

# Global Response Platform Briefing: Afghanistan & Central Asia

November 2025

This briefing paper provides an initial assessment of context, existing initiatives, higher education access challenges, and options for UK universities to support women in Afghanistan, and displaced Afghans in Central Asia. The briefing aims to prompt ideas, gauge interest from UK universities, and identify further research or project development to be undertaken.

## Summary

- Over 100,000 women are unable to access higher education within Afghanistan, where they have been banned from attending university since December 2022. There is an urgent need for alternative solutions in order to avoid a whole generation of young Afghan women missing out on higher education.
- There are immediate opportunities for UK universities to support through
  - [Online scholarships for women in Afghanistan](#)
  - [Scholarships at branch and partner campuses in Central Asia](#)
  - [Foundational and language programmes](#)
  - [Developing joint online programmes](#)
- Activities will need to be sensitive to a unique combination of challenges in Afghanistan, including psychological trauma, restrictions on movement, documentation, and language barriers.

## 1. Context

- **Within Afghanistan**, women are unable to access any formal higher education. Since the de facto authorities' takeover in August 2021, Afghan women have been excluded from secondary school and completely banned from attending university since December 2022. This is erasing two decades of gains and denying higher education to over 100,000 women<sup>1</sup>. Prior to this, female higher education enrolment had risen nearly twentyfold between 2001–2021; and female literacy nearly doubled

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<sup>1</sup> [UNESCO](#)

to 30%.<sup>2</sup> Afghanistan is now the only country where girls and women are barred from secondary and higher education, affecting 2.3 million learners.

- The overall economic and social context in Afghanistan is extremely challenging. Political instability, economic crises, reduced aid, and natural disasters have compounded an already fragile economic situation. Along with repressive laws that are eroding women's rights, access to services, and security, the situation is increasing the social exclusion and poverty of women.<sup>3</sup>
- Over 5.6 million Afghans are internally displaced due to conflict, economic collapse, natural disasters, and recent returns from Pakistan and Iran.
- Since late 2023, Pakistan and Iran have intensified forcible return campaigns of Afghans. Over 2 million Afghans have returned from Pakistan and Iran in 2025 alone, increasing the number of young women who cannot access university.
- **Outside of Afghanistan**, there are over 5m Afghans in neighbouring and regional countries, making them one of the world's largest displaced communities. Although Iran and Pakistan host the vast majority of displaced Afghans, there are smaller populations across Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. According to UN data, there are approximately 25,000 registered Afghan refugees across these countries. However, meetings with UN agencies in Central Asia have highlighted larger Afghan communities who are not formally registered as refugees but live in 'refugee-like situations'.
- **In the UK**, the government has expressed its concern about the education ban for women in Afghanistan<sup>4</sup>. There has also been significant campaigning to address the ban on female education access<sup>5</sup>, including on university campuses. However, opportunities for Afghans at UK universities have become increasingly restricted, as admissions from 'high risk' countries, including Afghanistan, have been reduced<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> [UNESCO](#)

<sup>3</sup> [UNDP](#)

<sup>4</sup> [UN Nations](#)

<sup>5</sup> [University of Sussex; Generation Equal.](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Times Higher Education](#)

## 2. Barriers to university access

- **Ban on access in Afghanistan:** The primary barrier to higher education access is the ban on women accessing university. The ban on girls attending secondary school is also restricting numbers able to progress to higher education.
- **Language barriers:** English language learning is severely restricted within Afghanistan. The de facto authorities banned girls from studying English or computer skills in private centres in 2023<sup>7</sup>.
- **Safety and mobility in Afghanistan:** Decrees on male-guardian (“mahram”) mean that girls and women are not allowed to travel or move around their communities without a male guardian, making attendance of non-formal learning risky.<sup>8</sup> Mahram restrictions also make it extremely difficult to obtain visas for overseas study, as many embassies have closed since 2021.
- **Mental health impacts:** Multiple assessments show a sharp deterioration in women’s mental health as a result of the bans on access to education, other services, and public spaces.<sup>9</sup>
- **Digital access and surveillance:** Internet access has largely remained constant since 2021 apart from recent internet shutdowns and platform restrictions<sup>10</sup>. There is a documented risk of surveillance and monitoring<sup>11</sup>, but no evidence has been found of online education being specifically targeted. Specific data on internet access for women in Afghanistan is hard to establish, but the number of active online learning initiatives for women in the country indicates that this model is possible and meaningful. Overall, only 18% of the Afghan population having access to the internet<sup>12</sup>, although this varies greatly between rural and urban areas.
- **Documentation:** Public universities in Afghanistan have been banned from issuing transcripts and certificates to women<sup>13</sup> since 2022, preventing women from using their qualifications or continuing studies and affecting employment prospects.

