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AFGHAN STUDENTS' ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES AND CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT IN THE UNITED STATES

Ayesha Sabri

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AFGHAN STUDENTS' ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES AND CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT
IN THE UNITED STATES

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PIM 77

A capstone paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master of Arts in
Intercultural Service, Leadership, and Management (ISLM) at SIT Graduate Institute in
Brattleboro, Vermont, USA

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Table of Contents

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Abstract..... | 5 |
| Introduction..... | 6 |
| Literature Review | 8 |
| Contextual Background | 9 |
| The Education System in Afghanistan..... | 10 |
| General Education Challenges..... | 12 |
| Higher Education Situation | 13 |
| International Students' Experiences in the US | 15 |
| Academic challenges | 16 |
| Teacher-student relationship | 17 |
| Language barrier | 19 |
| Social and cultural issues..... | 20 |
| Psychological concerns | 21 |
| Self-growth..... | 21 |
| Research Design and Methodology | 22 |
| Methodology Rationale..... | 22 |
| Phenomenological Approach | 22 |
| Participants' Description and Sampling..... | 23 |
| Data Collection Methods | 24 |
| Ethics of Research..... | 25 |
| Positionality | 27 |
| Data Management and Analysis | 28 |
| Credibility of Findings..... | 30 |
| Limitations and Delimitations | 30 |
| Findings..... | 31 |
| Nahid, Ali, Shirin, and Tamim | 31 |
| Education During War | 34 |
| Undergraduate Experiences in Afghanistan | 37 |
| Graduate Experiences in the US..... | 42 |
| Academic Life..... | 44 |
| Research skills | 44 |

| | |
|--|-----------|
| English language challenges | 45 |
| Teaching methods | 46 |
| Educational facilities | 48 |
| Teacher dispositions and vailability | 49 |
| Non-Academic Challenges | 50 |
| Food barriers | 50 |
| Social and psychological problems | 51 |
| Cultural differences | 53 |
| The Impact of U.S. Education on Afghan Students | 56 |
| Recommendations to Study Abroad Programs | 58 |
| Recommendations to Afghan Students | 59 |
| Conclusions | 60 |
| References | 62 |
| Appendixes | 75 |
| Appendix A: Informed Consent Letter | 75 |
| Appendix B: Interview Guide | 77 |

Abstract

This study explores Afghan students' academic experiences in pursuing graduate studies in the United States and contributes to the scarce literature on the adjustment experiences of Afghan students in the US. Data was obtained by employing a qualitative research methodology, particularly phenomenology, through individual interviews with four participants. The findings of this study reveal that the education these participants received throughout their schooling in Afghanistan was rote learning and teacher-centered. Studying in the US, Afghan students experienced a range of academic challenges (teaching methodologies, educational practices, language, research, and educational facilities). They were also confronted with non-academic challenges (social, cultural, psychological, food, and new environment) that exacerbated their academic challenges in the US. Despite the challenges, their education in the US was rewarding. Findings of this study present a list of recommendations to U.S. study abroad program organizers to provide support services that will help Afghan students succeed in their studies. Additionally, recommendations are provided to the Afghan students who are aiming to study in the US to overcome potential challenges in the US.

Introduction

The Afghan education system suffers from low quality. Many factors contribute to this challenge; however, the major one is 40 years of continuous war that severely damaged the entire infrastructure of the country, including the education sector (UNICEF, 2018b). In spite of national and international support in this sector, around half of the Afghan children are out of school (DW, 2017), and approximately, 60 percent of children who do not attend school are girls (UNICEF, 2018b). Those going to school are not receiving high quality education due to the lack of teaching materials, poor school infrastructure, and unqualified teachers (Samady, 2013; UNICEF, 2018b). In relation to teaching, rote learning is heavily practiced and the normal type of teaching in schools is theory based. Teachers are at the center of teaching; they transfer their knowledge to students and students are the receivers (Basheer, 2014). Classrooms are also overcrowded (Spink, 2004). In 2012, it was estimated that there were more than 35 students per class (Education for All, 2015). One of the reasons for having a large number of students in one classroom is that schools are unable to accommodate all students; therefore, the number of students per teacher is higher than normal (Spink, 2004).

In higher education the quality tends to be even more substandard (The World Bank, 2015). As the quality of higher education is dependent on the qualifications of its staff (WB, 2015), the majority of staff only have bachelor's degrees (NAFSA, 2014). The majority of universities rely on teacher-centered approaches without focusing on modern teaching methods such as "E-learning, on-site, face-to-face interaction between students and teachers" (WB, 2015, p. 2). The students lack exposure to modern teaching methods, experiential learning, and technology related education (Aturupane, 2013). It was reported that 70 percent of teachers in Kabul University rely on giving lectures, they use outdated teaching materials,

and generally they do not acknowledge their students' participation in the classroom (Kabul University, 2017).

Arguing that the use of teaching materials is essential for learning by doing practices, in the higher education sector of Afghanistan, teachers either do not have access to teaching materials, or they do not use them (Esmaeily, Pahwa, Thompson, and Watts, 2010). For example, there are laboratories in most of universities in Kabul, but the teachers do not use them because they perceive themselves more superior and knowledgeable than their students, and to do practical work in laboratories means having the same knowledge as their students (Esmaeily et al., 2010). Therefore, they rely only on giving lectures without the use of laboratories.

The development of Afghanistan depends on the growth of its education sector. Therefore, upgrading the overall education system, enhancing teachers' capacities, and increasing students' enrollment is crucial for the Afghan government and other donors (NAFSA, 2014; USAID, 2018). However, according to Aturupane (2013) and WENR (2016), there are scarce Master's and Ph.D. programs for Afghan students in the country; therefore, some Afghan students embark on receiving higher education abroad even with the high cost of tuition. According to WENR (2016), "As of 2016, UNESCO reports that approximately 17,000 Afghan students studied abroad in 2013" (para. 8) including Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, Iran, Pakistan, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

For my capstone project, I explored Afghan students' academic experiences in pursuing graduate studies in the United States (US) to better understand the challenges they face when they study in the US. This study is significant for two reasons. First, there is a lack of literature on Afghan students' experiences studying abroad; my research contributes to the existing literature by specifically addressing Afghan students' academic experiences. Second,

as Afghan students are coming to the US every year, it is vital for the US higher education entities to consider Afghan students' educational backgrounds and how they might better address Afghan students' needs. The following research questions guided this study: *From Afghan students' perspectives, how does the educational system in Afghanistan prepare them to study in the US? What kind of challenges do Afghan students face in their graduate studies in the US? How do Afghan students address these challenges in the US?* In order to answer my research questions, I conducted a qualitative study by interviewing Afghan students who received their higher education in the US. In what follows, I first situate my topic in relevant literature by contextualizing the history of war in Afghanistan, the education system in Afghanistan, and the challenges Afghan students face. Next, I will present the design and methodology of my research in which I will explain my research methodology, approaches, ethics of my research, and other components of my research design. Following this, I will present my findings organized by two major themes: Participants' undergraduate experiences in Afghanistan and their graduate experiences in the US. Lastly, I will conclude this study with the recommendations made by my participants to the Afghan students and to study abroad programs organizers to improve their programs for these students to meet their needs.

Literature Review

In this section, I will provide a contextual background on the education system of Afghanistan, including the existing challenges in education and higher education sectors of Afghanistan. Next, I will explore the challenges international students face in the US to better understand the differences between their experiences in their home countries and adjustments in the US.

Contextual Background

Afghanistan is one of the forty-seven least progressive countries in the world (Roof, 2014; United Nations, 2018; Pariona, 2019). Continuous years of civil war, invasion by different regimes, and insecurity have been the major causes of Afghanistan's underdevelopment (Samady, 2001). The war in Afghanistan has a long history; the country remains a battleground for many foreign and national forces (Little, 2017) since 1978, when the Democratic party of Afghanistan toppled the government of Mohammad Daud Khan (BBC News, 2018; UNDP, 2014). Later, in 1979, the Soviet Army invaded the country for the sake of saving the new communist regime (PBS News Hour, 2014). In the early 1980s, the Mujahideen¹ fought against the Soviet Army and succeeded to defeat the Soviets (Arabzadah, 2011; PBS News Hour, 2014). By 1996, the Taliban² Regime took over the country by defeating the Mujahideen (BBC News, 2018; UNDP, 2014). They ruled the country for almost five years.

The Taliban regime was one of the most inhumane regimes in the history of Afghanistan. As soon as they took over the country, they banned women from attending schools (Karlsson & Mansory, 2002), forbade them from leaving their house without a male escort, and forcefully ordered women to wear burqas (Roof, 2014). In 2001, their regime collapsed due to the U.S. invasion after the attack on the World Trade Center in New York on September 11, 2001 (Council on Foreign Relations, 2019; CNN, 2017). Since then, Afghanistan has remained an important country for the US. The US is currently supporting Afghanistan to fight against terrorism and helping the country to become a secure and economically self-sufficient country (U.S. Department of State, 2019).

¹ Mujahideen is the plural word of Mujahid, which means, "Struggle" or someone who fights (Szczepanski, 2018, p. 1). "The term is most frequently used in reference to the self-named Afghan Mujahideen, the guerrilla fighters who battled the Soviet army from 1979-1989" and fought for many years ever since (Szczepanski, 2018; Zalman, 2017, p. 2).

² "The word Taliban comes from Talib, "student" in Arabic" ("Taliban", n.d., p.1). Taliban were "a Muslim fundamentalist group in Afghanistan" ("Taliban", 2019, p. 1) who imposed "a strict Muslim code of behavior" in this country ("Taliban", n.d., p.1).

Since 1979 until the collapse of the Taliban regime, Afghanistan's progress in all sectors gradually slowed down, but it significantly declined in the education sector when the Taliban closed girls' schools (Samady, 2001). After the fall of the Taliban, with the help of national and international communities, the number of girls enrolled in general schools increased from almost no students to 39 percent (EFA, 2015; USAID, 2018; WENR, 2016). In 2001, only one million students were enrolled in schools, the majority of whom were boys. This number has increased significantly by 2013 when over nine million students, including boys and girls, attended schools (EFA, 2015). Despite this progress, the number of out of school students is 3.3 million (EFA, 2015).

Afghanistan is ranked as one of the lowest adult literacy rate countries in the world: only 36 percent of adults are literate (EFA, 2015). According to EFA (2015) "The literacy rate is dramatically different for the rural and urban populations, with rural adult literacy rate less than half of urban adult literacy rate for both males and females" (p. 12). The country is highly dependent on foreign aid; foreign aid runs almost 90 percent of the economy with the total expenditure of USD 4 billion annually (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2015, as cited in Ghiasy, Sheikh, Strand, Bonacquisti, & Hartmann, 2017). Poverty affects the development of the country; in 2014 almost 39 percent of Afghans were impoverished (The World Bank, 2019b). The number is increasing due to the influx of Afghan refugees returning from Iran and Pakistan; internally, in 2017 it was estimated that over 1.1 million Afghans were displaced (The World Bank, 2019a).

The Education System in Afghanistan

The Ministry of Education (MOE), Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE), and the religious institutions are responsible for the education sector in Afghanistan (EFA, 2015). The MOE supervises primary, lower secondary, and higher secondary education. In general, public education is free in Afghanistan from primary school to higher education (UNICEF,

2018a), and education is compulsory until grade nine (Spink, 2004). Primary education is from grade one to six (students seven to 12 years old); lower secondary education is from grade seven to nine (13 to 15 years old); higher secondary is from grade 10 to 12 (16 to 18 years old), including general and vocational education (16 to 18 years old or older) (UNICEF, 2018a).

