

Brain Drain in Afghanistan's Public Universities: Examining the Experiences of Migrated Faculty Members

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Abstract

The migration of academic professionals from Afghanistan's public universities has escalated following the political transition of August 2021, presenting critical challenges to the country's higher education system. This qualitative study explores the motivations, lived experiences, and institutional consequences of teacher migration, drawing on semi-structured interviews with 11 university faculty members who relocated abroad. Thematic analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, was employed to categorize findings across personal, organizational, and national dimensions. The analysis revealed that political instability, economic insecurity, limited academic freedom, and concerns for family safety were key factors influencing migration decisions. Participants also cited low salaries and the lack of research opportunities as significant push factors. The departure of experienced faculty has led to a decline in educational quality, loss of institutional knowledge, and weakened research capacity within universities. To mitigate these effects, the study recommends coordinated action by the Afghan government, university leadership, and international stakeholders. Specific measures include fostering institutional security through higher education reforms, enhancing economic incentives, safeguarding academic freedom, and expanding opportunities for professional growth. Moreover, the study underscores the importance of engaging the Afghan academic diaspora through structured knowledge-exchange initiatives, virtual collaborations, and short-term academic projects. While the implementation of these recommendations may face constraints such as limited funding and political uncertainty, their gradual adoption offers a pathway toward stabilizing and revitalizing Afghanistan's higher education sector.

Keywords: Brain Drain, Afghanistan, Public Universities, Teacher Migration, Thematic Analysis, Academic Freedom, Political Instability

Introduction

Brain drain refers to the emigration of highly educated and skilled professionals, particularly those working in academia, research, and other specialized fields, in pursuit of better opportunities abroad (Docquier & Rapoport, 2012). This phenomenon has become a serious concern in Afghanistan, especially within its public higher education institutions. The issue has escalated since the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, which has resulted in widespread political instability, economic decline, and significant concerns about academic freedom and personal safety (Human Rights Watch, 2022; United Nations Development Program [UNDP], 2022). Consequently, a substantial number of faculty members from Afghanistan's public universities have emigrated, causing critical faculty shortages, a decline in research productivity, and a loss of institutional knowledge. These challenges have undermined the

quality and sustainability of the country's higher education sector (Altbach, 2004). This study aims to examine the factors contributing to the emigration of faculty members from Afghanistan's public universities, the difficulties they encountered during this process, and the broader implications of their departure for academic institutions.

The research employs thematic analysis as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), a qualitative method particularly suited for identifying patterns and themes in complex social phenomena. This method was selected because it allows for an in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences and perceptions, offering valuable insights into both personal and structural drivers of migration. In this study, the terms *teachers* and *professors* are used interchangeably to refer to university-level academic staff, regardless of rank or designation. Through the voices of 11 faculty members who have left Afghanistan, this research provides a deeper understanding of their motivations, the challenges they faced, and their perspectives on the future. These insights carry significant policy relevance, highlighting the urgent need for strategies to retain academic talent, restore institutional resilience, and safeguard the autonomy of higher education in contexts of crisis and conflict.

Literature Review

The emigration of highly skilled professionals, commonly termed "brain drain," remains a critical challenge for developing nations, while the concept of "brain circulation" offers potential mitigatory pathways. Recent studies highlight the multifaceted drivers of these phenomena, including economic instability, political unrest, and systemic inefficiencies, while underscoring the urgent need for policy interventions to retain talent and harness diasporic contributions. This review synthesizes contemporary research, emphasizing regional case studies from Iran, Afghanistan, and sub-Saharan Africa, and explores emerging strategies to convert brain drain into cyclical knowledge exchange.

Conceptualizing Brain Drain and Brain Circulation

Brain drain, defined as the emigration of highly educated individuals seeking better opportunities abroad, continues to deprive source countries of critical human capital (Docquier & Rapoport, 2012). Recent qualitative work by Ghanbari-Jahromi and Ahmadi Marzaleh (2024) identifies seven factors driving brain drain in Iran's health sector, including economic instability, social disparities, and political neglect. Their study underscores how systemic issues, such as inadequate respect for elites and limited career advancement, propel skilled professionals toward destination countries with stronger institutional frameworks.

