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The Evolution of Indo–Afghan Cooperation: Women's Education, Cultural Diplomacy, and Educational Opportunities Across Political Regimes

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Abstract

Educational diplomacy creates opportunities, but scholarship provision does not necessarily translate into access or sustained participation. This article examines Indo–Afghan educational cooperation, cultural engagement and women's educational access across three political periods: 1996–2001, 2001–August 2021 and since August 2021. Combining public-diplomacy and capability perspectives, it distinguishes programme provision, application, participation and continuity. Descriptive analysis of 150 coded retrospective questionnaire records found 105 India-linked educational applications (70.0%), 93 records with educational study-mode responses and 14 organised cultural participants (9.3%). A separate history item identified 22 interruptions and five prevented starts. Gender-related restrictions were reported by 12/60 women and 5/90 men (Fisher's exact p = 0.0084; odds ratio 4.25). Linked access ratings were lower after August 2021 for all five girls' secondary-school pairs (exact sign-test p = 0.0625) and eight women's university pairs (p = 0.0078). These exploratory findings do not establish population trends or causal effects of political transition. The paper contributes an opportunity-to-use framework and shows why differing survey denominators cannot support a single scholarship conversion or completion rate. Unverified recruitment, consent and instrument records, an unreconciled dataset version and sparse historical pairs limit inference and must be resolved before presenting the survey as authenticated fieldwork. Ethical review remains essential.

Keywords: *Indo–Afghan Cooperation; Educational Diplomacy; Women's Education; Cultural Exchange; Political Transitions; Retrospective Questionnaire.*

INTRODUCTION

Scholarships and academic exchanges are visible instruments of educational diplomacy, but announced opportunities say little about who can actually study. Between an award and a meaningful educational outcome lie information, eligibility, application, selection, enrolment, financial support and continued participation. Counting these as one measure of diplomatic success obscures exclusions and interruptions. India–Afghanistan relations offer a useful setting: university scholarships, training and cultural programmes have long intersected with strategic relations and development cooperation (Ahmad, 2022; Pant, 2010; Pate, 2018; Ramzan & Ahanger, 2025). This study asks how reported opportunities differ from usable educational and cultural experiences.

The analysis considers three political contexts: the first Taliban administration (1996–2001), the transitional and Republic-era governments (2001–August 2021), and the period since August 2021. Schooling and university access varied, but insecurity, displacement, household resources and institutional capacity also influenced individual experiences (Yousuf, 2023). Studies of village schools and admission rules demonstrate why local institutions matter alongside national commitments (Burde & Linden, 2013; Najam, 2024). These periods organise retrospective responses; they are neither treatment groups nor a verified longitudinal series.

The recent period is especially consequential for Afghan women and girls. Restrictions on girls' secondary schooling began in 2021, while the suspension of women's university attendance was announced in December 2022 (UNICEF, 2026; UNESCO, 2022). Treating the entire period since August 2021 as a single policy exposure would conceal that sequence. Research describes exclusion and its social, educational and psychological

consequences (Akbari & True, 2022; Mohammadi et al., 2024; Orfan & Shams, 2026; Popalzay, 2026; Sediqi, 2026). Such sources establish context but cannot authenticate when, where or how each questionnaire respondent observed an event.

Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) records illustrate the measurement challenge. Its 2024–2025 annual report lists 1,000 utilised online e-scholarship slots for Afghan nationals, including 278 women and 722 men across nine participating institutions (Indian Council for Cultural Relations, 2025). This is an official count of utilised places, not the number eligible, applying, attending on campus or completing awards. Scholarship studies explain recipient experiences and intercultural links (Arslan & Sezgin, 2026; Lin & Chan, 2024), but cannot represent individuals prevented from starting.

The distinction also applies to cultural activities. Participation in festivals, heritage projects or exchanges can indicate contact, whereas diplomatic attraction requires evidence about attitudes and sustained relationships (Cull, 2008; Nye, 2008). The capability approach explains why formally available resources may remain unusable when travel, safety, affordability or digital access are constrained (Saito, 2003; Unterhalter, 2003). Remote delivery may reduce mobility barriers yet depend on electricity, connectivity, academic support and recognised qualifications (Elkahlout et al., 2026; Hussain et al., 2024). Education and cultural participation must therefore be assessed through distinct outcomes.

