

# BREAKING BARRIERS: EXPLORING WAYS TO INCREASE AFGHAN REFUGEE STUDENTS' ENROLLMENT AND DECREASE THEIR DROPOUTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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## ABSTRACT

*Afghan refugee students face various challenges when pursuing higher education in Pakistan. This study investigated the challenges affecting Afghan refugee students' pursuit of higher education within Pakistan's diverse socio-cultural landscape, with a particular emphasis on Quetta, Balochistan. Using a mixed-methods approach that includes quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews and focus group discussion, the study explored the opportunities and obstacles these students confronted. The study revealed both congruencies and discrepancies concerning opportunities and obstacles providing insights into the particular contextual factors affecting the educational paths of Afghan refugee students in Balochistan. Recommendations are offered to relevant stakeholders, including the UNHCR, academic institutions, and government agencies, for improving education opportunities and overall well-being for this vulnerable group. The study suggests workable strategies including the development of an innovative online dashboard.*

**Keywords:** *Enrollment Challenges, Retention Strategies, Higher Education Access, Afghan Refugee Student, Document Verification Challenges.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Afghanistan's ongoing conflict and political insecurity have resulted in a protracted refugee crisis, with many Afghans seeking asylum in Pakistan (Humayun et al., 2023). An estimated five million Afghan individuals are presently displaced outside their home country, with Pakistan and Iran accommodating the largest portions of this refugee population. Both Pakistan and Iran experienced another influx of refugees due to the fall of the US-supported Ashraf Ghani government and the Taliban's assumption of control in Kabul (Raisani, 2021). According to the information from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNCHR), as of June 2021, Pakistan was home to 1,435,445 registered Afghan refugees, with 327,247 of them living in Balochistan (Pakistan Refugee Statistics 1960-2024, 2024). As per the most recent data collected from UNHCR as of June 2023, the total number of Afghan refugees in Pakistan is 1,333,749 and the total number in Balochistan is 321,677 as shown in Figure 1 below (UNHCR, 2024).

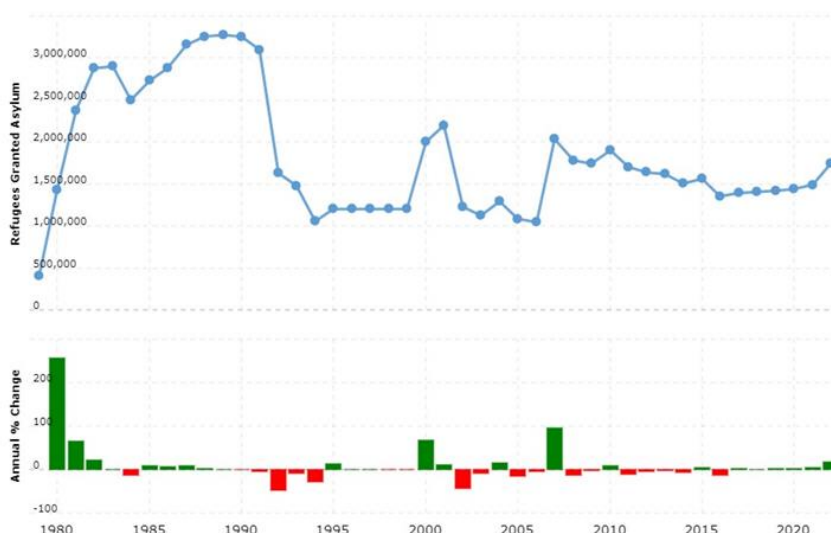


Figure 1: The population of Afghan refugees in Pakistan from 1980-2022 (Refugee Statistics - Pakistan, 2024)

Currently, there are about 4.4 million Afghan refugees. Out of the 4.4 million, about 1.3 million refugees have POR cards, 84000 have ACC Cards, and 775000 are undocumented. Table 1 below shows the information.

Table 1: The number of Afghan refugees in Pakistan.

Key statistics	Total value
Total Afghan refugees in Pakistan	4.4 million
Total Afghan refugees have a POR card	1.3 million
Total Afghan refugees have ACC card	840,000
Total Afghan refugees are Undocumented	775,000

Pakistan is one of the top five most populated countries in the world. Not only does the country struggle with the provision of basic facilities to its people but it also faces the most crucial financial issues. In such a situation, hosting such a large number of Afghan refugees is not free from dealing with additional challenges of the delivery of essential amenities and services such as education, safety, employment, and water and food. Given this backdrop, Afghan refugees undergo a double divide in Pakistan. First, they create their sustenance from what is meant for the mainstream Pakistani population. Second, they face social pressure and problems in the context of their status.

Access to education is a critical concern, with the need for accessible schooling for refugee children and higher education opportunities for young adults. The severest issue amongst the Afghan refugees is their access to Pakistan's public educational systems including schools, colleges, and universities. A large number of refugee students in this context face multiple challenges which include language barriers, financial costs, mental health, and educational document recognition issues in higher education.

Students from Afghanistan who have migrated to Pakistan as refugees aspire to complete their education despite the current circumstances to improve their futures and aid in the reconstruction of their nation. However, their route to enrollment in higher education institutions is lined with many obstacles due to the disruptions caused by migration (J. Khan et al., 2021). The hurdles include lack of proper documentation, recognition of prior education, language barriers, financial constraints, and the lack of familiarity with the educational system in Pakistan (Malik et al., 2022; Humayun et al., 2023). Higher education is essential for promoting the social and economic development of refugees (Koehler & Schneider, 2019).

### 1.1. A snapshot of educational challenges

In this section, we review diverse issues discussed by various authors concerning refugees. Many researchers have highlighted the difficulties that refugees face around the world. According to Kanno (2010), the challenges facing refugee higher education for English as a second language (ESL) students in the US context included not just poor English language skills but also institutional restrictions specific to this population, insufficient financial means, and the student's propensity to self-exclude. The authors recommended a reform in higher education policy in the United States to tackle language, structural, and economic barriers to the ESL students' access and participation in college education.