In contrast, brain circulation the cyclical movement of talent across borders has gained traction as a developmental strategy. The African Development Bank (2019) posits that encouraging skilled migrants to contribute expertise temporarily or through transnational collaborations can offset losses from permanent emigration. For instance, China's success in repatriating overseas students through targeted infrastructure investments exemplifies how home countries can leverage diasporic networks (African Development Bank, 2019). A 2024 scoping review further links brain circulation to subjective well-being, noting that migrants' return decisions hinge on ethical dilemmas, familial ties, and host-country conditions ("Scoping review about well-being," 2024).

Historical and Global Context

Globally, brain drain exacerbates disparities between developed and developing regions. In sub-Saharan Africa, the healthcare sector has been crippled by the exodus of medical professionals, with over 70% of Herat University's faculty fleeing Afghanistan post-2021 Taliban takeover (Amu TV, 2022). This crisis mirrors Iran's health system challenges, where 45 subcategories of push factors from salary cuts to political marginalization have driven elites abroad (Ghanbari-Jahromi & Ahmadi Marzaleh, 2024). Similarly, Eastern Europe's academic migration to Western institutions persists due to funding disparities, though recent policies

promoting intra-regional collaboration show promise in reversing this trend (Deville et al., 2014).

Factors Driving Brain Drain

Push-pull dynamics remain central to migration decisions. In Afghanistan, the Taliban's restrictions on academic freedom and gender-based exclusion policies have spurred over 400 academics to resign (JURIST, 2023; UNESCO, 2022). Concurrently, Iran's health workers cite economic precarity and lack of institutional support as primary motivators for emigration (Ghanbari-Jahromi & Ahmadi Marzaleh, 2024). Pull factors, such as advanced research facilities in destination countries, are compounded by emerging considerations like subjective well-being. The 2024 scoping review highlights how migrants' life satisfaction and social capital in host countries influence retention, with rootedness and moral obligations to home communities playing countervailing roles ("Scoping review about well-being," 2024).

Impact on Educational Quality and Institutional Knowledge

The loss of educational quality is unambiguous in conflict zones. At Herat University, the replacement of 300 credentialed lecturers with underqualified staff has degraded pedagogy and student morale (Amu TV, 2022). Iran's health system faces analogous challenges, as brain drain strains remaining professionals, increasing workloads and compromising care quality (Ghanbari-Jahromi & Ahmadi Marzaleh, 2024). Institutional memory loss is equally critical; Kenya's academic sector struggles to rebuild research capacity after decades of scholar emigration, underscoring the long-term repercussions of talent depletion (Odhiambo, 2013).

Comparative Perspectives

Regional case studies reveal shared challenges and divergent strategies. Ethiopia and Nigeria grapple with healthcare collapses due to medical staff shortages, while Iran's proposed solutions such as creating honorary professorial roles and involving elites in policymaking offer templates for systemic reform (Ghanbari-Jahromi & Ahmadi Marzaleh, 2024). Conversely, China's brain circulation model, which combines incentives with diaspora engagement, demonstrates how strategic investments can repatriate talent (African Development Bank, 2019). Pakistan's ongoing political instability, however, highlights the futility of isolated interventions without broader institutional reforms (Meo & Sultan, 2023).

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a Generic Qualitative Approach (GQA), which is particularly well-suited for examining complex and context-dependent human experiences such as the migration of Afghan university teachers where predefined qualitative methodologies (e.g., grounded theory, ethnography, phenomenology) may not be entirely appropriate or sufficient (Caelli, Ray, & Mill, 2003; Merriam, 2009). GQA is a flexible and pragmatic approach that allows researchers to focus on participants' subjective meanings and lived experiences without strict adherence to a particular philosophical tradition or framework (Percy, Kostere, & Kostere, 2015). In the context of this study, other qualitative frameworks were considered, such as phenomenology and narrative inquiry. However, these were not fully adequate: phenomenology focuses on shared lived experiences, whereas migration decisions in this study are shaped by individual, institutional, and national-level complexities that do not conform to a single unifying experience. Narrative inquiry, while valuable, requires detailed life stories that may go beyond the focus of this research.