Higher education in Afghanistan is led by MOHE. The MOHE grants Bachelor's (takes four years), Master's (takes two years), and Ph.D. degrees (takes three years) (EFA, 2015). The MOHE offers Master's degree programs at some public universities, with no Ph.D. degrees offered (NUFFIC, 2016). For students to enroll in public universities or to go for technical and vocational education, they need to undergo a rigorous university exam called "Kankor" that is taken at the end of higher secondary education (EFA, 2015).

Nonetheless, taking the Kankor exam is "not an admission requirement for the private universities (NUFFIC, 2016, p. 7), as each university holds its own entrance exam.

According to Ali (2015), The Kankor test is made of various subjects that are taught in high school particularly from grades nine through 12. The test encompasses 160 general questions (Ali, 2015), including science, art, language, and any subject taught in high school (Daily Outlook Afghanistan, 2013). The test is comprised of multiple-choice questions. In order to be admitted to a university, students need to score a minimum of 332 points or a score specified by the field and program. The most demanding fields with the highest "market value" (Shah, 2016, p. 3) for which students need to obtain high scores are medicine, law, engineering, political sciences, and economics (Ali, 2015). Regarding the nature of Kankor exam, Sherzad (2016) argues that the Kankor exam leaves the majority of the students disappointed for many reasons: A student's high performance in school is disregarded in the Kankor test; the slots available in every field are not enough for all high school graduates; and students' unfamiliarity with the Kankor exam and the lack of their knowledge on the

nature of exam question results in the students' failure. Moreover, students' admission into their desired field is restricted due to the high proportion of mathematics and science-related questions that are challenging for the students who desire to study social sciences. As a result, they fail and they will have only one last chance to retake the exam in the next years (Sherzad, 2016).

General Education Challenges

According to UNICEF (2018a), low quality education is hindering Afghan children. One of the reasons is the lack of qualified teachers in schools. The minimum requirement for becoming a teacher in Afghanistan is obtaining a Grade 14 diploma (EFA, 2015), which is equivalent to a U.S. two-year college degree (Eckel & King, 2011). Another reason is the low qualification of the teachers that not only impacts the quality of education, but also affects the learning achievements of students. Save the Children reports that students at the primary and secondary level have less learning achievements (EFA, 2015). The poor infrastructure and teaching facilities are additional reasons for students' lower performances and poor education quality (Darakht-e-Danish, n. d.; EFA, 2015; UNICEF, 2018;). Meanwhile, Strand (2015) argues that the content applied in schools tends to be outdated and not relevant to students' daily life experiences. Given these challenges, students' access to a quality education is questionable.

The educational environment is also poor. Approximately 50 percent of schools in Afghanistan do not have proper buildings for teaching; 70 percent of them do not have surrounding walls; 88 percent of schools have the electricity shortage; 50 percent of schools deal with sanitation deficiencies; and 88 percent of them do not have potable water (EFA, 2015). All of these factors affect student learning at school.

In addition to this, teaching hours are short. According to Matin and Lahire (2017), "on average in a public school, a grade four Afghan child spends three hours and 40 minutes

including a 20-minute break at school” (para. 6). Forty-five minutes in the Spring and 35 minutes in the Fall are allocated for each lesson to utilize the daylight. The reasons for the short learning time indicated by the Ministry of Education are the operation of school beyond two shifts, variation of allocated public holidays according to the different climate zones, and teachers and students' absenteeism in class (EFA, 2015).

Higher Education Situation

The constant years of war undermined the development of higher education in Afghanistan. During the civil war, close to six million Afghans including qualified higher education staff migrated to other countries (Samady, 2001). This impacted higher education development as Afghanistan lost its qualified cadre (Samady, 2001). However, after the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001, student enrollment in higher education has increased from one percent to 9.6 percent. As of now, the total number of students enrolled in governmental and non-governmental universities is 300,000, out of which 100,000 are female students (USAID, 2018). Since then, the number of universities has also increased; according to NUFFIC (2016), there are 19 governmental and 75 private universities in the country.

In conjunction with student enrollment in higher education, Afghanistan is not capable of enrolling all students who desire to pursue higher education. According to the 10-year strategic plan of MOHE, they can only enroll 25 percent of the students who take the Kankor exam (NAFSA, 2014). There is a huge disparity in higher education attainment for boys and girls, as according to the 10-year strategic plan of MOHE, in 2012 the number of female students enrolled in higher education was not more than 19 percent (Aturupane, 2013; Samady, 2013). In the study conducted in 2014, the student interviewees gave the following reasons for the low enrollment of female students in higher education: scarcity of fundamental and primary teaching materials (chair, desk, electricity, specific labs for women), including a lack of washrooms for female students; transportation and long

commutes; limited computer and language classes for women; a lack of female dorms in rural areas; no designated prayer rooms for women; religious and cultural barriers in general; lack of emotional support for girls living in dorms; and adjustment difficulties for girls from rural to urban culture (Kosha et al., 2014).

Another constraint in the higher education sector of Afghanistan is the scarcity of qualified teachers who can utilize active learning methods in the classroom. In 2015, the number of higher education staff in the country that held a Bachelor degree was 65 percent, Master's degree was 31 percent, and Ph.D. degree was almost five percent (WB, 2015). Enhancing teacher qualification along with upgrading their teaching skills is one of the key challenges in the higher education sector, since the majority of faculty are senior and ready to retire (Samady, 2013). In addition, according to Akbari (2018), the use of senior teachers' lecture notes is prevalent. The teachers rely on the content that reinforces students' memorization skills rather than motivate them to think outside the box. Their perception of their students is that they are a "recording device" (Akbari, 2018, para. 3).

Active learning is the essence of modern teaching, and modern teaching requires substantial materials and enough space for practical work - areas in which Afghan universities lag. Furthermore, the assessment methods used in higher education only measure students' learning outcomes rather than their memorization skills (Aturupane, 2013). Darmal (2009) referred to assessment as a traditional type of exam utilized by teachers in higher education to merely grade students based on the answers they provide on their papers, which are hand written. Exams are administered in writing; teachers do not use a diversity of assessment methods (such as essays, papers, journals, research projects, and other oral and practical forms of assessment) that provide feedback to students to improve their performance. Feedback mechanisms are not practiced beyond the tests to improve teaching and learning (Darmal, 2009).

International Students' Experiences in the US

Annually, U.S. higher education institutions enroll approximately one million international students (IIE, 2018a). After China, the United States is the second largest country for student enrollment in higher education (The Conversation, 2017). Globally, after the top two universities of the United Kingdom, seven U.S. universities are ranked in the top 10 universities list in 2019 (Times Higher Education, 2019). Students coming to the US are from diverse countries. However, Chinese (33.2%), Indian (17.9%), South Korean (5%) and Saudi Arabian (4.1%) students dominate the total number of international students (IIE, 2018b). The total number of graduate students in the US is 382,953 (IIE, 2018c), of which 282,475 are Asian graduate students (IIE, 2018d). Afghan students make up over 450 international students in the US; 230 of these are graduate students (IIE, 2018d).

The U.S. higher education system is one of the most prestigious systems in the world in terms of quality, quantity, diversity, integrity, government support, and work opportunities for qualified graduates (Eckel & King, 2011). Reasons for getting an education in the US differ for different people. For Asian students, studying in the US is due to the following reasons: English-taught programs, high quality education, the high quality and availability of modern teaching and learning materials (e.g. laboratories and libraries), and conducive learning environments (Academic Cooperation Association, 2004). For Sub-Saharan African and Chinese students, the quality of education in the US is better than education in their home countries. For Indian students, having wider choices of majors is one of the predominant factors for studying in the US (Roy, Lu, & Loo, 2016). Other reasons why international students study in the US include: improving their language competencies, getting familiar with a different or new way of thinking, getting hands-on practical work, doing quality research (Roy et al., 2016), developing their career opportunities in the host country, and/or experiencing new cultures and expanding their networks (ACA, 2004).

Even though studying in the US is a great opportunity to learn in a practical and participatory way that might not be practiced in students' home countries (Hegarty, 2014), it is also not an easy decision to make due to the existence of the challenges prior, during, and after the journey. Studying in the US is both rewarding and challenging for international students. From one perspective, students gain exposure to a new culture, society, and career opportunities. From another perspective, they deal with academic, social, and cultural challenges.

Academic challenges. According to Kim (2016), the prominent common academic challenge encountered by international students during their adjustment in the US is a gap between the education system of the US and their home countries. Group work and classroom participation are a hindrance to international students' academic adjustment; in spite of non-hierarchical culture in the US classrooms and spending a year in the US, international students find it difficult to participate in the classroom (Johnson, Adkins, Sandhu, Arbles, & Makino, 2018).

The classroom participation of international students is significantly less than that of US students. This is likely because international students have a rote learning background in their countries where there is less space provided for students to talk in the class (Segosebe, 2017). According to Aubrey (as cited in Mori, 2000), "Asian, Middle Eastern, and African students have been trained to sit quietly in lecture-type classes and take verbatim notes to be memorized in preparation for exams that are usually given only once or twice a year" (p.138).

For some international students, their participation is limited because of US classroom culture. Particularly for Korean students, silence and listening to the professors are ways of participating; raising their hand is necessary when they speak in the classroom. In the US, classroom culture is different, students' talk without raising their hands, and silence means the lack of student participation in the classroom (Kim, 2016). As a result, international

students get fewer opportunities to talk and participate in the class (Segosebe, 2017).

According to Sadykova (2014), “The skills for working collaboratively, however, are essential for successful group work in the US education setting” (p. 36), but not all international students are familiar with doing it or they perceive it differently. For some Asian students, group work is not about the task division, but getting it done jointly (Hathorn, Cited in Sadykova, 2014). For Korean, Chinese, and Japanese students, group work requires various types of communication competences or disagreement, confrontation, formal set up and peer feedback that is not used in their education system (Kim, 2016; Roy, 2013). Other teaching and learning approaches, such as group projects, including presentations and different systems of assessment, are major academic barriers for international students, as observed by Bastien, Adkins, and Johnson (2018). Moreover, the informal teaching styles of teachers in the classroom and the open-ended class discussions make international students uncomfortable because they are not used to this education culture. In addition, when the teachers do not write important points on the board, students need to take notes and look for its translation in their native languages to find the main point of the lecture (Huang & Rinaldo as cited in Roy, 2013). These are the challenges faced by Korean, Japanese and Chinese students (Roy, 2013). For Afghan students in particular, the practical nature of teaching in the US is not easy to adjust to. According to Esmaily et al. (2010), “Most Afghan students who have come to the US for their graduate level studies are completely unfamiliar with research and its key role in graduate level academic work” (p. 5). Additionally, while students in the US enjoy well-equipped classrooms and other facilities for practical work, for Afghan students, working in the laboratory is a huge challenge because of the absence of practical laboratory works in their home country (Esmaily et al., 2010).