The paper contributes in three ways. First, it combines public-diplomacy and capability scholarship into an opportunity-to-use framework, separating programme provision from genuine participation. Second, it audits item-specific questionnaire denominators instead of constructing a misleading application-to-completion funnel. Third, it describes educational participation, gender-related restrictions and programme interruptions using transparent exploratory tests. The argument is about measurement and practical access, not an estimate of the causal effect of Indian programmes or Afghan political change.

The research questions are: RQ1, what awareness, application, study modes and organised cultural engagement are reported? RQ2, how do eligible respondents retrospectively assess girls' secondary-school and women's university access across the three periods? RQ3, what gender-related restrictions, practical barriers, interruptions and priorities are recorded? These questions are addressed descriptively because the available file does not establish a representative sampling frame.

Evidence comes from three separate sources: public programme statistics, coded questionnaire records and published studies of Afghan educational conditions. None validates the sampling base of another. Accordingly, survey percentages are reported as features of the available records, not national participation rates; historical contrasts remain descriptive, and the article does not infer soft-power effects or educational programme effectiveness.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Indo–Afghan educational cooperation has been examined through development assistance, regional diplomacy, strategic interests and soft power (Ahmad, 2022; Pate, 2018; Ramzan & Ahanger, 2025; Singh et al., 2021; Tang, 2021). Existing studies highlight the diplomatic significance of scholarships, academic exchanges and institutional partnerships in strengthening bilateral relations. However, the availability of educational opportunities does not necessarily ensure their accessibility or effective utilisation. Scholarship announcements, applications, enrolments and programme completion represent distinct stages of participation. Understanding educational cooperation therefore requires attention not only to institutional provision but also to the circumstances that enable individuals to access and sustain educational opportunities.

Public diplomacy provides an important theoretical basis for understanding educational and cultural cooperation. Cull (2008) and Nye (2008) emphasised the role of communication, attraction and international relationships in strengthening diplomatic influence. Educational exchanges can contribute to these relationships through knowledge sharing and intercultural engagement (Gauttam et al., 2024). Research examining international scholarship recipients has identified academic networking, cultural understanding and professional development as potential outcomes of educational mobility (Arslan & Sezgin, 2026; Lin & Chan, 2024). Nevertheless, participation alone cannot establish diplomatic influence or programme effectiveness. Moreover, studies concentrating on scholarship recipients may overlook individuals who encounter difficulties during application, admission or enrolment. This distinction highlights the importance of examining barriers alongside reported participation.

Educational inequality in Afghanistan has developed within a complex historical and political environment. Political instability, conflict and institutional constraints have shaped educational opportunities across successive political periods (Pant, 2010; Sokhanwar et al., 2018; Yousuf, 2023). Burde and Linden (2013) demonstrated that village-based schooling could improve educational enrolment and achievement in particular Afghan communities. Similarly, Lyons (2023) and

Trani et al. (2025) examined factors influencing girls' educational participation through household-level evidence and local interventions. These studies demonstrate the importance of institutional availability, household conditions and geographical accessibility. However, their findings cannot be directly equated with retrospective assessments of educational access across different political periods.

Gender has remained a central concern in Afghanistan's educational development. Darwish and Wotipka (2024) and Najam (2024) examined the relationship between conflict, institutional arrangements and women's access to higher education. More recent studies have documented the restrictions and challenges experienced by Afghan women and girls following the political changes of August 2021 (Akbari & True, 2022; Mohammadi et al., 2024; Orfan & Shams, 2026; Popalzay, 2026; Sediqi, 2026). Najam et al. (2026) further examined the economic consequences of restricted female education. Collectively, these studies establish the significance of women's educational access but also indicate the need to distinguish national educational conditions from individual experiences. Retrospective questionnaire responses can provide insights into perceived restrictions, although they cannot independently establish historical enrolment trends or causal effects of political transitions.

Alternative educational arrangements have gained importance where conventional learning opportunities remain limited. Online education and community-based initiatives may support educational continuity, particularly for learners facing institutional restrictions (Elkahlout et al., 2026). Nevertheless, digital education introduces additional challenges involving internet connectivity, electricity, technological devices, financial resources and household circumstances. Hussain et al. (2024) highlighted the influence of gender, education and crisis conditions on digital participation among Afghan women. These barriers may affect different stages of educational engagement. Limited information can discourage applications, mobility restrictions can prevent enrolment, and financial or technological difficulties can interrupt ongoing studies. Consequently, educational delivery modes should be examined separately from participation, completion and reported benefits.

