

**Refugee Access to Higher Education in Canada:
A Case Study of the Afghan Newcomer Community in British Columbia**

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Funding provided by

John H. M. and Doris D. Andrews Research and Development Award

December 2024

“The process has been very difficult and complicated. There needs to be more information given to us about how to apply, where to apply, who to speak with, where to find money for paying school fees and how to apply for loans. Some guidance will be very helpful about which websites. There’s too much stress on top of trying to live in an expensive place like BC.”

- Afghan Survey Respondent

This research study investigates the obstacles in accessing higher education for newcomer Afghans in British Columbia (BC), Canada. The aim of this project is to find out what these barriers are through surveys and focus groups. This report highlights the preliminary findings presented in the surveys. We hope to provide insights and recommendations for enhancing Afghan refugee access to higher education in Canada, with a focus on BC’s education system at the end of study. This research project will also provide data regarding public education and community-based support services and resources available to these newcomers in their journeys towards post-secondary education.

There are 38 survey responses that have been collected from August 2024 to December 2024. All 38 respondents identified as being over 18 years old and from Afghanistan or of Afghan heritage, living in BC (with the exception of one who is currently out of province). 16 respondents identified as male and 22 identified as female.

The respondents' age upon arrival to BC ranges from 9 - 39 years old, with the mean and mode being 25 years old. The respondents' years lived in Canada at the time they took this survey ranged from 10 months - 16 years, with an average being 4.27 years (and mode of 2 years). Of the respondents, 29% attended public high school and 38% attended adult high school in BC. This information shows that Afghan newcomers are entering post-secondary institutions mostly having completed highschool outside of Canada, even though many are using established public school systems in the province.

The survey findings show that Afghan newcomers to Canada are highly motivated in pursuing higher education upon arrival. 75% of respondents stated that they were extremely interested in pursuing higher education, 6% were somewhat interested, and 19% were interested, with not a single respondent reporting a lack of interest in seeking higher education. The highest level of

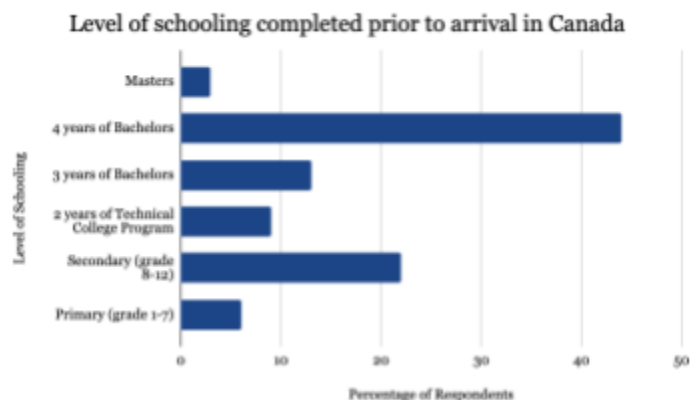


Figure 1: The table summarizes respondents' highest level of schooling completed prior to their arrival in Canada.

schooling completed by respondents is displayed above (Figure 1), showing almost 70% completed diploma and degree programs prior to arrival. Based on the survey findings, many Afghan newcomers display a strong command of the English language as outlined in the table below (Table 1).

Participants' Self-Assessed English Proficiency levels	Speaking	Reading	Writing
Advanced	63%	50%	44%
Intermediate	38%	50%	53%
Beginner	3%	0%	3%

Table 1: The table presents survey data showing the percentage of respondents who self-reported their proficiency levels (advanced, intermediate, or beginner) in speaking, reading, and writing English.

Their top motivations for pursuing post-secondary education are to increase life opportunities, take advantage of educational opportunities here that were unavailable in Afghanistan, and pursue a career that they are more passionate about (Figure 2). Based on these findings, Afghan newcomers are well positioned to pursue higher education; however, there are systemic barriers that they must overcome.

