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# The Impact of University Closures on Students' Motivation After the Fall of the Afghan Government by the Taliban

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## Abstract

The post-2001 generation in Afghanistan experienced less violence and less trauma than generations during the civil war. Most of them, with the help of the international community, were provided the chance to go to school. For today's generation, access to higher education, the chance to study abroad, freedom of speech, freedom of work, and freedom of lifestyle have provided the ground for progress and development. The presence of the young post-2001 generation in various fields, from mass media to governmental entities, was a sign of progress and transformation from a conservative society to an educated and liberated society. With the sudden fall of the government, all the plans, activities, aspirations, and, most importantly, the educational opportunities of today's generation vanished. The closure of the gates of the universities not only cut off the opportunities for progress and development for the youth but also created trauma and anxiety for the youth. In this research, an attempt has been made to analyze and examine the reactions of university students to the changes and the new rules and regulations. A descriptive survey method has been used, and a total of 105 participants—49 boys and 56 girls from different departments of 5 universities have participated. Due to security conditions, purposive sampling has been used to select participants in this study. The findings showed that most of the students/participants are uncertain about the future, and they think about immigration and leaving the country. The result also showed that most female students are worried about strict rules and being excluded from work and social activities.

**Keywords:** University Closure, Education, Motivation, Taliban, Students, and Regulation

## 1. Introduction

The relative peace that has been prevailed in Afghanistan in the last two decades, with the help and cooperation of international community, has provided the ground for education and growth for post-2001 generation. According to Engelbrecht and Hassan (2021), after 2001, the United States and other international allies provided more than a billion dollars to higher education institutions in Afghanistan to expand access to quality higher education to Afghan youths. After 2001, higher education institutions gradually expanded to the thirty-

four provinces, and in 2021, the number reached 150, and more than half a million students, of whom one third were female, had the opportunity to pursue higher education in various disciplines. All of the progress in the higher education sector is in a state of ambiguity now, and no one knows what changes the system of practical education will undergo. Besides, the sudden fall of the government by the Taliban has created an atmosphere of repression and panic that has caused severe social and psychological unrest. Displacement, family separation, the end of relationships, poverty, job loss, persecution, and a slew of other social constraints have disproportionately impacted Afghan civilians, particularly university students. Most importantly, the closing of the university gates for a long time and imposing the strict rules and regulations dealt a heavy psychological blow to the students, which caused discouragement, lack of motivation, and low confidence among them. Babury and Hayward (2013) stated that the post-war trauma or effect of war and conflict has been a serious problem among university students in Afghanistan. Keeping an eye on the problem, they proposed a policy change in the higher education curriculum to address the mental health problems of students in Afghan higher education institutions. They articulated that "the universities in Afghanistan are populated by students, faculty, and staff who are themselves victims of the trauma and associated mental health problems related to war." The recent dramatic political and social collapse in Afghanistan was a terrible shock for civilians, particularly for the post-2001 generation, which had less experience of war and conflict than the older generation. In addition to security concerns, the psychological and social problems caused by these political changes have severely devastated the younger generation, especially university students.

## **2. Fear and uncertainty**

With the Taliban taking over the Afghan government, anxiety, depression, and quandary are the common psycho-social problems that most of the university students have experienced. Because of the major policy change and strict rule and regulation imposition on institutions, the majority of students are uncertain about their future. During this crisis, a large number of university teachers and students fled from the country, even in some language departments such as English, French, Spanish, German, and Russian, where the majority of the teachers have left the country. This evacuation not only made the departments drained of professional teachers but also has created disappointment and confusion among those teachers and students who still remained in the country. Further, the exclusion of women lecturers and female students from higher education institutions has even deteriorated the situation, which has caused a high level of anxiety and depression among female teachers and students. Engelbrecht and Hassan (2021) reported that the newly appointed chancellor of Kabul University by the Taliban has stated that "women would not be allowed to go to work or attend college together with male fellows."

The majority of Afghan university students come from remote localities to pursue their higher education in major cities, where they mostly belong to poor farmer families. Financially, they depended on the support received by their parents and the Ministry of Higher Education. Sadly, amid the crisis, in addition to the disconnection from the study stream and the aforementioned challenges, they lost the support from their family and the stipend from the Ministry of Higher Education, which further exacerbated the situation for them. This distressing condition left many with no choice but to quit their studies and hope for the future.

## **3. Literature review**

It has been seen that during war and social unrest, the education sector is one of the most vulnerable sectors compared to other governmental and nongovernmental branches. It has been seen that the destructive consequences of war and conflicts remain for years in the education systems of poor states. Of several negative impacts, decreased financial support, destruction of physical premises, immigration of teachers and students, and restriction of access to educational opportunities are the most common ones experienced (Lai & Thyne, 2007). According to Pherali and Sahar (2018), educational institutions show the country's authority on the ground. Therefore, militant groups often target schools and learning organizations to undermine state control and disseminate propaganda to overstate their power. Conflict and violence rip the country's social fabric,

particularly in fragile multi-ethnic states. This means that in such states, some social groups, because of economic hardship, religion, ethnicity, language, and geographical situation, are more vulnerable than others and may suffer from educational disproportionality. In the same vein, poor social-wellbeing and poverty pose similar challenges, as the immediate negative impact of conflict forces poor students to quit studies and search for food. In such conditions, it has been seen that women and girls are the most vulnerable groups whose insecurity, more than young men, forces them to leave schools (Omoeva et al., n.d.).

