

Out-of-Province Students' Choice of University for Higher Education: Influencing Factors and Encountered Challenges

Zahra Sadry¹ , Marwah Ahmadi², Zahra Sorosh Amiry³, Hadia Waezi⁴ and Noorya Amiri⁵
^{1,2,3,4,5}English Language and Literature Department, Balkh University, AFGHANISTAN.

¹Corresponding Author: zahrasadry21@gmail.com

ORCID

<https://orcid.org/0009-0002-2143-8848>



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ABSTRACT

Choosing a higher education institution at which to study shapes students' professional careers and is one of the most complex and major life decisions that prospective students make. In developing countries, it can be an especially challenging choice for female students who want to study at a university beyond their hometown or region. This mixed methods study seeks to investigate the factors that highly influence Afghan out-of-province students' choice of a particular public university for higher education and to analyze the challenges they encounter. An identical concurrent sampling technique is utilized to recruit the study sample. Employing convergent parallel design, the current paper combines a quantitative survey (n=14, analyzed using SPSS 25.0) and qualitative semi-structured interviews (n=14, analyzed using thematic analysis) of Afghan out-of-province female undergraduates regarding the most influential factors for their choice of university, the challenges encountered, and their lived experiences. The findings reveal that economic, personal, university-related, and social factors influence students' decision-making when selecting an institution. Subsequently, these students highlight that they encounter affective, university-related, financial, and social-environmental challenges during their university studies.

Keywords- University selection, out-of-province students, factors, challenges.

I. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, the number of students pursuing higher education is increasing rapidly, science and technology are advancing faster every day, and living conditions are changing. Higher education empowers students to become academically and professionally competent individuals capable of applying, developing and creating technology and the arts. University is a means of organizing and developing education that can improve the quality of life of communities and nations (Harahap & Amanah, 2019).

The prophet (peace be upon him) said: "Seeking knowledge is obligatory upon every Muslim." This hadith shows that education plays a significant role

in one's life. It is a concept that brings intellectual enlightenment to human life and helps differentiate between right and wrong. It is said that education is the basis of a society that involves knowledge and information as the key variables in development (Pargaru et al., 2009).

Choosing a university is one of the most considerable decisions for most students to make. Almost all high school graduates want to continue their higher education in a university which provides educational facilities. Hence, selecting a suitable university to apply to is a crucial decision for any student. To pursue their studies, movement from one environment to another for academic purposes has spread around the world in recent years. This growing

trend of out-of-province student relocation to their higher education destination has drawn the attention of educators and researchers to the factors and challenges that are most influential among these students.

The selection process of a university includes several factors that are influential in decision-making. A previous study on university choice indicates that learning and environment, facilities for students, cost of education, the influence of peers, mass media, location, and parental preference, along with the cost and characteristics of the host country, are important (Baharun et al., 2011). Usually in Afghanistan, students prefer to attend universities in other provinces. They choose to study in other provinces for having appropriate security and a credible university; for providing opportunities to gain independence, life experience and self-reliance. But despite all these advantages that another city and university give them, usually, all out-of-province students experience some level of adjustment when relocating to a new environment. Students encounter numerous academic and non-academic challenges such as academic pressures, homesickness, financial shortfalls, poor health, loneliness, living with new people, interpersonal conflicts, and difficulty in adjusting to change. Hence, this study aims to identify the factors that highly influence out-of-province students' choice of a particular public university for higher education and to scrutinize their encountered challenges.

1.1 Research Objectives

1. To determine factors influencing the selection of university by out-of-province Afghan female undergraduates
2. To investigate the challenges encountered by these out-of-province Afghan female undergraduates in their four years of study time

1.2 Research Questions

1. What are the factors influencing the selection of university by out-of-province Afghan female undergraduates?
2. What are the challenges encountered by these out-of-province Afghan female undergraduates in their four years of study?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Factors Influencing the Selection of University

