

Factors Contributing to Brain Drain and Strategies for Retaining Skilled Professionals in Afghanistan: A Multisectoral Approach

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Abstract

This qualitative study investigates the underlying factors contributing to brain drain in Afghanistan and proposes actionable strategies to retain skilled professionals. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 33 Afghan professionals residing in various countries, the research identifies key drivers of emigration, including political instability, poor quality of life, ethnic discrimination, economic hardship, personal insecurity, lack of professional growth, and an uncertain future. Participants' narratives reveal the multidimensional nature of intellectual migration and highlight the urgent need for systemic reforms. Proposed retention strategies include enhancing political stability and governance, improving public services and infrastructure, enforcing anti-discrimination measures, creating economic and employment opportunities, and engaging the Afghan diaspora. The findings underscore the importance of a holistic, multi-sectoral approach to mitigating brain drain and fostering an environment conducive to personal and professional fulfillment. This study offers practical insights for policymakers, development practitioners, and scholars aiming to strengthen Afghanistan's human capital base and support long-term national development.

Keywords: Brain drain, skilled migration, Afghanistan, Political instability, Economic constraints, Diaspora engagement, Retention strategies, Professional development, Qualitative research

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Introduction

Afghanistan has been experiencing brain drain for decades in various forms. However, the auxiliary factors, apart from war, triggering this detrimental phenomenon remain underexplored. A multisectoral approach is employed to gather insights into the background characteristics, motivations, and factors influencing the intent to leave Afghanistan. Intellectual manpower movement from less developed to more developed countries is a global phenomenon, with the most notable migration occurring from poor and emerging countries to affluent nations. According to an OECD report (1987) on immigrants, 20 million of the 59 million migrants are highly skilled and originate from South Asian countries such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh (Sajjad, 2011). Developed countries employ various schemes to attract skilled workers, including scholarships, fellowships, the Green Card Lottery, and H1-B visa in the USA, the High Skilled Program in the UK, the Special Immigration Visa (SIV) program for Afghan citizens, and technology expert programs in Germany (Bilal, 2022).

Historical and Contemporary Context

Afghanistan, an underdeveloped country, has faced decades of immigration driven by war, poverty, natural disasters, security concerns, regime shifts, coups, and financial hardships. The first major wave of Afghan emigration occurred before 1979 when a natural disaster in northern Afghanistan displaced 15,000 people to neighboring countries (Rahimi, 2017). Brain drain, the emigration of skilled professionals to more developed regions, significantly challenges the socio-economic development of low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) like Afghanistan. This phenomenon adversely affects critical sectors such as healthcare, education, engineering, and public administration, undermining sustainable growth (Docquier & Rapoport, 2012). Afghanistan's prolonged political instability, economic hardships, and limited professional growth opportunities worsen this talent departure, further weakening its human capital base (Adil & Shinwari, 2019).

Global and Regional Dynamics

Globally, brain drain is driven by factors such as better career opportunities, higher incomes, and professional development prospects in destination countries (El Saghir et al., 2020). In Afghanistan, decades of conflict and systemic issues dictate a deeper exploration of the causes and strategies to mitigate its impact. Economic, organizational, administrative, and political disparities are key drivers of intellectual migration. Research identifies the lack of opportunities in science, technology, and medicine as significant contributors to brain drain (Malekpour Afshar et al., 2022). Heidary Soureshjani and Falahaty (2021) highlight social welfare, job satisfaction, freedom of expression, and research opportunities as determinants of emigration. Regional studies emphasize these challenges. For instance, financial

instability, inadequate pensions, and insufficient insurance schemes drive labor migration in Ukraine (Pieńkowski, 2020). Economic freedom and lower public health expenditure in destination countries attract LMIC physicians (Yakovlev & Steinkopf, 2014). In Pakistan, poor working environments and low educational quality prompt doctors to migrate, with the UK being a favored destination (Balouch et al., 2022). Similarly, dissatisfaction among Egyptian medical professionals due to verbal and physical abuse and strained workplace relationships has spurred widespread migration (Kabbash et al., 2021).

Sector-Specific Challenges and Strategies

The healthcare sector in LMICs is excessively affected by brain drain, with shortages in skilled workers adversely impacting service delivery. Dohlman et al. (2019) underscore the importance of addressing healthcare worker shortages to strengthen LMICs. In Afghanistan, medical professionals seek safer working conditions and better compensation abroad, leaving domestic healthcare systems ill-equipped (Bartolini & Lee, 2023). Economic constraints intensify the issue. Limited infrastructure, scarce resources, and low wages drive professionals overseas. Rubin et al. (2016) note inadequate financial incentives and restricted career mobility as significant push factors. Yar and Zazia (2024) emphasize that these constraints perpetuate cycles of poverty and underdevelopment, particularly in rural areas. Despite these challenges, innovative strategies can mitigate brain drain. Investments in technology, such as telemedicine and online learning platforms, enable professionals to contribute locally without emigrating (Kanchan et al., 2021). Strengthening local capacity through education and professional development is another key strategy. Abdulloeva et al. (2023) advocate improving working conditions, job security, and competitive salaries to retain talent.