Another study by Braye (2018) explored the difficulties that refugee students faced when pursuing higher education in the United States. Language, social, and economic challenges had been identified as key impediments to their educational efforts. The author focused on the treatments and resilience activities that had helped current or past migrants overcome these barriers and achieve their educational goals. The findings of the study intended to help social service providers build a curriculum that could support refugee kids as they negotiate their school journeys in America. The study emphasized the need for strong motivation and different support structures to assist refugee students in overcoming challenges and achieving their educational goals. Despite their vulnerabilities, the study underlined the resilient features of the refugee community.

Another study in this line was by Chick and Hannagan-Lewis (2019) who examined the difficulties that refugees in Wales (UK), under the Syrian Vulnerable Persons' Resettlement Scheme encountered, with particular attention to the issues related to jobs, education, and language acquisition. The authors suggested that present government mandates frequently fell short at the grassroots level, despite the need for successful language programs for heterogeneous communities. The author argued for greater flexibility in organizing English language sessions for the participants in Wales, with the goal of better meeting the requirements of instructors and students. The authors believed these recommendations would be useful for educators, politicians, and community organizers working at the crossroads of language and migration.

Highlighting the experiences of Afghan refugees pursuing higher education in Pakistan, the study conducted by Dilshad et al. (2021) who employed an interview protocol to gather data from 20 refugee students. The participants were selected through purposive sampling from four higher education institutions in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa. The study identified several themes based on the students' experiences: economic, social, language, and educational adjustment in the host country. The demographic data of the 17 students found that most refugee students lacked a feeling of home in Pakistan, but reported satisfaction with the host education system. However, they faced several challenges related to their economic and social adjustment. The following Table 2 summarizes the major highlighted challenges in the reviewed studies regarding the obstacles faced by (Afghan) refugee students pursuing higher education all over the world including Pakistan.

**Table 2: Reviewed studies highlighting challenges faced by Afghan refugees.**

Ref	Years	Highlighted Challenges	Country
(Crea, 2016)	2022	Education Costs, Reconsideration of Higher Education Policies	Iran
(Streitwieser et al., 2020)	2020	A lack of awareness and absence of a standardized protocol itemizing the specific needs of Afghan refugee students further excludes them from accessing and succeeding in higher education.	USA
(Stempel & Alemi, 2021)	2021	Economic, Employment, and low income	USA
(Sharifian et al., 2020)	2020	Barriers to English Language Learning, Formal Support Challenges, Pedagogical and Sociocultural Barriers, and Issues of Self-esteem and Motivation	Australia
(Thoma & Langer, 2022)	2022	Educational Inequalities and Insecurities, Global Contexts, and Inequalities, and Cumulative, Non-linear Educational Processes.	Germany
(Sadiković, 2018)	2018	Financial, lack of funds, resources, and degree completion.	Germany
(Mukhtar et al., 2023)	2023	Terrorism, political instability, and economic downturn.	Pakistan
(Dilshad et al., 2021)	2021	Uncertain Future for Refugees Need for Support and Hope, Silent Voices of Refugees, Limited Exploration of Refugee Experiences, and Inclusion of Refugee Voices	Pakistan
(W. Khan et al., 2020)	2020	Unstable socio-political structure, deprivation of basic rights, and the perception of them as a threat to the local society.	Pakistan
(Ishaque et al., 2021)	2021	Changing government policies, societal discrimination, economic burden, and security concerns.	Pakistan

Although studies have been conducted about challenges Afghan refugees face in Pakistan, until now to the best of our knowledge, there has been a lack of studies on refugee education in higher institutes, particularly, in the Balochistan province. According to the Economic Survey of Pakistan (2009–2010), Balochistan has a lower literacy rate and gender parity index as compared to other provinces of Pakistan, as shown below in Figure 2. In comparison to other Pakistani provinces, Balochistan continues to have one of its lowest percentages of literacy. Low primary school enrollment, limited access to secondary education, lack of middle and secondary schools, and insufficient access for women to education are all characteristics of the Balochistan system of learning.

The city of Quetta, the administrative center of Balochistan, has been one of the most well-liked refugee settlements for Afghans. Due to its proximity to the Afghan border, the city hosts a substantial population of Afghan refugees. This study aims to find out and understand the challenges that are faced by Afghan refugee students pursuing higher education in Quetta, Balochistan. The study intends to provide lawmakers, educational institutions, and humanitarian organizations (such as UNHCR) with practical implications. The research aims to provide practical suggestions that can enhance the academic path of Afghan refugee students.

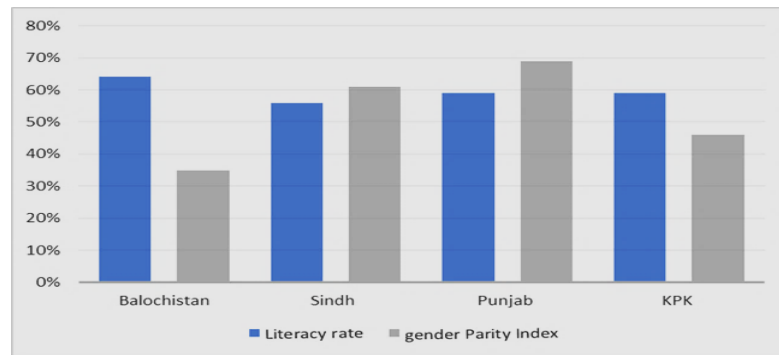


Figure 2: The literacy rate and gender parity index in Pakistan.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The journey towards higher education for Afghan refugees in Pakistan is riddled with several challenges such as language barriers, financial constraints, regulatory restrictions, discrimination, and limited access to educational institutions. However, by implementing targeted strategies and collaborative efforts, these obstacles can be overcome. This research aims to find out and understand the challenges that hinder their educational opportunities and discuss potential plans to overcome these barriers in the Balochistan context. Figure 3, below, illustrates the research design used for this study.

The research aimed to achieve the following specific objectives:

- To Identify the reasons behind the consistently low enrollment and retention rates of Afghan refugee students in higher education.
- To propose a framework that facilitates Afghan refugees' access to higher education by recognizing their prior education and credentials.
- To examine socioeconomic factors significantly affecting the academic performance of Afghan refugee children in Higher education.
- To explore effective methods and best practices that can improve educational outcomes for Afghan refugees in Pakistan.