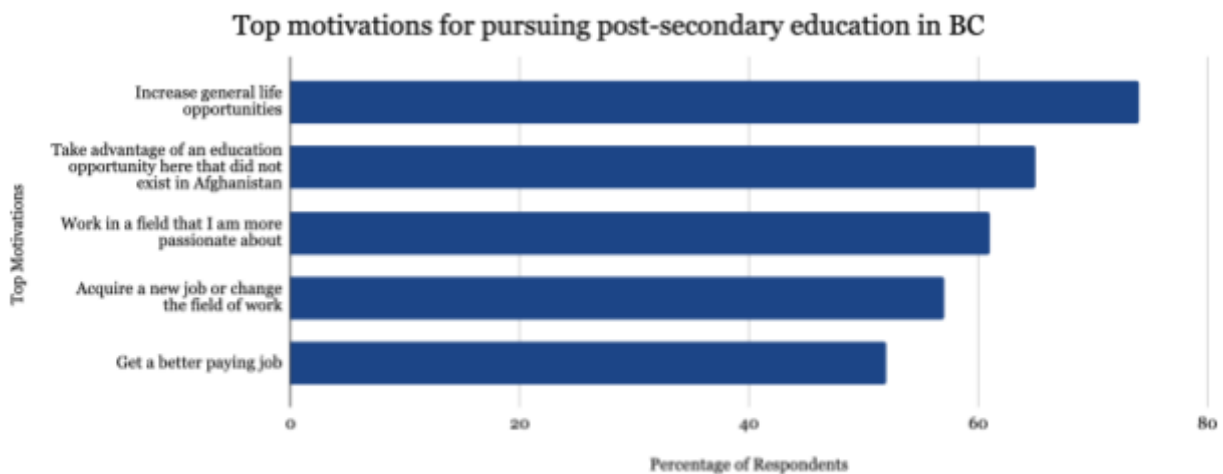


Figure 2: The table displays the top motivations for respondents pursuing post-secondary education in BC.

Many Afghan newcomers attempt to venture into post-secondary institutions by starting the application process. Our survey findings show that 65% of respondents attempted to apply to local colleges in BC, 26% did not want or need to go to college, and 9% wanted to apply but

were unable. With respect to universities in BC, 70% of respondents attempted to apply, and 30% desired applying but were unable to (due to external circumstances). Currently, 41% of survey participants are enrolled in a post-secondary program in BC. These attempts show that Afghan newcomers not only have a desire to learn, but are engaging in actionable measures to enter post-secondary institutions in the province.

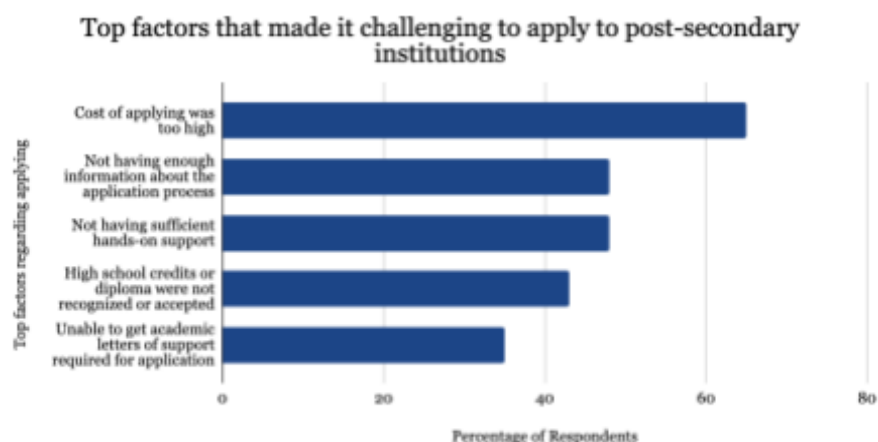


Figure 3: The chart outlines the top challenges respondents faced when applying to post-secondary institutions.

Respondents reported several challenges in the stages of applying, enrolling, and completing post-secondary education in BC. The main factors that made it difficult to apply to post-secondary institutions included high application costs, insufficient information about the process, and lack of hands-on support (Figure 3). Similarly, the

challenges for enrolling included a lack of financial support or scholarships, not having guidance or support with the enrolment process, and being unable to fulfill admissions requirements (Figure 4). Post-enrolment, the barriers impeding successful completion of their programs were high tuition costs and limited financial support, feeling unsupported by the institution's offices, and being unaware of how to approach professors and teaching assistants (Figure 5). These results show that newcomers in BC face financial and systemic barriers throughout every stage of their post-secondary journey, from the applications to their completion.

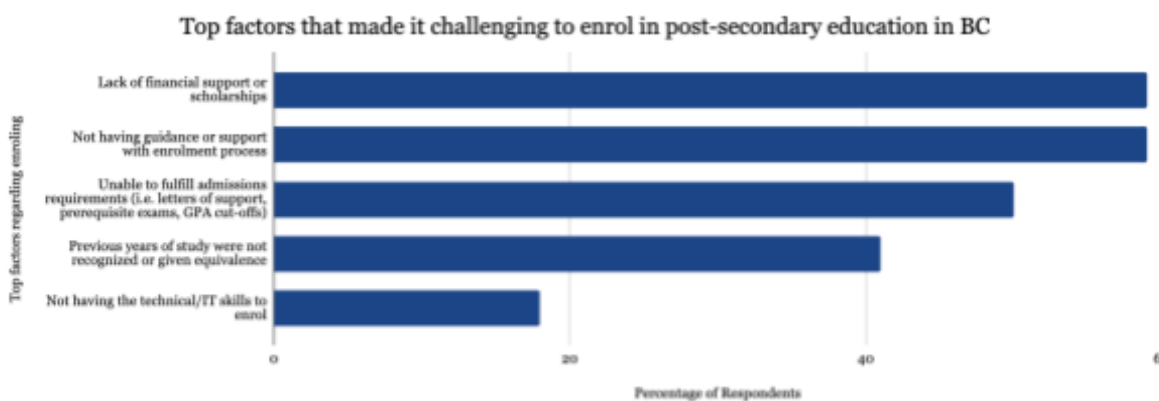


Figure 4: The chart highlights the top challenges respondents faced when enrolling in post-secondary education in BC.