Teacher-student relationship. Relationships between teachers and students are different in the US than in the home countries of many international students. While some

international students appreciate these differences, some of them find it difficult to adapt to. For Chinese students, the informal, engaging, and nonhierarchical teacher and student relationship in the US is admirable (Wan, 2001). One of the Chinese respondents in a study conducted by Wan (2001) stated that in China teachers are highly respected by their students; as a form of respect to their teachers, Chinese students are not allowed to drink or eat in the class and they are not encouraged to ask questions. In the US, it is the opposite; teachers allow their students more flexibility in the class. Likewise, Korean students appreciate the role of their teachers as “co-contributors in their learning process” (Kim, 2016, p. 414). In Kim’s study (2016), Korean students appreciated how teachers in the US develop self-confidence, and independence in their students, and how they provide opportunities for their students to take control of their own learning. Additionally, in Korea, students are reliant on their teacher’s guidance; in the US teachers give feedback to their students on how to improve their work as well as they provide the peer feedback opportunity for them (Kim, 2016). Similarly, another positive teacher and student relationship in the US is the availability of professors. According to an Afghan student in Leong’s (2015) study, students in the US can reach out to the teachers without any barriers, either in person or via email; this freedom and support is given by the professors and greatly helps students to solve their academic problems.

NAFSA (2014) captured one Afghan student’s experience on how the education environment in the United States is different than in Afghanistan. The student, Khalid Fazly, shared that on his first day of entering a classroom in the US full of a large number of students, students were engaged in their own businesses, such as doing academic work, dancing, talking to one another, and listening to music. This was not what he expected from the US classrooms (NAFSA, 2014). To him, it was interesting when the teacher entered the classroom and nobody offered respect, like standing up to greet the teacher. This experience

is opposite from what students do in Afghanistan; when a teacher enters the classroom, everyone in the class is required to stand for the teacher, sit calmly and quietly, and pay attention to the teacher (NAFSA, 2014, p. 32). This is an obvious difference in students' learning experiences in the United States compared to Afghanistan.

Despite some positive experiences that international students have with their teachers in the US, international students deal with some adjustment challenges. For instance, the openness and informality of the teachers in the US can lead to creation of "an informal environment for international students, which they are not used to" (Robinson as cited in Campbell, Strawser, and George, 2016, p. 638). For Chinese students, having eye contact with the professor is a challenge as it is regarded a disrespectful manner in their culture (Cox & Yamaguchi as cited in Roy, 2013).

Language barrier. In her study on Arab undergraduate students' experiences in the US, Rabia (2017) reported the weak English language proficiency of almost 80 percent of participants. Similarly, Chinese students struggle with written and spoken English in U.S. higher education (Wu, 2018). Although one of the enrollment requirements for getting an education in an English-speaking country is the demonstration of English language skills through a standardized test (TOEFL, IELTS), this does not guarantee high English language proficiency (Wan, 2001).

Low English proficiency of international students also influences their participation in the class. Results show that when students are not confident enough to participate in the class, it affects "writing notes, writing assignments, and asking questions" (Campbell, 2016, p. 637). According to Kuo (2011), international students find it hard to understand American slang, idioms, jokes, colloquialisms, and accent. As a result, this translates into the decreased participation in the classroom. For Chinese students, the main reason behind their struggle with written and spoken English in the U.S. higher education is the English learning

approaches in China that focus on English grammar, writing, and reading. However, in the U.S. education system, writing, speaking, and listening competencies are vital (Wu, 2018). While the literature addresses language issues for some students of the world, it does not explicitly address language barriers for Afghan students, which will be explored in this study.

Social and cultural issues. International students experience social and cultural barriers while adjusting in the US, which further compound their academic adjustment process in the US (Xiong & Zhou, 2018). The majority of international students struggle with social problems related to “social integration, daily life tasks, homesickness, and role conflicts” (Ozturgut & Murphy, 2009, p. 376). Other major daily life challenges faced by international students are high cost of dorms (Leong, 2015), their unfamiliarity with visa-oriented issues, school systems, and their lack of transportation in small towns (Johnson et al., 2018). These social issues and cultural gaps between their host and native country could disrupt students' academic work (Lin, 2012; Segosebe & Lyken, 2017).

For some international students, integrating with domestic students in the US is critical. The communication difficulties between domestic and international students due to the language, cultural, and social issues or gaps make it difficult for international students to get along with American students (Xiong & Zhou, 2018). Ozturgut and Murhpy (2009) found a cultural gap between American and international students' friendships. For international students, friendship is a serious and everlasting relationship. Somehow, this is not practiced in American culture and friendships are often superficial. For this reason, it is easier for international students to be friends with other international students rather than with American students (Johnson et al., 2018).

Another constraint is gender norms in the classroom culture in the US. Given that classroom culture plays an important role in student adjustment in the US, some students might find it different from what they have practiced in their countries. For example, for Arab

female students, mixed gender classes are a problem because this is not practiced in their country and culture (Young & Clark, 2017). Therefore, integrating into a new culture that practices a shared gender space is hard for Arab females to adjust to. This might be an issue for Afghan female students too; while co-education is not implemented at the school level, when they join public and private universities, they tend to study with male students.

Psychological concerns. International students suffer from psychological problems. Their unfamiliarity with writing academic papers, conducting research, and participating in class are major triggering causes of psychological problems (Mori, 2000). Subsequently, the adjustment in terms of “linguistic, academic, interpersonal, financial, and intrapersonal problems” (Mori, 2000, p. 137) results in international students’ anxiety. This can result in international students feeling inferior, isolated, and excluded (Johnson et al., 2018), which could affect their academic performance.

Self-growth. Even though international students face adjustment challenges, they thrive and experience self-improvement after spending a year in the US as they become familiar with the environment, people, content, and education system; gaining confidence in English language and socialization; receiving support from the school staff; and passing a stressful and high loaded activity year (Heng, 2018). This self-development takes place in different forms. For Chinese students, practicing independency, living on their own, and taking their own life decisions are examples of self-growth in the US (Heng, 2018). For Arab female students, independence (e.g. paying bills on their own), cultural freedom (e.g. driving), and gender equality are their positive adjustment experiences in the US (Young & Clark, 2017).

The journey of international students in the US is not an easy process; it involves challenges, struggles, and learning opportunities for their personal and professional development. Even though students come to the US with different backgrounds, their

experiences can be quite similar to one another. Afghan students might also deal with some of these same challenges in the US, as well as may face unique challenges. This will be further explored in the data collection part of this study after the introduction of the research methodology and design.

Research Design and Methodology

Methodology Rationale

To explore Afghan students' academic experiences in pursuing graduate studies in the US for this study I employed a qualitative research methodology and a phenomenological approach. The purpose of qualitative research methodology is to collect detailed information through multiple methods for a specific research inquiry (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). This information could be gathered through different methods, such as interviews and observation. As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) assert, "Humans are best suited for this task, especially because interviewing, observing, and analyzing are activities central to qualitative research" (p. 2). Given these strengths of qualitative research, I utilized qualitative research to explore Afghan students' lived experiences in the US.

Phenomenological Approach

To gain in-depth understanding about the lived experiences of Afghan graduates in the U.S. education system, I utilized a phenomenological approach for my research. The phenomenological approach is used to generate an extensive amount of information from a small number of participants concerning their lived experiences (Flynn & Korcuska, 2018). In this approach, each participant's lived experience is regarded as valuable and meaningful. This approach is often taken through a series of in-depth, intensive, and interactive interviews (Rossman & Rallis, 2017, p. 85). This approach involves a minimum of three lengthy interviews that are profound, and focuses on particular issues and interview objectives.

(Rossman & Rallis, 2017). In this respect, I individually interviewed four participants in three different sessions and provided a specified set of questions for each interview. My participants shared their experiences from the Afghan education system and their adjustment challenges in the US. Through this approach, I was able to collect detailed information from a small number of participants, which provided me the opportunity to find similarities and differences in their experiences. As a researcher, I chose this approach to keep aside my own biases and experiences in order to hear from my participants and collect a wider view from participants' involvement and attachment in relation to the topic, instead of sharing my opinion related to the topic (Groenewald, 2004).

Participants' Description and Sampling

For this research, it was important to find the participants who had a deep understanding about the research topic (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). This was also equally important that they could share their lived experiences, and had an interest in contributing to this research (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). For this research, I interviewed two male and two female participants. The participants were selected through purposive sampling. Through this sampling method, I identified potential participants "who had special insights; had relevant experiences; and were well articulated or appropriate for the focus of this research" (Oliver, 2008. p. 110). Participants needed to meet these specific criteria: a) who did their partial education in Afghanistan (some years of schooling and bachelor level education; b) received higher education at one of the universities in the US; c) already graduated or had at least one year of studies in the US; d) the gap between their education and this study was not more than five years. For this sampling protocol, it was important that all participants met these criteria to keep the findings of this study consistent.

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) defined the snowball sampling a type of purposeful sampling through which the researcher starts the interview first with the "key participants"

and ask them to “refer other participants” who could meet the research criteria (p. 98).

Following this trend, I used snowball sampling by reaching out to my circle of acquaintances without any biases regarding their gender and identity, asking them to connect me with the Afghan students who have completed graduate studies in the US. I contacted my potential participants via email or social media prior to the interview to get their consent to participate in this research. I sent them the consent form and scheduled their interviews at a convenient time for three consecutive interviews.

Data Collection Methods

The phenomenological approach is a helpful tool in collecting information from the research participants' point of view in a descriptive manner that evolves from their experiences (Lester, 1999). Interviews were the most appropriate method to help me answer my research questions by tapping into participants' lived experiences. They were the primary source of information for the phenomenological approach “to identify phenomena through how they are perceived by the actors in a situation” (Lester, 1999, p. 1).

The phenomenological research approach necessitates the use of semi-structured interviews to provide enough space, time, and freedom to participants to share their experiences and reflect upon them in a descriptive manner (Diaz, 2015). Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions allowed participants to share their experiences without following a restricted framework. Blandford (2013) describes it as a list of questions on a particular topic provided by the researcher prior to the interview to lead the interview. This also provides space for participants to talk freely about unexpected topics that arise during the interview (Blandford, 2013). For this reason, I developed a series of questions (See Appendix B) that helped me to answer the research questions in three sequential interviews. Collecting information from different perspectives enabled me to describe their viewpoints and experiences in relation to my research questions (Bevan, 2014).

The interviews were conducted online due to geographical distance between the participants and myself; I conducted interviews via Skype, Viber, and Facebook Messenger based on my participants' preferences. All of my research participants resided in Afghanistan during my data collection; therefore, the Internet services were poor for some of them. Thus, I conducted interviews without using a webcam as that helped the Internet connection to work faster. Each interview lasted approximately an hour. Interviews were recorded on my phone, and at the end of each session I transferred the recording to my password-protected laptop that only I had access to.

The interviews were conducted in my native language Dari, and in English language honoring my participants' preferences. Because the participants were able to speak English fluently, as was required to study abroad, I sought their preference on the language in which they felt comfortable speaking. Thus, most of the interviews were conducted in English as desired by my participants.

Ethics of Research

Before beginning this research, I shared the purpose and the scope of this research with participants prior to their agreement to participate in this study. As a researcher, I clarified my researcher role (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I specifically told them that this research will contribute to existing literature related to the topic and is part of obtaining my M.A. degree. I also responded to their inquiries related to my research at any point if they had questions. Participants were assured about the safety of participating in this research through a consent form that was provided to them prior to the interview (see Appendix A). The consent form ensured that I was conducting this research for the sake of obtaining my Master's degree only and I would not use this information (findings) for any other purpose or in any other place. Based on the information provided in the form, they assessed the potential level of harm and discomfort they may experience by participating in this research, and

decide whether or not to participate. However, I gave them assurance that no identifiable information will be shared, and the information they provided will be used to inform this research project.