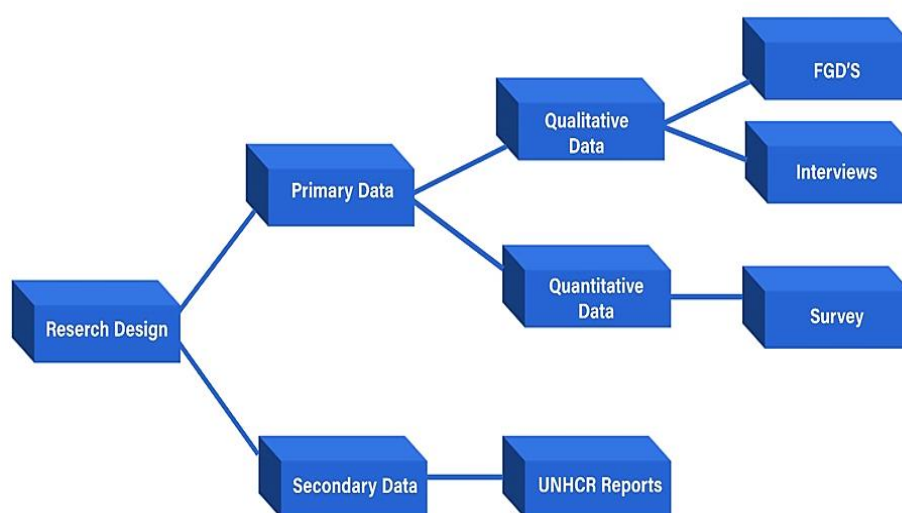


Figure 3: Research Design

This research follows Greene's (2007) views on combining qualitative and quantitative approaches and adopts a triangulation strategy, emphasizing triangulation and complementarity as the purposes of mixing methods in this study. According to Greene, triangulation should result in convergence, corroboration, or correspondence of results from various research methods, enhancing the reliability of inferences and interpretations (Greene, 2007). This methodological approach seeks to address the limitations associated with survey methodologies, for example, the use of questionnaires by combining it with qualitative aspects. Thus, through the combination of semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGD), the study intends to offer a comprehensive understanding of the experiences and perspectives of Afghan refugees. This study uses triangulation and complementarity to get a thorough understanding of the educational situation of Afghan refugees in Pakistan. The goal is to make well-informed decisions that can improve their access to higher education.

The data collection phase for this research project was scheduled from August to November 2023. The study incorporated perspectives from a diverse set of participants, including Afghan refugee university students, teachers and staff from Persian medium schools, administrators of universities, and representatives from various organizations engaged in document generation and verification. Quetta was selected as the research site due to its extensive Afghan refugee population, presence of reputable universities, and proximity to refugee camps.

**Table 3: Details of the participants of the study**

Participants	FDGS	Survey	Interviews	Total
Unenrolled Students	2	40	-	42
Enrolled Students	4	66	-	70
Teachers	-	-	2	2
Officials	-	-	2	2
Principals of schools	-	-	2	2
University administrators	-	-	2	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>106</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>120</b>

### 2.1. Quantitative Part: Survey

To learn about the academic experiences of Afghan refugee students, a well-structured questionnaire was designed. The survey, comprising four sections and forty-three items, aimed to address aspects related to the study's primary objectives. The questionnaire was originally written in English (Annex 1) and was later translated into languages such as Pashto (Annex 2) and Dari (Annex 3) to cater to respondents' native tongues.

In capturing their views and opinions, a 4-point Likert scale was used for each item of the questionnaire across sections. The Likert scale entailed the response options that embraced the terms "Strongly Agree," "Agree," "Disagree," and "Strongly Disagree." To provide a more detailed evaluation of their experience, participants were able to indicate how much they agreed or disagreed with the assertions made in each item by using the scale. Several categorical and nominal questions were added to the questionnaire to collect biographical and academic data and to provide the most comprehensive picture of the participants' origins and academic background.

A pilot study was conducted to assess the efficacy of the questionnaire in terms of reliability and validity. Pilot research involving approximately 20–30 responses helped in showing whether the questionnaire truly portrayed the experiences and views of Afghan refugee students. Following the pilot study, the questionnaire was revised to enhance its validity and reliability. For this research, a total of 106 responses were collected. The sample was carefully selected to match the objective of the study. Respondents were male and female refugee students studying in universities or preparing for university entry tests. To ensure diversity, respondents were selected from various Afghan ethnic groups and languages, i.e., Pashto speaking, Dari/Persian Speaking, Uzbek, Tajik, and an 'other' option was added for inclusivity purposes. Characteristics of the respondents can be seen in the Figure 4 below.

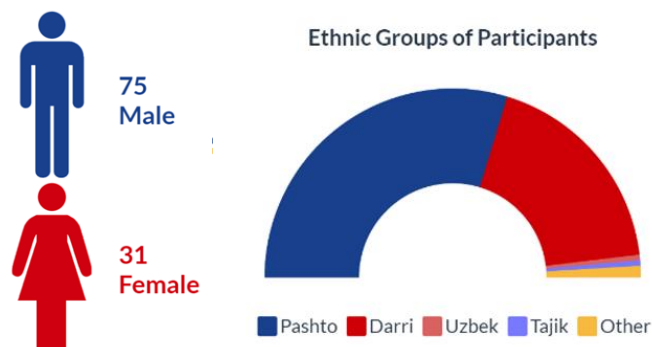
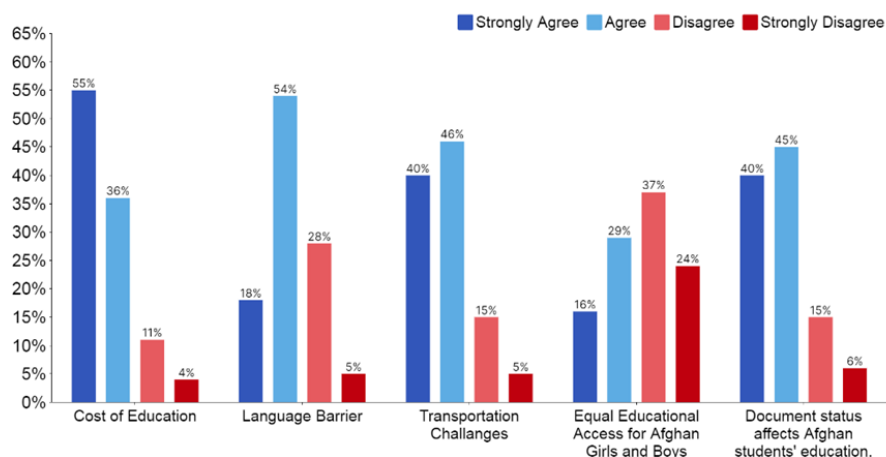