War and conflict have a negative impact not only on a country's economic and educational infrastructure, but also on the social well-being and emotional behavior of its citizens. Disappointment, lack of confidence about the future, stress, and trauma are the destructive effects of war and insecurity that can remarkably disrupt daily life. Murthy and Lakshminarayana (2006) have quoted the WHO's estimation that "in the situations of armed conflict across the globe, 10% of the people who experience traumatic events will have serious mental health problems and another 10% will develop behaviors that will hinder their ability to function effectively." In this vein, in 2004, two separate studies were carried out in Afghanistan where both of the studies showed a high rate of conflict-related mental health problems such as trauma, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In the first study, 62% of the participants aged 15 and above experienced trauma during the conflict, and symptoms of depression were found in 67.7%, while post-traumatic stress disorder was found in 72.2% (Cardozo et al. 2004). The second study, which was conducted in the Nangarhar province of Afghanistan, showed that of 1011 participants in the study, nearly half of them experienced traumatic events. Further, symptoms of depression were observed in 35.5% of the research population, and symptoms of anxiety were found in 51.8% (Scholte et al. 2004). The findings of both studies showed that women had experienced a higher rate of trauma, anxiety, PTSD, and depression than male participants.

The collapse of the Afghan government in mid-August 2021 and persecution and the imposition of strict rules, especially the closing of the doors of universities by the Taliban, caused a large number of professors to leave the country. This was an irreparable halt to the country's higher education main stream. In addition, a lack of security and a safe environment for academic activities has led to discouragement and frustration among university professors and students. In general, they become distrustful of their future, and this uncertainty has caused them to suffer from depression and other psychological problems. Besides devaluing academic researchers and closing universities' doors, economic hardship has added more burden to the educational problems in the country. Those university teachers who are still in the country have not received their salaries for months, so poverty has forced them to quit research and academic activities, instead struggling to provide food for their families. Private universities, however, are open, but they suffer from the same financial problems. This means that they are dependent on the fees of their students, but since the students, due to poverty, cannot afford their fees, they quit their studies and seek ways to immigrate. (Mallapaty, 2021).

#### **4. Problem statement**

The Taliban not only brought down the Afghan government in mid-August 2021, but also crippled the country's entire education system. For more than half a year, the gates of all governmental universities were closed; female professors and university students were not allowed to attend classes or enter campuses. A large number of students were halfway through their studies, and some were on the verge of graduating, but the sudden fall of the government put them in an ambiguous condition. Meanwhile, the female students are in utter confusion because they don't know whether the Taliban will allow them in the future to continue their studies; even if they are allowed to attend university, they don't know under what condition. The chaos caused the elite professors and experienced staff of the universities to leave the country and the students to be scattered anywhere, either across the country or abroad. In the midst of this turmoil, students are uncertain about their future, so despair, anxiety, and stress can be clearly seen among them.

##### *4.1. Research questions*

- 1) What is the students' reaction toward the university closure and the university regulation change by the Taliban?

- 2) Will the students have the same enthusiasm for studying as they had during the former government?
- 3) Are male and female students reacting to this change in the same way?

#### 4.2. Objective of the study

- 1) To examine the reaction of students toward the universities' closure.
- 2) To examine students' motivation for study under the Taliban government.
- 3) To investigate how students react to regulation change.

#### 4.3. Research Design

A descriptive survey method has been adopted to carry out this research. Due to security conditions and the closure of the doors of the universities, purposive sampling has been used to select the research participants. A multiple-choice questionnaire, through different means of communication (email, Google form, WhatsApp, and Skype), was administered to the research participants and SPSS was applied to analyze the data.

#### 4.4. Population

A total of 105 undergraduate students from 5 universities (Kabul University, Kabul Polytechnique University, Kabul Education University, Bamyan University, and Daikundi University), irrespective of the year of study, majors, and semesters, were selected as the research population. The Table No.1 shows the number of participants from different universities. Of 105 research participants, 49 (46.7%) were male students and 56 (53.3%) were female students. The number of fourth year (senior) students is greater than that of juniors, sophomores, and freshmen. Table No. 2 depicts the number and percentage of the research participants based on their year of study.

Table 1: Student's Participation from Different Universities

Institution	Frequency	Percent
Kabul University	16	15.2
Kabul Education University	17	16.2
Kabul Polytechnique university	12	11.4
Bamyan University	48	45.7
Daikundi higher education institution	12	11.4
Total	105	100.0

Table 2: Research Participants Based on Year of Study

Year of study	Frequency	Valid Percent
First year	7	6.7
Second year	31	29.5
Third year	21	20.0
Fourth year	46	43.8
Total	105	100.0

## 5. Data Analysis

This research was conducted in November and December 2021, at the time that the situation in Afghanistan, due to the collapse of the government by the Taliban distressful and critical. People were worried and confused about the future. Given that, the data has been collected amid chaotic and distressing conditions, and much effort was made to address the challenges that arose after the collapse of the government for Afghan university students. It is worth mentioning that due to the crisis and closure of universities in Afghanistan, the researchers have not been able to select the research participants equally from all the universities, so that, through purposive

sampling, students from different majors and different stages of study were selected. The data collection was done through different communication platforms like WhatsApp, Skype, Google Form, and email. Moreover, in this research, effort has been made to consider gender parity and reflect female students' concerns. Figure 1 shows the student participation based on the percentages in different universities.