The capability approach offers a complementary perspective for understanding these challenges. Nussbaum (2006), Saito (2003) and Unterhalter (2003) emphasised that access to resources does not automatically translate into meaningful opportunities. Applied to educational diplomacy, this perspective suggests that scholarships become valuable only when potential beneficiaries can obtain information, satisfy eligibility conditions, enrol and continue their studies. Public-diplomacy theory explains the institutional objectives of educational cooperation, while the capability approach clarifies the practical conditions necessary for individuals to utilise available opportunities. Combining these perspectives provides a conceptual foundation for examining the relationship between diplomatic provision and educational participation.

Building on these perspectives, the opportunity-to-use framework distinguishes institutional provision, information and application, educational participation, programme continuity and reported outcomes. Each stage involves different indicators and potential barriers. Administrative scholarship figures describe institutional provision but cannot establish the proportion of eligible individuals reached. Awareness and application responses provide information about engagement without measuring population-level application rates. Similarly, reported study modes and programme interruptions cannot independently establish completion or attrition rates unless individual programme histories are linked. This distinction is particularly important for retrospective questionnaires, where respondents may describe different programmes and periods without providing a complete educational history.

Cultural diplomacy also requires independent consideration. Language, literature, heritage preservation and artistic exchanges can encourage cultural understanding and bilateral engagement without involving formal educational programmes. Although cultural participation may contribute to diplomatic relationships, attendance figures cannot independently demonstrate increased trust, attraction or sustained cooperation (Cull, 2008; Nye, 2008). Educational and cultural activities should therefore be assessed using appropriate participation measures rather than a single indicator of diplomatic success. Evaluating their longer-term outcomes would require reliable evidence about continued engagement, institutional relationships and changes in participants' experiences.

Despite the existing literature, two related research gaps remain. First, studies of educational diplomacy frequently emphasise programme availability or the experiences of successful participants without adequately distinguishing institutional provision from meaningful access. Second, limited attention has been given to the different barriers affecting applications, participation and continuity across political transitions. Addressing these gaps, the present study examines reported Indo–Afghan educational and cultural engagement, women's educational access and practical restrictions using a retrospective questionnaire dataset. By maintaining separate response bases and distinguishing participation from programme continuity, it offers a more transparent interpretation of educational cooperation. Its

contribution is primarily conceptual and descriptive rather than a causal evaluation of diplomatic interventions or political changes.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses a retrospective cross-sectional questionnaire file containing 150 coded records (R001–R150; 90 men and 60 women) to examine Indo–Afghan educational and cultural cooperation. Questions concern 1996–2001, 2001–August 2021 and the period since August 2021. Responses are retrospective reports, not observations collected prospectively across the three periods. Intended eligibility covered adults with Afghan nationality or relevant first-hand experience; original recruitment and nationality records remain unverified.

Historical questions were routed through Q12, Q17 and Q22. Responses coded "could not assess", refusal or not applicable were excluded from item-specific valid bases. Four-category ordinal ratings (1 = no access observed; 4 = most had access) captured perceived access to girls' secondary schooling and women's university education. Other items measured applications, study mode, cultural participation, restrictions and programme continuity. Prior exposure to each political period was self-reported, not independently authenticated.

For response category k, questionnaire item j and political period r, the descriptive percentage was:

$$P_{rjk} = \frac{n_{rjk}}{N_{rj}} \times 100$$

where the numerator is the category count and the denominator is the applicable valid base. The percentage-point contrast between periods r and s was:

$$\Delta P_{jk}^{(r,s)} = P_{rjk} - P_{sjk}$$

Because valid bases differ, these contrasts neither track individual change nor estimate national trends. Multiple-response percentages may sum to more than 100%.

Paired Q20 (2001–August 2021) and Q25 (post-August 2021) ratings were compared using exact two-sided sign tests (Hollander et al., 2014). Here n is the number of non-tied pairs, and m is the smaller of the positive and negative sign counts:

$$p_{\text{sign}} = \min\left\{1,\ 2\sum_{i=0}^{m}\binom{n}{i}\left(\frac{1}{2}\right)^{n}\right\}$$

This test considers direction, not the magnitude of ordinal differences. Five girls' schooling pairs and eight women's university pairs qualified.