Addressing brain drain requires a holistic and multisectoral approach. Government agencies, private entities, and international organizations must collaborate to design comprehensive strategies. These efforts should prioritize creating a conducive environment for professional growth, reducing systemic inefficiencies, and fostering international collaborations (Ghosh, 2012). By tackling the root causes of brain drain, Afghanistan can retain its skilled professionals and secure a sustainable future.

Research Questions

- What are the factors contributing to brain drain in Afghanistan?
- What are the solutions to reduce brain drain in Afghanistan?

Objective of the Study

The objective of this research is to explore and identify the key factors driving brain drain in Afghanistan, particularly from the perspectives of skilled professionals who have migrated, and to examine the potential strategies for modifying this issue. By investigating the underlying causes such as

political instability, poor quality of life, ethnic discrimination, economic constraints, and threats to personal security, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by Afghan skilled migrants. Additionally, the research seeks to propose practical retention strategies that could reduce brain drain, including economic incentives, improvements in living conditions, political stability, professional development opportunities, and diaspora engagement.

Literature Review

Brain drain refers to the migration of intellectual human capital from source countries to regions offering better opportunities (Güingör, 2004). The term commonly describes the unidirectional flow of human capital, particularly when expertise predominantly moves in one direction (Salt, 1997). The concept of “brain” encompasses any ability, competency, or attribute regarded as a potential asset, while the term “drain” indicates that the rate of emigration exceeds what is considered “normal” or “desirable.” When combined, brain drain signifies the significant outflow of highly skilled individuals (Bushnell & Choy, 2001). Brain drain often involves the international migration of highly skilled professionals, such as surgeons, physicians, scientists, and engineers, from low-income to high-income countries, particularly to the United States. Studies on international migration highlight multiple causative factors, including both “push” and “pull” factors influencing skilled migration (Muula, 2005). Push factors primarily drive individuals out of their home countries, while pull factors attract them to host countries.

Push Factors Driving Brain Drain: Key push factors include low pay, poor economic conditions, unfavorable cultural traditions, and concerns about personal safety, particularly in conflict zones. For example, Afghanistan’s persistent political instability and insecurity significantly contribute to brain drain, as professionals seek safer environments abroad (Bilal Zai, 2022). The ongoing conflict and precarious security situation are critical drivers of emigration among Afghan intellectuals and skilled laborers. Economic challenges, such as high unemployment rates and low wages, aggravate dissatisfaction among professionals, leading them to explore opportunities in developed nations (Bilal, 2022; Adil et al., 2019). Poor working conditions and limited resources further fuel this dissatisfaction (Ayaz & Ali, 2021).

Social dynamics, such as ethnic discrimination, also play a significant role. Discriminatory practices and favoritism based on ethnicity undermine professionals’ sense of belonging, prompting them to emigrate (Galgóczy, 2022).

Pull Factors Encouraging Brain Drain: Pull factors include better living conditions, political stability, and improved public services such as quality education and healthcare in host countries. Developed nations often actively recruit skilled professionals to address human capital deficiencies, offering

competitive compensation, enhanced career opportunities, and better working conditions (Dauphinee, 2005; Klein et al., 2009). These factors collectively create an inverse relationship between the relative levels of remuneration, career advancement, and job satisfaction in source and host countries, further encouraging skilled migration.

Strategies for Retaining Skilled Professionals

Addressing brain drain requires a comprehensive approach involving government policies, private sector initiatives, and international collaborations (Bilal Zai, 2022). Strategies should include:

1. **Enhanced Economic Incentives:** Increasing salaries, offering better employment benefits, and creating financial growth opportunities within the country are essential for retaining skilled professionals (Ayaz & Ali, 2021). Infrastructure development and providing professional tools can improve job satisfaction and productivity (Adil et al., 2019).
2. **Continuous Professional Development:** Establishing talent management practices focusing on recruitment, training, and retention can sustain a skilled workforce. Such initiatives should emphasize professional growth and development (Adil & Shinwari, 2019).
3. **Leveraging Diaspora Networks:** Engaging the Afghan diaspora can foster investments, mentorship opportunities, and job creation within Afghanistan. Diaspora connections can play a pivotal role in mitigating brain drain (Bilal Zai, 2022).
4. **Inclusive and Secure Environments:** Addressing security concerns and fostering inclusivity are crucial for reducing emigration. Understanding the motivations and mindsets of professionals considering migration through a phenomenological approach can inform better policies (Bilal Zai, 2022).

The brain drain phenomenon in Afghanistan is a multifaceted issue driven by political, economic, and social factors. Mitigating its adverse effects requires a multisectoral approach involving enhanced security measures, economic incentives, and professional development opportunities. By creating an inclusive and supportive environment, Afghanistan can retain its skilled professionals, ensuring sustainable development.

Theoretical Framework

The constructs of this framework are grounded in the literature review and serve as the foundation for this research. The study aims to explore the auxiliary factors—beyond the impact of war—that have been driving brain drain in Afghanistan.



Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach to investigate the factors driving brain drain in Afghanistan and to identify potential solutions. The qualitative methodology was chosen to enable a deep exploration of participants' lived experiences, perspectives, and insights. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were utilized as the primary data collection method, offering the flexibility to explore emerging themes while addressing the central research questions:

1. What are the factors contributing to brain drain in Afghanistan?
2. What are the solutions to reduce brain drain in Afghanistan?

An interview guide was developed to facilitate structured yet open-ended discussions. The guide also allowed for follow-up questions based on participants' responses, fostering a richer, more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon. In line with the conference's methodological standards, the study applied purposive sampling to select qualified respondents, conducted interviews within a defined data-collection window, and followed an ethical protocol that included participant consent and confidentiality assurances. Data were analyzed through thematic analysis, and credibility was strengthened through peer review and participant confirmation of key points.

Data Collection Process

Interviews were conducted between January 01 and January 20, 2025, with participants drawn from governmental and non-governmental sectors, as well as Afghan elites who had emigrated. The sessions were held virtually through platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, and Google Meet. Interviews lasted between 20 to 50 minutes, averaging 18 minutes per session. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy. Transcriptions were rigorously reviewed, and the coding process was validated by two qualitative

research experts to enhance the reliability and validity of the findings. Participants openly shared their personal and professional experiences of intellectual migration, shedding light on both the challenges and opportunities they encountered.

Sampling Strategy and Sample Size

A purposive sampling method was employed to select participants with specific characteristics relevant to the study's objectives. This approach ensured the inclusion of individuals with firsthand experience of migration from Afghanistan, thereby providing detailed insights into the factors influencing brain drain and potential retention strategies. Guidelines from Clarke and Braun (2015) suggest that a sample size of 12 participants is sufficient for qualitative research to achieve data saturation, while Sandelowski (1995) recommends 8-12 participants for homogeneous populations. To capture a broad spectrum of experiences and achieve data richness, this study included 33 participants, representing a diverse range of professions and backgrounds. Participants were located in countries such as the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom, Canada, Turkey, Germany, and Austria, offering a global perspective on the challenges faced by Afghan skilled migrants and the opportunities available in host countries.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

The reliability and validity of the data were assessed based on the criteria proposed by Guba and Lincoln (1994), which include credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. Credibility was established through prolonged engagement with the data, member checking during the analysis process, and peer review as an external validation mechanism. This ensured that the findings accurately reflected participants' perspectives and experiences. To ensure dependability, the researchers accurately documented the entire research process, providing a transparent and detailed account that allows for replication and verification. Transferability was supported by providing a rich, detailed description of the study process and context, enabling others to evaluate the applicability of the findings to similar settings or populations. For confirmability, one external expert with expertise in qualitative research was consulted to verify the accuracy and integrity of the research process, including data coding and analysis. This external audit served to enhance the overall trustworthiness of the study findings. By adhering to these rigorous methodological criteria, the study ensures the reliability and robustness of its results, contributing valuable insights into the factors influencing brain drain and strategies for its mitigation.

Data Analysis

The analysis was conducted manually using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis method, following six sequential steps to ensure a rigorous and systematic approach. Initially, the researcher

familiarized themselves with the interview transcripts by re-reading them to gain a comprehensive understanding of the participants' narratives. Next, meaningful units of information were identified and organized to recognize recurring patterns within the interviews. These patterns were then grouped into broader themes that captured significant aspects of the participants' perspectives. The themes underwent a thorough review to ensure coherence and consistency while maintaining clear distinctions between them. Each theme was clearly defined and labeled to reflect its core meaning accurately. Finally, the themes were synthesized into a coherent narrative, providing an in-depth understanding of the factors driving brain drain and proposing practical strategies for its mitigation.

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

In table 1: The demographic characteristics of the participants in this study provide a clear view of their diverse backgrounds and experiences. The study included 33 respondents, with 70% being male (23 participants) and 30% female (10 participants). This gender distribution indicates a significant male predominance among the participants. The participants came from various professional backgrounds, offering a broad spectrum of experiences and insights. They were located in multiple countries, including the United States (21%), Australia (15%), the United Kingdom (18%), Canada (12%), Turkey (12%), Germany (12%), and Austria (9%), providing a global perspective on the challenges faced by Afghan skilled migrants.

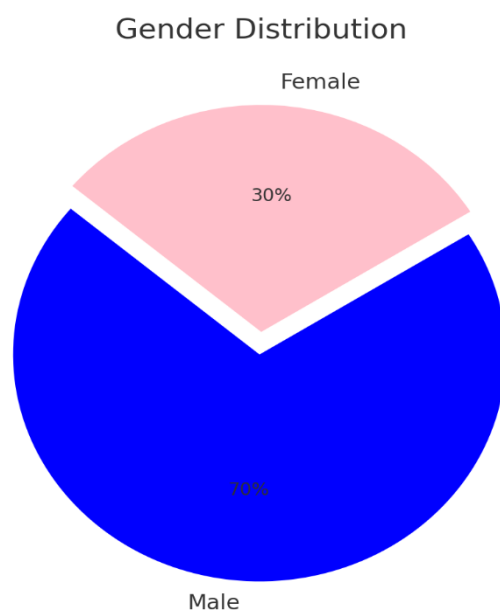
Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants with firsthand experience of migration from Afghanistan, ensuring detailed insights into brain drain and retention strategies. Interviews were conducted virtually via WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, and Google Meet, lasting between 20 to 50 minutes. The data collection period spanned from January 01 to January 20, 2025.

