

Final Report

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 2025

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“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

Objectives

This research study investigated accessibility to higher education by newcomer Afghans in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia (BC), Canada. The project aimed to use surveys to identify the barriers, and to use interview questions to assess how newcomer Afghans are overcoming these challenges. The participants’ responses as presented in this report provide insights and recommendations that can enhance Afghan refugees’ access to higher education in Canada, with a focus on BC’s education system. We also provide data regarding public education and community-based support services and resources available to these newcomers on their journeys towards successfully completing post-secondary education.

Participants

Seventy-one survey responses were collected between August 2024 and January 2025. All 71 respondents identified as being over 18 years old, living in BC, and from Afghanistan or of Afghan heritage. Thirty respondents identified as male, 41 identified as female, and none identified as non-binary.

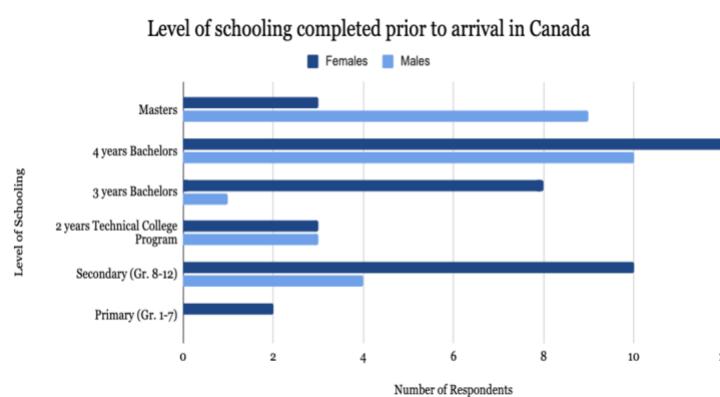


Figure 1: Respondents' highest level of schooling completed prior to their arrival in Canada.

The respondents' age on arrival to BC ranged from 9 to 40 years old, with the mean being 27 years old and mode being 25 years old. The respondents' years lived in Canada at the time they took this survey ranged from 10 months to 11 years, with an average of 2.49 years and mode of 2 years. Of the respondents, 28% had attended public high school and 44% had attended adult high school in BC. This shows that Afghan newcomers

are entering post-secondary institutions having completed high school mostly outside of Canada, although 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. Of respondents, 90% stated that they were extremely interested in pursuing higher education, 7% were interested, and not a single respondent reported a lack of interest in seeking higher education. The highest level of schooling completed by respondents is displayed in Figure 1, which shows that almost 75% had completed diploma and degree programs prior to arrival. Based on the survey findings, many Afghan newcomers reported strong command of the English language (see Table 1).

Participants' Self-Assessed English Proficiency Levels	Speaking	Reading	Writing
Advanced	51%	49%	39%
Intermediate	45%	46%	55%
Beginner	6%	4%	6%

Table 1: Percentage of participants who self-reported each level of proficiency in English language skills.

The top motivations for pursuing post-secondary education in BC varied between men and women (Figure 2). For women, the top three motivations were to enhance skills for their current job, to get a better paying job, and to pursue a career they were more passionate about. For men, the top three motivations were to increase general life opportunities, to pursue a career they were more passionate about, and to take advantage of an education opportunity in BC that did not exist in Afghanistan.