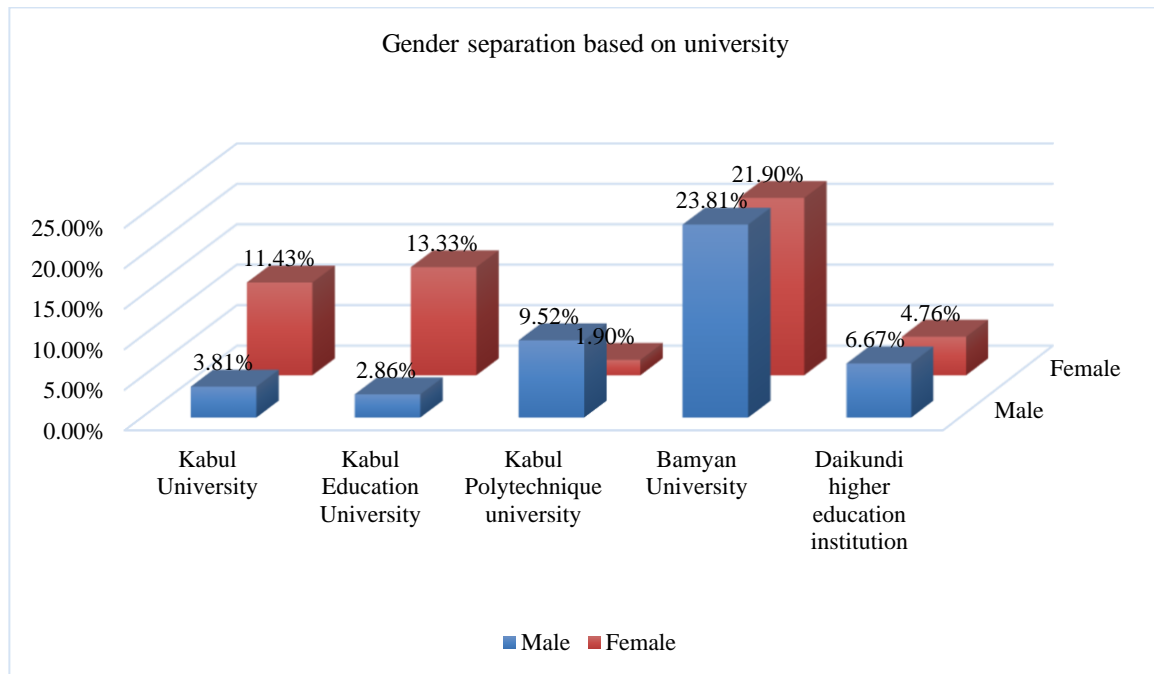


Figure 1: Gender comparison and percentage of respondents based on universities

The questionnaire that was administered consisted of five major interrelated questions, each of which contained four options. Each of the options probed a major concern of students regarding their study affairs.

In the first question on Figure No. 2, which was formulated to examine the participants' feelings toward the university closure and regulation change by the Taliban, 51 out of 105, or 48.6%, of the respondents admitted that they felt that their educational achievement was spoiled, especially the level of disappointment among female participants (29.52%) was greater than that of male students (19.05%). While 26 (24.8%) out of 105 were hopeful about resuming the universities as they were running before. From the total number, only 8 participants (8.6%) responded that they were no longer interested in continuing their education. In the same vein, 19 participants (18.1%) felt disappointed by the change and halt that occurred in their study stream.

