathways in Afghanistan, there is a scarcity of research that specifically collects firsthand data from university graduates post-Taliban regime change. Furthermore, with the Taliban mandate banning female graduates from working in many organizations, there is an urgent need for research that focuses on understanding the perspectives of female graduates. Therefore, this research paper aims to bridge

these gaps by directly gathering data from university graduates in 2021 and 2022 and analyzing their viewpoints on higher education and employment status. To achieve this, the study will explore the following research questions:

- 1. What factors influenced your choice of major in university?
- 2. How satisfied are you with your education experience at Samangan Higher Education Institute?
- 3. What are the most important factors in securing a job?

Higher education landscape in Afghanistan (2010-2021)

Access to higher education

The Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) has demonstrated a commendable commitment to expanding access to higher education throughout the country over the past decade (Welch & Wahidyar, 2020). The number of public universities has seen a significant surge, increasing from 20 in 2010 to 35 in 2015, and further reaching 39 in 2021. Moreover, both male and female academic employees have witnessed a considerable increase. In 2010, the male academic staff numbered around 2,570, with the female academic staff comprising 454. This positive trend continued in 2021, with the figures rising to 5,405 for male academic staff and 852 for female academic staff. The student demographic has also experienced significant growth, with the number of male students exceeding 51,000 and female students reaching 12,400 in 2010. Fast forward to 2021, and the numbers have surged to over 137,000 male students and approximately 60,000 female students. Despite significant development in Afghanistan, the gross enrollment rate in tertiary education remains one of the lowest globally, standing at 8.5%. Moreover, this rate is notably lower than those of neighboring countries: Kazakhstan at 50%, Kyrgyzstan at 44%, Tajikistan at 31%, and India at 27% (Sabzalieva, 2019).

Table 1: Public university growth, 2010-2021.

Year	Student (in thousands)		Academic staff		University
	Male	Female	Male	Female	
2010	51.3	12.4	2,569	454	20
2011	63.0	14.8	2,680	479	24
2012	82.1	19.2	3,033	522	26
2013	100.7	24.0	3,854	642	31
2014	122.8	30.4	4,375	726	31
2015	135.8	36.3	4,756	766	34
2016	141.3	41.0	4,700	774	36
2017	140.0	44.7	4,935	785	36
2018	153.3	54.2	5,058	811	38
2019	142.4	54.8	5,254	836	38
2020	142.7	62.7	5,326	853	38
2021	137.0	59.8	5,409	852	39

Source: NSIA, 2018; 2019; 2020; 2021; MoHE, 2018.

The private higher education sector in Afghanistan has experienced rapid growth, driven by a strong demand for higher education. This growth is evident in the remarkable increase in the number of private universities, which soared from 31 in 2010 to 133 in 2021. Furthermore, this expansion has had a significant impact on the academic workforce within private universities, with the number of

academic staff increasing tenfold from over 1,000 in 2010 to over 10,000 employees in 2021. Concurrently, the student population within private universities has seen a substantial surge, rising from 20,000 students in 2010 to an impressive 151,000 by 2021.

Table 2: Private university growth, 2010-2021.

Year	University	Academic staff	Student (in thousands)
2010	31	1,109	20.5
2011	59	1,757	35.3
2012	81	3,267	59.6
2013	88	4,546	80.5
2014	106	6,050	108
2015	124	8,022	128
2016	128	9,248	158
2017	130	11,508	181
2018	131	12,179	187
2019	132	12,819	227
2020	132	12,818	182
2021	133	10,285	151

Source: NSIA, 2018; 2019; 2020; 2021; MoHE, 2018.

The disparity in student-lecturer ratios between public and private universities has become more pronounced over the last decade. In public universities, this ratio has experienced an increase, rising from 21 students per lecturer in 2010 to 31 students per lecturer in 2021. Conversely, the student-lecturer ratio has declined in private universities over the same period. In 2010, private universities had a ratio of 18.5 students per lecturer; by 2021, this ratio had decreased to 15 students per lecturer. This reduction implies that private universities have successfully managed their student-lecturer ratios more efficiently, potentially providing students with more personalized attention and a lower lecturer workload.

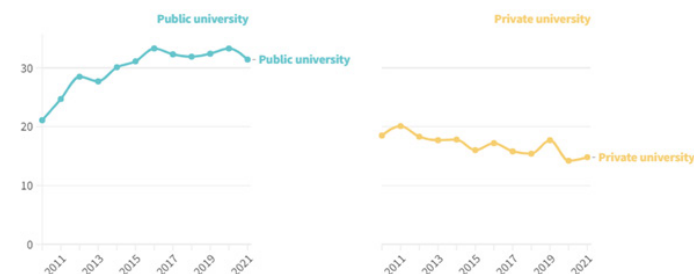


Figure 1: Student-lecturer ratio at public and private universities, 2010-22. Source: NSIA, 2018; 2019; 2020; 2021; MoHE, 2018.

Despite progress, universities face challenges in providing the quality and quantity of professionals needed for the labor market, particularly in management and technical fields where demand is critical (Roof, 2015). Additionally, insufficient dormitory space for women has been identified as a significant barrier to girls attending higher education institutions. Only 9.4% of girls have access to such facilities, which is significantly lower compared to boys, with access being three times higher (MoHE, 2015b). Families are reluctant to send their daughters to universities without access to safe and supervised accommodation (MoHE, 2015b; Roof, 2015). Moreover, mental health concerns pose a considerable challenge for young college students, with approximately 40% experiencing clinical levels of post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, or anxiety (Babury & Hayward, 2013). These mental health issues often result

in decreased academic performance and, in many cases, dropout.

The disparity in access to higher education is starkly evident across genders, regions, and wealth quintiles, primarily due to inequalities in primary and secondary education. This gender disparity is highlighted by a ratio of less than 2:1, indicating that more than two boys attend school for each girl, with close to 90% of girls out of school in some provinces (MoE et al., 2018). Additionally, the School Life Expectancy (SLE) reveals a significant gender gap, with boys expected to remain in education for 9.5 years, 1.7 times longer than girls (Pouras Consult, 2016). The completion rate for girls stands at 21%, nearly half of the rate for boys, which is at 40% (Pouras Consult, 2016).

Inequalities persist between rural and urban areas, highlighting geographical challenges that affect access to education. Children residing in rural communities are over twice as likely to be out of school compared to those in urban areas (MoE et al., 2018). Moreover, there is a substantial gap in primary school completion rates between rural and urban settings, with rural completion rates at 28% and urban completion rates at 42% (Pouras Consult, 2016). Additionally, inequalities based on wealth quintiles exacerbate disparities in educational opportunities. In the wealthiest quintile, primary school attendance rates are relatively high at 76%, contrasting starkly with the significantly lower rate of 25% in the poorest quintile (ARTF & UNICEF, 2023). Similarly, completion rates underscore this gap, with 77% of students completing school in the richest quintile compared to only 19% in the poorest quintile (ARTF & UNICEF, 2023).

Quality assurance and accreditation

In the aftermath of the Taliban's collapse in 2001, Afghanistan prioritized the expansion of private and public higher education institutions quantitatively, while neglecting to enhance educational quality (Welch & Wahidyar, 2020). However, improving the quality of university education has emerged as a critical challenge and focal point (World Bank, 2013). The MoHE, with the support of international organizations including the World Bank, have endorsed the establishment of quality assurance systems for higher education. These initiatives concentrate on various aspects, including aligning students' academic performance with international standards, ensuring the economic and social relevance of graduates, and evaluating the research contributions of academic staff through publications such as journal articles, books, and monographs (World Bank, 2013). The notion of quality assurance was a recent introduction in Afghanistan's higher educational landscape. It first emerged in 2009, prompting agencies to explore strategies for enhancing higher educational quality (Roof, 2015). Subsequently, in 2012, the MoHE established a Directorate on Quality Assurance and Accreditation, alongside the formulation of relevant rules and regulations. This development occurred in close consultation with higher education institutions (HEIs), leaders, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and accreditation agencies from abroad (Welch & Wahidyar, 2020). A pilot project involving four universities was initiated, with the process officially

launched for public HEIs in mid-2012 and extended to private HEIs in 2013. Despite facing threats and intimidation, the review process encompassed 90 private HEIs by early 2013 (Welch & Wahidyar, 2020).