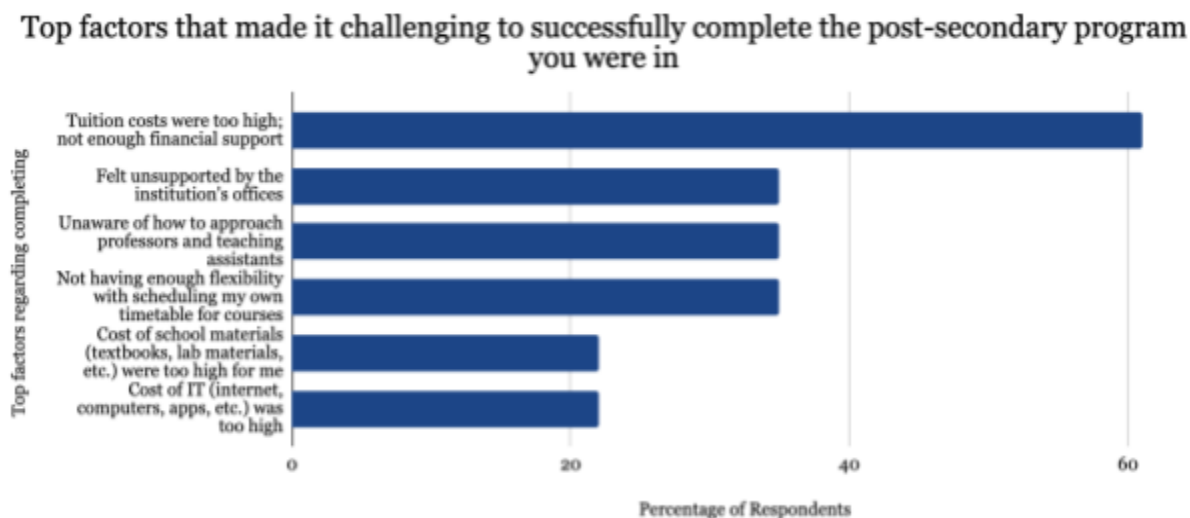


Figure 5: The chart outlines the top challenges reported to successfully completing their post-secondary programs (after enrolment).

Furthermore, respondents identified a variety of environmental and psychological challenges during their post-secondary education in BC that affected their academic and social experiences. In terms of environmental challenges, 63% cited cultural differences, 54% found it difficult to make connections or friends, and 46% noted a lack of information about available resources and supports. Beyond that, 38% of Afghan newcomer respondents experienced racism due to their ethnic background, 25% found the school system too individualistic or competitive, and 25% mentioned the lack of services. Respondents also shared several psychological or emotional challenges they faced in higher education. The most common psychological and emotional challenges reported were feelings of loneliness and isolation (57%), anxiety about balancing school and work expectations (57%), and anxiety about balancing school and family expectations (48%). Others had negative feelings about not achieving as much as they had hoped to after making it to BC (48%), being overwhelmed with class work (35%), and/or being unable to achieve their academic goals as quickly as they had hoped (35%). These findings accentuate the environmental and psychological challenges, alongside the systemic barriers identified earlier, that impact the quality of student life experiences of Afghan newcomers in BC.

The majority of respondents reported limited engagement with resettlement or non-profit organizations' programs aimed at helping newcomers navigate the education system in BC. When asked about using any resettlement or not-for-profit organizations' programs to better understand the education system in BC, 67% of respondents did not know of any programs, 21% responded that they knew of the programs (but did not use them), and only 13% used a program. These findings suggest a need for increasing awareness and accessibility to programs geared for assisting newcomers in better understanding and navigating post-secondary education in BC.

Of the 38 respondents to this survey, 13 are currently in a post-secondary program in BC (ie. college, university, trade school, etc.) and 13 have successfully completed their programs, demonstrating that success is possible for Afghan newcomers despite the challenges they face. The initial data from this study emphasizes the need for support and resources to increase the chances of success for newcomers seeking to access higher education in BC. The goal of this research was to identify the barriers faced by newcomers, and provide recommendations to improve access and outcomes for Afghan newcomers. A more detailed report of the entire project will be shared at the end of 2025, with specific and relevant recommendations on how the challenges can be addressed. If you would like to participate in this study, you may access the survey link at: https://ubc.ca1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_9Ky0PuwEPBz5YSW