Harahap et al. (2022) conducted a study to analyze the impact of education costs and teachers' quality on students' decision to choose a university. As a result, the study has revealed two main findings. Firstly, the results show that the cost of studying influences Indonesian students' decision to continue studying at a university. Second, the quality of teachers has an influence on students' choice to continue. Rudhumbu et al. (2017) undertook a survey to determine the factors affecting university students' decisions in Botswana when choosing a university to study at. Based on the

results of this study, two main conclusions were drawn. First, it was revealed that the characteristics of a university such as the quality of the staff, curriculum, location of the institution, as well as the ability to be employed by graduation have a strong influence on students' choice of university. Second, it was concluded that the choices of marketing strategies used by universities are important in influencing students' decisions about choosing a university to attend. Another study to identify the factors influencing the decision-making of prospective students regarding their choice of universities was carried out at North-Western University, Mafikeng Campus in South Africa. The main influencing factors identified as significant contributors to students' decision to enroll in the North West University, Mafikeng Campus were: self, family and friends' choice, availability of study programs and accommodation, cost and impact considerations, tuition costs, and location as well as academic qualifications of the university (Zyl et al., 2021).

Gaspar & Soares (2021) verified that intellectual and personal development desire, acquisition of professional skills, and the opportunity to prosper at a professional level and find a good job are the most significant factors when searching for a higher education institution. As reported by Moody (2020), several factors influence students' choices when selecting a college or university. Conditions of facilities such as classrooms, athletics facilities, and dormitories reflected a significant and positive relationship with the choice of school. The causative factors which are identified in students' institutional choice in LTZ University, Bihar, India, include location, university academic programs, university reputation, cost, accessibility of monetary assistance, occupational or placement opportunities, the effectiveness of institutional promotion and university campus visits (Kumar & Jain, 2020).

In the context of Vietnam, Liên, Hòa, and Anh (2015) identified fathers' educational background, students' ability and interest, university characteristics and "the communicative effort of university" or the university's communicative channels to the public are the main four influencing factors among Vietnamese students. Romanian students stated that educational offer, institution reputation, cost, employment opportunities, location, parents' and friends' influence are the most significant factors (Maniu et al., 2014). Similarly, another study to find out the most important factors among Romanian students discovered that reputation of the institution is a powerful influence when choosing a university in many ways, such as university age, reputation, accreditation, and brand name of the university. Moreover, infrastructure including classrooms, computer facilities, use of technology, quality of library, and campus size are other significant factors. Besides, career, costs, information sources/advertising, location, social life, and recommendations of family or other people are

additional factors that influence the selection of a university (Ionela, 2014). In Kenya, the influence of parents and friends, job opportunities, well-structured programs, quality of teaching, socialization and flexibility in the course requirements were identified as influential factors among undergraduates at the University of Eldoret (Ryan et al., 2019).

An investigation regarding the influential factors on university choice of pre-university students in Iran highlighted that economic factors, university-related factors, personal factors and social factors are the most salient factors for choosing a university compared to other factors (Jafari & Aliesmaili, 2013). According to Polat (2012), Turkish students conduct a serious amount of research on their own as well as with their families' and teachers' help when choosing and considering a university. The major factor that influences students in university selection is the physical condition of the university. This is followed by the city where the university is located, the university's socio-cultural facilities, and rumors and stories about the university.

2.2 Factors Influencing the Selection of University

In their findings, Boral et al. (2021) stated that in India there are various challenges addressed by students living outside their home states which are related to accommodation, food, adjustment, health issues, academic issues, homesickness, cultural differences, language barriers, expenses, and difficulties adjusting to the new place or city. Besides, the shortage of money made students skip meals and use fast food with less nutritive value. Chauhan and Kumar (2022) found that financial problems, social problems, household and workload problems, mental problems, and marriage-related problems were the major factors affecting a girl's higher education. Again in India, Waris (2016) declared that both resident and non-resident women students at Lucknow University faced various problems such as hygiene, administration, library, and security problems.

A similar study was conducted by Nghiem et al. (2021) in the context of Vietnam, indicating the difficulties encountered by students who were away from their homes. The finding shows that emotional, financial, environmental, and social problems were the common challenges for 416 students away from home. Another study in a leading Australian university revealed that students attending universities in states other than their home state experienced the following challenges: time management, workload, other expectations, family, and health. Family and health difficulties were considered as threatening difficulties (Brooker et al., 2017). The finding of Joan et al. (2021) showed that the most common constraints for university students in Kenya are social and interpersonal relationships, finances, academic struggles, and substance abuse.