The unadjusted association between gender (Q1) and reported restrictions (Q39) was assessed by a two-sided Fisher exact test (Agresti, 2018). The observed odds ratio was:

$$OR = \frac{a/b}{c/d} = \frac{ad}{bc} = \frac{12 \times 85}{48 \times 5} = 4.25$$

Here a and b denote the female yes/no counts, and c and d the male yes/no counts. The three exploratory tests also received Holm-adjusted p-values (Holm, 1979).

Question-specific bases were preserved: 105 educational applicants (Q30), 93 educational study-mode respondents (Q34) and 14 cultural participants (Q35). Q44 combines 107 educational and cultural programme statuses and cannot establish education-only completion. Recruitment dates, consent, ethical review and nationality lack independent documentation; the earlier 143-record version is unreconciled, and nine awareness/source responses conflict. These limitations preclude causal or population claims and require verification before journal submission.

RESULTS

This section presents the findings from 150 questionnaire records, covering Indo–Afghan educational and cultural cooperation, women's educational access, participation barriers, and statistical comparisons across political periods. The results are presented through descriptive statistics, tables, figures, and exploratory statistical tests to highlight key patterns and associations.

Characteristics of the Recorded Sample

Table 1 separates completed qualifications from current roles.

Table 1. Demographic and academic characteristics of the analytical sample (N = 150)

Dimension	Recorded category	n	%
Gender	Male	90	60.0%
	Female	60	40.0%
Age	18–24 years	25	16.7%
	25–34 years	45	30.0%
	35–44 years	35	23.3%
	45–54 years	30	20.0%

	55 years or above	15	10.0%
Highest completed qualification	Higher Secondary	12	8.0%
	Bachelor's Degree	32	21.3%
	Master's Degree	35	23.3%
	MPhil / equivalent	12	8.0%
	PhD / doctorate	59	39.3%
Current role	PhD research scholars	46	30.7%
	Master's student	24	16.0%
	School teachers	19	12.7%
	Government employee	19	12.7%
	Other postgraduate student (excluding master's and PhD)	15	10.0%
	University lecturers/professors	14	9.3%
	Private-sector employee	7	4.7%
	Undergraduate student	6	4.0%

Source: Primary data.

Of 150 records, 90 are male and 60 female; 80 are aged 25–44. Fifty-nine report completed doctorates and 46 identify as current PhD scholars. These different variables cannot be added; the sample is academically concentrated.

Historical Experiences of Education and Cultural Cooperation

Table 2 compares period-specific educational and cultural reports with access assessments. Bases differ by period and item, preventing representative trend inference.

Table 2. Period-specific reports of participation and educational access

Survey indicator	1996–2001	2001–Aug 2021	Since Aug 2021
Applied and participated in education	0/45 (0.0%)	76/135 (56.3%)	65/122 (53.3%)
Participated in organised bilateral cultural activity	0/48 (0.0%)	11/131 (8.4%)	3/122 (2.5%)
Reported no girls' secondary-school access	7/8 (87.5%)	2/20 (10.0%)	25/32 (78.1%)
Reported no women's university access	4/6 (66.7%)	2/20 (10.0%)	28/34 (82.4%)

Source: Primary data.

Educational participation was reported by 0/45 in 1996–2001, 76/135 (56.3%) in 2001–2021 and 65/122 (53.3%) since August 2021. Forty-eight respondents appeared in both later periods; 93 were unique educational participants. Cultural participation was 0/48, 11/131 and 3/122, respectively.

Figure 1 plots reported participation and perceived absence of access with explicit valid bases; it does not show national enrolment rates.