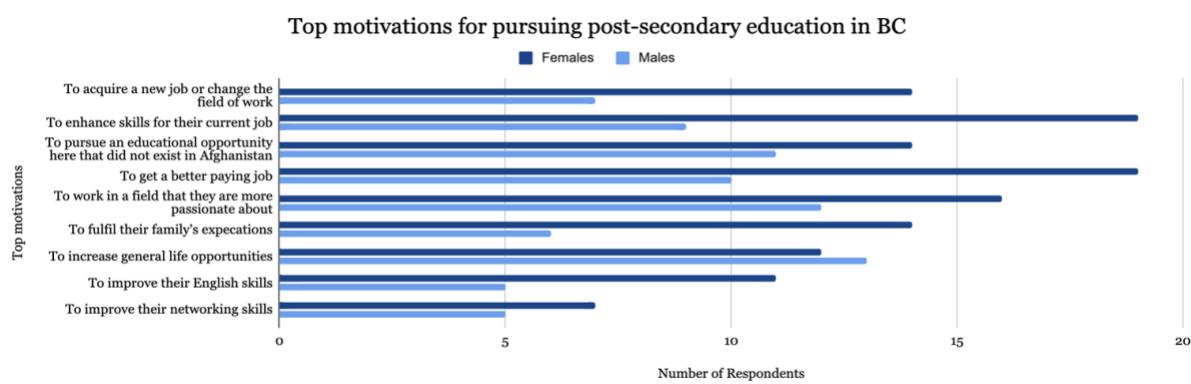


Figure 2: Top motivations for respondents pursuing post-secondary education in BC.

Based on these motivations and language skills, Afghan newcomers assume that they are well positioned to pursue higher education; however, there are identified systemic barriers that they must overcome to reach their educational goals.

Challenges

The application process presents challenges for Afghan newcomers. Our survey findings show that 55% of respondents attempted to apply to local colleges in BC, 19% did not want or need to go to college, and 26% wanted to apply but were unable. With respect to universities in BC, 57% of respondents attempted to apply, 2% did not want or need to go to university, and 41% wanted to apply but were unable to due to external circumstances. At the time the surveys were completed, 42% of participants were enrolled in a post-secondary program in BC. These attempts show that Afghan newcomers not only have the desire and are motivated, but are engaging in actionable measures to enter post-secondary institutions in the province. 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).

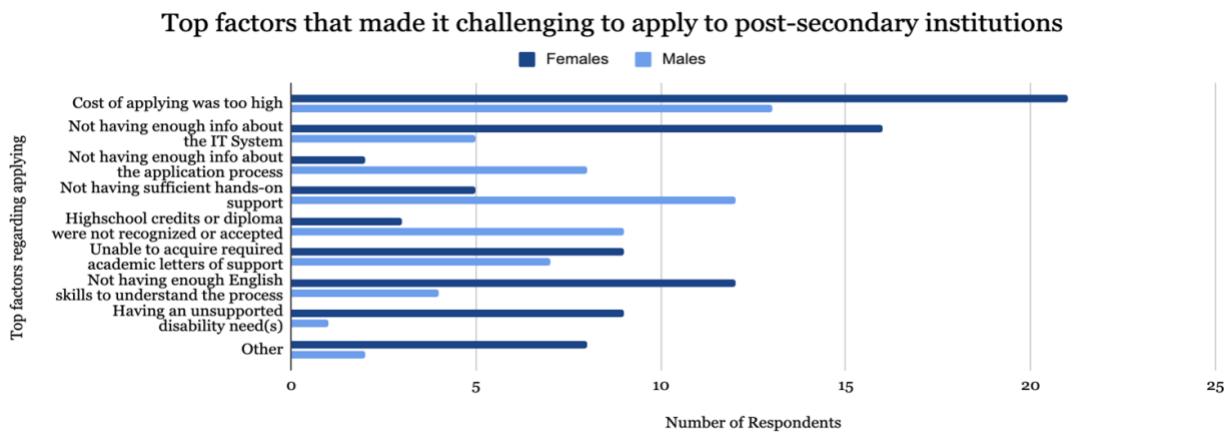


Figure 3: Top challenges respondents faced in applying to post-secondary institutions.

Similarly, the challenges to enrolling included a lack of financial support or scholarships, not having guidance or support for the enrolment process, and being unable to fulfill admissions requirements (Figure 4).