Kozikoğlu and Aslan (2018) conducted research to identify different problems of Syrian university students at Yüzüncü Yil University, Turkey.

Research results demonstrated that Syrian students had problems with all four basic language skills; felt extremely homesick; and some had serious problems with their instructors and with the locals. Doygun and Gulec (2012) carried out another study in Turkey to investigate the problems faced by Uludag University students. Results indicated that female students preferred to live in dormitories. The majority of students believed that they did not have a healthy diet. Moreover, it seemed that the students felt the need for advice. It was concluded that 68.51% of the students participating in the study lived with anxiety regarding unemployment and the future.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study employed mixed methods research and convergent parallel design to determine factors influencing the selection of universities by out-of-province Afghan female undergraduate students and to scrutinize the challenges encountered by these students in their four years of study time. A convergent design is the combination of both quantitative and qualitative research approaches, in which both types of data are collected simultaneously. The merger of both types of data to compare the results indicates accurate insights and understanding and provides various perspectives regarding the issue. Hence, one set of data further explains and validates the other (Nicolau et al., 2017; Creswell, 2015). As shown in Figure 1, first, the quantitative data using the survey design was collected, and afterward, qualitative data was collected using a phenomenology design. Eventually, both datasets were compared and interpreted.

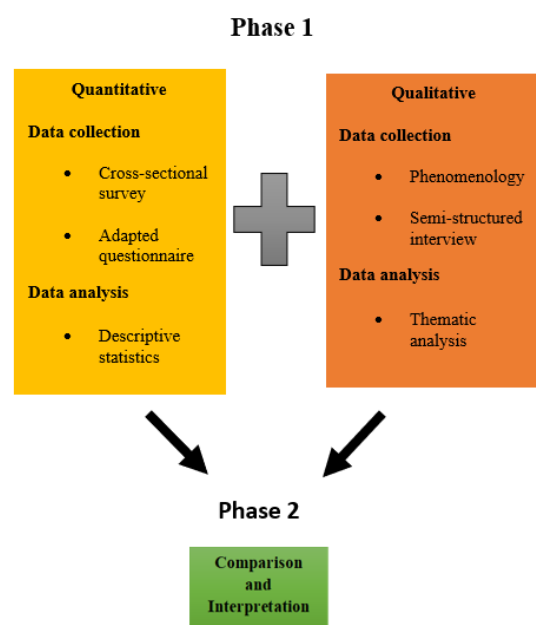


Figure 1: Convergent Parallel Design Adapted from (Nicolau et al., 2017)

3.2 Sample

The sample of the present study consists of fourteen female out-of-province senior undergraduate students from five different departments of Languages and Literature Faculty at a public university in Afghanistan. In convergent design, both quantitative and qualitative data is required to be collected to validate the obtained result. In terms of sample size in this design, Creswell (2015) states, “If the intention is to validate on a dataset with others, then I would recommend using the same individuals.” Therefore, the same sample of students were recruited for both the quantitative and qualitative stages of data collection which is called identical concurrent sampling technique. These assigned undergraduate students were from the English Language and Literature Department, the Dari Department, the Pashto Department, the Uzbek Department, and the Arabic Department. The researchers solely focused on Afghan female out-of-province undergraduates. Studying out of one’s province is not easy for girls. Despite the obstacles, Afghan female students entered out-of-province universities. In this study, senior Afghan female undergraduates were the target population because they had experienced studying in an out-of-province university.

In the quantitative data collection stage, following Krejcie and Morgan’s (1970) sample size table, 14 female out-of-province senior students who were from different provinces of Afghanistan were selected to be the respondents. Of the 14 selected female students, (2; 14.3%) were from Badakhshan, (4; 28.6%) from Faryab, (1; 7.1%) from Ghazni, (1; 7.1%) from Ghor, (3; 21.4%) from Kabul, (2; 14.3%) from Sar-e-pul and (1; 7.1%) from Takhar. Figure 1 illustrates that the Dari Department has the highest number of out-of-state students in the undergraduate program. Except for one of these out-of-province students, the rest were unemployed.

In the qualitative data collection stage, these senior female students were interviewed to gather in-depth data and obtain a clear understanding of the influencing factors and the encountered challenges. The reason for carrying out such an interview was to further validate the quantitative data because each of the undergraduates shed important light by sharing their lived personal experiences.