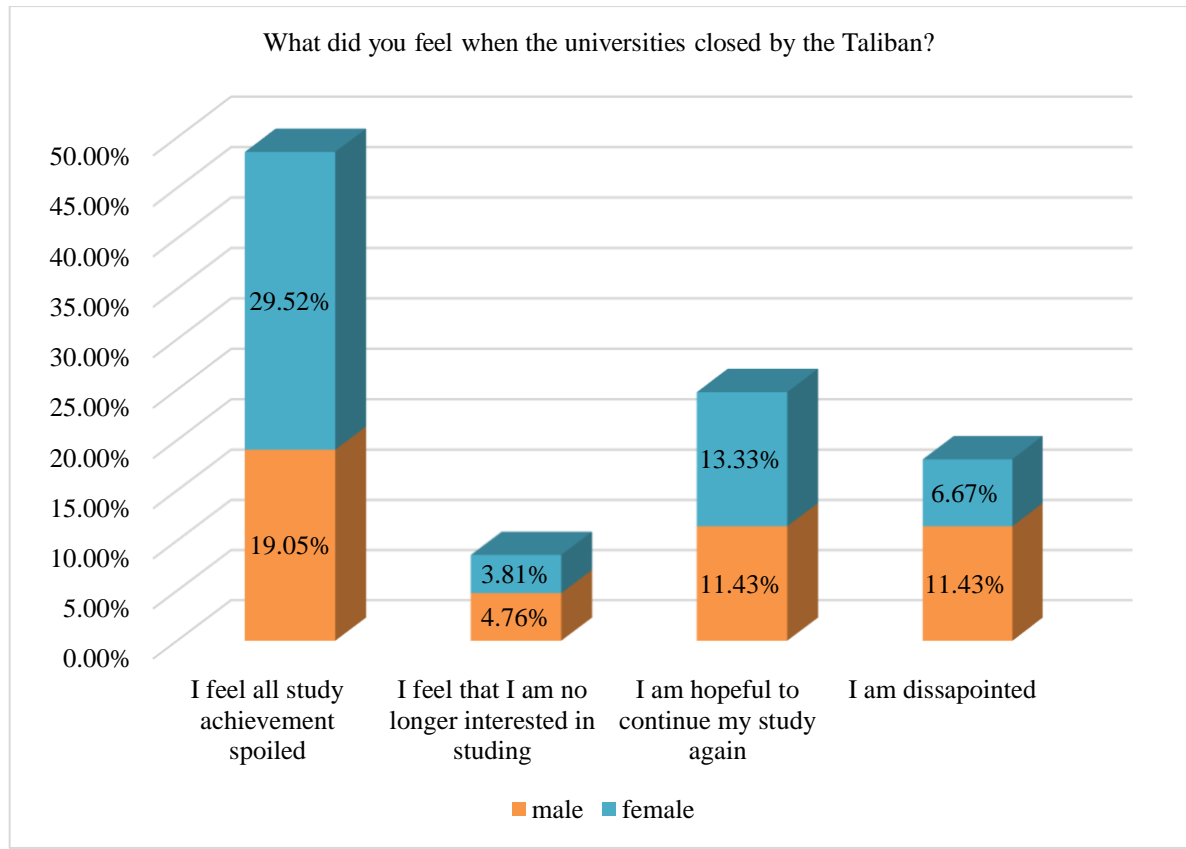


Figure 2: Students feelings and attitudes towards the closure of universities

The aim of the second question was to examine the participants' interest and enthusiasm in resuming their education under the Taliban rules and regulations. Of total respondents, 27.5% admitted that they will happily attend their classes if the universities are reopened, and 44.8% responded that they will do so without enthusiasm, because they have no other choices. Only 3.8% said that they no longer wanted to attend classes under the Taliban rule and regulations and wanted to quit their education.

Therefore, figure 3 shows that the education system is not suitable for youths and students, and they don't have the motivation and enthusiasm for education. It is a strong shock for the future of Afghanistan and is harmful for Afghan citizens.

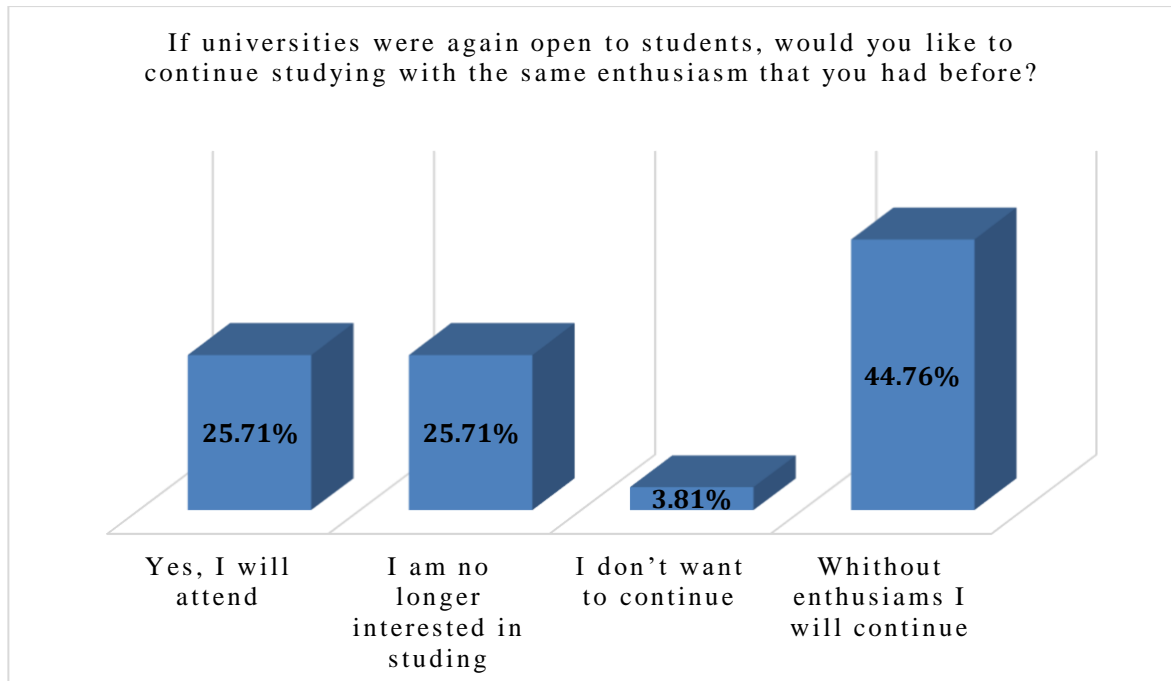


Figure 3: Assessment of students' motivation for study

If we want to consider the level of students' enthusiasm based on the separation of universities, Figure No. 4 shows that students of Kabul University, Kabul Education University, Kabul Polytechnic University, Bamyan University, and Daikundi Institute of Higher Education are not as enthusiastic as they were before the fall of the government. And the change in the system has had a very negative effect on their motivation and enthusiasm for study. Only the majority of participants from Kabul University were hopeful about the reopening of the university and the continuation of their studies as before. It could be attributed to Kabul University's status as the oldest and central university in Afghanistan, having more independence, facilities, and a better situation than other universities.