Data Collection

To gather rich and diverse perspectives, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 11 Afghan teachers who migrated from public universities. Data collection was concluded

upon reaching the point of data saturation, where no new themes or insights were emerging from additional interviews (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Semi-structured interviews provided the flexibility to explore emerging themes while maintaining a focus on core research questions. A brief transition between design and data collection is warranted: given the exploratory nature of GQA, semi-structured interviews were deemed appropriate for eliciting nuanced and contextually grounded responses.

The interviews were conducted online via Zoom, Skype, and Google Meet, which enabled real-time face-to-face communication across different geographic locations. These platforms were chosen due to their accessibility and user-friendliness for both researchers and participants. However, the online nature of the interviews posed some limitations, including inconsistent internet connectivity in certain regions and potential variations in participant engagement due to the lack of physical presence. Participants were selected using a purposive sampling strategy to ensure diversity in academic rank (junior to senior faculty), discipline (sciences, social sciences, and humanities), and country of residence. In addition to these criteria, participants were identified through academic networks, social media, and professional contacts. Initial contacts were followed by a snowball technique, where participants referred colleagues who met the inclusion criteria. Eligibility required that participants had been employed in a public university in Afghanistan and had migrated within the last five years.

Each interview lasted approximately 40 to 60 minutes and was conducted in a language comfortable for the participant. All interviews were audio-recorded with prior informed consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis

To explore the lived experiences and perspectives of teachers who have migrated from Afghan public universities, this study employed thematic analysis, a flexible and widely-used method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning across qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is especially well-suited for studies grounded in a Generic Qualitative Approach, as it allows the researcher to move inductively from raw data to emergent themes while preserving participants' voices.

The analysis followed the six-phase framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006):

- Familiarization with the data involved transcribing interviews, reading transcripts multiple times, and noting preliminary observations.
- Generating initial codes required systematically identifying meaningful units of data across the dataset. Coding was both descriptive and interpretive, using first-cycle coding techniques such as in vivo and descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2016).
- Searching for themes entailed collating similar codes into broader candidate themes that reflected patterns in the participants' accounts.
- Reviewing themes involved refining and validating themes by checking them against the coded extracts and the entire dataset to ensure coherence and internal consistency.
- Defining and naming themes included finalizing theme titles and crafting clear definitions to convey their essence and relevance to the research questions.
- Producing the report was the final stage, where vivid excerpts and narrative descriptions were woven into an analytic story aligned with the study's aims.

Data analysis was supported by NVivo software, which facilitated systematic coding, organization, and retrieval of qualitative data. NVivo was used for managing large amounts of text, visualizing code co-occurrence, and mapping relationships among themes. This helped in maintaining transparency and rigor during theme development and analysis.

Throughout the process, careful attention was paid to maintaining consistency in the use of terminology, referring to participants as “teachers who have migrated” or “academic migrants”

to enhance clarity and precision. Regular peer debriefing sessions and analytic memos were also used to ensure reflexivity and mitigate researcher bias during interpretation.

Findings

Demographic Information of Migrated Teachers

S.No	Age	Gender	Academic Rank (Previous)	Highest Education Level	Experience (Years)	Current Residence
1	36	Male	Assistant Professor	PhD in Progress	8	Germany
2	60	Male	Professor	Master with Advanced PGD	38	Germany
3	37	Male	Assistant Professor	Master's Degree	7	Germany
4	38	Male	Assistant Professor	PhD in Progress	13	France
5	38	Male	Associate Professor	Master's Degree	10	UK
6	36	Male	Assistant Professor	Master's Degree	5	Croatia
7	37	Male	Assistant Professor	PhD in Progress	7	Pakistan
8	38	Male	Associate Professor	Master's Degree	10	UK
9	41	Male	Assistant Professor	PhD	8	Russia
10	38	Male	Assistant Professor	Master's Degree	8	Germany
11	40	Male	Associate Professor	PhD in Progress	12	UK

The table above summarizes the demographic information of the eleven migrated teachers who participated in this study. The participants ranged in age from 36 to 60 years, with the majority being in their late 30s and early 40s.