Table 1: Demographic Factors

Variable	Level	N	Percentage
Department	Arabic	2	14.3 %
	Dari	5	35.7%
	English	3	21.4%
	Pashto	2	14.3%
	Uzbek	2	14.3%
Province	Badakhshan	2	14.3%
	Faryab	4	28.6%

	Ghazni	1	7.1%
	Ghor	1	7.1%
	Kabul	3	21.4%
	Sar-e-pul	2	14.3%
	Takhar	1	7.1%
Age	22	6	42.9%
	23	6	42.9%
	24	2	14.3%
Marital status	Single	13	92.9%
	Married	1	7.1%
Employability	Employed	1	7.14%
	Unemployed	13	92.85%

3.3 Instruments

In their findings, Boral et al. (2021) stated that in India there are various challenges addressed by students living outside their home states which are related to accommodation, food, adjustment, health issues, academic issues, homesickness, cultural differences, language barriers, expenses, and difficulties adjusting to the new place or city. Besides, the shortage of money made students skip meals and use fast food with less nutritive value. Chauhan and Kumar (2022) found that financial problems, social problems, household and workload problems, mental problems, and marriage-related problems were the major factors affecting a girl's higher education. Again in India, Waris (2016) declared that both resident and non-resident women students at Lucknow University faced various problems such as hygiene, administration, library, and security problems.

3.4 Data Collection Procedure

The present paper is based on data driven from quantitative and qualitative study in 2021. Prior to undertaking this research and data collection for both types of data, the potential study sample was informed regarding the aims of this investigation and ethical clearance was obtained. Moreover, the researchers ensured that students’ participation was completely voluntary and they could withdraw at any time. First, quantitative data through a survey was collected. Then semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted to obtain the qualitative data on the same day. The data were recorded on a digital audio recorder and transcribed.

3.5 Data Analysis

After the data collection, the statistical process of quantitative data was performed using SPSS 25.0. Descriptive statistics (frequency, mean, and standard deviation) were utilized. Next, a deductive thematic analysis approach was used to analyze the qualitative data. This analysis comprised the following four stages: familiarization, coding, generating themes, and reviewing as explained by Caulfield (2022). This paper followed the same stages: the recorded audios were

transcribed, key phrases and sentences were highlighted and coded, codes were combined and transformed into pre-determined themes, and finally, themes were reviewed for accuracy. The qualitative data were quantized by enumerating the frequency and percentage of themes selected by the participants and subsequently, direct quotations were provided to support the findings.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on phase 1 of the study, a cross-sectional survey was conducted to examine the influential factors and the encountered challenges faced by out-of-province students. The result of descriptive statistics analysis shown in Table 2 indicates the factors influencing university choice.

The most important factor among others was the economic factors (M=3.41, SD=.677). University-related factors (M=3.08, SD=.641), personal factors (M=3.08, SD=.641), and social factors, (M=3.08, SD=.641) gained lower mean scores respectively. Economic factors had four sub-categories. “Availability of employment opportunities after graduation” had the highest mean score among other sub-categories (M=3,79, SD=1.18).

Table 2: Factors Related to the Choice of University

Factors	Mean	Std. Deviation
Economic factors	3.41	.677
University-related factors	3.08	.641
Personal factors	3.08	.641
Social factors	3.08	.641

Table 3 demonstrates the challenges encountered by out-of-province students during their study time at the public university. Each category had mean scores in the range of two to four. According to this table, affective challenges (M=4.11, SD=.725) and university-related challenges (M=3.92, SD=.372) had higher mean scores. Financial challenges (M=3.86, SD=.913) and social environmental challenges (M=2.46, SD=.876) gained comparative lower scores respectively. “I feel homesick” as the sub-category of affective challenges achieved the highest mean score (M=4.57, SD=.852).