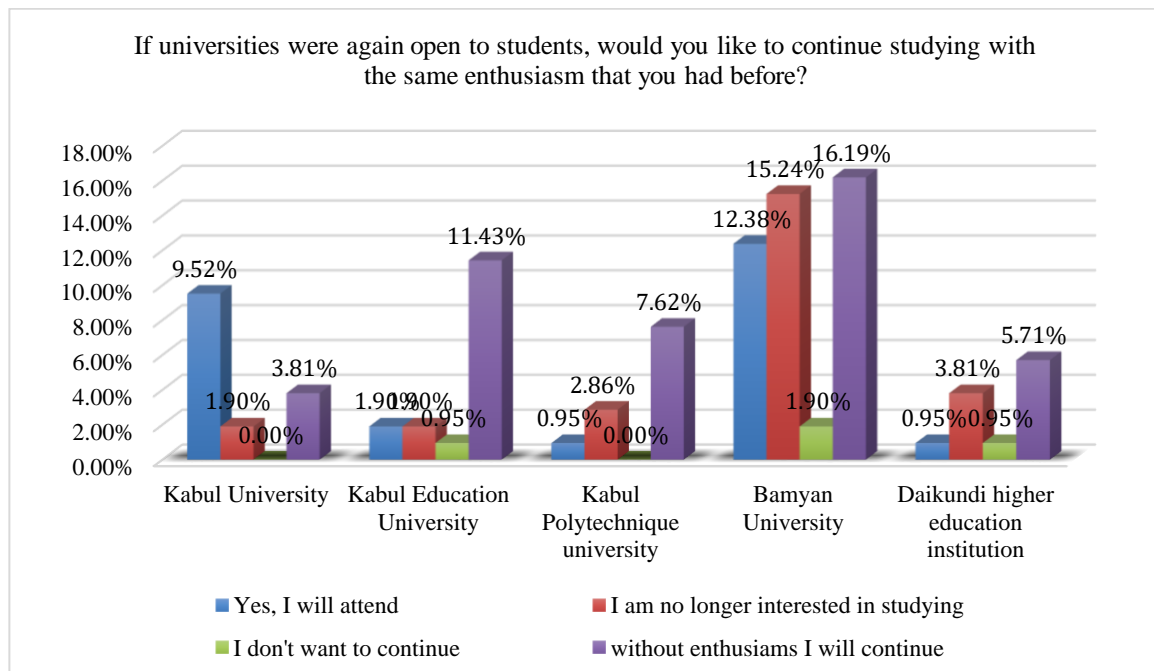


Figure 4: Assessing the students' desire for study based on the separation of the university in case of reopening universities



The third question was supposed to ask about the major factors that caused discouragement among the research participants. 56.2% of the respondents answered that they were uncertain about their future, and 22% admitted that the immigration of their teachers and classmates caused them to feel discouraged. In the same vein, 19% were concerned about strict rules and regulations by the Taliban, and only 3.8% revealed that separated classes for gender caused them to feel discouraged.

Figure 5 shows that the male participants, because of the uncertain future and the immigration of teachers and classmates, were discouraged, but the female participants, unlike the males, were more concerned about strict rules and regulations and the separation of male and female classes, which were the causes of their discouragement.