In terms of academic rank, most participants held the position of Assistant Professor, while a few were Associate Professors or Professors. Their highest levels of education varied, with most holding a Master's Degree or being in the process of completing a PhD. Teaching experience among the participants ranged from 5 to 38 years, with an average of approximately 10 years, indicating a significant level of expertise and contribution to the higher education sector in Afghanistan.

The participants currently reside in various countries, including Germany, France, the UK, Croatia, Pakistan, and Russia, reflecting the diverse destinations of Afghan academic professionals following migration. The majority of participants migrated in 2021, a period marked by significant political changes in Afghanistan, which likely influenced their decision to leave. This demographic overview highlights the diversity and expertise of the participants, providing a foundation for understanding their experiences and the broader implications of brain drain in Afghanistan's higher education sector.

Themes Emerged from the Study

Theme 1: Political Instability and Security Concerns

Political instability and security concerns were the most frequently cited reasons for migration. Participants expressed fear for their safety and that of their families, particularly after the Taliban's rise to power in 2021. One participant stated:

"The security situation was just not safe for me anymore. You see, I worked under the previous government, and when the Taliban came to power, the academic landscape changed drastically. They started replacing modern educational practices with religious school-based teachings, appointing madrassa graduates who were completely unfamiliar with modern sciences. That really pushed me away." (Participant 10)

Another participant highlighted the impact of political instability on their decision to leave:

"Every day felt uncertain, and the security situation was just getting worse. It wasn't just about me---it was about my family too. I mean, how do you focus on teaching or research when you're constantly worried about safety?" (Participant 3)

Theme 2: Economic Hardship and Lack of Financial Stability

Economic hardship was another significant factor driving migration. Participants reported that their salaries were insufficient to meet basic needs, and the economic situation in Afghanistan was deteriorating rapidly. One participant explained:

"The economic conditions weren't any better. Inflation was out of control, and salaries weren't keeping up. So, even the little money we earned, it didn't stretch far enough. It felt like... well, like trying to build a future in a sinking ship. You'd work hard, but there was no sense of stability or progress." (Participant 3)

Another participant emphasized the lack of financial stability as a key reason for leaving:

"You can't expect teachers to stay when they can't even afford basic necessities. A fair and reliable compensation system would have been a game-changer, you know?" (Participant 3)

Theme 3: Lack of Academic Freedom and Professional Respect

The lack of academic freedom and professional respect was a recurring theme in the interviews. Participants expressed frustration with the interference of political and military figures in academic affairs, as well as the appointment of unqualified individuals to key positions. One participant stated:

"When military officials or politically motivated individuals interfere in university operations, it undermines the whole purpose of academia. If there had been less interference and more support for research and teaching, I think many of us would've reconsidered leaving." (Participant 3)

Another participant highlighted the lack of respect for academic professionals:

"Teachers weren't seen the way they used to be, and honestly, it was demoralizing. Then there were situations like the dismissal of Dr. Rahmatullah Zahid from Kunar University---without any proper justification. It was unsettling, you know? It made the job feel unstable." (Participant 3)

Theme 4: Concerns for Family and Children's Future

Concerns for family safety and children's future were also significant factors in the decision to migrate. Participants expressed a desire to provide a better future for their children, particularly in terms of education and safety. One participant explained:

"One of the most important reasons was the lack of schools for my daughters, which was deeply concerning. Then, of course, there were the economic challenges. These issues together really pushed me to consider leaving." (Participant 2)

Another participant emphasized the importance of family safety:

"The biggest thing is that I feel safer, and that's not just for me but for my family too. Financially, things are much better---there's more stability and, uh, the quality of life is definitely higher." (Participant 3)

This theme aligns with perspectives from migration theories, particularly the New Economics of Labor Migration (NELM), which suggests that migration decisions are often made at the household level rather than solely by the individual (Stark & Bloom, 1985). Families strategize to diversify income sources, reduce risk, and invest in the future of their children, particularly through education and improved quality of life. Similarly, under the aspiration-capabilities framework (De Haas, 2021), family-related aspirations such as securing a better future for children are closely tied to an individual's perceived capabilities and real opportunities to migrate.