Table-1: Summarizing the Demographic Data

Demographic Characteristic	Category	Number of Respondents (N=33)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	23	70%
	Female	10	30%
Professional Background	Diverse range of professions	33	100%
Geographical Representation	United States	7	21%
	Australia	5	15%
	United Kingdom	6	18%

	Canada	4	12%
	Turkey	4	12%
	Germany	4	12%
	Austria	3	9%
Recruitment Method	Purposive sampling	33	100%
Interview Duration and Mode	20 to 50 minutes, virtual (WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, Google Meet)	33	100%
Data Collection Period	January 01 to 33 January 20, 2025		100%
Recruitment Method	Purposive sampling	33	100%

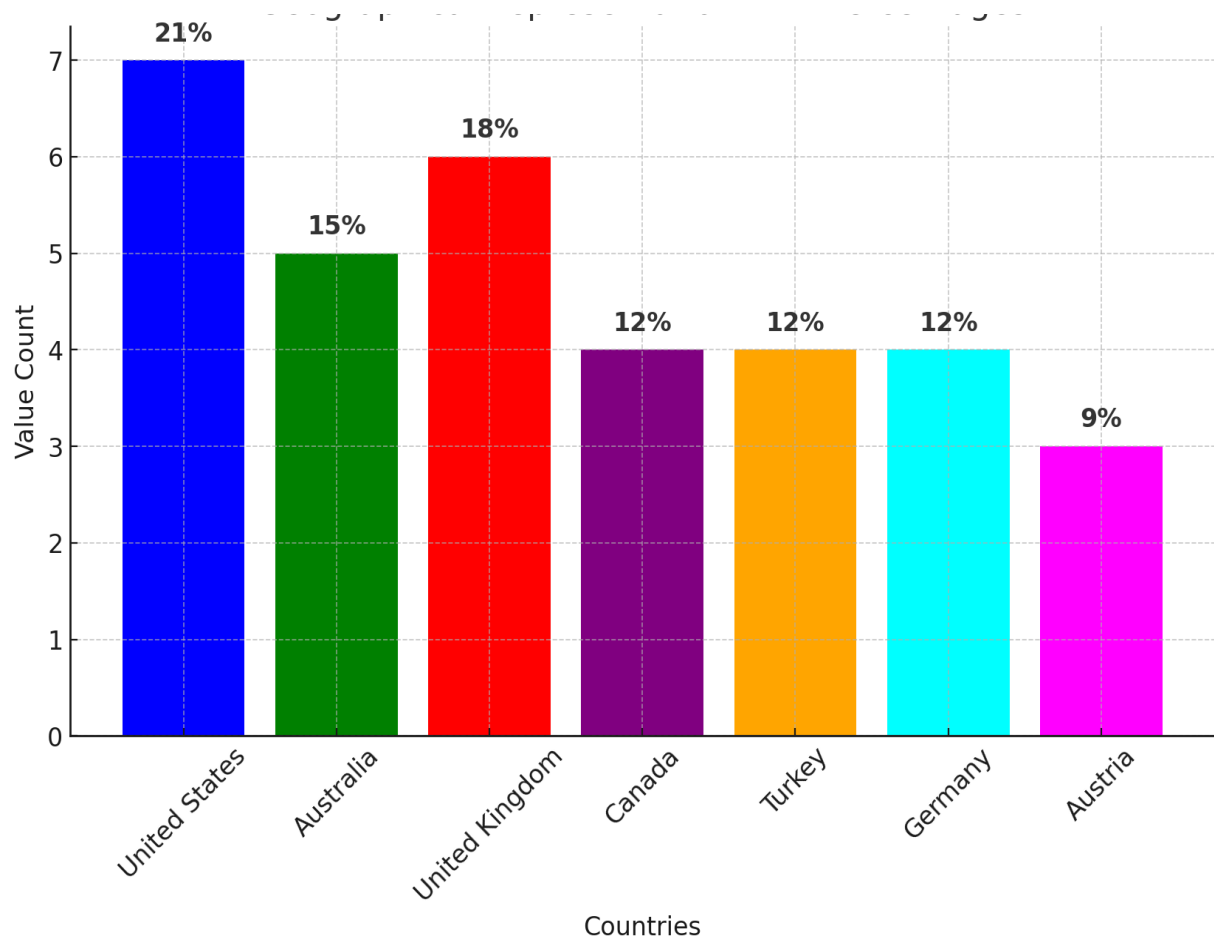
Figure 1 & 2: The pie and bar charts below represent the demographic distribution of participants based on gender and geographical representation.