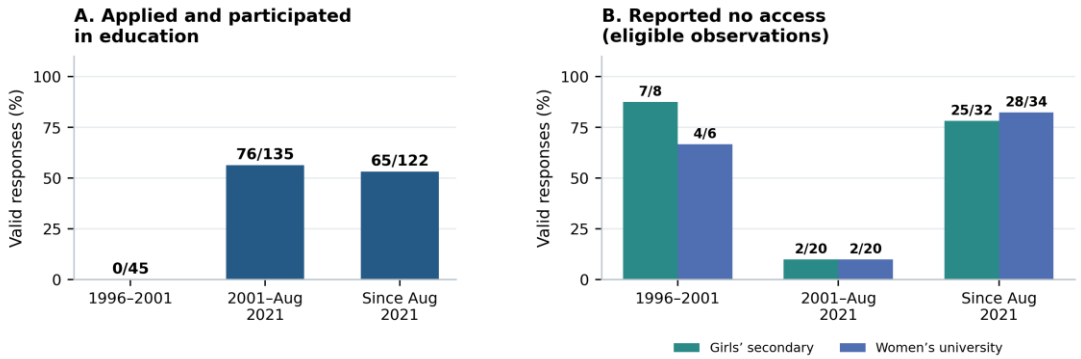

Figure 1. Educational participation and reported absence of access across three historical periods Source: Primary data.

Reported absence of girls' secondary access was 7/8 (first period), 2/20 (middle period) and 25/32 (recent period); corresponding figures for women's university access were 4/6, 2/20 and 28/34. These small, unequal denominators limit comparison.

Table 3 distinguishes applications, latest outcomes, delivery modes and mixed educational/cultural status. Q44 cannot be treated as a denominator for educational completion.

Table 3. Programme familiarity, application outcomes and reported participation

Domain	Recorded indicator	n / valid N (%)
Awareness	Very or extremely familiar	117/150 (78.0%)
Awareness	Heard of ICCR scholarships	89/150 (59.3%)
Applications	Applied for an India-linked opportunity	105/150 (70.0%)
Latest application result	Selected and participated	76/105 (72.4%)
Latest application result	Not selected	12/105 (11.4%)
Latest application result	Selected but unable to participate	6/105 (5.7%)
Latest application result	Withdrew application	8/105 (7.6%)
Latest application result	Application pending	3/105 (2.9%)
Study mode	In person in India	33/93 (35.5%)
Study mode	Online while living in Afghanistan	24/93 (25.8%)
Study mode	Online while living outside Afghanistan	25/93 (26.9%)
Study mode	Combination of online and in-person	11/93 (11.8%)
Educational/cultural programme status	Completed	61/107 (57.0%)
Educational/cultural programme status	Currently participating	28/107 (26.2%)
Educational/cultural programme status	Temporarily interrupted	8/107 (7.5%)
Educational/cultural programme status	Withdrew before completion	7/107 (6.5%)
Educational/cultural programme status	Programme cancelled	3/107 (2.8%)
Educational/cultural programme benefit	Professional/social networks	54/107 (50.5%)
Educational/cultural programme benefit	Academic knowledge	37/107 (34.6%)
Educational/cultural programme benefit	Cultural understanding	35/107 (32.7%)

Source: Primary data.

Table 3 reports high familiarity (117/150), ICCR awareness (89/150) and India-linked applications (105/150). The 105 latest outcomes included 76 participating, 12 rejected, six unable to start, eight withdrawn and three pending. Study modes comprised 33 in-person, 24 online in Afghanistan, 25 online elsewhere and 11 blended. Q44 combines 93 educational with 14 cultural participants; its 107 programme statuses cannot establish educational completion. Multiple reported benefits were permitted.

Cultural Participation and Practical Barriers

Table 4 distinguishes organised cultural activity, personally experienced gender-related restrictions and other selected barriers.

Table 4. Organised cultural engagement and barriers to participation

Domain / base	Indicator	n / base (%)
Organised cultural engagement	Reported participation	14/150 (9.3%)
Organised cultural engagement	Heritage projects among cultural participants	6/14 (42.9%)
Organised cultural engagement	Festivals/events among cultural participants	3/14 (21.4%)
Personally experienced restriction	Women reporting a gender-related restriction	12/60 (20.0%)
Personally experienced restriction	Men reporting a gender-related restriction	5/90 (5.6%)
Type among 17 restricted respondents	Admission or enrolment restrictions	7/17 (41.2%)
Type among 17 restricted respondents	Travel or mobility limitations	6/17 (35.3%)

Type among 17 restricted respondents	Insufficient institutional support	6/17 (35.3%)
Type among 17 restricted respondents	Restrictions on attending classes or activities	5/17 (29.4%)
Type among 17 restricted respondents	Reduced access to scholarships or training	4/17 (23.5%)
Other participation barriers	Safety concerns	30/150 (20.0%)
Other participation barriers	Financial barriers	27/150 (18.0%)
Other participation barriers	Travel or visa difficulties	23/150 (15.3%)
Other participation barriers	Insufficient programme information	22/150 (14.7%)
Other participation barriers	Internet, electricity, or device limitations	16/150 (10.7%)

Source: Primary data.