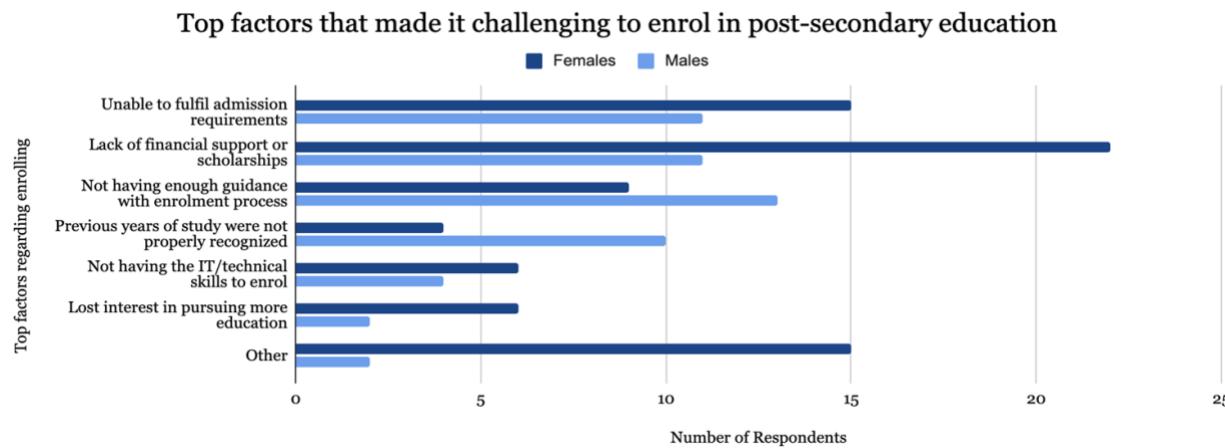


Figure 4: Top challenges respondents faced in enrolling in post-secondary education in BC.

Post-enrolment, the barriers impeding successful completion of respondents' 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 at every stage of their post-secondary journey, from applications to completion.

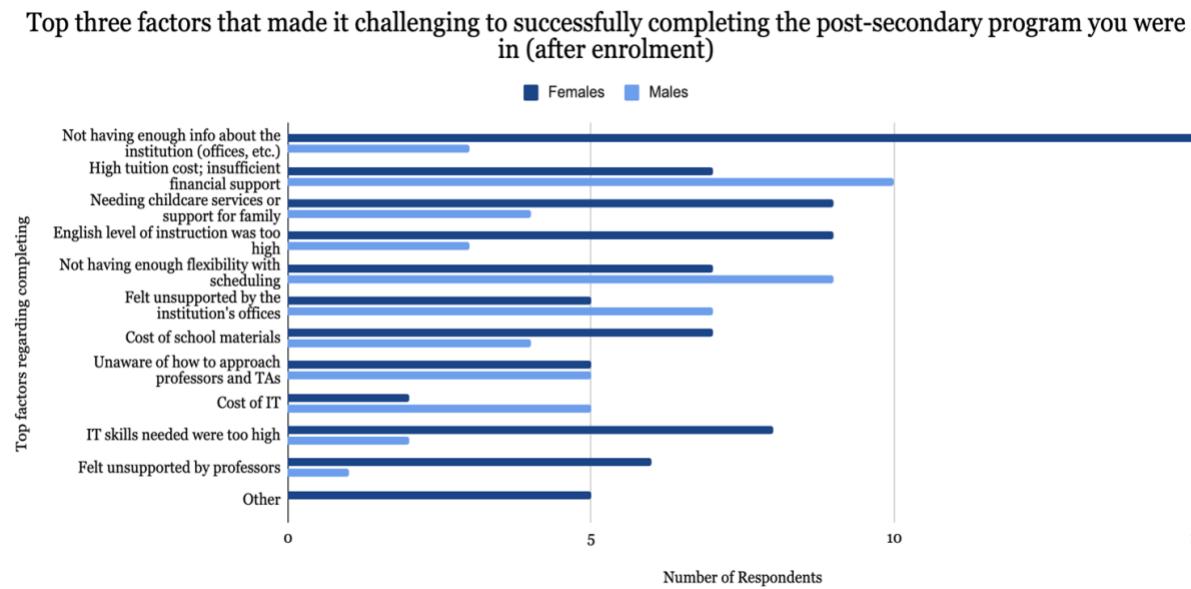


Figure 5: Top challenges reported by survey-takers to successfully completing their post-secondary programs (after enrolment).