Emerging Themes and Proposed Solutions

The analysis of participants' narratives identified seven key themes that illustrate the underlying factors contributing to brain drain in Afghanistan. These themes highlight the multidimensional nature of the issue:

1. **Political Instability and Uncertainty:** Participants expressed concerns about war, chaos, unreliable governance, and a pervasive distrust in political systems.
2. **Poor Quality of Life:** Challenges such as inadequate healthcare, poor infrastructure, pollution, and limited access to modern technology were frequently cited.
3. **Ethnic Discrimination:** Experiences of unfair treatment, harassment, nepotism, and favoritism based on ethnicity emerged as significant deterrents.
4. **Economic Constraints and Unemployment:** Widespread poverty, lack of job opportunities, job insecurities, and limited entrepreneurial success were emphasized.



5. **Mysterious Killings and Threats:** Fear of death threats, kidnappings, and targeted violence created a hostile environment for skilled individuals.
6. **Lack of Professional and Personal Growth:** Limited opportunities for career development, inadequate wages, and restricted upward mobility hindered aspirations.
7. **Uncertain Future:** Participants expressed apprehension about chaos, distrust in governance, and the potential collapse of political systems.

To address these challenges and mitigate brain drain, participants proposed several actionable strategies:

1. **Economic Incentives:** Providing competitive salaries, financial growth opportunities, and entrepreneurial support to create a stable economic environment.
2. **Improved Quality of Life:** Investing in healthcare, transportation infrastructure, and environmental improvements to enhance living standards.
3. **Political Stability and Governance:** Strengthening security measures, ensuring system reliability, and mitigating fears of political transition.
4. **Addressing Discrimination:** Implementing and enforcing inclusive policies to ensure fairness and equality across all ethnic groups.
5. **Professional Development Opportunities:** Establishing training programs, promoting talent management, and advancing workplace technologies to foster growth.
6. **Diaspora Engagement:** Encouraging return migration through mentorship programs, investment opportunities, and support systems.
7. **Security Measures:** Ensuring the safety of individuals by addressing threats, violence, and fostering trust in governance and institutions.

Political Instability and Uncertainty

In response to the question of what factors contribute to brain drain in Afghanistan, many participants pointed to political instability and uncertainty as significant drivers. The following responses illustrate their perspectives: Participant 1 (2025):

"Well, The instability of our political system is the main reason I chose to leave. For decades, there's been no consistent leadership, and every government has either collapsed or failed to deliver. It's impossible to build a future in such an environment." **Participant 2 (2025):**

"Hmmm! The lack of political certainty makes living unbearable in Afghanistan. We wake up every day not knowing if there will be another power shift, another conflict. This unpredictability forces people like me to leave because stability is essential for progress." **Participant 3 (2025):**

"I believe that trust in the government is nonexistent. Every administration makes promises, but none of them last long enough to fulfill them. When the republic fell and the Islamic Emirate took over, it showed me how fragile everything is. Educated people can't afford to risk their lives and futures like this."

"Participant 4 (2025): *"Political chaos is at the heart of Afghanistan's problems. When regimes change overnight and policies shift with no warning, how can we plan for anything? This uncertainty pushes the best minds out of the country because they crave stability and long-term security."* Political instability and uncertainty stand out as a core factor in Afghanistan's brain drain. Participants identified themes such as distrust in leadership, regime fragility, and the inability to predict or rely on the political future. These issues compel skilled individuals to seek stability and opportunities abroad.

Poor Quality of Life

When asked about factors contributing to brain drain in Afghanistan, many participants highlighted the poor quality of life as a critical driver. Below are the responses of six participants: Participant 1 (2025): *"To address the above question, I would like to state that the basic living conditions are so poor that it's hard to survive, let alone succeed. Access to clean water, electricity, and healthcare is inconsistent. As an educated person, I couldn't see a future for myself or my family in such dire circumstances."* Participant 2 (2025): *"The cost of living is high compared to the income levels in Afghanistan. Even if you're educated and employed, you struggle to provide a decent life for your family. It's not just about earning money—it's about having access to resources that make life bearable."* Participant 3 (2022): *"Healthcare is a major concern. Hospitals are poorly equipped, and even basic medicines are hard to find. For someone like me who wants to ensure a safe and healthy environment for my children, staying here was not an option."* Participant 4 (2025):

"The lack of proper housing is another issue. Most people, even educated ones, live in cramped, unsafe conditions. When your living environment doesn't meet even basic standards, it becomes impossible to focus on personal or professional growth." Participant 5 (2025): *"Afghanistan lacks recreational facilities and spaces for personal development. There are no libraries, parks, or cultural centers to inspire or nurture young minds. This low quality of life forces educated people to look for better opportunities elsewhere."* Participant 6 (2025): *"Poor infrastructure is a daily struggle. Roads are damaged, public transport is unreliable, and communication networks are weak. These issues affect every aspect of life and make people feel like they're living in survival mode rather than building a future."* A number of participant believe that the poor quality of life in Afghanistan emerged as a significant factor contributing to brain drain. Thematic analysis identified six major concerns: lack of basic amenities, inadequate

healthcare, high living costs, poor housing, absence of recreational spaces, and failing infrastructure. These conditions collectively compel skilled individuals to seek better living standards abroad.