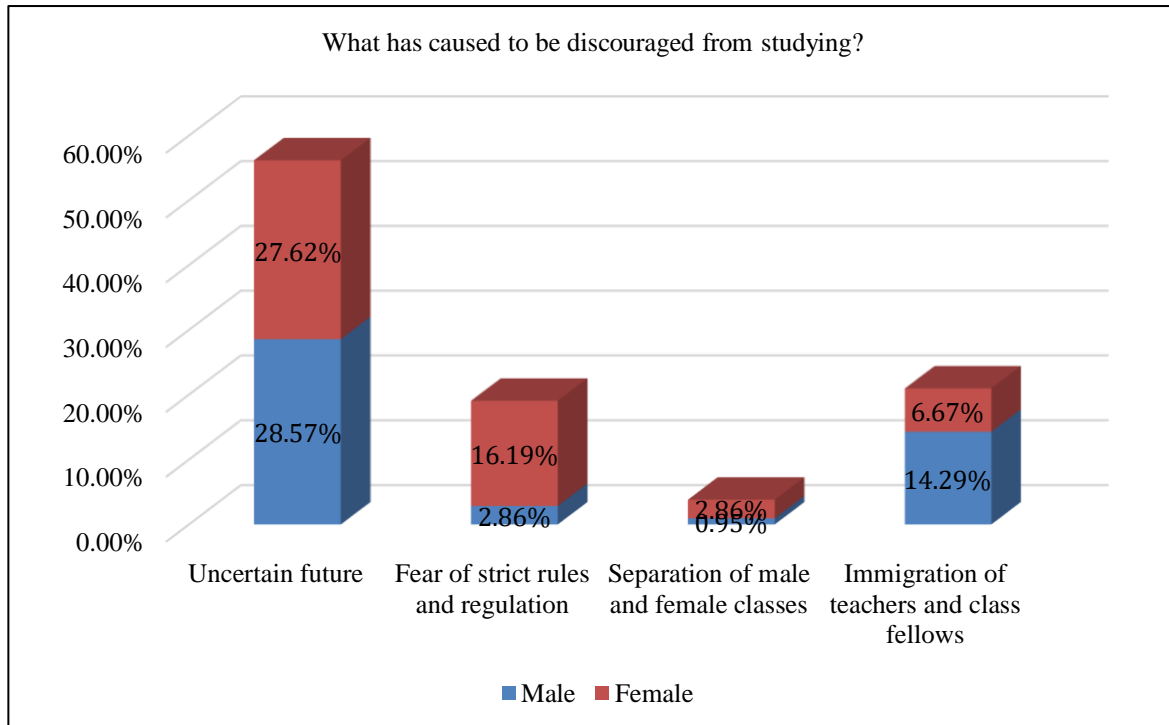


Figure 5: The factors of students' discouragement from studying

The fourth question touches upon the major problems that the participants faced after the collapse of the government by the Taliban, which, in addition to the aforesaid challenges, prevented their education. A lack of a clear perspective on the job market was mentioned as a potential problem by 44.8% of the total respondents. Female exclusion from study and work was mentioned as a major problem by 30.5%. Economic problems were mentioned as an important problem by 15.2%. Only 9.5% of those polled stated that security was one of the most difficult aspects of their research.

Figure 6 depicts female exclusion from work and education are the major concern for female students than the male students.

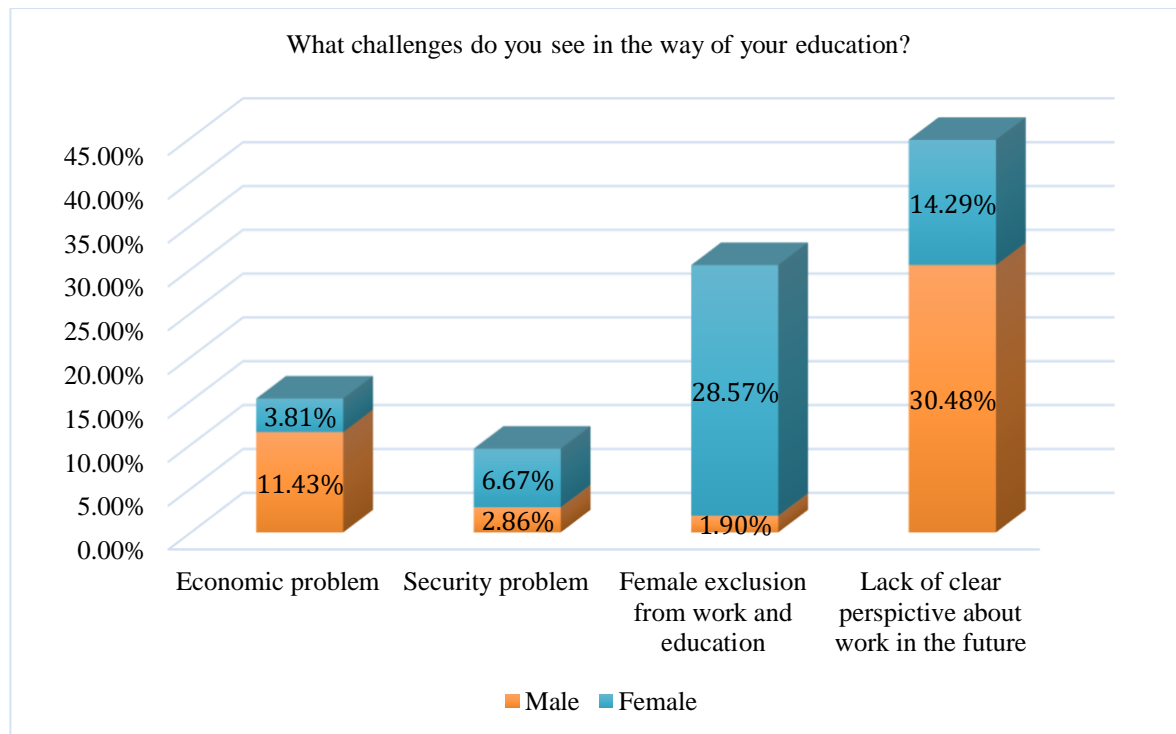


Figure 6: Educational problems after the collapse of the government by the Taliban

The fifth question probed: if the Taliban extend the current situation and do not lift the restrictions on educational affairs, what will students do? Of the total respondents, 46.7% said that if the situation continues as it is now, they will seek an opportunity to leave the country. And 34.2% said they were still in shock and unable to make a decision. But 16.2% mentioned that they will cope with the situation, and, at any cost, they want to continue their education. Only 4.8% of the respondents mentioned that if the imposed restrictions were not lifted, they would shift from studying to free work.