In order to make the participants feel safe and secure from any harm, I refrained from using participants' real names, disclosing their job positions, or the place they lived in. Instead, I used vague descriptions as "Ali who lives in Kabul and works for a local NGO...". As such, they were not identifiable and this helped them to feel more comfortable with participating in this study. In addition, to reduce discomfort of my participants or increase the level of their confidence while sharing their experiences, I asked them to disregard any question that they did not feel safe to provide their answer to or if they felt emotional or uncomfortable at any point of the interview. Also, I informed them they could discontinue or withdraw from the interview any time with no repercussions.

I kept the interviews' transcription safe, as I was the only one to have access to the data, which was used only for this research. The participants' names and identities were kept confidential, and when quoting them I used pseudonyms. Therefore, their personal information was not revealed in any part of research findings. Additionally, I informed the participants about recording their voices while interviewing them. I asked them, in case it caused them discomfort, or if they did not give me permission to record them, I could take notes without writing their names on it. All of them permitted me to record their voices. During and after transcription, I reached out to them and asked them follow-up questions. Moreover, I encouraged participants to share as much information as they felt comfortable sharing, as that helped me to better understand the situation. Their audio recordings were deleted immediately once they were transcribed; all files were deleted once the study was over.

Positionality

As a person who received secondary and higher education (a B.A. degree) in Afghanistan, my personal experiences were interconnected with this study. This research was informed by my own experiences with the Afghan education system and study abroad. I was not aware of the challenges of the Afghan education system until I had the opportunity to study in Europe and the United States. While studying abroad, I became acquainted with different teaching approaches and concepts that are vastly different from those applied in the Afghan education system. For example, both in the Netherlands and the US, I learned that students are at the center of teaching and learning; their needs and desires for learning are acknowledged and encouraged, making mistakes is allowed, and rote learning is replaced by experiential learning.

It is rare in my country to apply the acquired knowledge in a work place because not everyone has the chance to change the educational system, as it is hard to bring change in a conflict-affected area. Nevertheless, I was lucky to have the opportunity to work on small-scale changes in the educational system in Afghanistan, more specifically in a newly established college. As a dedicated team of young professionals, my colleagues and I initiated an agricultural college (a semi-autonomous college under the Dutch funded Agricultural TVET project in Afghanistan) from scratch. We developed the curriculum, employed student-centered methods instead of traditional methods, and extended teaching classes to a full day. This practice is not typical for most educational institutions in Afghanistan. As an educator, curriculum developer, teacher, facilitator, trainer, and education director of a college in my country, I worked with determined young professionals on changing the traditional teaching styles. I had to challenge my own experiences and practices by shifting from the traditional learning style to a student-centered teaching style because change starts with ourselves first. This change was not easy for my students either, because it challenged

the traditional teaching and learning approaches. To establish rapport and make this change accepted by my students, as a teacher, I had to explain every strategy towards utilizing student-centered approaches in the transformed classroom. This transformation process entailed justification as pinpointed by bell hooks (1994): “In the transformed classrooms there is often a much greater need to explain philosophy, strategy, intent than in the “norm” setting” (p. 42).

As a researcher, I shared my positionality in this research as someone who has questioned the quality of the Afghan education system since it fails to develop students' competences. I started questioning the system when I began studying abroad and later began teaching in a college where learning by doing was practiced and students were key to teaching and learning. Despite positive aspects of study abroad, it entails some specific challenges, all of which I experienced as an international student. Aware of my own biases, I sought to uncover the stories and experiences of my participants from the Afghan and U.S. classrooms to better understand the challenges Afghan students face in the US, considering their education background in Afghanistan. Because of my keen interest in helping to improve the education sector and raise awareness on the study abroad challenges for Afghan students, this research is one of those first steps towards working for the development of this sector and provides information to the professional designing study abroad programs for Afghan students.

Data Management and Analysis

Every interview was recorded by using a Voice Memo application on my phone. After the completion of each interview, the recordings were transferred to my password-protected laptop; I deleted the recordings from my phone immediately and, after the completion of this study, deleted the recordings from my laptop. After each interview session was done, I transcribed the interviews and kept the written form of the interviews in my

password-protected laptop. I conducted most of the interviews in English. I also took notes during the interview. I typed all the information on my laptop and used pseudonyms for each participant.

The data was analyzed through deductive and inductive reasoning. Deductive reasoning is a process that is concerned with testing theory and hypothesis with specific data, observation or findings (Cresswell & Clark, 2017). It generally starts with a broader or general topic and becomes more specific (Torchim, 2006). In relation to this reasoning, I categorized data based on specific themes discussed in the literature review section of the capstone paper by giving a code to each data point was attributed to or covered such issues as 1) educational challenges in schools; 2) higher education challenges in the country; and 3) overall education challenges or experiences in the US. Through the given codes, I made connections between different themes; one of the overarching ones was the academic challenges Afghan students face in their country and the US.

Through inductive coding, I drew out the unexpected findings expressed by participants during interviews. The inductive reasoning is a process in which “analysis moves from the specific observations to broader generalizations and theories” (Torchim, 2006, p. 2). Keeping this in mind, during research new topics or themes emerged and generalizations were made on the basis of generated information (Surbhi, 2018). Since there is lack of literature on the experiences of Afghan students in getting higher education in Afghanistan as well as their experiences in adapting to the U.S. education system, this analysis approach was extremely important to generate new knowledge on this topic. Therefore, I identified the emergent data that was not discussed in the literature review and it was coded inductively. Upon completion of a coding process, I compared the data gathered from the interviews and embarked on developing themes. Finally, the data was interpreted in relation to the

conceptual framework developed at the beginning of this research or additional literature that I reviewed in light of the unexpected findings.

Credibility of Findings

To ensure my findings were credible I employed different strategies. Credibility is a process to check the reliability of the findings in a qualitative research through different forms (Hoyo & Allen, 2005). Although triangulation, or the use of three or more methods, was not feasible for this study, I employed analyst triangulation and peer debriefing to ensure the credibility of my findings.

The method of analyst triangulation necessitates one or more readers to proofread (review) the findings of the research through analytical lenses (Magana, n.d.). Therefore, once I wrote the findings section of the research, I asked two reviewers who have gone through the same education system in Afghanistan and the US to review the findings of my research and provide me with feedback. This helped me to test the validity of the information provided by the participants.

According to Hail, Hurst, and Camp (2011), peer debriefing is a method to check the data credibility of the research. I reached out to my peers to solicit their feedback on my interpretation of the findings. Their feedback in every thematic section of research findings was important to ensure I did not sound biased, or to verify if I covered all important points discussed during the interviews.

Limitations and Delimitations

One of the limitations of this research was interviewing participants living in a different time zone, which affected the timeframe of this research. For examples, participants residing in Afghanistan were in a different time zone, where Afghanistan is nine and a half hours ahead of the state I live in the US. Therefore, I needed to interview participants usually during the day to make sure they had access to the Internet and electricity. I had to follow

their schedule instead of mine. Furthermore, because the participants had a busy schedule back at home, I rescheduled most of the interviews based on their availability and preferences; this caused a slight delay in data gathering process. In addition, I took most of the interviews without using any camera due to poor Internet connection; as such I was not able to see the emotions of my participants that I could talk about in this research.

It is important to note that I interviewed only four participants, which does not represent the viewpoint of a larger Afghan population that has studied in the US. I delimited the scope of my study by focusing on Afghan students who studied in Afghanistan and received their higher education in the US instead of focusing on all international students. This helped me to narrow down the scope of this research and to focus only one country. Moreover, to gain up-to-date information, I deliberately chose participants for whom the gap between their graduation and this research interview was not more than five years. This ensured the information derived from the interviews was not outdated.

Findings

I conducted this research to explore Afghan students' academic experiences in pursuing graduate studies in the United States to better understand the challenges they face when they study in the US. My research questions were: *From Afghan students' perspectives, how does the educational system in Afghanistan prepare them to study in the US? What kind of challenges do Afghan students face in their graduate studies in the US? How do Afghan students address these challenges in the US?* In the following, I provide the contextual information about the participants first to highlight their experiences.

Nahid, Ali, Shirin, and Tamim

I interviewed four ($n = 4$) Afghan students, two male and two female, who did their graduate studies in the US. I interviewed each participant three times. The names of all

participants have been changed; their given pseudonyms are Nahid, Ali, Shirin, and Tamim. All four have graduated from top universities in the US and live in Afghanistan. At present, they all work at national and international organizations, holding managerial, officer, and high-level positions in their organizations.

The education of my research participants has been adversely affected by the war. Due to civil war, some migrated to neighboring countries and some remained in the country, continuing their education in a fragile state. Both female participants' schooling - Shirin and Nahid – was interrupted. Nahid studied until grade 11 in Afghanistan, with breaks in between her schooling. Due to the conflict in the country from grade nine to 11, she could not go to school every day. Then she migrated to Pakistan and continued her education in a refugee school established by Afghan immigrants. Later, she completed three years of her Bachelor in English Literature in one of the universities established by Afghan refugees. During her interview, she said that she could not even call it a university, because nothing looked like a university to her. She did the final year of her B.A. back in the capital after the fall of the Taliban regime. She has been the breadwinner of her family since she was 18 years old, so besides getting an education, she had a part-time job. For the sake of doing her Master's in the US, she succeeded in obtaining a Fulbright scholarship (2013-2015) after two times of having had her application rejected. Nahid did her M.A. in international studies, with a focus on gender and development in one of the universities in the US. She currently works in the development field at an international organization in Kabul.

Another female participant, Shirin, also did her schooling in Afghanistan. She attended school until grade seven. After that, civil war began and she faced a huge gap between her studies from grade eight to 10: she studied in grade eight when she was an internal immigrant; grade nine and 10 at home; and she studied half of grade 11 at school and another half at home. After the collapse of the Taliban regime, Shirin finished 12th grade,

took the Kankor test and got accepted to Kabul Medical University, her field of choice. Shirin studied there for one and a half years with passion; however, she could not succeed in completing her degree due to the rough education system. Disappointed by the education system, she decided to do her undergraduate studies in the US by obtaining a full scholarship. Once in the US, Shirin completed her B.A. in Public Health and Sociology, and she also obtained two different Master's degrees from two separate universities. She earned her first Master's degree in Public Health (2013) and the second one in Management (2015). During the time between earning these two degrees, she remained in the US where she worked for one year in an organization. After she graduated with her second Master's, Shirin worked in Afghanistan until 2017-2018, when she came back to the US in order to complete a fellowship in leadership. She is currently working for an international NGO in her field.

Ali is a male participant. He was a refugee in Iran where he studied from grades one through 11. Upon his return to the Herat province of Afghanistan, he completed his schooling and succeeded in the Kankor exam, gaining admission to the Education Faculty (the English department in one of the public Universities). From 2014 to 2016, he went to the US on a Fulbright scholarship. He did his M.A. in the Linguistic department with a focus on teaching at a university in the US. As an undergraduate student, he started teaching English at different organizations. In his fourth year, he was a volunteer teacher in the same public university where he was doing his B.A. due to the lack of teachers. He was also at the top of his class. Additionally, he was a teaching assistant for a year during his studies in the US. Upon his return to Afghanistan, he began serving as an adjunct faculty in one of the private universities and is also working as an English Program Manager in one of the local NGOs in Kabul.

Tamim is the fourth research participant. He lives in Herat, Afghanistan. He did all of his secondary schooling in Afghanistan. He did his primary education during the Taliban regime. Tamim was admitted to the school of education in the English language department

at a public university in Herat. He completed his B.A. in 2011 and, in 2018, he received his M.A. degree in Sustainable Development in the US. He has served as an English lecturer since he was an undergraduate student and was also a volunteer lecturer at the same university due to the lack of teachers. He was the top student in his class. Currently, he teaches English literature at a private university and works at an international non-profit organization.