Ethnic Discrimination

In response to the question of what factors contribute to brain drain in Afghanistan, some participants cited ethnic discrimination as a significant issue as well. The following responses illustrate their experiences: **Participant 1 (2025):** *"As a member of a minority ethnic group, I always felt excluded from opportunities. No matter how educated or skilled I was, my background overshadowed my abilities. This kind of systemic bias makes it impossible to succeed here."* **Participant 2 (2025):** *"Ethnic discrimination is deeply rooted in every sector, from education to employment. Jobs and promotions often go to people from dominant ethnic groups, regardless of merit. For people like me, leaving was the only way to escape this injustice."* **Participant 3 (2025):** *"I faced discrimination not just at work but also in my daily life. Being treated as an outsider in your own country is heartbreaking. When you know that no matter how hard you try, your ethnicity will always hold you back, and leaving becomes the only choice."* **Participant 4 (2025):** *"The favoritism toward certain ethnic groups creates a divide that affects everything. It's not just about individuals—it's about entire communities being marginalized. Many of us felt that staying would mean accepting a life of inequality, so we chose to leave."* Respondents cited that ethnic discrimination emerged as a significant factor driving Afghanistan's brain drain. Participants highlighted themes of exclusion, systemic bias, limited opportunities, and social inequality, all of which compel skilled individuals from marginalized communities to seek opportunities elsewhere.

Economic Constraints and Unemployment

When asked about factors contributing to brain drain in Afghanistan, several participants overwhelmingly pointed to economic hardships and a lack of job opportunities. The following responses from seven participants provide insight into their experiences: **Participant 1 (2025):** *"The job market here is broken. Even if you have an advanced degree, there's no guarantee you'll find work. Most jobs are either unavailable or poorly paid, and it's impossible to support a family on what little you earn."* **Participant 2 (2025):** *"I graduated with honors, but after months of searching, I couldn't find a job in my field. It's not about being qualified; it's about having the right connections. I left because I couldn't afford to waste my potential in a system that doesn't value talent."* **Participant 3 (2025):** *"In my opinion, unemployment is crushing in Afghanistan. Every day, I saw skilled people struggling to find even temporary work. It felt like no matter how hard you tried, there was no hope of building a stable financial future."* **Participant 4 (2025):** *"The economy is in shambles, and inflation makes everything unaffordable. Even when you find work, your earnings barely cover basic needs like food and shelter. This constant*

struggle pushes people to leave and seek better opportunities elsewhere. **Participant 5 (2025):** *"There are no opportunities for growth or innovation. You either work in low-paying jobs with no future or stay unemployed. For someone with aspirations, staying Afghanistan feels like wasting your life."*

Participant 6 (2025):

"Many organizations have collapsed due to instability, leaving thousands jobless. I saw entire families depend on a single breadwinner who barely earned enough. It's not just about personal ambition—it's about survival." **Participant 7 (2022):** *"The lack of economic stability creates a cycle of hopelessness. People like me who want to contribute to society feel trapped because the system doesn't support entrepreneurship or growth. Leaving was the only way to find a path forward."* Economic constraints and unemployment emerged as one of the critical factors driving Afghanistan's brain drain. Participants emphasized themes such as the lack of job opportunities, inadequate wages, inflation, systemic corruption, and the collapse of industries. These economic hardships leave educated and skilled individuals with no choice but to seek stability and opportunity abroad.

Target Killings and Threats

In answer to the question about what causes brain drain in Afghanistan, participants also mentioned that mysterious killings and threats forced them to leave. Several said the ongoing danger of violence and unexplained killings made skilled people want to leave. Here are three responses that show this problem: **Participant 1 (2025):** *"Living in fear every day puts huge pressure on your mental health. Professionals like me were targeted simply because of our work or positions. I had colleagues who were killed in broad daylight, and the government couldn't protect us. The fear of being next was unbearable."* **Participant 2 (2025):** *"Threats became a daily reality. Whether it was through phone calls or physical intimidation, we lived under constant pressure. I had to leave because staying meant risking my life and my family's safety. No one should have to live in such fear."* **Participant 3 (2025):** *"Mysterious killings were happening to people I knew, and the authorities were either powerless or unwilling to investigate. When professionals are murdered without consequence, it sends a message: No one is safe. That was the moment I knew I had to get out."* Mysterious killings and threats were seen as major contributing factors to Afghanistan's brain drain. Participants spoke about the pervasive fear for their lives and the inability of the state to provide protection, leading many skilled individuals to seek safety and stability abroad.