Figure 4: Participants' Characteristics

2.1.1. Key Findings

Research Area 1: Enrollment and Retention Rate of Afghan Refugee Students in Higher Education Institutions

Enrollment and retention rates of Afghan refugee students in higher education institutions were addressed in Section I of the questionnaire. Section I intended to study various determining factors in the enrollment of Afghan refugees in higher educational institutions such as universities. It included factors including the cost of education, ACC and POR card-related problems, delays and complications in document validation, non-availability of information regarding university admission procedures and assessment system, and having a different language for classroom teaching and instructions than their prior education. Figure 5 illustrates the important findings about the enrollment and retention of Afghan students in higher education.

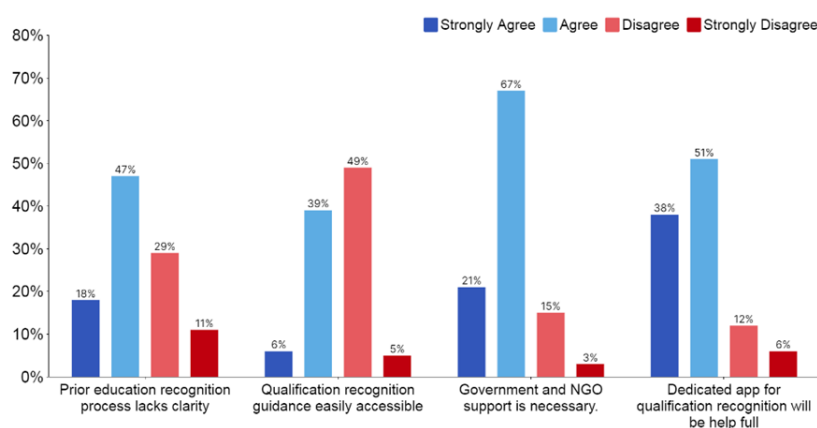


**Figure 5: Challenges Encountered by Afghan Refugees in the Process of Enrollment and Retention in Higher Education**

Most of the respondents strongly agreed that the cost of education was a barrier to their enrolment and retention in higher educational institutes, reflecting a common understanding of the financial challenges they face. Another major concern was language barriers, acknowledged by a significant number of students. Obstacles related to transportation were also prevalent, causing challenges for most Afghan students to access the universities. Conflicting views on equal educational opportunities for Afghan boys and girls highlighted the diversity of viewpoints among them. Furthermore, a substantial proportion of students believed that the status of their documents had a significant impact on their education.

### Research Area 2: Recognition of Prior Learning and Qualifications

Section II of the survey attempted to study aspects of prior learning and qualification of Afghan refugees in higher educational institutions. It included factors such as the process of recognizing prior educational documents, guidance through the process of qualification recognition, and support of government or non-government organizations over qualification validation. In this segment, each aspect was analyzed and discussed separately. Figure 6 demonstrates the important findings about the recognition of prior learning and qualifications.



**Figure 6: Insights into the Recognition of Prior Learning and Qualifications among Afghan Refugee Students.**

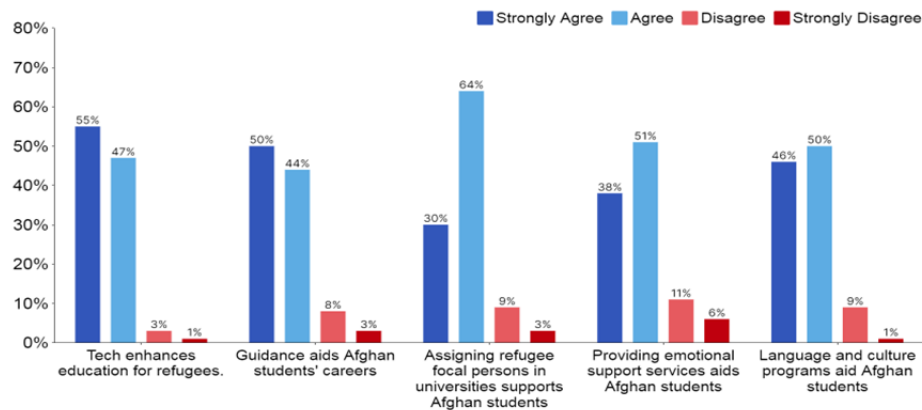
Most of the Afghan refugee students involved in this survey agreed that the procedure of recognizing their prior educational qualifications was not clear and easy. Validation and recognition of prior education are necessary for enrolment in universities; otherwise, the delayed validation of prior qualification from concerned authorities leads to late admissions and complications in retention and negatively impacts future career opportunities for Afghan refugees. Many of the students showed disagreement over guidance and information, which implied that guidance on the qualification validation process was not readily available. The inaccessibility of such important information to Afghan refugee students further delayed the process of qualification validation and consequently delayed enrollment into university.

Additionally, most of the respondents agreed that government and non-governmental organizations' support was necessary for the validation of prior education of refugee students in Pakistan. Regarding the statement related to 'designing a dashboard for Afghan refugees to manage and recognize prior learning and qualification, the findings showed that most of the respondents agreed with the idea. A digital dashboard for Afghan refugee students in Pakistan would decrease delays and make the procedure efficient.



**Research Area 3: Best Practices and Innovations**

Section III of the survey measured aspects of best practices and innovations suggested by Afghan refugees in higher educational institutions. It included factors such as the use of technology in improving learning outcomes, career planning, and guidance services, emotional support, and language and cultural orientation programs by host universities for Afghan refugee students. Figure 7 summarizes key findings regarding the innovations and best practices to improve education for Afghan refugees.