In this context, family concerns are not merely emotional or protective in nature but serve as long-term motivators that shape both the decision to migrate and the sustainability of that

migration. Migrants who perceive that their families benefit from improved conditions abroad are more likely to settle permanently, while those who struggle to meet family aspirations may reconsider their migration plans. Thus, family emerges as a central axis around which both short-term decisions and long-term trajectories of academic migration revolve.

Theme 5: Consequences of Brain Drain on Higher Education

The participants highlighted the severe consequences of brain drain on Afghanistan's higher education sector. They noted a decline in the quality of education, loss of institutional knowledge, and weakened research capacity. One participant stated:

"When experienced and qualified teachers leave, it, uh, creates this massive gap in the quality of education. Students suffer because there are fewer competent professors to guide them, you know?" (Participant 3)

Another participant emphasized the loss of research capabilities:

"When professors leave, they take their expertise and research capabilities with them. That knowledge could've helped develop academic programs or even boosted the university's reputation globally. But instead, it's lost." (Participant 3)

Theme 6: Conditions for Return

Participants were asked about the conditions under which they would consider returning to Afghanistan. The most common responses included improvements in security, economic stability, and academic freedom. One participant stated:

"First and foremost, there'd have to be significant improvements in security. A safe and peaceful environment is just... essential, not only for personal well-being but for effective teaching and research too." (Participant 3)

Another participant emphasized the need for academic freedom:

"Academic freedom and professional autonomy are non-negotiable for me. Professors need to work without fear---no political or military interference. And, um, there has to be a culture of mutual respect between faculty and the administration." (Participant 3)

Discussion

This study affirms the growing body of literature indicating that skilled professionals in developing countries often migrate due to a combination of economic hardship, political uncertainty, and limited institutional support (Ghanbari-Jahromi & Ahmadi Marzaleh, 2024; Docquier & Rapoport, 2012). In the Afghan context, participants consistently cited financial insecurity, constrained academic environments, and uncertainty about the future as key motivators for emigration. These drivers are consistent with patterns observed in other regions, including Iran, where health professionals report similar structural limitations (Ghanbari-Jahromi & Ahmadi Marzaleh, 2024), and sub-Saharan Africa, where such conditions have long contributed to human capital loss (African Development Bank, 2019).

Family considerations were also a dominant theme. Many participants expressed a desire to secure a safer and more stable environment for their children and emphasized concerns about access to quality education, particularly for daughters. This finding aligns with broader migration research that highlights the central role of family in shaping migration decisions (Carling & Collins, 2018). In Afghanistan, recent changes in the higher education sector and institutional policies regarding access and gender have influenced the decisions of many educators, reinforcing the importance of both personal and professional considerations in migration choices. The consequences of skilled migration are evident in Afghanistan's academic institutions. Participants described noticeable declines in instructional quality, increasing workloads, and the loss of institutional memory as experienced colleagues depart. At Herat University, for example, reports indicate that hundreds of academic staff have left, and replacements often lack the same level of expertise (Amu TV, 2022). These trends mirror challenges in other contexts, such as Kenya and Iran, where emigration has disrupted research

continuity and weakened institutional frameworks (Odhiambo, 2013; Ghanbari-Jahromi & Ahmadi Marzaleh, 2024). Losses are not limited to pedagogy. Research capacity, mentorship networks, and collaborative initiatives suffer when experienced faculty members exit. As highlighted in both this study and comparative literature, rebuilding institutional knowledge is a slow and complex process (Semela, 2011; Shinn, 2002). The psychological impact on those who remain should not be overlooked, as uncertainty and reduced support can affect motivation and job satisfaction.