Figure 7 depicts a severe educational and political crisis, with students and youngsters losing interest in educational pursuits. Students and youths are the motors that propel society forward. When students' enthusiasm for education fades, society as a whole suffers, and there is no prospect for improvement. As evidenced by the data, students are either considering leaving the country or are still in shock and unsure what to do.

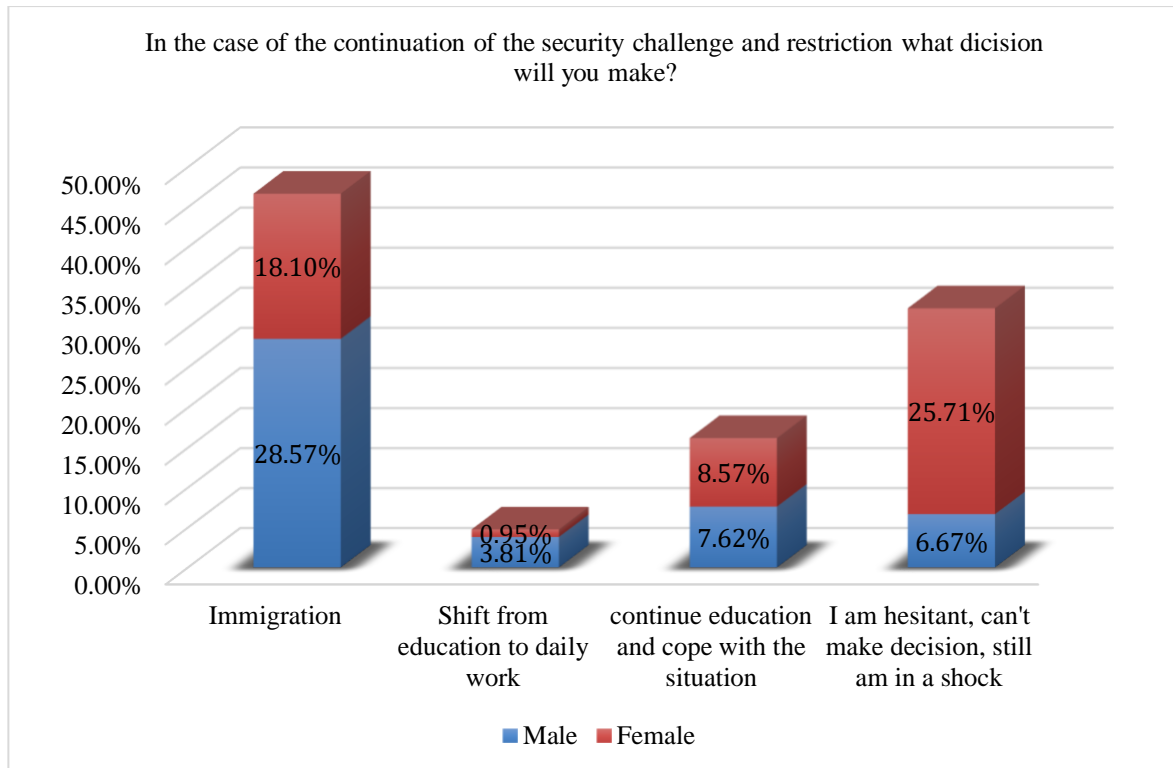


Figure 7: The analysis of students’ decisions on the continuation of their education

The young generation is the driving power of any civilization, and the progress of that society is inextricably linked to the scientific and technological capabilities of the youth. The current situation in Afghanistan has compelled young people, particularly university students, to consider migrating. When we look at individual students' perspectives and attitudes on the current situation, we find that the majority of them are focused on migration.

Figure 8 shows that students of Kabul University, Kabul Polytechnic University, Bamyan University, and Daikundi Institute of Higher Education are the most likely ones thanking of immigration. Only the students of Kabul Education University, as shown in Figure 1, who are mostly girls, have responded that they are still in shock and could not think of any decision, because immigration is difficult for young girls.