Of 14 cultural participants, six reported heritage projects and three festivals. Restrictions were reported by 12/60 women and 5/90 men. Among 17 affected respondents, seven noted enrolment barriers, six mobility limits and six inadequate support. Other selected obstacles included safety (30), finances (27), visas/travel (23), information (22) and digital access (16).

Exploratory Comparisons and Future Priorities

Table 5 presents the three exploratory exact comparisons.

Table 5. Exploratory exact tests and descriptive effect estimate

Comparison	Valid basis	Method	Two-sided p	Observed pattern
Girls' secondary access: 2001–2021 vs since Aug 2021	n = 5; ties = 0	Exact sign	0.0625	All 5 non-tied pairs declined; small base
Women's university access: 2001–2021 vs since Aug 2021	n = 8; ties = 0	Exact sign	0.0078	All 8 non-tied pairs declined; small base
Gender × experienced restriction	150 (60 women; 90 men)	Fisher exact	0.0084	OR 4.25; RD +14.4 pp

Source: coded questionnaire records.

All five girls' schooling pairs and all eight women's university pairs rated later access lower (exact sign-test p = 0.0625 and 0.0078). The gender–restriction association produced a 14.4-percentage-point risk difference (Newcombe 95% CI 3.8–26.6), odds ratio 4.25 (approximate 95% CI 1.41–12.79) and Fisher p = 0.0084. The Holm-adjusted p-values were 0.0625, 0.0234 and 0.0234, respectively. The results are exploratory.

Figure 2 records the stated priorities rather than tested effects.

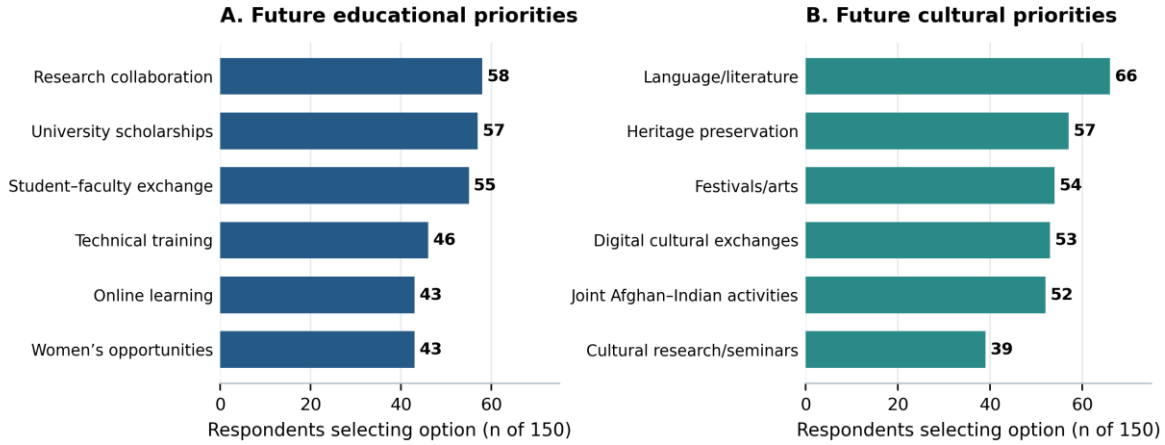

Figure 2. Respondents' stated educational and cultural cooperation priorities (*Source: Primary data.*)

Figure 2 records education priorities—research (58), scholarships (57) and exchanges (55)—and cultural priorities—language (66), heritage (57) and festivals (54). Financial support (35), information (26) and transparency (25) were also requested.

Programme Continuity and the August 2021 Cohort

Table 6 keeps August 2021 enrolment, funding, study effects and programme history separate.