Education During War

In what follows, I will discuss my research participants' experiences inside the country and in the US. As explained in my literature review, the years of war influenced education quality in Afghanistan and resulted in a number of implications for Afghan students (Roof, 2014; Samady, 2001; UNICEF, 2018b). Reimers (2006) asserted that students' capabilities are associated with the education quality; more specifically, an outdated curriculum does not prepare students for life after the school. In a fragile state like Afghanistan that has gone through four decades of war, the education quality is still doubtful. Overall, my findings revealed that my research participants were not content with the quality of education they received in Afghanistan. According to Nahid and Shirin, the education quality was better in the 1970s. They spent more time in school. Nahid remembered going to school for long hours before the war erupted:

Before the Taliban and Mujaheddin, during doctor Najeeb's [the former Afghan president] time... we had longer classes...from 7:30 am to 12:30 pm. But when civil war broke and we were in a conflict situation it was only two hours of school time. From the early 90s when I was in grade nine, there were couple hours in school and sometimes school was off for months. (personal communication, 2019)

Much like Nahid, both Tamim and Ali mentioned short school hours (three hours, including a 15 minute break) in Afghanistan even after the fall of the Taliban. Their narratives demonstrate that the school hours remained short since the beginning of the civil war.

Shirin talked about her schooling during the civil war with disappointment. She recalled how insecurity in the country prevented her from going to school continuously and also kept her away from her books: “We migrated from one part of the country to another part several times...we could not carry all our books and then our house was bombed and we lost all our educational materials” (personal communication, 2019). The days she went to school, teaching materials were scarce:

Since it was a civil war going on, in the class, we did not have chairs and the board...we used to write on the wall or we would buy a piece of black leather cloth, we would hang it on the wall to write on it in the class...You know, when there isn't necessarily material, the students cannot learn and focus. (personal communication, 2019)

Tamim discussed the availability of educational materials in class during the Taliban regime; the books were outdated and it was a forced or dictatorship type of education. Ali, who did his whole schooling in Iran (except the 12th grade which he did in Afghanistan), mentioned that each class in his school was 90 minutes and composition subjects such as drawing and calligraphy were included in the school curriculum and the content of the books was rich; however, the teachers used traditional teaching methods. This comparison informs us about the education quality, similarities, and differences in the neighboring countries of Afghanistan. The above-shared experiences by the participants exemplify the effects of war and insecurity in the schools of Afghanistan and how students struggled in all spheres of conflict whether they were in the country or outside, which resonates with the reviewed literature (Aturupane, 2013; EFA, 2015).

My findings demonstrated that participants had a keen passion to receive higher education; therefore, three of the four took the Kankor test, the exception being Nahid who migrated to Pakistan during the civil war where she attended a refugee-established university without taking an entrance exam. Similar to the findings in the literature review (Shah, 2016; Sherzad, 2016), my participants found the Kankor exam challenging, frustrating, and an improper way for students to be admitted into universities. Ali mentioned that studying in the Education faculty was his last choice; he had to indicate his top 10 choices in the exam and ranked the faculties of medical, engineering, law, and computer sciences as his preferred choices. He ranked education as the very least, and he ended up going into the English department of Education. In relation to students' failure in getting admission to their preferred fields, Shirin mentioned, "Kankor test disappoints students because it does not judge students based on their talents" (personal communication, 2019). According to Tamim, "I think knowing all the school subjects in Kankor is hard, the fields need to be specific and categorized" (personal communication, 2019). Although Shirin found this test unfair for judging students' talents, she succeeded in getting a higher score on the test so she was admitted to the medical university. Though Tamim and Ali could not succeed in their fields of interest, they became interested in their undergraduate studies once they were admitted. Nahid wanted to become a doctor. Since there were not enough resources, materials, facilities, and labs available and since it was "involving human health," (personal communication, 2019) she gave up on this. With a pain in her voice she declared, "I hate these warlords because of my education, I had to give up on my passion for an education that I had interest in" (personal communication, 2019). From the participants' narratives about the Kankor test, which led to studying in a field that was not their choice, it is clear that for Afghan students, getting an education in their preferred field is rare. The nature of the Kankor exam, insecurity, and the years of war are many of those reasons. Moreover, the Kankor test

does not determine students' talents and competences due to the number of questions being brought from nearly all the subjects taught in school. As a consequence, students either fail or end up studying in a field that is not their preference.

Undergraduate Experiences in Afghanistan

As elaborated earlier, the education of my participants was substandard, especially in terms of higher education quality. In the following section, I will discuss the main challenges the participants experienced in Afghanistan.

In a country like Afghanistan, teachers are at the center of teaching. However, their qualification is often below a Master's or Doctoral degree (WB, 2015). My research findings confirmed this. It was affirmed by the majority of participants that their teachers' level of education was equal to their own. Ali stated that in the whole university there was only one teacher who held a master's degree. Similarly, Tamim said that his teachers at the university were fresh graduates. Tamim stated that in his final year of undergraduate study he had a teacher whose English competency was not good. He indicated, "I was learning English and the person who was teaching me could not speak English fluently. How could you learn English from someone whom himself cannot speak very well?" (personal communication, 2019). As Nahid did her three years of undergraduate study in Pakistan and the final year at Kabul University, the qualification of her lecturers was a major concern to her as they were speaking poor English while teaching in the English literature department.

According to Aturupane's (2013) findings, knowing that student learning is directly linked with the usage of teaching methods; Afghan students are unfamiliar with student-centered methodologies. Students learn best when their teachers are creative with the usage of diverse teaching methods for various topics. My findings align with Aturupane (2013) and Kabul University (2017), revealing that in Afghanistan, the teachers' emphasis is on teacher-centered approaches such as giving lectures, reading from chapters, asking a few students to

repeat the same words in front of the class, and giving notes to their students. This was prominent in my participants' accounts. For example, Ali recounted his undergraduate experience as following:

The teaching in the class was more of a lecture style and repetitions and the usage of participatory approaches in the class was minimal, the percentage of lecture styles and rote memorization was higher than the usage of participatory approaches. (personal communication, 2019)

Experiencing similar rote learning practices, both Shirin and Nahid emphasized listening to their lecturers' lessons in the classroom and taking notes. As noted by Nahid, lecturers were expecting students to take "not only short notes but full notes; they were appreciating those students" (personal communications, 2019). In regards to the common usage of rote learning methods, the majority of participants stated that the number of students in their classes was a lot to manage. Therefore, the lecturers had to resort to giving lectures in class. Ali, for instance, said that he would not blame teachers for not using participatory or practical teaching methods in class for three reasons: the number of students in class was more than 50, there was a lack of movable chairs and tables, and there was not enough space for engaging students rather than giving lectures.

Regarding teaching materials, participants often referred to the lack of teaching materials, such as laboratories, updated books, computers, internet, and overall materials for practical work. Although other participants stated that the education facilities and learning environment were poor in Afghanistan, Nahid had a different opinion. Maybe it was because she had seen poorer situations, but for her, it was a blessing to have better education facilities at Kabul University than the University she attended in Pakistan. When she joined Kabul University, she liked the environment, the big campus, and the classroom equipped with resources. Having enough teaching and learning resources at educational institutions is

necessary, especially in the fields of science and medicine. For a student like Shirin, having a physiology lab was desirable. Unfortunately, they did not have it. She remembered: "We were just like memorizing the material and taking the test because we did not have all required lab materials" (personal communication, 2019). As another example, she said:

You know, medicine is a very important degree all over the country, it should be based on practice or practical activities...for the chemistry and Biology classes, we did not have a lab to see how the equation was happening, so what our teachers had is chalk, board, and their old chapters. (personal communication, 2019)

In terms of the availability of books, participants indicated that most of their lecturers were giving chapter notes to their students and students had to make their own notes by copying them from the textbook. They also indicated that the curriculum taught by the lecturers was outmoded and not market-oriented. Regarding the curriculum, Tamim mentioned the following:

The education curriculum in Afghanistan is not market-oriented, it is outdated, it is based on theories, it is not functional, and it is not based on the need of the country. So the curriculum is a mess, it is all copied from the Internet, the teachers copy paste it in their chapters and teach to their students. (Personal communication, 2019)

As these accounts demonstrate, participants explicitly dealt with the lack of teaching and learning materials in addition to the outdated curriculum, which was also identified in the literature review (Akbari, 2018; Aturupane, 2013). Moreover, Shirin's statement confirms Esmaeily et al.'s (2010) argument regarding the poor or non-existence of the laboratory works at Kabul University.

When it comes to research, the teachers are less likely to conduct research; as a result, Afghan students miss this opportunity to learn how to conduct research. They also miss out on learning analytical, creative, imaginative, reading, and writing skills. When teachers do

not do research, their students cannot do it either. As a result, they lack research skills pinpointed by Esmaeily et al. (2010). In relation to this, Nahid mentioned, "Whenever we were given assignments at the university, we were asked to just copy from the book and write it in our notebook, that's all, so we were never asked on doing research at university" (personal communication, 2019). As Tamim is a part-time lecturer in a private university, he shared his concern along the same lines about the reliance of students on copying and pasting information:

In Afghanistan, students earn a B.A. degree without doing any research. They copy-paste the information, give a seminar and graduate. This bothers me a lot. I want to change this if I can, at least with the students that I want to be their academic advisor. (personal communication, 2019)

My findings demonstrated the participants' limited exposure to research in the Afghan education system, which subsequently hindered their development of research skills.

In Afghanistan, educational assessment of students' learning at the end of a term or the academic year is a fundamental practice. Assessment is not only about passing the course, but about how the student has improved or could improve his or her performance; this can be done by providing feedback on student performance. All of the four participants indicated that there is no feedback mechanism in the Afghan education system. The assessment is done by administering an exam. It was further illustrated by Nahid, "When we had exams, the teachers were expecting bookish language on our papers, so in a way, they were just expecting us to memorize the book" (personal communication, 2019). Shirin also indicated that the test was done without giving feedback to the student. She further stated that, "the teachers used to write numbers on our papers like 70 out of 100" (personal communication, 2019). Likewise, Ali shared:

The assessment system we have in Afghanistan, as we call it is more summative assessment (what we call it is that just the quizzes, midterm, and final exam) there is not formative assessment or in other words ongoing assessments. The teachers do not focus much during the course they focus much on results. (Personal communication, 2019)

Hearing participants' experiences on assessment practices in the country, giving feedback and employing other types of assessments other than tests or exams were missing from the student assessment practices and therefore limited the opportunities for further improvement, which was also indicated by Dormal (2009).

During the interviews, two of my participants talked about the existence of negative competition between Afghan students. Ali said that Afghan students are in competition to get a higher score in order to surpass other fellow students by getting high scores in all the subjects. Similar with Ali's opinion, Nahid talked about grading students in the class. She said: "As much as I enjoyed being a top student in the class by having high grades, I have realized our education system does not support average students, for the majority students it is rather discouraging" (personal communication, 2019). Both Nahid and Ali underlined the negative aspects of the grading system that reinforces negative competition between students in the Afghan educating system.