Table 3: Encountered Challenges

Challenges	Mean	Std. Deviation
Financial challenges	3.86	.913
University-related challenges	3.92	.372
Social environmental challenges	2.46	.876
Affective challenges	4.11	.725

The qualitative ethnography data in phase 1 aimed to explore the perception of out-of-province students. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews with each out-of-province students. The data collected was quantified by enumerating the frequency and percentage of themes selected by the participants. Table 4 shows the frequency and percentage of each theme indicating the key factor for university choice. The result reveals that all four factors had influence when choosing an institution, but personal factors played a major and important role in students’ decision-making. As one of the students stated, “I wanted to travel because I lived a very relaxed life and did not experience any difficulties. Therefore, it was my personal choice to study at this university.”

Table 4: key Factors Based on Qualitative Data

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Economy factors	1	3%
University-related factors	5	13%
Personal factors	7	18%
Social factors	6	16%

Table 5 discloses the challenges out-of-province students faced during four years of study time. Students encountered financial, university-related, social, and affective challenges, but affective challenges (10, 26%) and university-related challenges (9, 24%) had the higher percentages compared to other categories. One of these out-of-province students stated, “I am mother of one year old child. When she was five months old, I left her and came to this province to pursue my studies and I am worried about.”

Table 5: Encountered Challenges Based on Qualitative Data

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Financial challenges	8	21%
University-related challenges	9	24%
Social challenges	6	16%
Affective challenges	10	26%

The comparison of both quantitative and qualitative results leads to an interpretation. Convergent parallel design helps researchers “obtain different but complementary data” (Creswell, 2014/5). Based on the quantitative and qualitative data, all four factors-university-related factors, economic factors, personal factors and social factors influenced students’ decision-making when selecting an institution which is in agreement with (Jafari & Aliesmaili, 2013) work that deals with the influential factors for university choice by pre-univeristy Iranian students. The result from quantitative data revealed that the most influential factor for these out-of-province students was the economic

factor. However, according to qualitative data, personal factors were one of the the main reasons for their university selection.

In terms of challenges, both quantitative and qualitative data showed the same findings. Financial challenges, university-related challenges, affective challenges, and social/environmental challenges were the main challenges encountered by out-of-province students, which is in agreement with Boral et. al (2021). The two most frequently experienced challenges by these out-of-province students were affective challenges and university-related challenges respectively. These findings are in corroboration with the previous studies conducted by Medani et al., (2024), Boral et al., (2021) and Sadry et al., (2017) who stated that students studying out of town, province or city and country encountered various and massive problems.

V. SUGGESTIONS MADE BY OUT-OF-PROVINCE STUDENTS TO THE INSTITUTION

The following suggestions are made by students' to the institution:

1. Most out-of-province students are from low-income families and they need financial support from the university side. If the university could allocate monthly stipends to these students, they may not face financial challenges.
2. There should be study rooms equipped with sufficient computers, internet connection, and printers on the campus as well as in the dormitory. Students also suggested some educational workshops focusing on public speaking, job opportunities, employability, research methodology, and software for analyzing data.
3. There must be standard rooms in the dormitory. Students should have access to health/medical facilities and good quality food as well a library to study inside the dormitory.
4. In the summer, the weather is very hot and only a fan is not sufficient for students in dormitory. On the other hand, winter is very cold and there is no heater . It is very hard for students to study in such conditions and this needs to be taken care of by the university.
5. It is necessary to have a counseling office. When students step into a university for the first time and they are in their freshmen year, they need a lot of counseling because they are in a new environment and everything is new to them.
6. Professors and lecturers should try to understand out-of-province students. Sometimes they may have severe affective challenges, so instructors must consider this issue.
7. If the university could provide tours and cultural exchange programs for out-of-state students, it could have a positive influence on students' spirit

and they may feel less homesick. They get familiar with new places and experience new things.

8. So far, respondents were satisfied with the quality of education but technology is advancing rapidly and institutions must take this into consideration.

VI. CONCLUSION

It is evident that several factors influence the choice of university for female out-of-province students seeking higher education in Afghanistan. The research conducted on this topic has shed light on the major factors such as university-related factors, financial considerations, social factors and personal factors. The challenges encountered by these students in their pursuit of higher education are diverse yet interconnected. From financial constraints and affective challenges to university-related problems and lack of familiarity with the new environment, these challenges can have a important role in the academic and personal experiences of out-of-province students. Universities and policymakers must address these challenges and provide appropriate support systems to ensure a positive and enriching educational journey for out-of-province students.

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