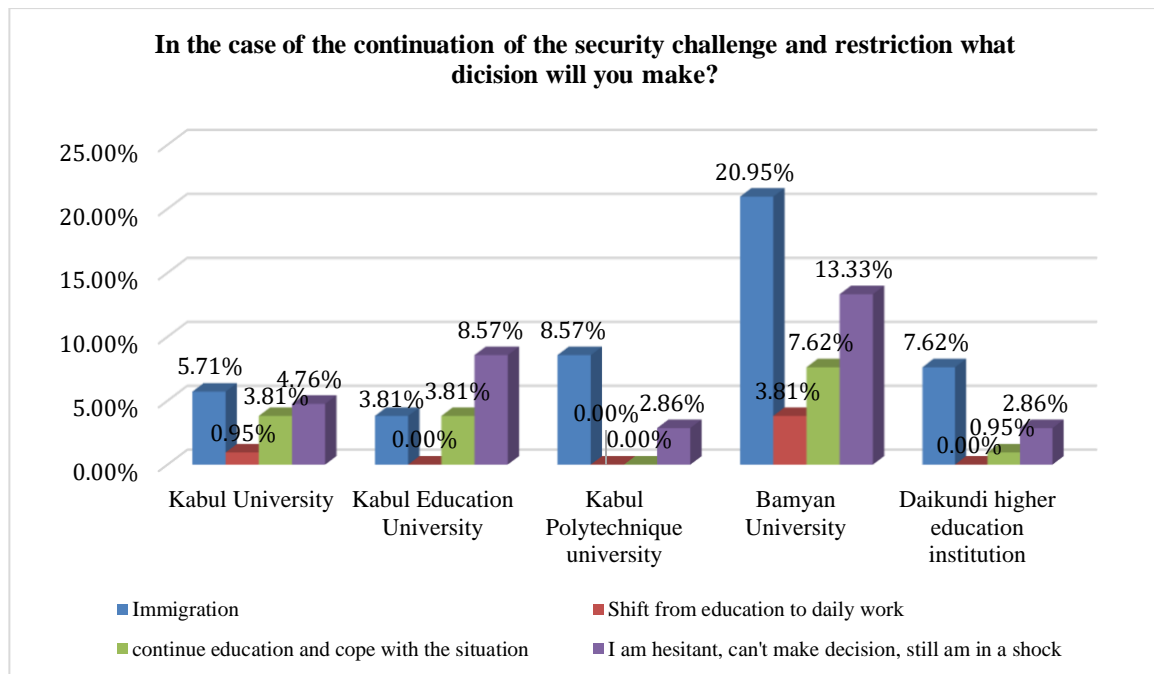


Figure 8. Students' life decision despite security challenges separated by universities

The growth and development of a society requires political stability, economic consistency, and manpower, including educated youth. Afghanistan is currently in a situation where political, security, economic, social, and cultural problems have deteriorated the apparatus of the country's development and desperately left Afghan students with many concerns about their future. The basis for the development of societies depends on the dynamic progression of their modern education. Education expands dynamically while educated individuals and students are assured of social, political, economic, and job stability.

## 6. Discussion

Evidently, analysis of the data shows that the fall of the Afghan government by the Taliban caused a fundamental disintegration and change in the field of education, especially in Afghan universities. This fragmentation has two types of negative effects on the entire Afghan university system and beneficiaries—immediate negative impact and long-term negative impact.

### 6.1. Immediate negative impact

As can be inferred from the data analysis, a general rift has been created in the higher education system in which communication between faculty and students has been disconnected. It can be said that the liability of the university system has vanished and the university officials no longer have confidence in their safety and security. This diffusion has confused the students as a whole, making them doubt their studies and educational future. Incredulity and frustration can be well understood from the responses of the participants in this research. Most participants responded that they were not optimistic about their continuation and the successful end of their education. Meanwhile, female students were more afraid of strict rules and restrictions than male students. In the short term, if these challenges are not resolved, the classrooms will be empty, and both students and professors may leave the university.

### 6.2. Long-term negative impact

The above problems, in the long run, cause the academic elite to leave the university and the departments to be empty of young and active cadres. And in the end, the achievements and progress of the last twenty years will be lost. The selection of the immigration option in the questionnaire by most of the respondents signals that if the

situation continues like this, Afghan universities will lose most of their academic staff, which will cause brain drain in Afghan universities. In addition, this chaotic condition disrupts the study stream, which will lead to frustration and anxiety among students.

## 7. Conclusion

The collapse of the former government in mid-August 2021 caused fundamental chaos and destruction in the country, which caused mass immigration and internal displacement. Amid the crisis, the education sector, especially higher education institutions, experienced the most destruction. The regime changes and the crisis caused a large number of university instructors and technical staff to leave the country. Consequently, the halt of universities, the imposition of strict rules and regulations, the exclusion of females from work, the separation of male and female students' classrooms, and many other social restrictions caused growing fear, anxiety, depression, and uncertainty among students. The survey result showed that 48.6% of the respondents felt that they were about to lose their educational achievements, which they gained through years of schooling. In addition, the analysis of the respondents' answers found that uncertainty about the future, deterioration of security and the economy, and the exclusion of women from work and education are the major causes of concern and discouragement among students. Besides, the study showed that in the event of the continuation of the crisis and restrictions, a large number of students, especially males, are seeking to find ways to immigrate, while females suffer from the strict regulations that prevent them from studying, working, and traveling. Since immigration is difficult for women, they live with distress and fear about their future.

Finally, the current situation in Afghanistan is moving toward backwardness where the achievements of the last two decades, especially in the education system, are being destroyed. If this condition continues, soon the country will face brain drain and the majority of young specialists and educated individuals will leave the country.

**Authors contribution:** The first author, Chaman Ali Hikmat, conceived the theoretical framework, developed the formalism, and administered the field data collection. The second author, Ramazan Ahmadi, provided valuable contributions in revising the work, deriving analytical conclusion, and conducting numerical simulations.

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**Informed consent:** This study was non-interventional, and the participants were adults aged 18 or above. Each participants received a copy of the informed consent document before their involvement in the study.

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