Part of the endeavor to enhance quality in higher education involves elevating the qualifications of faculty members, including their attainment of master's and PhD degrees. In an interview with Roof (2015), the Vice Chancellor of Kabul University highlighted that a considerable percentage of lecturers at the institution possess only bachelor's degrees, suggesting that faculty members should temporarily leave Afghanistan to pursue advanced degrees abroad. The World Bank estimates that around 500 faculty members were pursuing master's degrees overseas, with a smaller cohort working towards PhDs (World Bank, 2013). To facilitate this process, the MoHE has forged partnerships with several international universities worldwide. These collaborations enable faculty exchanges and grant Afghanistan access to valuable resources from partner institutions. About half of Afghanistan's universities have initiated partnerships with foreign educational institutions, aiming to bolster faculty development and enhance educational standards (Roof, 2015). In 2020, statistics on the qualifications of lecturers in public universities reveal that 50% possessed a master's degree, 45% attained a bachelor's degree, and 5% obtained a PhD (Ahmadi, 2022).

Despite advancements in quality assurance, the Strategic Plan for Quality Enhancement in Higher Education 2015-2020 outlined various challenges. These included the rapid growth of unplanned universities in the past decade, the streamlined process of granting permits to higher education institutions, resulting in unchecked expansion, and the insufficient budget allocated for implementing quality assurance programs (MoHE, 2015a). Another study compares the MoHE and the Ministry of Education (MoE), concluding that the MoHE is considerably smaller than its counterpart which is responsible for overseeing the broader education system. This discrepancy leads to ongoing challenges for the MoHE, including insufficient funds and personnel (Welch, 2011). These challenges are exacerbated by the highly centralized nature of the public higher education system in Afghanistan, which controls virtually every aspect of decision-making for individual campuses, while private institutions often fail to meet minimal standards for academic quality (Berger & Thomas, 2015). Thus, establishing a more autonomous public system and implementing stricter regulations for private institutions are crucial prerequisites for the further development of a high-quality higher education system (Berger & Thomas, 2015). Additionally, regularly reviewing the 12 standards and relevant guidelines for self-assessment is crucial. It is especially important to tailor them to the unique needs, circumstances, and available resources of each public institution (Taheryar, 2017).

Women's participation in higher education

The MoHE initiated efforts to reintegrate women into higher education, following the defeat of the Taliban at the end of 2001. Under Taliban rule, women were barred from all levels of education, except in the field of medicine,

where female doctors were permitted to treat women and daughters. Kabul Medical University saw the graduation of approximately 134 women MDs during this period, with an estimated 380 women enrolled in Kabul Medical School from 1996 to 2001 (Hayward & Karim, 2019). The issue of female illiteracy remained prevalent, with more than 90 percent of women in Afghanistan being unable to read in 2009 (Crane & Rerras, 2009). Additionally, child marriage persists as a significant challenge, further exacerbated by societal pressure that often leads employed women to resign after marriage (Crane & Rerras, 2009). Afghanistan continues to lag behind on the international Gender Parity Index, with a low score of 0.2, compared to an average of 0.6 for least-developed countries (World Bank, 2013).

Alongside other initiatives, the MoHE developed the Sexual Harassment Policy and the Higher Education Gender Strategy to address issues concerning women in higher education effectively. The sexual harassment policy, first instituted in 2009, underwent revisions and expansions in 2015. Moreover, the Higher Education Gender Strategy, with its final English version completed in May 2014, was formally released in July 2016. The gender strategy culminated in an action plan, prioritizing several key initiatives. These included enhancing access for women at both undergraduate and graduate levels, fostering a campus environment conducive to equal treatment and safety, aiming to increase the representation of women students to 25% and faculty members to 20% by 2020, expanding fellowship opportunities for women pursuing master's and PhD studies abroad, constructing an additional 4,000 dormitory spaces for women, and instituting a committee to monitor progress towards these objectives (Hayward & Karim, 2019).

The gender distribution among students in public universities has shown a positive trend over the past decade, with the number of female students increasing from 20 in 2010 to 30 in 2021 for every 100 students. Yet, female participation rates in higher education are strikingly low in Afghanistan compared to neighboring countries. In 2017, the participation rate was over 20% in Afghanistan, while it fell short of 40% in Tajikistan and nearly 55% in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, respectively (Sabzalieva, 2019). The MoHE underscores several factors hindering girls' access to higher education, including inadequate dormitory facilities, limited numbers of female graduates from primary and secondary levels, security concerns, economic challenges, societal norms, fear of harassment, and a lack of interest in pursuing higher education (MoHE, 2015b). The researcher identifies additional factors influencing the situation. According to Najam and Johnston (2023), the rigid score-based admission criteria of public universities contribute to the exacerbation of gender inequality, particularly in highly selective programs. This disparity in performance may be attributed to the systemic underinvestment and cultural barriers that Afghan women encounter when seeking access to post-secondary education. Roof (2015) discovered, through interviews, that while policies may appear adequate on paper, implementation often falls short. Ali (2014; 2015) reports instances of corruption and mismanagement within the MoHE, particularly in relation to the *Kankor* (university entrance exam).

Table 3: Gender distribution ratio for academic employees and students at public universities, 2010-21.

Year	Academic staff		Student	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
2010	84.9	15.1	80.5	19.5
2011	84.8	15.2	81.0	19.0
2012	85.3	14.7	81.0	19.0
2013	85.7	14.3	80.7	19.3
2014	85.8	14.2	80.1	19.9
2015	86.1	13.9	78.9	21.1
2016	85.9	14.1	77.5	22.5
2017	86.3	13.7	75.8	24.2
2018	86.2	13.8	73.9	26.1
2019	86.3	13.7	72.2	27.8
2020	86.2	13.8	69.5	30.5
2021	86.4	13.6	69.6	30.4

Conversely, the gender ratio among academic employees at public universities has seen a different trajectory. In 2010, there were 15 female academic employees for every 100 employees, and this ratio decreased slightly to 13.5 for every 100 employees by 2021. While the absolute numbers of male and female academic staff have increased, this reduction in the gender ratio suggests that there may be challenges or disparities in achieving a balanced gender representation among academic employees at public universities. This issue stems from two primary factors: Firstly, there is a limited number of girls with bachelor’s or higher education degrees. Secondly, entrenched conservative beliefs spread the notion that women should not pursue employment outside the home (MoHE, 2015b). Roof (2015) found in interviews with officials at the higher education ministry that most families do not permit females to pursue advanced degree programs overseas. Consequently, the ministry has suggested providing master’s programs within the country for female candidates unable to study abroad.