Afghan professors' availability outside the classroom was another challenge for students. Three out of the four participants indicated that the professors in Afghanistan do not have teaching hours available for students due to their expectation from the students to solve their problem or raise the queries in class. However, Tamim and Nahid stated that as top students it was not an issue for them. Nahid observed that it was hard for low scoring students, and usually teachers did not know those students' names. This suggests that teacher-

student relationship and rapport are missing in the Afghan education system because teachers are not accessible to their students.

Finally, to corroborate Akbari's (2018) argument on how the Afghan education system reinforces students memorization skills, it was important for me to know what competencies the Afghan education system has developed in Afghan students so they could pursue higher education abroad, or at least if it has prepared them to study abroad. The participants' responses to these questions proved my assumption that the Afghan education system does not prepare students to study abroad, mostly because the system is teacher-centered, which is opposite of what Western education espouses. Two of my participants stated that they decided to enhance their competences independently since the system failed to do so; therefore, they have become autonomous learners. The other two participants respectively commented that the system substantially built the memorization skills in them as Shirin admitted, "Indeed, writing and reading are basic skills which were not developed when I was in Afghanistan throughout the years of my education" (personal communication, 2019). These quotes demonstrate that the education system in Afghanistan did not help the participants to develop necessary academic skills, which contributed to the academic challenges they experienced in the US, as the next part of the paper will show.

Graduate Experiences in the US

In reference to the arguments of Aturupane (2013) and WENR (2016) on the shortage of M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in Afghanistan, my research findings demonstrated that some Afghan students go to the US and other countries to receive higher education. Three out of the four participants did their Master's in the US through Fulbright scholarships; only one participant (Shirin) did her undergraduate and first Master's degree in the US through a different scholarship program. However, for her second Master's degree, she took out a loan. While three of my participants studied in the US for a similar period of time, Shirin had much

more experience studying in the US. It is unique and rare for an Afghan woman to receive education to this extent.

Earlier, I shared that Shirin was a medical student for one and half years at Kabul Medical University. Throughout her academic life, she has been an intelligent and top student. Shirin was the only participant out of the four who was able to study in her chosen field. Unfortunately, she was unable to continue her education due to the challenging teaching environment, and her teachers' inability to identify the needs, talents, and learning styles of students like Shirin's. Shirin said that when she was admitted to the medical university, she received a low score from the lecturer and that gradually eroded her interest in studying in this field. She was disappointed and lost her hope when a teacher included tough questions on the exam in order to fail some students. Shirin was amongst them. This unjust assessment system influenced Shirin to quit Kabul Medical University and to go to the US for her Bachelor's degree. There, she restarted her undergraduate studies. Having heard her experiences about the system that did not support her, we can understand how the educational system can discourage students like Shirin. Upon arrival and with the onset of Shirin's new academic life in the US, she once again experienced what it's like to be a successful student, although not without challenges.

Traveling to any new place involves some challenges that one needs to go through for the sake of obtaining something valuable. When it comes to the international students' adjustments in a host country, these challenges become more obvious. Along with social, cultural, and language challenges, academic challenges are also included (Segosebe & Lyken, 2017). Like other international students discussed in the literature review section of this paper, Afghan students in the US went through similar challenges that will be discussed next.

Academic Life

Coming from a rote learning system to a system that is totally in contrast with what they had experienced back home was a major impediment to Afghan students obtaining their education in the US. Some of the academic challenges mentioned by my participants in the first days of their academic studies in the US contained adjustments such as time management, getting their assignments submitted online and on time (some of them asked for the extension and some missed to submit it on time due to their unfamiliarity with the system), and overall, getting familiar with the US education system. With a rote learning background, my participants lacked skills needed in the US to pursue higher education. The skills mentioned by participants were academic reading, writing, conducting research, working in groups, searching for books and journals in the library and E-library, participating in class discussions, giving and receiving feedback, analyzing and solving problems.

Research skills. Research is a required skill for students in the US. The participants knew the basics but had not practiced back home. When they came to the US that was the first time, they became familiar with it. Nahid stated the challenges she faced while being introduced to the research, saying, "...In the first term, I learned that I needed to do research for some of my academic papers, I struggled for a year since I did not have that skill. It became a nightmare to me" (personal communication, 2019). She addressed this issue by taking a research class in the second year, saying, "the course helped me to know and gain research skills, so I become comfortable doing it" (personal communication, 2019). Similar to Nahid's struggle in conducting research, other participants mentioned how hard it was for them. Ali recalled, "I could not sleep properly and enjoy my life because of conducting research, everything was new to me" (personal communication, 2019). Much like other two participants' experiences, Tamim found some elements of doing research hard but not challenging. This falls in line with the argument Esmaeily et al. (2010) made concerning the

lack of research skills in Afghan students. From participants' narratives it could be understood that they were not familiar with doing research in the US; or somehow, they did not know the proper ways of doing research, its components and requirements, as their research skills were not developed in Afghanistan.

English language challenges. For most participants language was one of the greatest challenges they experienced in the US. The participants extensively mentioned reading and writing academic articles and papers as a language barrier. The participants had been given a TOEFL exam to demonstrate their English language proficiency. However, it was not enough to ensure they would not face language-related challenges in the US, a point Wan (2001) articulated in their article. Much like Lin and Scherz's (2014) study, the participants indicated that less time was available for reading and writing. Two participants had a hard time reading. Tamim recalled that at the beginning of his studies in the US it was tough to read a lot of material within a day or a week stating, "I felt I am proficient in English, but when I came to the US I realized no matter how good your English is, but there is still room for improvement" (personal communication, 2019). This resonated with Nahid as well, who spoke of her experience as, "The amount of reading for every week was more than 50 articles...my American fellows could finish their reading in one hour, but it literally took me four to five hours to read and digest an article" (personal communication, 2019). Writing was another constraint related to the language. Both Ali and Shirin found academic writing challenging. For instance, Shirin shared how she struggled with writing a lab report in the first semester. She did not know the format or proper language to use in her paper. She defined this problem as:

To learn English in Afghanistan is not academic, it is only about how to speak in English, but to write an academic paper, you need to write or have a good knowledge

or experience in writing that I did not gain from my school and university. Therefore, I struggled in the US. (personal communication, 2019)

Ali's experience with the English language was different from other participants. To him, some of his professors in the US spoke "too fast" and that created a problem for Ali: "after two hours lecture, every time, I had a headache because I was not able to grasp that knowledge in English back to back" (personal communication). Participants' responses reflect Wu's (2018) idea about different strategies of learning English in students' home countries. Thus, the language problems that these participants shared are also consistent with Lie, et al.'s (2010) notion claiming that language is a huge barrier for non-native speakers in an English-speaking country and that it affects their education (as cited in Akanwa, 2015).

To analyze these experiences, we may initially assume that language was a huge hindrance for these students to adjust to in the US. However, each had a different coping strategy. Participants addressed their reading challenges by using a dictionary, asking their fellow American students about reading strategies, and eventually learning how to read fast by skimming an article, reading the salient points (abstract, introduction, and conclusion) of the article. The writing challenge was addressed by asking their American fellows to proofread their papers, requesting and receiving feedback from their professors, and seeking the help of writing centers. All in all, the strategies they employed increased their confidence in writing academic papers.

Teaching methods. In the literature review section, I discussed the pedagogical differences between the educational systems of international students' home countries and their host countries (Johnson et al., 2018; Kim, 2016). Participants emphatically expressed their unfamiliarity with student-centered teaching methods in the US. For example, multiple participants listed the following methods used by the professors in the US to actively engage students in the learning process: group work, presentation, classroom discussion, projects,

hands-on work in the lab, audio and video demonstrations, research projects, quizzes, among others. However, by using these methods, participants reported that they were able to make choices for their own learning and learn via diverse methods. As discussed above, these methods are barely used in Afghanistan (WB, 2015; KU, 2017). Tamim expressed that getting acquainted with various types of teaching methods has been useful for him back home and he has already been applying the new methods in his classes since returning to Afghanistan. In addition, he said, "I liked how the professors were teaching in the US, it was sometimes beyond the curriculum, and flexible to students' needs and ways of learning" (personal communication, 2019). Similarly, Nahid talked about the flexibilities of the teachers in using different teaching methods for individual students. For example, those students that were not able to participate in class were given a different assignment by the professors to compensate for their lack of classroom activities. She further explained, "It doesn't matter either you are an extrovert or an introvert student; for everyone, there is a way to contribute in the US, it is not like Afghanistan that the teachers' attention is only on top students" (personal communication, 2019). For Shirin, the different classroom activities in class helped her to overcome her shyness. The participants embraced the use of mixed pedagogical teaching methods in the US, which provided a learning opportunity for them.

As discussed earlier, international students participate in the classroom less than American students (Segosebe, 2017). For some participants, class participation was not easy. For Shirin it was difficult to take part in some discussions: "American students talk a lot in the classrooms. One should not talk to that extent to make other students not to talk in the class" (personal communication, 2019). Shirin's narrative delivers the message that the lack or less participation of a student in the class is not a sign of being lazy, indeed it is rooted in other causes. For instance, one of the causes is that international students usually tend to refrain from open confrontation, which is not inherent in their culture (Wang, as cited in

Segosebe, 2017). Shirin's experience to some extent confirms Segosebe's (2017) idea that there is less opportunity for international students to talk in class. However, Tamim and Ali, who both had teaching backgrounds in Afghanistan, said class participation was not hard for them. Their teaching experiences had prepared them to contribute to classroom discussions and to share their opinions.

For Nahid, participating in group work was challenging because she needed more time than her American fellows to grasp the topic in order to contribute to class discussion, which relates to Sadykova's (2014) findings on international student constraints in group works. In some groups she was given an equal chance to contribute and in some, she was not able to. Her reason for not being able to participate in some group works was that "American students were in speed, I could not be up to their level, also some of the topics were Americanized that was unfamiliar to me" (personal communication, 2019); by "Americanized" topics she meant topics related to American history and policy. These examples demonstrate that while equal participation in American classrooms is deemed essential, it is often not achievable. For an international student, it is more of a challenge because they are new to the system and are not native speakers. Therefore, the findings of my research assure that while students embrace the use of diverse pedagogical approaches in the US, they face challenges with some of these methods.

Educational facilities. The application of different teaching methods requires teaching materials and facilities. The US is well known for its educational facilities and resources (ACA, 2004). In developed countries like the US, students have access to and are familiar with the teaching materials and facilities compared to the students in developing countries. Afghan students do not have access to these basic facilities at home. In this regard, Ali remarked that one of the reasons that made the quality of education higher in the US for him was the resources. To him, having electricity in the classroom was a privilege while in

the Afghan classrooms, it is not available to run the “projector or the audiovisual” (personal communication, 2019). Three out of the four participants were pleased with the availability of the materials like overhead projectors, visual aid materials, Internet connection, movable tables and chairs, library, big classrooms, quiet study rooms, cafeteria, laboratory, and other resources. Only Tamim expressed that his school could be equipped with more facilities; his school lacked sufficient books in the library, as it was small, including study rooms.

However, sometimes the use of these facilities might become overwhelming to some students. Searching e-books was extremely challenging for two participants who were not used to or had never seen big libraries at home. In addition, posting their assignments on Blackboard (an electronic way of assignments submission) was new to them. In one way or another, students had to adjust to becoming comfortable with the usage of these facilities through seeking help from the librarians, their class fellows, and the orientations that helped them to learn the systems.

In the literature review, I discussed that Afghan students find working in the laboratory difficult (Esmaily et al., 2010). Similarly, since Shirin had to work in the laboratory in her undergrad and first M.A. degree, she found working in the laboratory significantly challenging, as she did not know the lab equipment names in English. She also mentioned that she was lacking basic skills for the lab work that American students already knew.