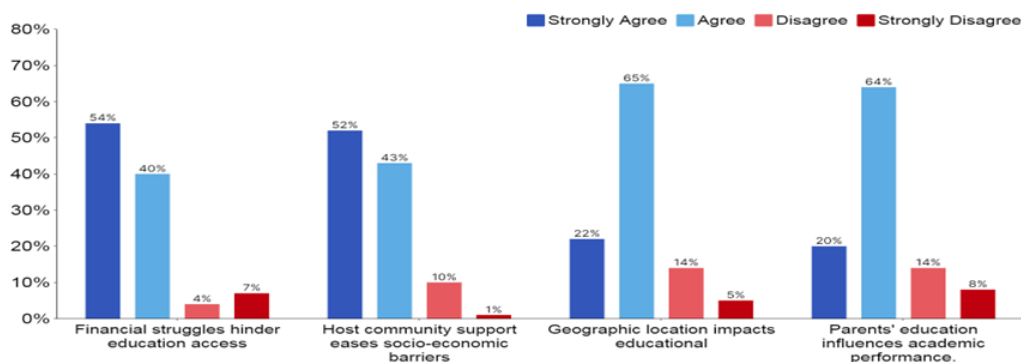


**Figure 7: Overview of Innovations and Best Practices Enhancing Education for Afghan Refugee Students.**

Participants strongly agreed that technology could enhance learning outcomes for Afghan refugee students in universities, with dropout rates often attributed to a lack of job prospects and government employment opportunities. Career guidance at the university level was identified as crucial for reducing dropouts and improving retention. The idea of appointing refugee focal persons within organizations, who understand enrollment, retention, and education-related challenges, was well-received. Many refugee students faced stress due to study-related, financial, and document verification issues, and participants expressed the need for emotional and psychological support services in Pakistani universities. Additionally, language and cultural orientation programs were deemed essential to help Afghan refugee students adapt to the local educational environment.

**Research Area 4: Socio-Economic Issues**

Socio-economic issues of Afghan refugee students were addressed in Section IV of the questionnaire. This section measured factors related to financial problems, support, and available resources to Afghan refugees in higher educational institutions. Figure 8 highlights the key findings related to socio-economic challenges faced by Afghan refugee students in Higher education in Pakistan.



**Figure 8: Overview of Socio-Economic Challenges Impacting Higher Education for Afghan Refugee Students.**

Participants indicated a consensus on the significant influence of economic challenges on Afghan refugee students' educational attainment and outcomes, potentially leading to high university dropout rates. The majority expressed a strong need for financial support from the host community and Pakistani universities to overcome socio-economic barriers. Geographic location, whether urban or rural, was identified as a factor affecting access to economic resources. Furthermore, students acknowledged the impact of their parents' educational backgrounds on their own education.

## 2.2. Qualitative Research: FGDs and Interviews

Six focus group discussions were conducted, engaging both unenrolled and enrolled Afghan refugee students from different universities (see Table 4 below). The participants' varied language backgrounds were a noteworthy feature of these discussions. Some students expressed their ideas and experiences in Dari or Pashto, while others spoke in Urdu. To foster meaningful and beneficial interactions, the study team deliberately opted for people who spoke Pashto, Dari, and Urdu effectively. This allowed for a seamless and thoughtful exchange of ideas and points of view between the participants.

**Table 4: The details of FDGS participants.**

Participants	Institute	Male	Female	Total
<b>Enrolled Afghans</b>	BUIITEMS	4	1	5
	University of Balochistan	4	4	8
	SBK	-	2	2
	Alhamd Islamic University	1	2	3
<b>Unenrolled Afghan</b>	-	8	8	16
<b>Total</b>		17	17	24

Our research employed in-depth semi-structured interviews to delve deeper into the challenges faced by Afghan refugee students, as expressed in the surveys. We conducted nine interviews, including two with instructors directly involved with Afghan students and engaging with principals of Persian-medium schools crucial for refugee education as shown in Table 5. Furthermore, we interviewed the Protection Officer at the Proof of Registration Card and Modification Center to gain insights into complex documentation issues, particularly related to registration cards.

**Table 5: Details of the participants of the interview**

Participants	Organization	No of Participants
Instructors	BUIITEMS	2
School Principals	Persian medium schools	2

Participants	Organization	No of Participants
Protection Officer Representative	roof of Registration Card Modification (PCM) center Inter Board Coordination Commission (IBCC)	1
University Administration	BUIITEMS Alhamd Islamic University University of Balochistan	3
Total		9

### 2.2.1. Key Qualitative Findings

#### 1. Document Verification Issues Equivalency Certificate Issuance

A significant number of refugee students encountered complications in obtaining equivalency certificates, facing delays in processes involving the Inter Board Coordination Commission (IBCC) and the Afghan Ministry of Education. The complex and prolonged duration of the process further delayed the enrolment and admission of Afghan students, which caused several other problems such as postponed degree completion, lost employment chances, and psychological stress. All the participants stated they had issues with equivalency certificates. For instance, an FGD participant, Saima, shared that,

*It takes three years just to get an equivalency certificate/for a simple document, so who would want to study here? In three years, they could complete multiple classes and proceed with their studies.*

Equivalency certificates are required not only for those who had previously attended school in Afghanistan but also for students who attended Pakistani refugee schools. Refugee students who have attended Persian or Pashto refugee schools must also obtain an equivalency certificate from the IBCC. Afghan refugee students in Pakistani schools and institutions, on the other hand, do not experience these challenges. An Afghan refugee female participant, Laila, who had her previous education from Pakistani schools and college shared that, “*I do not have equivalency issues due to my prior education at Pakistani education institutes.*”

#### Proof of Registration (POR) Cards-Related Issues

Afghan refugee students encountered several challenges related to equivalency certification and enrolling procedures because of the Proof of Registration Card (POR). Enrolment and obtaining benefits as a refugee student became difficult without a POR card. The following were some of the major difficulties that were recorded during the FGDs with POR cardholders:

- POR Cards take a lot of time to make, sometimes months or years
- Delays in POR cards renewal
- Mistakes in the spelling of names (a highly common issue)
- Short-termed POR cards, which tend to expire early (are only for a couple of months).
- Incorrect date of birth, as all the participants agreed that PCM put January 1st as the date of birth for all the refugees.