Higher education and employment under the Taliban rule

Higher education

Following the Taliban’s assumption of control in August 2021, numerous concerning developments have surfaced, marking a shift in policies. The implementation of restrictive measures has significantly curtailed personal freedoms and disrupted daily life. This has had a particularly severe impact on women and educated individuals, exacerbating barriers to education, employment, and participation in public life (UN Women et al., 2024; Safi et al., 2024). Based on a report from around 750 interviews with Afghan women across all provinces, more than half expressed feeling unsafe when leaving their homes without a Mahram (male guardian) (UN Women et al., 2024). Another evident outcome is the departure of professionals and intellectuals as they seek to leave the country amidst the changing political environment and related uncertainties. According to reports, 229 professors from Afghanistan’s leading universities, Kabul, Herat, and Balkh universities, have left (National Herald India, 2022). Similarly, a report reveals that over 400 professors have left Kabul University alone in the past two years (Hasht-e-Subh Daily, 2023). Moreover, educated youth and middle-class households also express a desire to leave the country due to concerns about personal safety, restrictions, limited

economic opportunities, and the potential for civil unrest (Rahimi & Joya, 2023; Barlas & Ammar, 2022). As skilled and educated individuals choose to seek better prospects abroad, their departure results in a notable loss of human capital within their home country (Docquier, 2014).

In their second month of power, the Taliban permitted the reopening of universities despite implementing strict mandates enforcing gender-segregated classes (Al Jazeera, 2022). Female university students encountered severe limitations, including the requirement to cover their faces not only in public areas of the university but also during classes, alongside the prohibition of male teachers from instructing female students (Easar et al., 2023). Subsequently, on December 20, 2022, the Taliban expanded these restrictions to include a ban on women pursuing university education entirely (BBC, 2022). These stringent measures have had a significant impact, resulting in the exclusion of over 100,000 female students from government and private higher education institutions (UNESCO, 2023). This exclusion has also been linked to an increase in mental health issues among students who are banned from attending education (The Washington Post, 2023; The Guardian, 2022; Neyazi et al., 2023). Additionally, according to the World Happiness Report for 2024, with a score of 1.72, Afghanistan is classified as the unhappiest country on earth (Wellbeing Research Centre, 2024).

Furthermore, these restrictions have had a profound impact on private universities. Enrollment numbers have declined significantly since the Taliban takeover, largely due to the ban on women attending universities and the fleeing of students from Afghanistan (SIGAR, 2023). Additionally, over 30 universities and private educational institutions were shut down due to financial difficulties. However, certain experts propose that the main factors contributing to the closure of private universities include the breakdown of ethical values and the absence of specialized subjects (Kawa, 2023).

The Taliban has also taken steps to Islamize higher education and implement changes in curricula. Prior to the Taliban’s rule, undergraduate programs typically included eight credits of Islamic studies, equivalent to one credit per semester. However, the Taliban has tripled this requirement, mandating that universities teach 24 credits of Islamic studies during undergraduate programs, with plans to increase this to 32 credits (Sharafat, 2024). Moreover, the MoHE under the Taliban rule, commenced the review of curricula in 2023, as they released a press statement highlighting their consideration of both religious and modern subjects in the higher education system (Tolo News, 2023; Sharafat, 2024). The MoHE decided to recognize religious studies conducted in madrasas as part of the formal education system. Following this decision, a qualifying exam was administered by the MoHE for 51,000 graduates of religious schools (MoHE, 2024). Upon successfully passing the exam, these graduates will be awarded a degree equivalent to a master’s level qualification (KabulNow, 2024). These degrees may potentially increase their chances of being hired as academic staff at universities.

These policies regarding higher education have played a significant role in undermining academic freedom. Academic freedom serves as a cornerstone, ensuring educators have the autonomy to utilize their expertise, engage in inquiry, and apply critical thinking, acknowledging their authority rooted in education and experience (Vélez & Curry, 2020). As outlined by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), educators are entitled to freedom in various realms, including research and publications, classroom presentations and discussions, including textbook selection, and protection from institutional censorship when expressing opinions outside the institution through extramural speech (Vélez & Curry, 2020). The Academic Freedom Index (AFI) provides a unique framework for assessing academic freedom, examining five key indicators: freedom to research and teach, academic exchange and dissemination, institutional autonomy, campus integrity, and academic and cultural expression freedom (Kinzelbach et al., 2024). The AFI spans from 0 to 1 on a continuous scale, where higher values signify increased academic freedom (Lott, 2023). Afghanistan's position in this index has seen a significant decline, with a ranking below 0.1 in 2024, placing it in the bottom 10% (Kinzelbach et al., 2024). In contrast, Afghanistan, with a score above 0.5, was positioned within the bottom 30% - 40% in 2022 (Kinzelbach et al., 2022).

Employment

Since August 2021, there has been a marked deterioration in the employment landscape. According to a rapid assessment conducted by the International Labour Organization (ILO), job losses in the third quarter of 2021 exceeded half a million, escalating to 900,000 by mid-2022. The impact on female employment was particularly severe, with losses reaching 21 percent by mid-2022 (ILO, 2022). The Taliban systematically curtailed women's rights, imposing constraints that barred them from accessing public spaces, including employment opportunities. As part of this restriction, beauty salons were prohibited, leading to the closure of 12,000 businesses and the subsequent loss of jobs for over 60,000 women (Reuters, 2023). Additionally, on December 24, 2022, the Ministry of Economy issued a directive banning Afghan women from working with national and international NGOs. The authorities clarified that this ban would not affect women employed in hospitals, clinics, or other healthcare facilities (International Crisis Group, 2023). Before the ban, estimates indicated that around 30-40 percent of Afghan NGO workers in the country were women (International Crisis Group, 2023; UN Women, 2023).

These exclusive policies exacerbated the humanitarian and economic crises. Following the issuance of the directive, UN Women conducted consultations with 165 Afghan women who had previous experience working for national and international NGOs. They also surveyed 127 national NGOs. The results revealed that 94% of the surveyed organizations had either partially or fully ceased operations, with the ban affecting 70% of their activities (UN Women, 2023). These findings underscore the critical role of women humanitarian workers in facilitating aid for vulnerable populations, including women, across all provinces of Afghanistan. The surveyed organizations highlighted that over one million

women beneficiaries were impacted by this ban (UN Women, 2023). Moreover, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) analyzed the restrictions on women's employment, estimating that the loss of many women from the Afghan workforce immediately reduced Afghanistan's economy by \$1 billion (NRC, 2023).

The political transition significantly undermined Afghanistan's private sector. Since August 2021, the World Bank has conducted three Private Sector Rapid Surveys (PSRS) to gain insight into the business environment in the country (World Bank, 2022a; World Bank, 2022b; World Bank, 2024a). The initial survey revealed that one in three businesses had temporarily halted operations, with surveyed firms laying off approximately three-fifths of their workforce. Smaller and women-owned businesses were disproportionately affected by these challenges (World Bank, 2022a). The most recent Private Sector Rapid Survey has revealed that employment levels in surveyed firms continue to lag behind those of August 2021. Key challenges cited include a lack of demand, issues within the banking system, uncertainty about the future, deficiencies in public services, and restrictions on women's activities (World Bank, 2024a). The unemployment rate among youth and women is alarmingly high (World Bank, 2023; ILO, 2023). The predominant form of women's participation in the labor market has shifted towards home-based self-employment (ILO, 2023). Furthermore, the Women, Business and Law Index analyzes countries based on indicators such as mobility, workplace conditions, pay equity, marriage and parenthood rights, entrepreneurship opportunities, asset ownership, and pension accessibility. Afghanistan's ranking in 2024 indicates a setback, with a score of 31.9, compared to 38.1 in 2020 (World Bank, 2024b; World Bank, 2020).

A decline in income was also observed at the national level as per capita income dropped from \$517 in 2020 to \$350 in 2021 (*Tolo News*, 2022). By 2022, approximately 97% of the Afghan population was living below the poverty line (UNDP, 2021). Moreover, around 24 million people are in urgent need of assistance to sustain their lives (OCHA, 2024). Economic crises, coupled with restrictions on female employment, have exacerbated the situation, leading to more children being pushed into labor and early marriage (Save the Children, 2022; Safi et al., 2024). Amidst this challenging economic context, a quarter of the children surveyed disclosed that they were asked to assist their families by engaging in work (Save the Children, 2022).