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<sup>7</sup> [UNESCO](#)

<sup>8</sup> [UN Women](#)

<sup>9</sup> [ibid](#)

<sup>10</sup> [AP News](#)

<sup>11</sup> [RSE](#)

<sup>12</sup> [World Bank](#)

<sup>13</sup> [UNESCO](#)

- **International fees:** Although the Afghan refugee presence in Central Asia is modest, Afghan students still face international-fee status. In Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan scholarships for Afghan students are limited in scale, and have been further restricted by recent global aid funding cuts.

### 3. Existing higher education access initiatives

A selected list of existing initiatives is presented below. The scale of existing initiatives – typically a few hundred or less – is far from meeting the overall demand. Those marked with \* are those that Mosaik already has a connection with.

#### Online / remote higher education in Afghanistan

- Criss Cross Education (CCE)\*: An Afghan-led NGO working to provide accredited online higher education for women in Afghanistan. CCE has secured courses from Arizona State University and Coursera, and are developing logistics to support delivery of online courses, whilst also creating pathways to online employment. 200 students have registered their interest in online higher education with CCE.
- Future Learn: has offered free access to short courses via the ‘Unlimited’ and ‘Expert Track’ subscriptions on their platform since 2023. However, their accredited microcredentials, programme assessments, and degrees are not included.
- Alliance for the Education of Women in Afghanistan (AEWA)\*: A network of mostly US or US-connected organizations led by individuals at Arizona State University and Stanford University. It aims to deliver online education opportunities for women in Afghanistan, including online higher education courses.
- ALPA Academy of Arts and Sciences: offer Studies in Law and Political Science, Sociology and Anthropology, History and Cultural Studies, Economics and Public Policy, and Education and Gender Studies led by Afghan academics through two tracks: an unaccredited four-year diploma; and one semester/short-term courses.
- Sahar Education’s Thrive Programme: An online learning initiative offering Afghan women and girls free access to Coursera courses in various fields, with options in both English and Farsi, to build skills and earn certifications.
- University of the People Afghan Women’s Scholarship Fund: offered 1000 scholarships for women in Afghanistan to pursue a bachelor’s degree in business, health or computer science.

- Afghanistan Desk, Cambridge Refugee Hub\*: An initiative based at the University of Cambridge provides Afghan women and girls in Afghanistan and in exile with online learning English as well as subject-specific higher education courses.

### **Regional scholarship programmes**

- UNHCR DAFI programme\*: The UN's primary refugee scholarship programme, which has provided 86 scholarships in Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan.
- UNDP/EU Scholarship Programme\* supported 110 Afghans in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan. This was originally a regional mobility programme.
- AUCA/Bard College\*: The American University of Central Asia and Bard College provides 40 scholarships to Afghans in Kyrgyzstan.

### **Online / remote secondary education in Afghanistan**

There are many online secondary education initiatives in Afghanistan. These could provide networks through which to share higher education opportunities or develop partnerships. A select number offering accredited high school diplomas or with existing university links are listed below:

- Oxus Global Impact\*: offers primary and secondary education for Afghan women and girls, based on Afghan and UK education, with a focus on STEM.
- Network of Sustainable Development & Education: offers online secondary school for Afghan girls offering IGCSE and A Level certificates..
- Right to learn / Darakht-e Danesh Classroom: offers online high school education providing an accredited Canadian high school diploma.
- School of Freedom: offers online education programmes designed specifically for Afghan girls, with English and university preparation courses.

## **4. Recommended activities for UK universities**

The proposed activities are intended to prompt ideas and identify opportunities for UK universities to support individually or as a group. Once we have gauged universities' interest in specific activities (A–D), Mosaik will gather further information to address gaps, convene interested institutions and relevant Afghan and regional partners, and support the design and development of projects.