Lack of Professional and Personal Growth

When discussing the factors contributing to brain drain in Afghanistan, many participants also pointed to the lack of opportunities for professional and personal development as key reasons for leaving. Below are five responses that reflect this issue: **Participant 1 (2025):** *"There was no room for growth here,*

whether professionally or personally. Even if you're highly qualified, the lack of mentorship and support systems means you stay stagnant. I left because I wanted to reach my full potential in a place that values progress. "Participant 2 (2025): *"Afghanistan doesn't offer the opportunities needed for people to advance in their careers. I worked hard, but my efforts were often overlooked or dismissed. Without the chance to grow, I felt like I was wasting my time. That's why I left."* Participant 3 (2025): *"There's no platform for professionals to excel. You're either stuck in one position for years or forced to accept low-paying jobs. The lack of professional development opportunities was a major reason I decided to seek a future elsewhere."* Participant 4 (2025): *"Personal growth is also limited here. With no access to global networks or exposure to new ideas, you feel isolated and uninspired. The lack of intellectual stimulation was suffocating. I needed a change to grow and expand my horizons."* Participant 5 (2025): *"The barriers to progress in Afghanistan are not just professional—they're cultural. There's a lack of innovation and no real encouragement to try new things. It felt like the country was holding me back, so I had to leave to pursue my ambitions."* The lack of professional and personal growth appeared as a significant factor in Afghanistan's brain drain. Participants highlighted the absence of career advancement opportunities, limited intellectual stimulation, and the cultural constraints that hindered both professional and personal development, compelling many to seek better prospects abroad.

Uncertain Future

In their answer to the question about what caused them to leave Afghanistan, most people mentioned the uncertain future as a key factor. Several participants also emphasized this uncertainty as a major reason for their decision to leave, contributing to brain drain. Below are four responses that reflect this sentiment. Participant 1 (2025): *"I always felt that the future of Afghanistan is always uncertain. Every time we think things are improving, something happens—whether it's a political shift or a new conflict. Living with such uncertainty makes it impossible to plan a future, and that's why I decided to leave."* Participant 2 (2025): *"To me, the constant instability made it clear that there was no security for my family or career. How can you build a future when the government keeps changing and the country remains in turmoil? I couldn't afford to wait any longer for a future that may never come."* Participant 3 (2025): *"The uncertainty is paralyzing. I spent years hoping for change, but nothing ever stayed stable. The fear that everything could fall apart at any moment made me realize that staying was not an option. I needed a place where I could see a clear future for myself."* Participant 4 (2022): *"Afghanistan's future is unpredictable, and that unpredictability destroys any hope for progress. I've seen so many people invest their lives in this country only for it to crumble under the weight of political chaos. I couldn't live with that kind of uncertainty anymore."* The uncertainty about the future in Afghanistan was one of the major

factors contributing to brain drain. Participants expressed their frustrations with the constant instability, political shifts, and the inability to build a secure future, leading many to seek opportunities abroad.

Retention Strategies

Retention strategies tailored to address the specific challenges identified by participants provide a pathway to mitigate brain drain and retain skilled individuals in Afghanistan. By focusing on improving political stability, enhancing the quality of life, promoting inclusivity, addressing economic constraints, ensuring safety, and fostering opportunities for professional and personal growth, these strategies aim to create an environment where individuals can envision a secure and prosperous future. By systematically addressing issues such as political uncertainty, ethnic discrimination, and the lack of development opportunities, these measures not only curb the departure of talented individuals but also build a foundation for national progress and resilience.

Political Stability and Governance

From the participants' perspectives, addressing political instability is crucial for retaining skilled individuals in Afghanistan. Strengthening governance, ensuring system reliability, and building public trust are vital steps. One participant emphasized: *"The instability of our political system is the main reason I chose to leave. For decades, there's been no consistent leadership. If the government could deliver consistent policies and security, people like me would reconsider leaving."* (Participant 1, 2025). Retention strategies focus on building trust and stability. Promoting transparent governance ensures accountability, while continuity in leadership avoids disruptive changes. Engaging citizens in policy decisions fosters trust and involvement, strengthening long-term support.

Quality of Life Improvements

Participants highlighted the importance of improving living standards to retain talent, stressing the need for investment in basic amenities like healthcare, housing, and infrastructure. One participant shared, *"Access to clean water, electricity, and healthcare is inconsistent. If these were improved, many educated individuals would stay."* (Participant 1, 2025) To address this, retention strategies include developing infrastructure, expanding healthcare services, and enhancing living conditions through affordable housing and recreational facilities. Participants also emphasized the need to address ethnic discrimination to create an inclusive and equitable environment. Reducing systemic bias would encourage skilled individuals to remain in Afghanistan. As one participant noted, *"As a member of a minority group, I always felt excluded. If opportunities were genuinely equal, I would have stayed."* (Participant 1, 2025) Retention strategies to address this include enforcing anti-discrimination policies, promoting diversity in leadership, and creating awareness programs to educate and reduce biases.

Economic Constraints and Employment Opportunities

Economic hardships, unemployment, and a lack of growth opportunities are key factors driving brain drain. Participants emphasized the importance of financial stability and job creation in retaining talent. One participant explained, *"The job market is broken. If the government supported industries and entrepreneurship, people like me would stay."* (Participant 1, 2025) To address these challenges, retention strategies include stimulating job creation by supporting industries, especially in technology and education; encouraging entrepreneurship through grants, loans, and resources for startups; and ensuring fair employment practices by establishing merit-based hiring that rewards qualifications over connections.