Assessments from global indices paint a concerning picture of Afghanistan's status. According to the 2023 Democracy Index, Afghanistan is ranked 167th, with a score of 0.26. This classification places Afghanistan's government system under the authoritarian category, indicating an absence of democratic governance (EIU, 2024). The Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) Index evaluates nations based on 13 indicators related to security, inclusion, and justice. In the 2023 ranking, Afghanistan received a score of 0.286, positioning it as the 177th country and identifying it as the most perilous nation for women (GIWPS & PRIO, 2023). Moreover, in the Human Development Report of 2023-2024 released by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), a stark warning is issued regarding the impact of human development losses

in Afghanistan. The report underscores the alarming setback of Afghanistan's Human Development Index (HDI) by a staggering ten years (UNDP, 2024).

Literature review

Several studies have assessed the perspectives of students and graduates regarding higher education. Monib (2023) explored the perceptions of undergraduate students toward e-learning, specifically targeting those who were the primary beneficiaries of such methods. This quantitative study utilized a survey format, collecting data through questionnaires. A total of 140 randomly selected respondents participated in the survey. The study revealed that e-learning is generally perceived as beneficial in higher education. However, it also highlighted the challenges associated with electronic education, including its cost and the necessity for strong Information and Communication Technology skills. Furthermore, more than half of the participants expressed a preference for hybrid learning, which combines online and face-to-face learning methods. In contrast, Hashemi (2021) aimed to investigate the impact of COVID-19 on the academic performance of Afghan students and their satisfaction levels with online teaching. A total of 1231 respondents, comprising 867 males and 364 females from both public and private universities in Afghanistan, participated in the study. The findings revealed that COVID-19 had a detrimental effect on the academic performance of Afghan students, and they expressed high levels of dissatisfaction with online teaching during this challenging period.

Orfan (2022) conducted a study to investigate the faculty behaviors perceived as the most uncivil by students and the frequency of these experiences. Data were gathered from 948 undergraduate students through a questionnaire distributed across four public universities in Afghanistan. The findings revealed that students identified 30 faculty behaviors as uncivil to varying extents. Among these, the most frequently experienced behaviors were administering excessively difficult or tricky exams and grading students based on *Waset* (connection). Similarly, Orfan (2023) investigated behaviors exhibited by students that the lecturers deemed uncivil, as well as the causes and consequences of such behaviors. Data for the study were collected using a survey questionnaire and interview protocols with open-ended questions. The findings indicated that participants regarded threatening or harassing comments, belittling, engaging in *waset*, complaining about a lecturer, and cheating on exams as highly uncivil behaviors.

Studies have identified various factors that influence education and career choices. Noora and Wani (2021) examined students' approaches to career planning and their perceptions of Afghanistan's labor market. The study revealed that students with positive perceptions of the labor market tended to exhibit better control over their careers. Conversely, those with negative perceptions of the labor market were found to be influenced by other factors in their career decision-making process and struggled to plan their careers effectively, leading to their pessimistic view of the labor market.

Furthermore, as per Taneja (2005), children raised in an environment where parental guidance and lifestyle are congruent are more inclined to be influenced by them. Consequently, a child's career aspirations are likely to be shaped by their parents' occupations in such circumstances. Kazi and Akhlaq (2017) conducted a study to explore the factors influencing students' career choices, sampling 432 students from two public sector universities in Lahore city. The findings reveal that parental influence emerged as the most significant factor, followed by peer influence. Challenges emerge when parents are uninformed about the latest trends and advancements in the diverse range of professional options available (Noora & Wani, 2021).

Samangan Higher Education Institute profile

The Samangan Higher Education Institute (SHEI), initially established under the management of Balkh University in 2008, saw significant expansion over the years. The Ministry of Higher Education approved the addition of agriculture and economics faculties to the institute in 2012, officially recognizing it as a higher education institute (SHEI, 2023). Regarding departmental structure, the education faculty comprises nine departments, while the agriculture faculty consists of three departments and the economics faculty comprises two departments (Vice Chancellor, 2023). Furthermore, the Ministry of Higher Education recently approved the establishment of Islamic Sharia and Geology and Mining faculties at SHEI, although they have not yet commenced operations (Vice Chancellor, 2023).

Over the years, the distribution of academic staff has undergone significant changes across faculties. In the Education Faculty, the number of male lecturers increased from six in 2008 to 45 in 2021, with the inclusion of five female lecturers by the same year. The agriculture faculty, established in 2012 with male lecturers, saw an increase to 15 male lecturers by 2021, and while a female staff member joined in 2017, no further female recruitment occurred. The economics faculty experienced growth from four to ten male lecturers by 2021, yet it remains without any female academic staff. These trends underscore challenges in achieving gender diversity within faculties.

Table 4: Lecturer figures categorized by gender and faculty, 2008-22.

Year	Education faculty		Agriculture faculty		Economics faculty	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
2008	6	0	0	0	0	0
2009	6	0	0	0	0	0
2010	6	0	0	0	0	0
2011	8	0	0	0	0	0
2012	16	1	7	0	4	0
2013	28	2	9	0	4	0
2014	33	2	11	0	7	0
2015	33	2	11	0	7	0
2016	34	2	12	0	7	0
2017	38	5	12	1	9	0
2018	42	5	12	1	9	0
2019	45	5	13	1	10	0
2020	45	5	14	1	10	0
2021	45	5	15	1	10	0
2022	41	5	15	1	9	0

Source: This statistical information was derived from an interview with the Vice Chancellor (2023) and data obtained from the lecturers' department, 2023.

The distribution of students across faculties reveals varying patterns of female participation, with the education faculty exhibiting a higher female contribution compared to agriculture and economics. The agriculture faculty witnessed an increase in female students from 84 in 2019 to 132 in 2020, while the economics faculty saw a rise from 90 in 2019 to 116 in 2020. However, the landscape dramatically shifted after the Taliban takeover in 2021, leading to a significant decline in female student enrollment across all faculties. Considering the number of female students in 2021, it is apparent that over 950 girls were prevented from pursuing higher education at Samangan Higher Education Institute. It is necessary to highlight that this figure does not include new enrollments. The data further indicates a reduction in the number of male students, exemplified by the Education Faculty where the count dropped from close to 1,070 in 2021 to approximately 490 in 2023, less than half of the previous enrollment.

Table 5: Student distribution across faculties based on gender, 2019-23.

Year	Education faculty		Agriculture faculty		Economics faculty	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
2019	1,124	556	526	84	325	90
2020	963	648	472	132	347	116
2021	1,069	710	323	118	448	124
2022	603	554	247	86	302	77
2023	489	0	236	0	267	0

Source: This statistical information was derived from data obtained from the students' department, 2023.

The student-lecturer ratios exhibit variations among faculties, with a decrease observed from 2019 to 2021 in the agriculture faculty, an increase in the economics faculty, and fluctuations in the education faculty. However, a shift occurred when females were banned from pursuing higher education, leading to a decline in this ratio across all three faculties. In the education faculty, the ratio decreased from 36 students per lecturer in 2021 to 25 in 2022. Similarly, the Agriculture Faculty saw a decrease from 28 students per lecturer in 2021 to 21 in 2022, and the economics faculty experienced a reduction from 57 students per lecturer in 2021 to 42 in 2022. Comparing these figures with the student-lecturer ratio at public universities presented in Figure 1, it becomes evident that the Samangan institute faces a higher ratio. The faculties struggle with insufficient academic employees in their human resource structure (Vice Chancellor, 2023), exacerbating the challenges faced in maintaining optimal student-lecturer ratios. Another contributing factor could be that the Samangan Higher Education Institute is not authorized to independently process and hire its academic staff; instead, recruitment is handled through Balkh University. In most cases, it takes one to two years for a lecturer to be recruited at this institute, potentially leading to delays in addressing staffing needs and resulting in higher student-lecturer ratios. The first strategic plan of this institute also acknowledges the lack of sufficient staff, identifying the need to increase human resources as a key focus point (SHEI, 2023).