- Children born to refugee parents in Pakistan are still given refugee status and provided POR. Though they should be considered registered Pakistani citizens.
- Delays in POR cards delay the procedure of Shaahadat-Nama (Degree) thus leading to more delay in enrolment to higher education.

#### Challenges Arising from Afghan Government Policies

Another obstacle the refugee students faced was trying to obtain their documents from the Afghan government. Many people fled in an emergency during the Taliban's overtake of the government in 2021. In the crisis, they couldn't get hold of their important documents, and many university-going women were banned from university in the course of their education. The lack of educational documents/proof from their previous educational institutes in Afghanistan has made it difficult for many young Afghan refugees to continue their education in Pakistan.

Besides, due to the anti-women policies of the Taliban, many Afghan women found it impossible to get equivalent certificates from the current Afghan government. Another issue was the restriction on women's movement, which again created issues, especially for women, to reach out to the Ministry of Education and get their required documents. Saima, a participant, shared that,

*When we go to Afghanistan to receive our documents and get certificates or degrees, Pakistani police beat us on our route and create trouble for us. The same happens when we reach Afghanistan; the Taliban and Afghan police do the same with us. We face a lot just to get a certificate or identity card.*

Refugee women who wished to study further faced physical abuse and violence at both ends of the border at the hands of law enforcement agencies (LEAs). Another FGD participant, Fatima, shared that,

*At our current state as the Taliban has banned girls from universities, you cannot go to university and take your transcript yourself. You have to ask a male relative to go and receive it, sometimes the mere act of receiving a transcript takes years, and the process is complicated.*

Female students who had to migrate in an emergency from their homes during the Taliban's takeover had to leave their education incomplete due to the Taliban's ban on girls' education. Several Afghan women who participated in our research expressed disappointment about the Taliban government's prolonged certificate processing. They reported delays and even cases when they applied these quite undetectable stamps on equivalent certificates. Afghan students received cold shoulder treatment during enrollment since Pakistani universities did not accept these stamps as legitimate due to their lack of clarity. Another FGD participant, Iqra, stated that,

*When I wanted to get university admission, it was difficult for me to come to university every day. There were also problems due to insufficient documents. It was difficult to get the required documents because the Taliban captured Kabul and we migrated from there.*

Another FGD participant, Zahra, added that,

*"Now it has become much more difficult for us to continue our education due to the Taliban government. They delay the document verification process."*

In our conducted FGDs with Afghan refugees who were either studying in higher education institutes or potential candidates, female students were highly critical of the Taliban government and its anti-women policies. The policies were impacting Afghan women's access to education, the workplace, and public landscapes. Thousands of women chose to migrate to other countries for better education and opportunities, but they still faced the same issue, and the Taliban government denied them their transcripts and other necessary documents. This means these women must start over, which might decrease their chances of timely career opportunities.

#### **Shahadat-Nama Related Issues**

Refugee schools are located near refugee camps in various parts of Pakistan, with some 153 secondary schools throughout Pakistan (Education - UNHCR Pakistan, 2024). Most schools are in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) and Balochistan due to the large number of Afghan refugees residing there. These schools are working with the support of UNHCR, the Government of Afghanistan, and the Government of Pakistan. Additionally, they offer intermediate education to their students.

However, these schools are not registered with the Board of Intermediate and Secondary Education (BISE) within Pakistani provinces. Instead, the refugee schools are registered with the Afghan Ministry of Education. This misalignment between location and registration created complications for students studying in refugee schools.

An FGD participant, Adnan, shared that,

*With their NICs and places of residence, the residents and Pakistani students find it easier to get admitted to institutions. We must navigate from one office to another as part of the process. While it's easier for those with connections, it can be quite challenging for others. It even takes a visit to the Afghan consulate to obtain a No Objection Certificate (NOC). Even simple tasks as Afghan students require obtaining documentation signed by numerous departments. I lost two years to this bureaucratic nightmare.*

The kind of red-tapism and strict bureaucracy creates more complications for refugees instead of providing a solution.

#### **2. Lack of opportunities**

Afghan refugees found it difficult to get employment possibilities and financial resources in Pakistan. Despite their education and degrees, migrants encountered difficulties when trying to find jobs. Employment prospects are mostly reserved for the local people, with no quotas set aside for refugees, even those with degrees from Pakistani institutions. Even those who managed to land a job frequently made less money than residents. Due to the lack of job prospects, Afghan refugees were forced to rely on freelancing, odd jobs, and small companies. Unfortunately, as found in data, there were no notable financial benefits from education for Afghan refugees.

A participant, Junaid, shared, *“There isn't any motivation or goals behind my enrolment to a university due to lack of employment education.”*

Children born in Pakistan are also stripped of employment opportunities. They are neither eligible nor can apply for any official jobs. A participant, Bashir shared,

*Another problem is that children born in Pakistan are still considered refugees, they also have to study at a refugee school, have to face all these difficulties, and will never get employment as a refugee. This rule should be changed to provide opportunities for education to everyone.*

### **3. Language Barrier**

The language barrier is a prevalent issue among Afghan refugee students, even for those born in Pakistan. One cause was that refugee schools taught in either Pashto or Persian, following the educational system and textbooks of Afghanistan. Teaching and communication were conducted in one of these two languages. When students from refugee schools enrolled in Pakistani higher education, they struggled to continue their education, understand lectures, and communicate effectively with classmates or teachers. A participant, Bibi Gul, stated,

*We come from Persian schools, we don't know anything about Urdu or English and related education systems. Students must be guided and oriented toward the system. We had the same subjects but, in another language, it was hard for me to adjust initially to the system, so I think students should be oriented before enrollment.*

The students who had their prior education in Pakistan did not have to face the language and communication issues. A participant, Najeeb, added that,

*"The language never has been an issue for me, because I had my prior education at Pakistani schools."*