Teacher dispositions and availability. Referring back to the teacher and students relationships and teachers availability in the US (Kim, 2016; Leong, 2015; Wan, 2001), participants' responses were positive reporting on the direct teacher and student's relationships, availability of their teachers, and teachers' openness to listen to students' concerns. As Tamim talked about professors' dispositions, he claimed that “in the US you can question your teachers” (personal communication, 2019). Moreover, participants did talk

about their teachers' support and how they include their students in taking responsibility for their own learning in the US (Kim, 2016). However, only one participant shared his experience with his two professors in the US who did not accept his idea. Instead, they imposed theirs on him; he found those teachers firm and not open to new ideas. After hearing their stories in this regard, we can surmise that teachers in the US are available to discussing students' inquiries, and the majority of participants were content about the teacher-student dynamic in and outside of the classroom.

Non-Academic Challenges

The academic challenges that international students face in a host country have a correlation with non-academic challenges. According to Ozturgut and Murphy (2009), international students face many non-academic challenges that influence their academic performances. These non-academic challenges impact international students' academic adjustment a great deal (Bastien et al., 2018; Rabia, 2017). Non-academic challenges affect their mental health, wellbeing, social and cultural integration in a host country (Aldawsari, Adams, Grimes, and Kohn, 2018). Rabia (2017) suggests that when the non-academic challenges or needs of international students are served, their academic adjustments would be decreased. For my research participants, the non-academic challenges were one of the triggering causes of their academic challenges. The non-academic challenges that emerged from the interviews are related to their food concerns, social and psychological issues, and cultural differences, which I am going to discuss next.

Food barriers. Food is one of the biggest cultural shocks that international students confront when they study abroad (Carrol & Ryan, 2005). In relation to Carrol and Ryan's notion of food as a culture shock to the international students, two of the four participants highlighted challenges related to food. They indicated that the food provided by their schools was not anywhere close to what they ate at home. The food often contained cheese or was

simply American food that they could not eat. Because of not eating the school food, Tamim got ill at the beginning of his stay in the US and he wanted to quit his education explaining, “I did not have proper and sufficient food in order to study well, so I wanted to leave the US” (personal communication, 2019). He calls this experience a “food shock” (personal communication, 2019). Similarly, Shirin could not eat the school food due to her lactose intolerance saying that “everything had butter and cheese, so I could not eat, I had to take food from the salad bar [boiled beans or chickpeas], and used to add the spices I brought from home” (personal communication, 2019). To both Shirin and Tamim food was a concern that they had to think about their wellbeing and find alternative ways to survive in the US; therefore, food added more challenges to their academic adjustments. Another challenge to them was the rare access to halal shops because it was too far from their location and in the beginning they were unaware of these shops. Tamim stated that “On top of high loads of reading and writing, food was an issue for me, I suffered a lot because of not having desired and halal food” (personal communication, 2019). Tamim addressed this problem by deciding to live off campus in his second term to cook for himself, and Shirin also found ways to cook for herself once a week using the university kitchen. The two of my participants' statements in regards to food inform us that they addressed their food issues by themselves through finding alternative survival ways without having their school to support them. For other participants, food was not a problem since they lived off-campus and would cook for themselves, which made it easier for them to cook the food that they used to eat in Afghanistan.

Social and psychological problems. A graduate student's life is replete with various adjustments to many things beyond academics. For students, in this process, it is inevitable not to face psychological problems caused by many academic and non-academic factors (Mori, 2000). Traveling to a new society itself can be a challenge and feelings of loneliness

are a part of this, in addition to feeling isolated and excluded (Mori, 2000). As the Afghan community is a collective society, when a student leaves that atmosphere and comes to another society that embraces individualism, he or she surely goes through some social and psychological problems. According to Tamim, his first days in the US were incredibly hard as he felt homesick and became ill. He nearly left early on his journey in the US; however, his other fellow Fulbright students convinced him to stay. Ali also felt homesickness in the first six months of his stay in the US. He indicated that he was overwhelmed by adjusting in the US and living a new life. In a study done by Rabia (2017), Arab students shared their problems regarding homesickness due to the isolated university environment and being away from home. Ali in his first semester was only going to his classes and coming back to his room. Later, he started making friends, tried to call his family regularly, and explored the neighborhood, all of which helped him to tackle those initial challenges. Tsevi (2018) argues that when students are connected and integrated with the environment and people inside or outside the school, it helps them to overcome their loneliness. In that sense, for Ali, when he started socializing with people in his surroundings, it helped him cope with academic challenges by spending more time with friends with whom he could share his papers, seek their advice, and share his loneliness. In addition to this, we also need to keep in mind that these experiences exhibit that being away from home, regardless of where we travel, requires some time to adjust to a new place. Nahid's narrative in relation to this problem captures it in the following terms:

As an international student going to a country like the US, everything is new to you, from A to Z. From crossing the road, observing the walk signs, the ATM machines, including weather, food, shopping, living by yourself, to big campus and everything is a challenge; you have to learn and unlearn things you used to do at home because you are in a new world, you go through a lot of things. (personal communication, 2019)

Academic challenges play a fundamental role in causing psychological problems. For The high volume of reading caused Nahid stress, anxiety, and sleep deprivation throughout her studies. For Tamim, the high number of course credits (15 credits per semester), as well as intense readings and back-to-back classes, gave him less time to socialize or to rest. Lin (2012) provided a reason for this problem: as there is lack of time for international students to socialize, they therefore undoubtedly feel isolated, homesick, and suffer from psychological disorders. From their stories, I found out that the main causes of psychological and social problems are not only academic, but also social that need to be addressed before they affect students' mental health. To address students' psychological problems, which make their academic adaptation in a host country more challenging, they need to be socially served (Shadowen, Williamson, Guerra, Ammigan, & Drexler, 2019). For example, these students could be asked by the school management to maintain their contacts at home, connect them with the students in the US before their arrival in the US, facilitate integration into local communities while they are in the US, and lastly, make prior adjustments or help them with logistics such as housing (Jackson, Ray, & Bybell, 2013). The application of these strategies suggested by Shadowen et al. (2019) would be helpful for the host country to prepare international students for their study abroad experience in the US and address their social and psychological needs.

Cultural differences. Another significant finding of this research is the cultural differences between Afghan students and American students. The cultural differences are always apparent as we are all influenced by our own cultures. There are many causes of culture shock faced by international students in study abroad (Rabia, 2017). As I discussed earlier with regard to two of my participants, food is a culture shock. What happens when an international student offers food to a domestic student and the response is negative? In Afghan culture sharing food is a must; it is a sign of generosity and kindness. Nahid shared

her concern regarding offering food in class to one of her American fellows by insisting she eat and the response she received from her fellow was “I am fine.” In the Afghan culture, when someone denies something, you need to ask them a couple of times; you insist, so the final time you ask, the person has to accept your offer. Otherwise, it is rude to decline an offer. So for Nahid, hearing “I am fine” was first of all not clear in meaning; second, it was perceived as rude; and third, she finally realized that in American culture, being forceful with offers does not work so she quit asking them to eat. Learning how to communicate with people from a different culture is important; neither Nahid nor the American student was aware of these cultural differences. Nahid explained this intercultural communication experience as an impediment to integrate with American students. Based on this example, we may surmise that there was lack of proper communication and cultural awareness between an American and Afghan student that limited their interaction and the establishment of friendship that could serve Nahid both academically and socially.

Nahid found another culture shock related to greetings. She shared with me the importance of saying hi and hello in the Afghan culture as a way of communicating and showing respect. She confronted a challenge in this regard in the US. She narrated, “When I was saying hi to my American fellow peers, I was not hearing back saying hi to me from some of them, although it is mandatory in my culture to say hi to everyone” (personal communication, 2019). For Nahid, greeting her fellow student was important, as it would open up ways to become friends with American students. She elaborated, “If I had more American friends, I would have been more successful in my courses because I could just ask their assistance to help me with my papers and discuss my readings outside the classroom” (personal communication, 2019). This suggests that it is equally important for the international and domestic students to share their cultural differences and similarities in order to avoid cultural miscommunication and conflicts. According to Elturki, Liu, Hjeltness, and

Hellmann (2019), interaction is a useful tool to address cultural differences between American and international students and to enhance students' communication and social skills. The interaction opportunities between American and international students simultaneously contribute to lessening the degree of their academic challenges.

Another culture shock noted by my participants was the reading habits of Americans in noisy and crowded places. Ali discussed how different cultural reading habits created a gap between him and his American fellow students. He recounted, "My American friend took me to Starbucks to study... I didn't know what Starbucks was...we went there...took our literature books...but, I could not study there" (personal communication, 2019). Reading in a crowded place was surprising to him, as he was not used to it. He said, "The way we study in Afghanistan, we study in a quiet place, and nobody should talk to us, no TV, no music. Maybe this is one of the things that we grew up with. So being in a crowded place to study was shocking to me" (personal communication, 2019). Mori (2000) argues that the international students' unfamiliarity with the American culture is a barrier for their social integration with American students and building a social support network. Indeed, for Ali, cultural differences in study habits made it hard for him to study with his classmates and solve his study related questions. Ali's example explains that for an Afghan-international student, the cultural differences are a day-to-day challenge.

Previously I shared participants' experiences regarding ranking system practices in the Afghan education system. There is tough competition between Afghan students, which is not true for American students. Ali narrated that it was surprising to him when he asked about the score of his fellow students in order to compare it with his own and he was shocked when the fellow student did not tell him. He defined this situation as culture shock: "This is the difference that we (Afghan students) are just looking at higher grades just with numbers... In the US, one's development is more important than a score" (personal communication, 2019).

In relation to this, Shirin affirmed the same challenge: “As an Afghan student, I wanted to compete with my classmates, when I went to the US it took me a while to just compete with myself, no one else” (personal communication, 2019). The participants’ statements point out the various cultural shocks and social differences they encountered in the US in different ways that were making their academic, social, cultural, emotional and psychological adjustments harder. Both Ali and Shirin argued that if a proper orientation to the American educational system, customs, and cultural practices is given prior to arriving to the US, Afghan students will deal with less shock and face fewer academic challenges.

The Impact of U.S. Education on Afghan Students

As my participants’ accounts demonstrate, they experienced a number of challenges in the US higher education. Some of these challenges made them struggle. However, some of these challenges made them thrive and positively influenced their lives. For example, they were pushed to get out of their comfort zones by participating in the class discussions or taking part in other activities that barely happened in Afghanistan. These activities were not easy for them to adopt to spontaneously; it took them a while to adjust and get used to. The participants’ higher education shaped their personality and characters. When I asked them to what extent the education they received in the US was helpful to them, their responses highlighted a number of positive influences. For instance, for Shirin, getting an education in the US was rewarding as she described, “I gained a lot of skills, knowledge, and self-confidence from my education in the US which I was not able to gain if I was in Afghanistan...it completely changed me and my perspective about myself” (personal communication, 2019) By receiving two Master’s degrees in the US, she proved that everyone has a talent and is capable of getting an education even if it takes studying in another country in another language. She identified herself as a shy person and recounted that when she would be late for her class in Afghanistan and the lecturer arrived to class, the

student would need to ask their teacher's permission to enter the classroom. Shirin stated, "When the teacher was in the class, I was shy to ask his permission to enter the class....the class was full of students too...so, I was waiting behind the class door if someone else enters first" (personal communication, 2019). She said that her two Master's degrees immensely helped her overcome her shyness through classroom presentation, discussions, and group work. As such, diverse assignments and activities helped her to become more confident and enhanced her competencies. To her, the impact of her education in the US was simultaneously challenging and rewarding, as she was able to apply her knowledge and skills on the job.