The number of graduates has steadily increased over time. In 2011, over 100 students graduated, comprising 82 males and 19 females. By 2019, this number had surged to 419 male graduates and 116 female graduates. The significant

Table 6: Student-lecturer ratio by faculties, 2019-22.

Year	Education	Agriculture	Economics	Overall
2019	34	44	41	40
2020	32	40	46	39
2021	36	28	57	40
2022	25	21	42	29

increase after 2015 and 2016 can be attributed to the addition of economics and agriculture faculties, which began graduating students during this period. Additionally, due to COVID-19 disruptions, 52 male students graduated from night shift classes in 2020. Table 7 further illustrates that approximately 200 female students graduated in 2022, representing the period before the Taliban implemented restrictions on girls attending universities.

Table 7: Number of graduates, 2011-22.

Year	Male	Female	Both
2011	82	19	101
2012	75	17	92
2013	23	10	33
2014	34	8	42
2015	320	115	435
2016	413	110	523
2017	430	118	548
2018	408	95	503
2019	419	116	535
2020	52	0	52
2021	366	162	528
2022	347	199	546

Source: This statistical information was derived from data obtained from the students' department, 2023.

Methodology

This study was based on a survey conducted among graduates of Samangan Higher Education Institute in 2021 and 2022. Additionally, a background interview with the Vice Chancellor of this institute was undertaken to provide an introduction and context about Samangan Higher Education Institute, given the limited available information.

Population and sampling strategy

The survey was focused on 284 graduates from Samangan Higher Education Institute, and a stratified sampling approach was chosen. This method was chosen to offer a structured framework for studying specific subpopulations within the graduate cohort. By doing so, it enhances the representativeness of the sample and elevates the quality of the data obtained (Arnab, 2017). The determination of the total number of graduates was crucial and was definitively established based on the information provided in Table 8, which categorized all graduates according to gender, faculty, and graduation year.

Table 8: Number of graduate students from Samangan Higher Education Institute in 2021-22.

Faculty	2021			2022		
	Male	Female	Both	Male	Female	Both
Education	193	114	307	183	163	346
Agriculture	100	25	35	90	17	107
Economics	73	23	96	74	19	93
Total	366	162	528	347	199	546

Source: This statistical information was derived from data obtained from the students' department, 2023.

The Cochran (1977) method with a 5% error rate was applied, to calculate the appropriate sample size. The Cochran formula facilitates the calculation of an optimal sample size

based on the desired level of precision, confidence level, and the estimated proportion of the attribute present in the population. This methodology, implemented in R, suggested a sample size of 298 observations for the survey. Following this recommendation, a list of participants for the survey was generated using the numbers proposed by R. The survey was conducted over the phone by five enumerators, consisting of three males and two females. These surveyors underwent training and worked with mock questionnaires before commencing the actual survey. A group chat was created for the enumerators and researchers, to facilitate communication and address challenges during data collection. This platform allowed them to share their experiences and difficulties. The research team took on the responsibility of responding to and handling these challenges. Approximately 20% of the initially selected participants were unreachable due to the unavailability of their active contact numbers. In response to this challenge, new participants were selected to replace the unreachable ones. This replacement process took into consideration their gender, faculty, and graduation year to maintain the initial stratified structure of the sampling.

The questionnaire was designed to be completed within 20-25 minutes. However, it took a longer time to arrange phone calls with respondents, and several challenges were observed in this process. Firstly, a significant percentage of female phone numbers belonged to their fathers or other household members, resulting in a prolonged effort to arrange a call with the graduate. Secondly, women typically responded to calls from numbers saved in their phones or numbers they recognized. Consequently, surveyors had to make multiple attempts to reach these respondents. Thirdly, in some cases, parents did not permit female respondents to complete our questionnaire.

The survey spanned three weeks in November 2023, during which the team successfully completed 284 questionnaires. These questionnaires comprised responses from 121 graduates of the year 2021 and 163 graduates of the year 2022. Both males and females participated in our survey, with 77 males and 44 females among the graduates of 2021, and 107 males and 56 females among the graduates of 2022. However, female participation from the education faculty is significantly higher compared to their counterparts in the agriculture and economics faculties. For instance, 49 female graduates from the education faculty in 2022 were surveyed, whereas the figures for female graduates of agriculture and economics were three and four, respectively. This issue arises from our graduate list, where most graduates come from the education faculty, which has more departments and students than the economics and agriculture faculties.

Table 9: Sample size based on faculty and gender.

Faculty	2021			2022		
	Male	Female	Both	Male	Female	Both
Education	33	33	66	57	49	106
Agriculture	22	6	28	20	3	23
Economics	22	5	27	30	4	34
Total	77	44	121	107	56	163

Research tool

The data were collected using a questionnaire comprising four major sections. Firstly, the family and demographic section addressed gender, age, province, and household information. Secondly, the higher education information section delved into details about the faculty, the Kankor exam, and reasons for major selection. Thirdly, the respondents' experience and opinions about Samangan Higher Education Institute were explored, covering aspects such as facilities, teaching quality, and department satisfaction. Lastly, the section on life after graduation dealt with employment status and the reasons behind job-seeking efforts. The questionnaire employed a diverse set of measurement units, including binary choices, scale measurements, and Likert scales, to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the participants' responses.

Interview

The interview, held on November 23, 2023, lasted over 90 minutes, delving into various aspects of Samangan Higher Education Institute. The interview covered a brief history of the institute, its current status, and future plans. Additionally, challenges and opportunities were explored, along with identifying key stakeholders. The valuable insights gathered during this interview played a pivotal role in shaping the profile of the institute.

Ethical considerations

During surveys with graduates, ethical considerations were prioritized to ensure the protection, well-being, and dignity of all participants. In essence, the data collection process adhered to the principle of 'do no harm' (Vibert, 2022). Verbal informed consent was obtained from all graduates participating in the study. Additionally, the researchers explained the following key points to participants:

- The purpose, nature, and potential risks and benefits of the survey were communicated in a language and format understandable to participants.
- The voluntary nature of participation and the right to withdraw without consequences were emphasized.
- Participants were assured that their responses would be kept confidential, and their identities would be protected.
- Contact information of a researcher was provided in case participants had further questions or concerns.

Findings

Demographic profile of graduates

The demographic characteristics of the respondents showcase notable diversity across gender, age, ethnicity, geographic location, and faculty affiliation. The gender distribution reveals that approximately 65% of the respondents identify themselves as male, while 35% identify themselves as female. Examining age categories, a majority fall within the 22-26 age range, with approximately 30% aged 22-24 and 47% aged 24-26, while a smaller percentage, around 2%, are in the 30-34 age bracket. In terms of ethnicity, the respondents comprise a varied mix, with the majority identifying as Tajik (56.2%), followed by Uzbek (22.2%), Pashtun (10.2%), Hazara (8.5%), Turkman (1.8%), and Arab (1.1%). The geographic distribution indicates that a significant proportion resides in urban areas, constituting 66.2%, while 33.8% come from rural areas. In the realm of academic disciplines, the respondents are distributed across faculties, with 60.6% affiliated with the Education Faculty, 18.0% in Agriculture, and 21.4% in Economics.

Table 10: Demographic characteristics of respondents.