Environmental and Personal Factors

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, 46% cited a lack of services and supports, 46% found difficulty in making connections and/or friends, and 39% noted a lack of overall information about resources or supports. Beyond that, 36% of Afghan newcomer respondents experienced racism due to their ethnic background, 29% found the school system too individualistic or competitive, and 20% experienced overall cultural differences.

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 (38%), anxiety about balancing school and work expectations (36%), and anxiety about balancing school and family expectations (35%). Others had negative feelings about not achieving as much as they had hoped to after arriving in BC (35%), being overwhelmed with class work (35%), and being unable to achieve their academic goals as quickly as they had hoped (31%). These findings accentuate the environmental and psychological challenges, alongside the systemic barriers identified earlier, that impact the quality of student life experiences for Afghan newcomers in BC.

The majority of respondents reported limited engagement with programs offered by resettlement or non-profit organizations to help newcomers navigate the education system in BC. When asked about using programs offered by resettlement or not-for-profit organizations to better understand the education system in the province, 71% of survey takers did not know of any programs, 14% responded that they knew about programs but did not use them, and only 15% had used a program. These findings suggest a need to increase awareness and accessibility to programs geared to assist newcomers in better understanding and navigating post-secondary education in BC.

Of the 71 survey-takers, 29 are currently in a post-secondary program in BC (i.e., college, university, trade school, etc.), and 38% of respondents have successfully completed their programs, demonstrating that attainment of higher education is possible for Afghan newcomers despite the challenges they face. The 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. In addition to identifying the barriers faced by newcomers, the goal of the survey was to also compile recommendations to improve access and outcomes for newcomers; these are presented in the next section.

Recommendations

The following list of suggested actions is taken directly from survey-takers' responses to an open-ended question about what supports would facilitate their success in the process of accessing and completing higher education.

1. Knowledge about the education system and opportunities.
 - 1.1. Provide personalized academic and career counseling to guide individuals on pathways to resume their professions or explore new ones.
 - 1.2. Help individuals to overcome their challenges and guide them to proper resources.
 - 1.3. Explain chosen career paths, challenges, and opportunities, and how to connect with the right mentors.
2. Offer structured, in-person English classes with a focus on practical and academic language skills.
 - 2.1. Create an immersive learning environment where students can practice real-world scenarios, such as filling out forms, attending interviews, or participating in group discussions.
3. Help newcomers leverage skills from their home countries.
 - 3.1. Provide skill assessments to recognize and validate their qualifications.
 - 3.2. Create bridging programs for professions like pharmacists, doctors, and teachers, making the licensing process quicker and less burdensome.
 - 3.3. Focus on hands-on training to help individuals transition smoothly into their careers.
4. Facilitate opportunities for requesting support/reference letters.
 - 4.1. Establish mentorship programs where newcomers can connect with experts in their industries.
 - 4.2. Facilitate internships or volunteer opportunities to help build local references and networks.
5. Support parents and families
 - 5.1. Create affordable and accessible daycare programs with flexible hours.
 - 5.2. Ensure daycares are culturally sensitive and provide a safe, nurturing environment so parents can focus on their studies or work without worry.
 - 5.3. Provide culturally competent mental health support through counselors who understand the challenges faced by Afghan newcomers.
 - 5.4. Offer family-focused workshops on integrating into Canadian culture.

5.5. Provide resources about and for children's K–12 education to ensure students can adapt to the school system and parents can better understand their role in their children's academic success.

6. Ensure that settlement workers are familiar with the nuances of the Canadian or British Columbian education systems.

6.1. Provide professional development for settlement workers to help newcomers actualize their dreams instead of giving them up for immediate resettlement purposes.