While brain drain presents serious challenges, emerging literature suggests the potential of brain circulation as a more dynamic model. Instead of focusing solely on permanent emigration, brain circulation refers to the temporary or cyclical movement of skilled professionals who contribute to their home countries through collaboration, mentoring, or return migration. China's experience in attracting overseas scholars through investment in research infrastructure and institutional flexibility serves as a useful example (African Development Bank, 2019). Likewise, Iran's proposed reforms, such as creating honorary academic roles and involving skilled professionals in national policymaking, show how policy innovation can contribute to talent retention (Ghanbari-Jahromi & Ahmadi Marzaleh, 2024). Participants in this study were generally open to returning to Afghanistan under certain conditions. They emphasized the need for political stability, adequate institutional support, and opportunities for professional growth. These views align with previous findings from other post-conflict or transitional societies, where targeted incentives and institutional reforms have played a key role in reversing brain drain (Mutume, 2003; Welch & Zhang, 2008). However, participants also noted that any solution must go beyond economic considerations. Academic freedom, personal security, and a supportive work environment were repeatedly identified as prerequisites for return.

Contextual Considerations

Afghanistan's situation is unique and must be approached with sensitivity to its political and cultural dynamics. Educational institutions have undergone significant changes in recent years, and many participants described working in environments that have become increasingly uncertain. Institutional changes affecting co-educational arrangements and curriculum access have had profound implications for both students and educators. These conditions have intensified the push factors driving migration and have made it more difficult to attract skilled professionals back to the country.

However, the study's findings also highlight that not all migration is irreversible. The concept of ethical rootedness, described in the recent scoping review on well-being and migration, captures how migrants' emotional ties to their homeland and sense of responsibility to their communities can influence their decisions to return or contribute from abroad ("Scoping review about well-being", 2024). For many Afghan academics, this sense of rootedness remains strong, despite difficult circumstances.

Conclusion

This study investigated the key factors driving the migration of teachers from public universities in Afghanistan, the effects of this academic brain drain, and strategies for mitigating its impact. The findings revealed that personal security concerns, limited academic freedom, financial instability, and restricted professional growth are the main drivers prompting educators to leave the country. Additionally, the departure of skilled faculty has led to increased workloads, reduced research output, and weakened institutional continuity. These findings suggest that addressing brain drain requires a multi-dimensional response. While long-term political reforms and economic recovery are crucial, targeted interventions by the Afghan government, higher education institutions, and international development partners can help mitigate the damage and support the reintegration of skilled professionals. Creating meaningful incentives for retention and return, preserving academic freedom, and fostering connections

with the Afghan academic diaspora are essential to rebuilding the country's higher education system. Moreover, in the short term, remote academic programs and virtual engagement initiatives may offer viable alternatives for knowledge transfer and collaboration.

Recommendations

The Afghan government, in coordination with regional actors and international organizations, should prioritize diplomatic engagement and education-sector reforms to improve institutional security. Strengthening governance in universities and ensuring non-interference in academic operations can help rebuild trust in the system. The Ministry of Higher Education and related authorities should establish competitive salary structures, housing allowances, and performance-based bonuses to attract and retain talented faculty members. International donors can support these efforts through targeted funding programs. National education policies should ensure that academic professionals are free to teach, research, and express ideas without undue restrictions. Clear regulations must be developed to safeguard academic spaces from political or ideological interference. Universities should increase access to research funding, training programs, and international exchange opportunities. Partnerships with global academic institutions and NGOs can play a vital role in enhancing local research capacity and faculty development. The Afghan government, in partnership with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and international partners, should develop structured diaspora engagement strategies. These could include honorary academic positions, visiting scholar programs, and joint research initiatives. Countries like India and China have effectively leveraged their academic diasporas by offering flexible return policies and research grants, serving as useful models for Afghanistan. To bridge immediate gaps, universities and NGOs should establish virtual platforms for knowledge sharing. Initiatives like remote mentoring, online guest lectures, and collaborative research projects can allow Afghan academics abroad to contribute without physically returning.

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