Characteristics		Percentage
Gender	Male	64.8
	Female	35.2
Age	20-22	0.4
	22-24	28.9
	24-26	47.2
	26-28	16.2
	28-30	5.3
	30-32	1.0
	32-34	1.0
Ethnic	Tajik	56.2
	Pashtun	10.2
	Uzbek	22.2
	Hazara	8.5
	Turkman	1.8
	Arab	1.1
Area	Urban	66.2
	Rural	33.8
Faculty	Education	60.6
	Agriculture	18.0
	Economics	21.4

The data provides insights into the geographical distribution of respondents, indicating representation from 16 out of 34 provinces. Samangan province emerges with the highest share, constituting 67% of the respondents. Following are Balkh and Baghlan provinces, contributing 10% and 4.5%, respectively. Conversely, the Logar and Nangarhar provinces exhibit the lowest shares among the surveyed graduates.

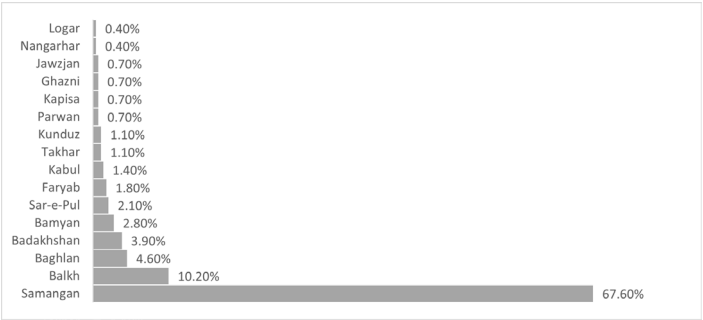


Figure 2: Distribution of respondents by province.

Expectations and education experience

Participation in Kankor preparation courses is integral for success in the Kankor national exam, significantly enhancing students' readiness and potentially improving their acceptance chances at public universities. There exists a discrepancy in participation rates between urban and rural areas within the surveyed sample. Approximately 64% of urban respondents acknowledged their participation in these preparatory courses. In contrast, the figure is lower in rural areas, with 52% of respondents confirming their engagement in Kankor preparation courses. Families predominantly enroll their male children in Kankor preparation centers, where courses typically cost around \$250 per person for several months. These programs have notably boosted admission success rates to approximately 80% for participants (Hayward & Karim, 2019). To address the gender disparity, the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) has initiated various efforts. These include urging NGOs to provide free or discounted preparatory courses for female students and recommending higher education institutions to offer complimentary pre-Kankor classes, particularly in rural regions. (Hayward & Karim, 2019).

A study focused on the Programe-e Erteqai Zarfiyat wa Amadagi Kankor dar Manatiq Mahroom (PEZAK), to assist high schoolers in underprivileged areas preparing for the national university entrance exam (Kankor). This initiative prioritized female inclusion as a requisite for participation. The findings demonstrate that the program positively impacted test scores, university enrollment in esteemed institutions and overall pass rates (Mobariz, 2022). Unlike male counterparts who can access preparation centers in provincial hubs and major cities, female students lack this advantage. Thus, programs like PEZAK play a vital role in facilitating female enrollment in higher educational programs (Mobariz, 2022). A shortage of qualified teachers, especially in science and mathematics, has hindered students' preparation for the Kankor exam. Kankor preparation courses offer additional support to students in grades 7-12, covering subjects like math, science and language, and providing exam-writing skills. As a result, more students are attempting and succeeding in the Kankor exam, paving the way for their higher education at universities (Roy, 2015). Reports also highlight significant challenges associated with the Kankor exam, including intense competition, corruption, interference from powerful individuals, and mismanagement (Ali, 2014; 2015).

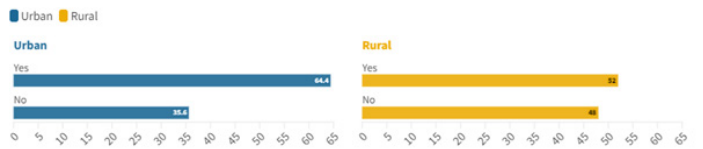


Figure 3: Participation rate in Kankor preparation courses by location.

The graduates provided insights into their motivation factors for selecting their majors, with considerations for both gender and geographical area. Individual preferences emerged as the most influential, suggesting that personal interest, passion, or individual aptitude heavily influenced major choices. Family and friends constituted another

significant motivator, reflecting the cultural and social context in Afghanistan where familial and peer influences play a pivotal role in decision-making. Students' educational and career decisions are significantly influenced by their environment, societal norms, and family (Popova, 2014). The emphasis on individual preferences and familial influences suggests that students might prioritize intrinsic motivations over external factors like job availability, potentially leading to a situation where graduates may be unprepared for the demands of the labor market.

Surprisingly, employment opportunities were ranked last among the motivating factors, indicating that graduates may prioritize personal fulfillment and societal expectations over immediate job prospects. However, studies show that enhanced perceived employability can result in heightened individual success within the labor market and foster more efficient recruitment, retention, and performance of new graduates (Jackson & Wilton, 2017). In the Afghanistan context, where economic conditions and job markets may be less predictable or well-defined (World Bank, 2024a), the impact of not knowing the employment market for a chosen major becomes particularly pronounced. This underscores the importance of improving career guidance services, fostering awareness about employment trends, and enhancing the alignment between educational offerings and market demands to better equip graduates for successful transitions into the workforce.

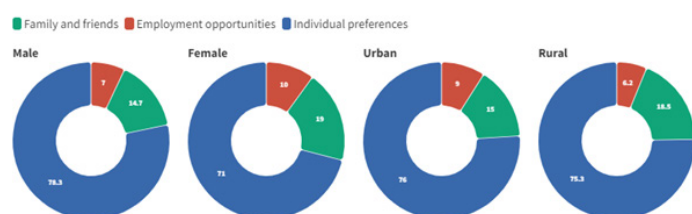


Figure 4: Motivation factor for selecting majors based on gender and area.

The data indicates that nearly half of the graduates engaged in short-term courses during their educational journey, with a comparable participation rate between male and female respondents. However, there is a slight variation in participation rates between rural and urban areas, with 50% for urban respondents and 59% for those from rural areas. In rural areas, access to educational resources and opportunities is limited in comparison to urban in Afghanistan (MoE et al., 2018; Pouras Consult, 2016). Short-term courses could be perceived as valuable supplements to formal higher education, offering practical skills and knowledge that are often in high demand. Moreover, the slight variation may also be influenced by economic considerations. Graduates from rural areas might view short-term courses as a means to enhance their employability, bridging skills gaps and increasing their chances of securing livelihoods in environments where formal job markets are more limited or locally oriented.

The data reveals that a significant portion of graduates engaged in learning practical skills through various courses and training programs. For instance, 54% of respondents participated in computer skills courses. Digital skills are

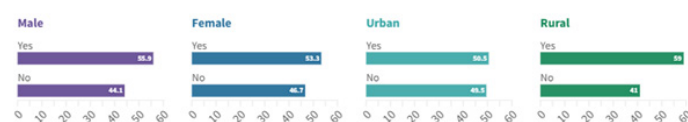


Figure 5: Participation rate in short-term courses by gender and area.

crucial in landing a job (Pirzada & Khan, 2014). A study examining the ICT market in Afghanistan revealed that many Afghans, including IT students, lack awareness of the potential opportunities within this sector. Furthermore, the workforce lacks the necessary skills and experience demanded by job openings in this field (ILO, 2017).

Language skills were also a priority, with 48% participating in language skills courses. Furthermore, 40% of graduates invested in their career development by participating in CV and job application training courses. However, the lower participation rate of 4% in research and academic writing courses suggests a lesser emphasis on academic and research-oriented skills among the surveyed graduates. These findings highlight the practical approach of graduates, emphasizing skills directly relevant to the job market. The participation rates in computer and language skills courses, coupled with career development training, indicate a keen awareness of the practical requirements of the professional landscape.