Like Shirin, Tamim also expressed his opinion regarding the impact his education in the US has had on him. He described: "My education in the US has changed my worldview, now I know what are the problems and how the globe can be sustainable" (personal communication, 2019). He also expressed his enthusiasm for applying his knowledge he acquired from the US in his classes. Different teaching methods are one example of an area of learning that he has already applied to his work. Nahid called her experience "a package" that impacted her in different ways: it increased her cultural awareness and skills; it helped her in getting familiar with the world concepts; and it helped her to learn about different cultures. Ali described the impact of his education in the US in numbers: "To me it is 90% impactful". He further stated that his education in the US has made him successful in his job in terms of the application of teaching methods (e.g. participatory approaches), technology skills (e.g. Google Drive), and gained knowledge (e.g. designing and delivering training programs) that he was not capable of before. Despite the challenges the participants faced in the US, each participant defined the impact of their education overall as a positive.

Recommendations to Study Abroad Programs

One of the intentions of doing research on this topic was to share Afghan students' voices to the US study abroad program organizers to improve their programs for these students since their education experiences in their home country differs from that one of other international students in regard to the education quality. Therefore, I asked my participants for their recommendations because they are the ones who have experienced these programs, so they are the ones who can advise the program organizers on improvements. The recurrent recommendations from participants were on how to ease the language barriers for the student through not relying only on the TOEFL test and for English academic reading and writing classes to be organized prior to their journey to the US. Plus, the program organizers need to work with the professors to inform them of the potential language barriers for Afghans. Nahid suggested professors to be flexible, to "not strictly focus on the language, grammar, but more on the content and subject matter skills...[to] show a bit of flexibility and less strictness on the language" (personal communication, 2019).

Because Afghan students have a rote learning background, the transition from that education system to the US education system is arguably challenging; therefore, participants suggested organizing pre-academic courses in their country and when they get into the US. Through this course, "Students could be informed about the education differences between two countries at first place and identifying potential challenges for the students while being in the US would help" (Ali, personal communication, 2019). This resonated with Nahid; she asked the organizers to "introduce students to teaching methodologies, research, library, and different academic writing formats" (personal communication, 2019).

Shirin and Tamim provided their recommendations on accommodating students' food needs and allergies in the program. Tamim proposed to "know the students food needs and their food sensitivities before bringing them to the US." Similarly, Shirin proposed to "take

Muslim students to the Halal shops to get their stuff from there” (personal communication, 2019). Finally, all participants suggested connecting Afghan students to the Afghan families, students, and communities to feel at home, and prevent loneliness. In addition, they suggested connecting them to their fellow students. Shirin stated, “Linking students with other students at the university offer the opportunity for the students to ask their questions from them and get ready to study in the US” (personal communication, 2019).

Recommendations to Afghan Students

One student can understand another student better because they share a similar educational experience. When I asked participants to provide their recommendations to other Afghan students deciding upon getting an education in the US, their recommendations were related to academic and non-academic aspects. First and foremost, participants in general recommended that students prepare themselves for a high volume of reading and writing, in addition to getting familiar with different scholars and knowing the technology or various teaching materials. They suggested multiple ways to prepare: For example, “ They [Students] need to start reading and practice writing prior going to the US, this will help them to get used to a lot of readings and to know the writing structure” (Nahid, personal communication, 2019). Shirin suggested connecting with other students: “Try to reach out to the students that are already in the school, share your concerns with them...prepare a list of questions and ask them”. Also, they suggested connecting with their advisor to share their queries and concerns with them, as “...Universities and professors in the US want students to succeed so they will help you” (Ali, personal communication, 2019). These recommendations may be helpful for Afghan students to have an idea about the US and its education system before embarking on their journey to the US.

To be better prepared to face potential academic and non-academic challenges in the US, Tamim shared the following: “there is a possibility of feeling lonely, so lower your

expectations and be ready for it” (personal communication, 2019). Moreover, participants advised students to practice cooking at home as they may happen to cook their own food in the US. In addition, they recommended addressing potential culture shock by doing research about the US in general. One source of culture shock hypothetically indicated by three participants was finding pets in American houses, as household pets are uncommon in Afghanistan. Therefore, their advice for these students is to check for the pets if they do not want pets in the house. Lastly, Shirin suggested being honest about their education background, talking about their experiences instead of making assumptions that people in the US might know their background. Thus, she said, “Don’t be shy, instead be honest about your life” (personal communication, 2019).

Conclusions

The main objective of this study was to explore Afghan students’ academic experiences in pursuing graduate studies in the US to better understand the challenges they face when they study in the US. In this research paper, I strived to bring the voices of Afghan students to the attention of US study abroad program managers to take into account the needs of Afghan students while designing graduate programs for them in the US. To do this, it was important to first situate the education background and history of these students in the country against the backdrop of the ongoing war that has impacted their education in significant ways.

One of the key findings of this research was that the Afghan students received poor quality education before coming to the US. Their education did not prepare them to study in the US; however, through determination and hard work they developed their academic skills. Despite limited access to education facilities and their lack of exposure to modern teaching methods, such as student-centered teaching along with empowering students to be the agents

of their own learning, participants were successful in achieving their goals of studying in the US and completing their graduate programs. Although the participants' overall responses on the impact of the US education on them were positive, they underwent some academic and non-academic challenges in the US. Based on their experiences and the challenges they have faced, they shared a number of recommendations to the Afghan students who might choose to study in the US in the future in addition to their recommendations to the study abroad programs managers in the US.

The findings of this study suggest that Afghan students are in need of more support from the program managers, university staff, and professors to succeed in their studies or to face fewer challenges while studying in the US. The support system is essential to establish in order to make students feel at home and welcomed as they integrate into the US culture, introducing them to the cultural system and society as well as providing them with opportunities to share their concerns and overall academic experiences with their classmates and school staff. This can be made possible through raising awareness by organizing trainings and workshops to educate all stakeholders not only on Afghan students' experiences but international students in general.

Finally, as my findings show, the Afghan students have the capacity to study in the US or in other countries despite their rote learning background and despite the fact that English is not their first language. The study abroad opportunities should be given to them to enhance their competencies so that upon their return to the country they could contribute to the development of Afghanistan. This opportunity can empower Afghans to transform the traditional education system for the better.

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Appendixes

Appendix A: Informed Consent Letter

Title of the Study: The Impact of Afghan Education System on Afghan Students: Afghan Students Experiences and Adjustments in the US

Researcher Name: Ayesha Sabri

My name is Ayesha Sabri, I am a student in the Intercultural Service, Leadership, and Management (ISLM) at SIT Graduate Institute. I would like to invite you to participate in a study I am conducting for partial fulfillment of my MA in ISLM. This is a consent form for research participation. It contains important information about this study and what to expect if you decide to participate. Your participation is voluntary. Feel free to ask questions before making your decision whether or not to participate. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and return it back to me.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY:

This research is designed to explore Afghan students' academic experiences in pursuing graduate studies in the United States to better understand the challenges they face when they study in the US.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY:

The anticipated benefit of participation to you is minimal but may include the opportunity to discuss your ideas, perceptions, your education experiences in Afghanistan and the US that raise awareness on the issues that Afghan students are facing in their country and in the US related to education attainment. This study is significant to share Afghan students' experiences or the challenges they face in Afghanistan and the US so that the US higher education institutions address Afghan students' needs in their study abroad programs. The personal benefit of participating in this study is minimal, but this study might benefit the readers to have a better understanding of the topic. This study will contribute to the scarce literature on Afghan students' experiences in U.S. higher education.

EXPLANATION OF THE PROCEDURES:

As participant of this research, you will be asked to talk about or share your experiences of studying in Afghanistan and the US. Participation in this study involves agreeing to three interviews with me. Each interview will not take more than an hour, depending on how fast we can go through all the questions. With your consent, I will record the interview and transcribe it immediately after the completion of your interview for the purpose of data analysis. Once transcribed, the transcription will be saved in my personal password protected computer to which I am the only one to have access.

CONFIDENTIALITY:

No identifying information will be used in any section of this research. I will create a pseudonym for you and alter any other personally identifiable information. Upon completion of the research process, I will destroy all audio recordings and transcripts of your interviews. Every effort will be made to keep the study-related information confidential. As a participant, you are free to pose/share any question or concern with me regarding confidentiality of the research or anything related to this research.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS:

There are no minimal risks or discomforts that are anticipated from your participation in the study, however while talking about your experiences you might feel emotional. There are no penalties should you choose not to participate; participation is voluntary. During interview, you have the right to not answer any questions or to discontinue participation at any time. If you make this request, I will stop the interview immediately and destroy the collected data.

PARTICIPANTS RIGHTS:

If you choose to participate in this study, you may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Upon your withdrawal from this study, your data and all other information related to you will be destroyed.

FURTHER QUESTIONS AND FOLLOW UP:

You are welcome to ask me any question that occurs to you during the interview.

If at any point you have questions about the research, you may contact me at Ayesha.sabri@mail.sit.edu. Additionally, you may contact my advisor Dr. Alla Korzh at alla.korzh@sit.edu.

RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT – IRB CONTACT INFORMATION:

In an endeavour to uphold the ethical standards of all SIT proposals, this study has been reviewed and approved by the SIT Institutional Review Board. If you have questions, concerns, or complaints please contact the Institutional Review Board at:

School for International Training Institutional Review Board
1 Kipling Road, PO Box 676 Brattleboro, VT 05302-0676 USA
irb@sit.edu
802-258-3132

If you decide to participate in this study, please indicate your choice below:

- I would like to participate and agree being recorded for the interview
 I would like to participate but **I do not** agree to be recorded for the interview
 I would be willing to be contacted in the future for possible follow-up interview questions that might come up later on in the process of study.

I, _____ (name; please print clearly), have read the above information. I freely agree to participate in this study. I understand that I am free to refuse to answer any question and to withdraw from the study at any time. I understand that my responses will be kept anonymous.

Participant's signature _____

Date: _____

Researcher's signature _____

Date: _____

Appendix B: Interview Guide

Session 1: Education Experiences in Afghanistan

1. Tell me about yourself. What is your education and work background?
2. How would you describe your overall education experiences in Afghanistan?
3. What challenges did you face in your education in Afghanistan? Can you give me an example please?
4. What specific competencies did you develop in the Afghan education system?
5. Would you like to add anything on the things we discussed so far?

Session 2: Education Experiences in the US

1. How did you decide upon getting an education in the US?
2. What has your experience been like receiving an education in the US?
3. To what extent is the education you received in the US impactful for you?
4. What adjustment challenges did you face in the US? How did you address them? Can you give me an example?
5. How was the transition from the Afghan education system to the US education for you? Can you give me an example?
6. What gaps did you find between the US and Afghan education systems?
7. How had your education and life in Afghanistan prepared you for a US education, if at all?
8. Is there anything you would like to add?

Session 3: Reflection

1. What is the level of your satisfaction/dissatisfaction about the Afghan education system? How would you describe it?
2. Similar to the earlier question, what about the US education system? Can you give me an example?
3. What is your recommendation for improving the US study abroad programs organized for Afghans students?
4. What recommendations do you make for the Afghan students who decide upon getting an education in the US?
5. Is there anything else you would like to add?