### **4. Lack of knowledge about university admissions/scholarship and procedures**

The majority of refugee students were unaware of the admission procedures for universities. Additionally, those who were enrolled in Pakistani universities claimed that initially, they were not familiar with the procedures and requirements for the semester system. Many students, coming from refugee schools or Afghanistan, had limited knowledge about the Pakistani education system. An FGD participant, Saleem, shared that,

*Many refugees do not know the educational systems of Pakistani universities; they don't have any knowledge about the assessment system. Before admission students should be taught about the university system because many refugee students are unfamiliar with the system.*

In addition to the lack of awareness about the admission procedure, refugee students were unfamiliar with university class requirements, examination systems, assignments, etc. Their naivety toward educational procedures, both inside and outside classrooms, often resulted in several refugee students dropping out of higher education. A participant, Mujeeb recorded that,

*A lot of refugee students do not know about services from different organizations, awareness sessions should be arranged in refugee villages for students. The awareness should be regarding admissions at universities,, and their procedures.*

Many refugee students were also unaware of organizations and scholarships for refugee students and their support. A participant, Bilal, shared that,

*I am a student at the University of Balochistan, when I was getting admission, we (refugee students) faced a lot of issues. We did not know that there is a facilitation center for refugee*

*students at the university, and secondly did not know about the departments and their admissions procedures.*

Several students were unaware of available scholarships or the application process. Additionally, many participants in this study expressed dissatisfaction with the requirements of these scholarship organizations. In a focus group discussion, Zainab shared her perspective on this matter.

*DAFI and Hans Seidel scholarships provide scholarships to refugee students, but their priority is refugee girls, they have fixed a quota for boys. Boys also face the same financial problems as girls besides there are very few refugee girls studying at universities. There should be equal opportunities for both, one shouldn't be preferred over the other.*

There were far fewer girls than boys in higher education, and for the encouragement of girls, Afghan refugee female students were preferred more for scholarships, which left many young male students unmotivated and discouraged due to the reduction of financial support for them.

#### **5. Financial Difficulties**

Financial issues created hurdles in the overall enrolment, retention, and educational performance of Afghan refugee students in higher education institutes in Pakistan. An FGD participant, Bashir, shared that,

*There are financial challenges; as refugees, we lack earning opportunities. Most refugees are economically unstable. Refugee students come with the hope of easy admissions and financial support, but unfortunately, they receive neither.*

Due to the financial complications, many refugee students chose to drop out and leave university. An interview respondent (teaching crash course to refugee students) shared that,

*These students (Afghan refugee students) have multiple financial issues, many refugee students studying in crash courses also work a second time to earn for their families and take back something home with them.*

Economic and financial difficulties increased the dropout rate of Afghan refugee students from higher educational institutions in Pakistan. This issue could affect the overall educational performance of refugee students.

#### **6. Discrimination**

While most participants in focus group discussions rejected experiencing discrimination or stereotypes, they acknowledged not disclosing their refugee status to classmates or teachers. The fear of potential discrimination and bullying based on their identity was prevalent, leading to a reluctance to reveal their refugee status. Some reported instances of being called Mahajir (a local term for refugees) and facing inhumane behavior from the local community or organizations like PCM. Despite this, the majority denied experiencing bullying within their educational institutes. A participant, Aliya, shared that,

*A friend of mine had issues with his cards, he went to PCM, and they told him that you have issues with your card because you are a Muhajir, as if it's offensive to be a Muhajir.*

It was also recorded during the data collection processes that refugees were also discriminated against in organizations founded for their support. One was such a case of putting January 1st as the date of birth for all refugees and putting wrong spelling or incorrect card numbers, which created obstacles in admissions and scholarship attainment. A participant, Abida, shared,

*“Our cards have 2-3 extra alphabets, when we enter the number, the system notifies us that the number is incorrect.”*

Discrimination at the university level was not very prevalent, but it did occur. Below is an incident of bullying at the university, as shared by our participants:

*“I have faced discrimination at university. When I was a college student, I did not tell my classmates about my refugee status fearing that I would face discrimination. When they got to know about my refugee status, they bullied me intensively. They used to call me by the name of “Muhajar”. Whenever I used to enter the class, they used to say “See, there is the Muhajar, they have come from Kabul, she is a refugee”. I was so much disturbed by this event that I did not take the classes for two weeks.”*

#### **7. Family pressure**

Another, though not highly prevalent, recorded issue was family pressure concerning girls' education in refugee families. Some considered it the most challenging obstacle during admissions and enrollment. A participant, Fatima, shared,

*“Many refugee girls also leave their education because of family pressure and responsibilities, in such situations, they choose to drop out.”*

Family played a crucial role in supporting refugee women's education. If the family refused to provide support for the sake of education, it became nearly impossible. Several female refugee students reported that parents feared for their daughter's safety and support due to discrimination and attacks on the Hazara community.

### **3. DISCUSSION**

Afghan refugee students encountered various challenges during admission, enrollment, and post-enrollment. These challenges included their refugee status, difficulties in document attestation and equivalence from Pakistani and Afghan authorities, POR card registration, financial constraints, and various forms of daily discrimination. In Pakistan, Afghan refugee students confronted issues like limited financial opportunities and diverse discrimination, further impeding their educational journey. This paper aims to assist UNHCR, higher education institutions, the governments of Pakistan and Afghanistan, and other organizations dedicated to refugee well-being in identifying key challenges affecting Afghan refugees' access to education. It seeks to emphasize suggestions directly provided by Afghan refugees, facilitating the adoption of best practices and the planning of successful projects for Afghan refugees in both Pakistan and Afghanistan. Each theme and problem is accompanied by multiple subjective suggestions from Afghan refugee students enrolled in universities in Quetta, Balochistan.

#### **3.1. Similar Findings with Literature:**

The literature evaluation, which shows a consistent pattern of difficulties encountered by Afghan refugee students around the globe supports the results of our study. Similar to other research such as Humayun



et al., (2023), J. Khan et al., (2021), Malik et al. (2022) our study highlights the challenges associated with documentation, recognizing prior education, overcoming language difficulties, and financial limitations. According to Koehler and Schneider (2019), the relevance of higher education for the socioeconomic growth of refugees is a common theme.