Figure 6: Participation rate in various types of short-term courses.

The respondents have conveyed their opinions on various aspects of Samangan Higher Education Institute, including facilities, lecturers, and departments, each examined through several sub-questions. In particular, when assessing the facilities, which encompassed the library, conference hall, classrooms, free internet, green campus, laboratories, sports facilities, and diploma issuance, graduates expressed dissatisfaction with certain amenities. Notably, sports facilities, free internet, and laboratories received low satisfaction ratings, with over 90% of graduates rating sports facilities as moderate, low, or very low. Providing internet services is a crucial component of the e-learning programs that this institute will prioritize in the next five years. Additionally, initiatives such as audio and video recording of lectures and establishing an e-library will be integral parts of these efforts (SHEI, 2023). In contrast, the majority of graduates expressed satisfaction with the institute's green campus, as over 70% rated it as high or very high.

Numerous questions were posed to the respondents regarding various aspects of the lecturers, covering factors such as education level, technical knowledge, quality of content, teaching methods, assessment and exams, utilization of technology, availability, communication skills, and respect and fairness. The feedback indicates a generally high level of satisfaction with the lecturers across these diverse dimensions. However, it is noteworthy that close to

half of the respondents expressed a moderate, low, or very low level of satisfaction specifically concerning the use of technology for teaching. This particular finding underscores an area that may benefit from increased attention and technological integration to enhance the overall teaching and learning experience at the institute. These issues are also addressed in the strategic plan, which proposes equipping classrooms with electronic devices and enhancing computer labs for practical modules (SHEI, 2023).

Table 11: Respondents’ opinion about Samangan Higher Education Institute.

Index	Rating (%)				
	Very low	Low	Moderate	High	Very high
Facilities					
Library	1.8	8.5	31.7	46.5	11.6
Conference hall	1.4	8.8	34.5	45.1	10.2
Classroom	2.5	12.7	40.1	33.1	11.6
Free internet	26.4	23.6	22.9	19.4	7.7
Green campus	2.8	8.8	16.9	39.4	32
Laboratories	18.7	15.1	39.1	23.9	3.2
Sports facilities	55.3	17.6	19.0	8.1	0.0
Diploma issuance	12.0	24.3	18.0	37.7	8.1
Lecturers					
Education level	0.0	1.1	16.2	46.5	36.3
Technical knowledge	0.0	0.0	17.6	47.2	35.2
Quality of contents	0.0	1.1	21.1	52.5	24.4
Teaching method	0.4	0.4	21.8	46.1	31.3
Assessment and exam	0.4	2.5	18.3	45.1	33.8
Using technology	3.5	7.7	37.3	31.3	20.1
Availability	1.1	3.9	16.5	49.3	29.2
Communication skills	0.0	2.8	31	40.1	26.1
Respect and fairness	0.4	0.7	16.2	45.1	37.7
Department and Dean					
Availability	1.1	2.8	16.9	43.0	36.3
Respect and fairness	0.0	2.5	13.4	50.7	33.5
Short-term programs	13.7	16.2	31.7	22.9	15.5
Attention to complaints	3.9	12.7	34.9	31.7	16.9
Considering students’ proposals	1.8	12.7	29.2	38.0	18.3
Orientation	14.4	19.7	22.5	26.1	17.3

The survey delved into various aspects related to the departments and dean at Samangan Higher Education Institute, including availability, respect and fairness, short-term programs, attention to complaints, considering students’ proposals, and orientation. The results indicate a high level of satisfaction among graduates with the availability and respect demonstrated by their departments and dean. Approximately 80% of respondents rated availability as high or very high, and a similar percentage expressed satisfaction with the respect and fairness exhibited within these academic entities. However, the findings also reveal areas that may require improvement. Graduates were notably dissatisfied with short-term programs and orientation, and attention to complaints, with close to 60% rated these aspects as moderate, low, or very low. These insights suggest that there is room for enhancing the effectiveness of short-term programs, improving the orientation process, and addressing concerns related to complaint resolution.

The survey findings indicate notable disparities in the expectation levels of male and female graduates. Only 30% of male graduates confirmed that their expectations were met, while this number doubled to 60% for female graduates. Additionally, around 40% of male graduates suggested the need for improvement, contrasting with only 16% of female graduates expressing a similar sentiment. Considering the Afghanistan context, potential explanations for higher

female satisfaction may include the limited historical and societal opportunities for women to pursue higher education (MoHE, 2015b; Roof, 2015). Female graduates may perceive their academic achievements as more significant due to potential gender-related barriers, leading to a higher level of contentment.

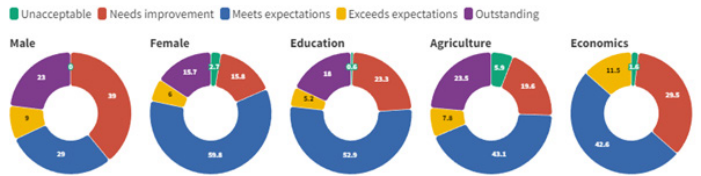


Figure 7: Distribution of expectations based on gender and faculty.

Furthermore, the study reveals variations in expectation levels across different faculties at Samangan Higher Education Institute. Specifically, four out of ten graduates from the economics and agriculture faculties confirmed that their expectations were met, while this figure slightly increased to five out of ten in the education faculty. Additionally, in terms of suggesting areas for improvement, three out of ten graduates in the economics faculty expressed this need, while it was slightly lower at two out of ten for the education and agriculture faculties. These findings suggest that graduates from the education faculty, on average, reported a slightly higher satisfaction level in terms of their expectations being met compared to their counterparts in the economics and agriculture faculties. One potential contributing factor to this difference could be the student-lecturer ratio, which plays a crucial role in the overall learning experience. Notably, the education faculty exhibited a smaller ratio of students to lecturers in 2019 and 2020 compared to the agriculture and economics faculties. This discrepancy in student-lecturer ratios could have positively influenced the quality of education, and better interaction between students and lecturers in the education faculty, potentially contributing to the higher satisfaction levels reported by graduates in that faculty.

The survey also included questions about the respondents’ experiences with continuing their education and participating in other degree programs. A significant majority, comprising 92% of respondents, indicated that they had not pursued further education beyond their current degree. In contrast, only a small minority, accounting for 8% of respondents, reported that they had participated in other education degree programs. The Taliban policy prohibiting girls from attending university could potentially serve as a primary reason for female graduates’ reluctance to participate in further education programs (UNESCO, 2023; Kawa, 2023). Additionally, economic hardship emerges as another significant factor contributing to graduates’ decision not to continue their higher education (SIGAR, 2023).

Employment

The analysis of employment status among graduates, segmented by gender and faculty, reveals significant disparities, taking into account three categories: employed, unemployed, and engaged in small livelihood activities.

For male graduates, the employment rate varies across faculties, with 66% employed from the education faculty, 63% from economics, and 57% from agriculture. In contrast, the employment rates for female graduates demonstrate a notable difference, with 40% employed from the education faculty, and significantly lower rates of 11% from agriculture and economics faculties. These findings highlight distinct patterns in employment outcomes for male and female graduates across different academic disciplines.

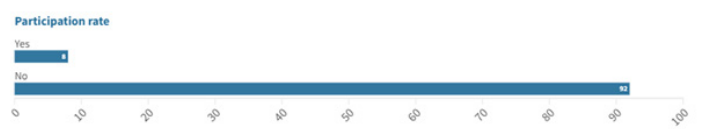


Figure 8: Participation rate for another education degree.

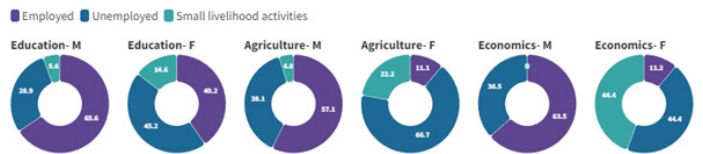


Figure 9: Employment status based on gender and faculty.