Table 6. Reported programme continuity, enrolment and interruption

Question / base	Recorded response	n / valid N (%)
Q27: Enrolled in India, August 2021	Yes	18/150 (12.0%)
Q28: Among 18 enrolled in India	Indian scholarship ended/interrupted	4/18 (22.2%)
Q28: Among 18 enrolled in India	Existing Indian scholarship continued	4/18 (22.2%)
Q28: Among 18 enrolled in India	Previous scholarship renewed/extended	4/18 (22.2%)
Q28: Among 18 enrolled in India	Application or extension not approved	3/18 (16.7%)
Q28: Among 18 enrolled in India	Self-funded/other non-Indian support	3/18 (16.7%)
Q41: Effects on study plans/work	Any reported effect	20/150 (13.3%)
Q43: Overall programme history	Interrupted or stopped participation	22/150 (14.7%)
Q43: Overall programme history	Prevented from starting	5/150 (3.3%)
Q43: Overall programme history	Able to participate or complete	80/150 (53.3%)
Q43: Overall programme history	Never participated	43/150 (28.7%)

Source: Primary data.

Of 18 students reporting enrolment in India in August 2021, four reported interrupted scholarships, four continued support, four renewals, three unapproved extensions/applications and three other financing. Additional difficulties were financial (8), visa-related (6), family finances (3), accommodation (2) and readmission (1); four reported none. Across 150 records, Q41 identified 20 affected study/support histories; Q43 identified 22 interruptions, five prevented starts, 80 participants/completers and 43 nonparticipants.

These indicators describe different questions and cannot be combined to infer attrition, policy effects or a single programme trajectory.

DISCUSSION

The central finding is that Indo–Afghan educational cooperation cannot be assessed through scholarship availability alone. The questionnaire records 105 educational applicants, 93 respondents specifying an educational study mode and 107 educational or cultural programme statuses. These figures represent different, partly overlapping measures rather than consecutive stages of a verified cohort. Their separation prevents misleading completion estimates and highlights the importance of examining educational access, participation and continuity alongside institutional provision.

This distinction contributes to public-diplomacy scholarship by separating participation from diplomatic influence. Cull (2008) identifies educational and cultural exchanges as important instruments of public diplomacy, whereas Nye (2008) associates soft power with attraction. The 14 respondents reporting organised cultural participation therefore indicate reported engagement rather than increased diplomatic influence. Unlike Lin and Chan (2024), who examined scholarship recipients' perceptions and intercultural outcomes, the present study considers applications and participation barriers. Nevertheless, its questionnaire cannot establish changes in attitudes towards India or the experiences of individuals excluded before enrolment.

The capability approach provides a complementary explanation. Saito (2003) and Unterhalter (2003) emphasise that educational resources do not automatically generate substantive opportunities. In this study, financial difficulties, mobility restrictions, safety concerns and digital limitations suggest potential obstacles between programme availability and actual participation. However, these reported barriers cannot establish why particular respondents withdrew or failed to enrol. The study extends this theoretical perspective by distinguishing the stages at which opportunities may become inaccessible, rather than treating institutional provision as evidence of successful cooperation.

Official evidence further illustrates this distinction. The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (2025) reported 1,000 utilised online scholarship places for Afghan nationals during 2024–2025, including 278 women and 722 men. UNESCO and UNICEF (2026) reported that more than 2.6 million Afghan girls had been denied secondary education since 2021. Although these figures concern different populations and educational levels, they highlight the difference between scholarship provision and broader educational access. Neither provides a representative denominator for the present questionnaire.

Retrospective assessments indicate less favourable conditions for girls' secondary schooling and women's university education after August 2021. All five valid schooling pairs and eight university pairs recorded declines, although these small samples cannot establish national educational trends. The findings are contextually consistent with Akbari and True (2022), who examined gender-based restrictions following the Taliban's return, and Orfan and Shams (2026), who documented challenges experienced by female university students. Unlike those studies, the present retrospective comparisons cannot independently verify the timing or mechanisms of exclusion. Moreover, secondary-school restrictions began in 2021, whereas the university suspension followed in December 2022 (UNICEF, 2026).

Gender-related restrictions were reported by 12 of 60 women and five of 90 men, producing an observed odds ratio of 4.25. This association is consistent with concerns about gendered barriers in Afghanistan's educational environment. However, the comparison remains unadjusted, and differences in respondents' experiences, selection and reporting may influence the observed relationship. Consequently, the findings cannot establish causal effects or population-level prevalence.

Programme continuity represents another important dimension. Twenty-two respondents reported interrupted or stopped participation, five were prevented from starting, and eight programme statuses were classified as temporarily interrupted under a separate question. These measures cannot be combined into a single attrition rate. The 18 respondents enrolled in India during August 2021 also reported different funding experiences, demonstrating the need for programme-specific monitoring of enrolment, financial support, interruptions and completion.