The obstacles faced by refugee students in terms of language, social, and financial difficulties are highlighted in the works of Braye (2018), Chick and Hannagan-Lewis (2019), Kanno, (2010) and Sadiković (2018). These issues align with our findings. Additionally, the Dilshad et al. (2021) study offers a contextual foundation, which our research builds upon by analyzing these difficulties in the particular context of Quetta, Balochistan. It becomes clear that the challenges are common in a variety of contexts rather than being confined to one region.

### 3.1.1. Unique Insights from District-Specific Contexts:

Apart from the difficulties that correspond with the extant literature, our results present distinct elements particular to the situation of Afghan refugee students in Quetta, Balochistan. The following elements add to the unique nature of your research:

**Identity and Terminology:** Stories of harsh treatment and the local word "Mahajir" for refugees highlight the difficulties refugees have with their identities. This distinctive feature gives the situation a sociocultural dimension to the study, reflecting the local dynamics influencing Afghan students' educational experiences.

**Gender Differences in Educational Opportunities:** According to the findings, girls were given notably different educational opportunities depending on their community background. Participants in the Dari community showed support for girls' education, but the Pashtun community showed reluctance, pointing out how important it is to address gender-specific issues in various cultural contexts.

**Documented Disparities:** The study highlights the differences in challenges faced by Afghan refugee students with different types of cards. ACC card holders in particular are having additional problems. This observation emphasizes the importance of a better investigation of the various difficulties that individuals experience based on their legal status.

Our study's observation of these distinctive characteristics not only underlines the challenges that still exist but also adds richness to the narrative by highlighting the socio-cultural, identity-related, and collective dynamics that influence the experiences of Afghan refugee students in Quetta, Balochistan.

## 4. DASHBOARD PROPOSAL

### 4.1. Objective:

The suggested dashboard aims to improve the enrollment and admissions process for Afghan refugee students by streamlining and digitizing the paperwork and verification process. The dashboard seeks to empower stakeholders at every level of the educational process, accelerate document processing, decrease delays, and improve transparency by developing an integrated system. Figure 8 illustrates the complete comprehensive design of the proposed online dashboard for streamlining the documentation process.

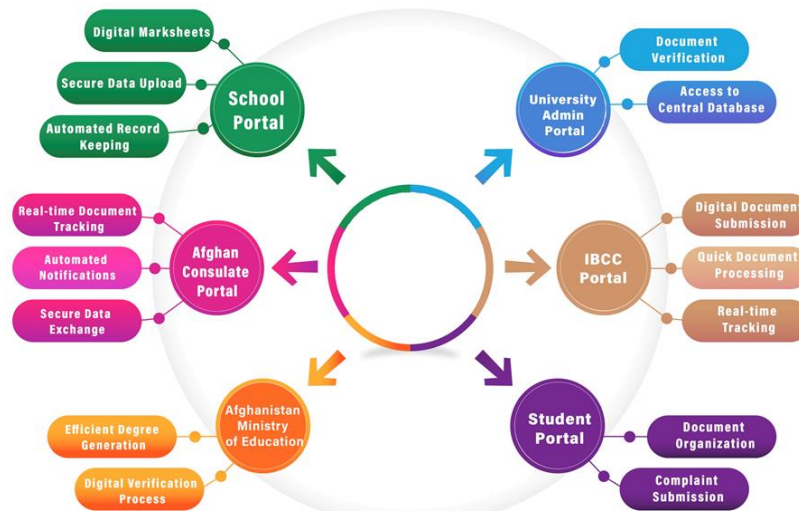


Figure 8: Recommended online dashboard for streamlining the documentation process.

## 5. RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

- Our study was limited to the city of Quetta, restricting the generalizability of our findings to other regions.
- Our study was conducted over a defined timeframe, which may have limited our ability to identify changes or advancements over a longer period.
- While we attempted to connect with a variety of stakeholders, certain opinions may not have been fully reflected in our findings.

## 6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the research findings and the hurdles faced by Afghan refugee students pursuing higher education in Pakistan, a set of policy recommendations is suggested to address and mitigate the identified impediments. To establish an environment that promotes Afghan refugees' academic progress, these recommendations are specifically designed for key stakeholders such as the UNHCR, the Government of Pakistan, and higher educational institutions.

### 6.1. Recommendation for the Government of Pakistan:

- Collaborate with Afghan ministries to expedite equivalency certificate issuance.
- Advocate for the registration of refugee schools with Pakistani education authorities (HEC and BISE).
- Establish mechanisms to ease equivalency certification for degrees obtained in Higher education in Pakistan.
- Advocate for job opportunities for refugees, ensuring equal access to employment.

### 6.2. Recommendation for UNHCR:

- Facilitate an online digital system for document verification to reduce delays.
- Work with relevant authorities to address POR/ACC card delays, errors, and renewals promptly.
- Advocate for long-term POR cards and accurate information, preventing unnecessary hurdles.
- Implement language programs to bridge the gap between refugee school education and Pakistani universities.

- Establish programs that provide psychological and mental health support for refugee students facing discrimination or trauma.
- Increase the number of scholarships for Afghan refugee students.
- Conduct awareness campaigns to inform refugees about available scholarships and support services.
- Establish safe, digital pathways for Afghan women to obtain educational documents.

### **6.3. Recommendation for Higher Educational Institutes:**

- Provide orientation sessions for refugee students to understand Pakistani educational systems and procedures.
- Establish career counseling services for refugees to guide them in their educational and career paths.
- Support initiatives that create an inclusive environment for all students, regardless of their background

## **7. CONCLUSION**

This study illuminates the intricate challenges impeding the educational journey of Afghan refugee students in Balochistan, Pakistan, offering a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted barriers they encounter. Through a comprehensive analysis of factors such as documentation hurdles, linguistic disparities, and socio-economic limitations, the study provides valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and humanitarian agencies. The proposed online dashboard emerges as a pragmatic solution to streamline the documentation process, exemplifying a technological intervention to facilitate the educational aspirations of Afghan refugees. By aligning findings with global literature and advocating for targeted policy measures, this research contributes to the broader discourse on refugee education, underscoring the need for context-specific interventions to foster inclusive educational landscapes.

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