**A. Online scholarships for women in Afghanistan:** UK universities could establish dedicated online scholarships for Afghan women currently inside Afghanistan. These could include full degrees (undergraduate and postgraduate), Level 4 and 5 qualifications, or microcredentials in priority subject areas (see Annex 1).

#### Possible institutional contributions

- Commit to pilot a small cohort of students on selected online programmes with full tuition fee waiver.
- Develop partnerships with Afghan organisations with networks on the ground (e.g. CCE) to facilitate the appropriate equipment, connectivity and safeguarding, and to identify realistic post-graduate employment pathways.

#### Key design considerations

- Courses should lead to formally recognised qualifications or credit-bearing certificates issued by a higher education institution in order to add value beyond existing non-accredited provision.
- Partner with Afghan organisations to conduct recruitment and coordinate the logistics delivery of delivery and access.
- Programmes should be flexible, recognising connectivity, safety, and mental health challenges. Universities may want to use existing [workshops](#) and [courses](#) on trauma informed pedagogy.
- Recognition of prior learning will be required for students who were forced to leave uncompleted courses in 2022.
- Afghanistan is currently subject to sanctions, and some subjects may involve export-controlled technology. Online programmes in cyber security, AI, or computer science may require universities to undertake due diligence to determine whether export controls apply to course content.

**B. Scholarships at branch and partner campuses in Central Asia:** Institutions with branch or partner campuses in Central Asia could create in-person scholarships in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan or Kyrgyzstan.

#### Potential contributions from UK universities

- Commit to pilot a small number of scholarships for Afghan students at partner or branch campuses, including full tuition fee waiver, accommodation and living stipend.

#### Key design considerations:

- Consider partnering with existing scholarship providers (UNHCR DAFI) to build on existing programmes and explore opportunities for co-funding.
- Plan for graduate employment pathways (e.g. internships, regional employer engagement) and, where feasible, onward mobility to third countries.
- Scholarship for Afghan to study overseas will require planning on documentation, mahram restrictions, visas, and long-term protection and employment.

**C. Foundational and language programmes:** If undergraduate and postgraduate scholarships are created, there will be a parallel need for foundation, language, and transition programmes. Universities could create these opportunities in alignment with commitments from other universities pursuing options A or B.

#### Potential contributions from UK universities

- Commit to pilot a small cohort of students on existing online foundation or preparation programmes with full tuition fee waiver.
- Develop tailored English language and academic skills courses (e.g. English for STEM, academic writing, study skills) to be delivered fully online, in partnership with Afghan organisations and/or existing secondary school initiatives.

**D. Develop joint online programmes:** Over the medium term, a group of UK universities could develop joint online programmes designed for Afghan women in Afghanistan and displaced Afghans. Possible models include:

- A jointly delivered and recognised online programme in a priority field (e.g. computer science), with shared curriculum design, content and teaching contributions.
- A stackable programme where existing courses on FutureLearn or Coursera are combined with university courses into a coherent, credit-bearing pathway that leads to a recognised qualification.
- Partner with existing unaccredited programmes (e.g. ALPA) to support validation and/or programme development.

#### Potential contributions from UK universities

- 1-2 year development and pilot phase, with an initial cohort (e.g. 20-30 learners)
- In-kind contributions of academic time for curriculum design and teaching.

## **Annex 1: Subjects of interest collected from students registered with CCE**

### **Undergraduate:**

- **Business / Management**
  - International Management / Business Administration
  - Digital Business, Entrepreneurship
  - Industrial and Organizational Psychology
- **Software development / Computer science:**
  - Data Science
  - Computer Science
  - Cyber Security
  - Applied Artificial Intelligence
  - Software Development
- **Engineering:**
  - Industrial Engineering & Management
  - Engineering
  - Robotics
- **Healthcare, Psychology:** International Healthcare Management, Applied Psychology

### **Postgraduate:**

- **Software development / Computer science:**
  - Data Science
  - Cyber Security
  - Computer Science
  - Artificial Intelligence
  - Big Data Management
  - Data Management
  - Cloud Computing
- **Engineering:**
  - Engineering Management
- **Business / Management:**
  - Product Management,
  - Industrial and Organizational Psychology,
  - Business