Practical implications differ across educational delivery modes. Students attending institutions in India may require assistance with visas, travel and accommodation, whereas online learners may depend more heavily on connectivity, devices and academic support. Hussain et al. (2024) documented how digital participation among Afghan women is shaped by educational and crisis-related conditions. Similarly, Elkahlout et al. (2026) examined the potential and limitations of locally adapted educational opportunities. These studies reinforce the relevance of accessible delivery arrangements, although the effectiveness of particular interventions remains untested here. Cultural cooperation should also be evaluated through sustained interaction, reciprocity and collaboration rather than attendance alone.

Finally, the study is limited by retrospective reporting, small historical comparison groups, a highly educated sample and incomplete documentation of recruitment, consent and ethical review. The unresolved discrepancy between the 143- and 150-record versions further restricts reproducibility. Future research should employ authenticated survey records, longitudinal programme tracking and qualitative interviews to investigate barriers across successive stages of participation. Such approaches could establish stronger evidence about educational continuity and diplomatic outcomes. Until then, the present findings provide exploratory insights rather than causal estimates of Indo–Afghan cooperation.

CONCLUSION

This study examined Indo–Afghan educational and cultural cooperation across three political periods, focusing on women's educational access, participation opportunities and the barriers affecting educational engagement. By integrating public-diplomacy theory with the capability approach, the study highlights the distinction between institutional provision and the practical ability to access and sustain educational opportunities. Its central contribution is an opportunity-to-use framework that separates programme awareness, application, participation and continuity, providing a clearer basis for evaluating educational cooperation under changing political conditions.

The analysis of 150 coded questionnaire records reveals substantial reported educational engagement alongside persistent participation barriers. Among respondents, 105 reported applying for India-linked educational opportunities, 93 provided educational study-mode information and 14 reported organised cultural participation. Programme histories also identified 22 interruptions and five instances in which participation was prevented. These findings suggest that the availability of educational opportunities does not necessarily translate into continuous participation. Importantly, the different questionnaire measures cannot be combined to calculate programme completion or attrition rates.

Gender-related findings further illustrate the challenges surrounding educational access. Restrictions were reported by 20.0% of women compared with 5.6% of men, indicating a statistically significant association within the coded sample (Fisher's exact $p = 0.0084$). Retrospective comparisons also recorded less favourable assessments of girls' secondary-school and women's university access following August 2021. However, the comparisons involved only five and eight valid paired observations, respectively. Consequently, these results should be interpreted as exploratory evidence of reported experiences rather than representative estimates of educational conditions or causal consequences of political transitions.

The findings contribute to educational-diplomacy research by demonstrating the importance of distinguishing announced

opportunities from accessible and sustained participation. They also extend the practical application of the capability perspective by identifying different stages at which financial, institutional, mobility and digital barriers may restrict educational engagement. Cultural participation represents a separate dimension of bilateral cooperation and should not be interpreted as direct evidence of increased diplomatic influence. Together, these distinctions offer a more cautious and transparent framework for understanding educational and cultural exchanges.

From a policy perspective, India–Afghanistan educational cooperation would benefit from monitoring systems that separately record scholarship applications, selection decisions, enrolment, delivery modes, financial support, interruptions and completion. Institutions should also consider the distinct requirements of online and in-person learners, particularly regarding connectivity, academic support, mobility and qualification recognition. Cultural initiatives should be evaluated through continued engagement, reciprocal participation and institutional collaboration rather than attendance alone. These recommendations identify priorities for future evaluation, not interventions whose effectiveness has been established by this study.

Nevertheless, the research is constrained by retrospective reporting, small historical comparison groups, a highly educated sample and incomplete documentation of recruitment, consent and ethical review. The unresolved difference between the earlier 143-response compilation and the current 150-record dataset also limits reproducibility. Authenticating these records is essential before presenting the evidence as a verified empirical survey. Future research using documented sampling procedures, longitudinal programme records and complementary qualitative evidence could establish more reliable insights into educational continuity, gender-related barriers and the longer-term outcomes of bilateral cooperation. Overall, the study offers a conceptual and descriptive contribution while recognising the limits of its empirical evidence.

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