Further, the unemployment rates among male and female graduates from different faculties highlight distinct patterns. Among male graduates, four out of ten from the agriculture and economics faculties, and three out of ten from the education faculty are unemployed. In contrast, the unemployment figures for female graduates vary across faculties, with seven out of ten from agriculture, and four out of ten from both education and economics faculties being unemployed. These findings are consistent with assessments by the World Bank (2023) and the International Labour Organization (2023), which underscore an alarming unemployment rate among women. Restrictions imposed by the Taliban have limited women’s entry into the labor market (UN Women, 2023). In addition, conservative ideologies that discourage women from working outside the home may exacerbate this issue (MoHE, 2015b; Shekib, 2014).

The data further indicates that female graduates are more actively engaged in small businesses compared to their male counterparts, highlighting a potential avenue for economic participation. Moreover, the engagement in small businesses varies among female graduates across different faculties. For example, 44% of female graduates from the economics faculty are involved in small businesses, while this figure decreases to 22% for agriculture and 15% for education. This finding aligns with the observation that the primary mode of women’s participation in the labor market has transitioned towards home-based self-employment (ILO, 2023). Considering the Taliban restrictions on women’s employment, there emerges a notable opportunity for international organizations to play a pivotal role in empowering female graduates through entrepreneurship initiatives. By providing support, resources, and training in entrepreneurship, these organizations can contribute to fostering economic independence and creating sustainable livelihoods for women in Afghanistan.

The employed graduates provided insights into the sectors in which they work, categorizing their employment into the private sector, government, and NGOs. Among male graduates, half are employed in government organizations, 47% work in the private sector, and only 3% are employed by NGOs. In contrast, female graduates exhibit a different distribution, with over 60% working in the private sector, 20% in government, and 18% in NGOs. These findings shed light on the distinct employment patterns between male and female graduates, revealing a higher representation of males in government positions and a predominant presence of females in the private sector. Additionally, a notable proportion (18%) of female graduates are engaged in non-governmental organizations.



Figure 10: Gender-based employment distribution in various organizations.

The analysis of factors influencing job opportunities among all graduates, regardless of their employment status, reveals both similarities and differences. It is noteworthy that all graduates, both employed and unemployed, identified experience, foreign language skills, and connections as crucial factors in landing a job. For instance, over 60% of employed graduates and over half of unemployed graduates rated experience as high or very high in influencing job opportunities. Similarly, connections were deemed significant by over 50% of employed graduates and over 65% of unemployed graduates, indicating a shared recognition of the importance of professional networks in the job market.

Table 12: Influencing factors in landing a job categorized by employed and unemployed status.

Factor	Employed (%)					Unemployed (%)				
	Very low	Low	Moderate	High	Very high	Very low	Low	Moderate	High	Very high
Gender	30.0	12.5	13.8	22.5	21.2	40.6	9.4	12.5	11.5	26
Ethnic	52.0	16.7	18.0	9.1	4.2	47.0	8.2	12.5	18.8	13.5
Connection	16.0	10.5	18.5	33.3	21.6	11.3	9.3	14.4	25.8	39.2
National language skills	26.0	16.0	21.0	21.0	16.0	22.7	16.5	36.1	13.4	11.3
Major	14.6	20.2	14.0	25.6	25.6	37.1	21.6	16.5	13.4	11.3
Experience	6.1	8.6	22.7	32.5	30.1	15.5	9.3	22.7	28.9	23.7
Foreign language skills	12.3	21.5	25.8	25.8	14.7	8.2	22.7	28.9	24.7	15.5
Technical skills	4.3	11.1	27.2	35.2	22.2	20.2	24.5	34.0	17.0	4.3
Computer skills	14.1	19.6	23.3	27.0	16.0	10.3	21.6	32.0	21.6	14.4
Communication skills	2.5	5.6	17.4	47.2	27.3	8.6	24.7	38.7	20.4	7.5

Significant differences in opinion between employed and unemployed graduates emerge when considering the influence of the university major, technical skills, and communication skills in securing a job. Among employed graduates, five out of ten rated their major as a high or very high influential factor, whereas only one out of ten unemployed graduates shared this perspective. Similarly, technical skills were considered a high or very high influencing factor by six out of ten employed graduates, while only two out of ten unemployed graduates expressed a similar

sentiment. Further, seven out of ten rated communication skills as a high or very high influential factor in landing a job. In contrast, only three out of ten unemployed graduates expressed a similar perspective regarding the impact of communication skills.

Limitations

Two limitations could be observed in this study. Firstly, our sample was solely drawn from the Samangan Higher Education Institute, which may restrict the generalizability of our findings to all graduates across Afghanistan. Additionally, our study relied predominantly on survey data, which may have limited our ability to delve deeply into the context surrounding our research questions. Therefore, we recommend that future research endeavors consider employing a more representative sample size and utilize a combination of survey methods and interviews to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the opinions of graduates.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study highlights several key findings regarding the factors influencing undergraduate students' choice of major and subsequent employment opportunities. Individual preferences play a significant role in choosing a major, underscoring the importance of personal interests and aspirations in educational decisions. Further, over half of the participants had access to short-term courses, including computer skills courses, which employed individuals confirmed as important factors in securing jobs. A study by the Asian Development Bank (2022) on digital jobs and digital skills in Global South countries found that individuals with intermediate or advanced digital skills are in high demand. These individuals have better opportunities, are more likely to change jobs frequently, and are less likely to face unemployment (Pichler & Stehler, 2021).

Recent educational policy changes by the Taliban in Afghanistan focus on implementing curricula with a stronger emphasis on religious subjects (Sharafat, 2024). However, we recommend that educational institutions ensure their curricula include subjects that align with labor market demands. Furthermore, universities should expand their short-term courses to include computer skills, foreign languages, and communication skills. These courses equip graduates with the necessary skills to enhance their employability and better meet the demands of the job market.

This study also reveals significant gender disparities in employment opportunities. Female graduates face more limited job prospects than their male counterparts, with a significant percentage of these women being unemployed or engaged in small businesses. This issue is primarily attributed to the Taliban's ban on women working at NGOs (International Crisis Group, 2023), which has led to a decline in the overall economy (NRC, 2023) and disrupted humanitarian aid distribution (UN Women, 2023).

These insights underscore the critical need for targeted interventions to support female graduates, who face unique challenges in the job market. To address these issues, we recommend implementing comprehensive programs designed to empower female graduates with essential entrepreneurship skills. These programs should provide practical training in business management, financial literacy, and marketing to equip women with the knowledge they need to start and run successful enterprises. Establishing mentorship networks where experienced entrepreneurs can offer guidance and advice will help female graduates navigate the complexities of building and sustaining a business. Additionally, providing access to essential resources, such as startup capital, business tools, and technology, will enable women to launch and grow their ventures. This program should facilitate women's access to markets, financing, and networking opportunities through partnerships with financial institutions, market access initiatives, and platforms for business development.

Lastly, the importance of connections and networks in securing employment cannot be overstated, as they play a major role in helping graduates land jobs. We acknowledge the importance of further research on the student perspective in higher education. It is crucial to delve deeper into understanding the experiences and viewpoints of graduates to inform future educational policies and practices effectively. Therefore, we recommend that future research endeavors prioritize employing a more representative sample size and utilize a combination of survey methods and interviews. This approach enables a more comprehensive exploration of graduates' opinions, providing deeper insights into the factors that influence their educational and employment outcomes. Such research efforts will be instrumental in identifying effective strategies to enhance the quality of higher education and support graduates in achieving their career aspirations.

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