6.2. Provide settlement workers with training on higher education pathways so that they can appropriately and better direct newcomers.

6.3. Compile a list of institutions or courses that are able to accommodate the financial and scheduling needs of newcomers interested in higher education.

7. Have flexible scheduling options for programs.

7.1. Design programs with flexible schedules, including evening and weekend classes, to accommodate diverse needs.

7.2. Offer self-paced learning options for those who need more time due to other commitments.

7.3. Offer workshops on stress management and creating a balance between personal, professional, and educational goals.

Success Factors

The interviews provided a more nuanced understanding of how particular knowledges, resources, and personnel supports, in addition to high aspirations, led participants to successfully access, enroll in, and complete their college and/or university programs. Only four of the survey respondents participated in the interviews. Table 2 provides a summary of the factors they identified as essential to their success.

Application	Enrolment	Completion
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Having a clear sense of purpose and motivation Approaching the choice of programs strategically through preparation and planning Consulting personal and professional networks to obtain letters of reference Taking an active role in seeking out and engaging with institutional personnel and supports Maintaining consistent communication through follow-ups and clarification of policies and documentation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Preparing well in advance for the enrolment process Being proactive with university systems for guidance, course planning, registration, or financial supports Communicating clearly and consistently with university staff, such as academic advisors and departmental advisors Having strong self-advocacy when navigating requirements, policies, and any systemic challenges 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Having self-determination and resilience Wanting to adapt to new academic environments and learning expectations Utilizing time management strategies Accepting the need to make sacrifices and commit fully to academic responsibilities Striving to have informed decision-making throughout the academic journey

Table 2: Summary of factors shared by interview participants that led to their success in each major stage (application, enrollment, and completion) of their post-secondary journey.

Summary

Overall, the participants' success in navigating higher education, from application to enrollment and through to completion, was shaped by various factors. During the application process, the participants' admission was shaped by their personal drives and strengths. Participants reported having a clear sense of purpose and motivation, approaching the process strategically through preparation and planning, consulting personal and professional networks for letters of reference, actively seeking out and engaging with institutional supports, and maintaining consistent communication through follow-ups and clarification of policies and documentation. Of all the factors mentioned, having a clear sense of purpose and motivation was most critical to proceeding with the application process. Participants described the importance of reflecting on their long-term goals, dream careers, or desired impacts in order to weigh the financial investment, time duration, or program reputation necessary to achieve them.

The participants' progress in the enrolment stage appears to have relied on systemic supports at the institutions of higher education. Here, they reported having academic advisors who helped them understand the university systems, course planning, registration, or financial supports. The participants still had to contend with balancing personal responsibilities and academic requirements, communicating clearly and consistently with university staff such as academic and departmental advisors, and demonstrating strong self-advocacy in navigating requirements, policies, and systemic or external challenges. Accessing free university resources such as academic advising or enrolment services were of benefit to participants. Afghan participants mentioned that speaking sincerely with advisors to increase awareness about the situation in Afghanistan and their own arrival context in BC led to the university's careful consideration of required documentation and transcript translation. Additionally, advisors were able to provide helpful details regarding program requirements, courses, and other inquiries.

Finally, the completion of their post-secondary goals was achieved by keeping their ultimate goals and dreams in mind. Interviewees cited self-determination and resilience, a willingness to adapt to new academic environments and learning expectations, effective time management strategies, acceptance of the need to make sacrifices and fully commit to academic responsibilities, and a commitment to informed decision-making throughout the academic journey. Afghan participants also stated that prioritization and leveraging available resources and supports were critical to overcoming challenges and attaining their educational pursuits. To participants, prioritization involved learning how to balance work and academic responsibilities, studying according to the weight of assignments, declining optional social commitments, and knowing when to reach out for help when feeling overwhelmed. Participants noted that mentorship, learning from classmates, consulting advisors, and leaning on loved ones when needed all played a role in pushing them forward.