Mitigating Security Concerns

A few participants slightly emphasized that the fear of violence and threats is a factor driving skilled individuals to leave. One participant shared, *"Living in fear every day is hard. If safety were 100% guaranteed, I'd return."* (Participant 1, 2025) To address this, retention strategies include enhancing law enforcement by investing in training and equipping security forces, establishing protection programs to provide safe environments for professionals and their families, and strengthening the rule of law to ensure justice for victims of violence and restore public confidence.

Professional Development and Personal Growth

Participants expressed that the lack of opportunities for career advancement and intellectual growth limits their potential. One participant noted, *"There's no room for growth here. If mentorship and global networks were available, I would stay."* (Participant 1, 2025) To address this, retention strategies include creating training programs to offer advanced skills development and mentorship opportunities, facilitating global exposure through international collaboration and exchange programs, and investing in research and innovation by developing platforms to foster creativity and progress.

Reducing Uncertainty about the Future

Participants expressed that constant instability and uncertainty about Afghanistan's future discourage long-term commitment. One participant remarked, *"The uncertainty is paralyzing. If a clear and stable path forward existed, I would stay."* (Participant 3, 2025) To address this, retention strategies include developing long-term plans that present a clear roadmap for Afghanistan's development, ensuring policy continuity to avoid abrupt changes in laws and regulations, and engaging youth in vision building by involving young professionals in shaping the country's future.

Discussions

This section examines the findings in light of the research questions and offers retention strategies informed by participants' insights and existing literature. The study investigated factors driving skilled migration from Afghanistan and identified actionable solutions to mitigate brain drain effectively.

Key Themes Driving Brain Drain

Political instability and uncertainty emerged as significant factors compelling skilled individuals to leave Afghanistan. Participants cited regime changes, a lack of public trust in leadership, and fears of political transition as central issues. Such instability prevents individuals from planning long-term futures in the country. To address this, promoting transparent and consistent governance is essential to building trust. Strengthening security measures can ensure system reliability, and fostering citizen engagement in policymaking would create a sense of inclusion and shared vision.

The poor quality of life in Afghanistan was another critical factor highlighted by participants. Inadequate access to basic amenities, healthcare, proper housing, and recreational facilities collectively reduced living standards, driving skilled professionals to seek better conditions abroad. Enhancing healthcare, infrastructure, and housing can significantly improve living conditions. Additionally, providing clean water, reliable electricity, and efficient transportation, alongside developing recreational and cultural spaces, can foster community well-being and encourage skilled individuals to stay. Mysterious killings and threats were reported as pervasive issues that created a sense of insecurity among professionals. Many participants shared experiences of intimidation and a lack of protection from authorities. Strengthening law enforcement through better training and resources, implementing protection programs for professionals and their families, and ensuring swift and transparent justice for victims of violence are crucial measures to restore public confidence and mitigate fear.

Systemic ethnic discrimination and workplace biases also emerged as significant deterrents. Participants described feeling marginalized and excluded from opportunities based on ethnicity, which undermined their sense of belonging. Addressing this issue requires enforcing anti-discrimination policies, promoting workplace diversity, and introducing awareness campaigns to reduce ethnic biases. Ensuring equitable representation in leadership roles would further foster inclusivity and equality.

Economic constraints and unemployment were consistently identified as major push factors for migration. Afghanistan's struggling economy, characterized by high unemployment, low wages, and limited entrepreneurial opportunities, forces skilled individuals to seek stability elsewhere. Stimulating job creation by supporting key industries, particularly in technology and education, can provide much-needed opportunities. Offering grants, loans, and resources for entrepreneurship and establishing merit-

based hiring systems that reward qualifications over nepotism would further strengthen economic stability.

The inability to predict or rely on Afghanistan's political and economic future was another significant driver of brain drain. Participants expressed concerns over potential conflicts and governance failures, leading to widespread uncertainty. Developing long-term national development plans to present a clear roadmap for progress is crucial. Ensuring policy continuity to avoid abrupt governance changes and engaging youth in shaping the nation's vision would foster hope and commitment among skilled professionals. Finally, participants reported a lack of professional and personal growth opportunities as a barrier to remaining in Afghanistan. Limited career advancement, mentorship, and intellectual development opportunities hindered their potential. Addressing this requires creating robust training and professional development programs, facilitating global collaboration and exchange opportunities, and investing in research and innovation to provide platforms for creativity and intellectual progress.

By addressing these root causes of brain drain and implementing the proposed retention strategies, Afghanistan can foster an environment conducive to professional and personal growth. Such measures would enable skilled professionals to thrive and contribute significantly to the nation's sustainable development.

Conclusion

The study investigated the factors contributing to brain drain in Afghanistan and identified strategies to retain skilled professionals. It highlighted that political instability, poor quality of life, ethnic discrimination, economic challenges, mysterious killings, and an uncertain future are the main drivers compelling intellectual migration. These factors collectively create an environment where talented individuals feel unsafe, undervalued, and unable to achieve their personal and professional goals. Participants emphasized the dire need for stability, security, and better living conditions to reduce brain drain. They also pointed out the importance of equal opportunities, economic support, and professional development to encourage skilled individuals to stay in Afghanistan.

To address these challenges, the study proposed actionable strategies:

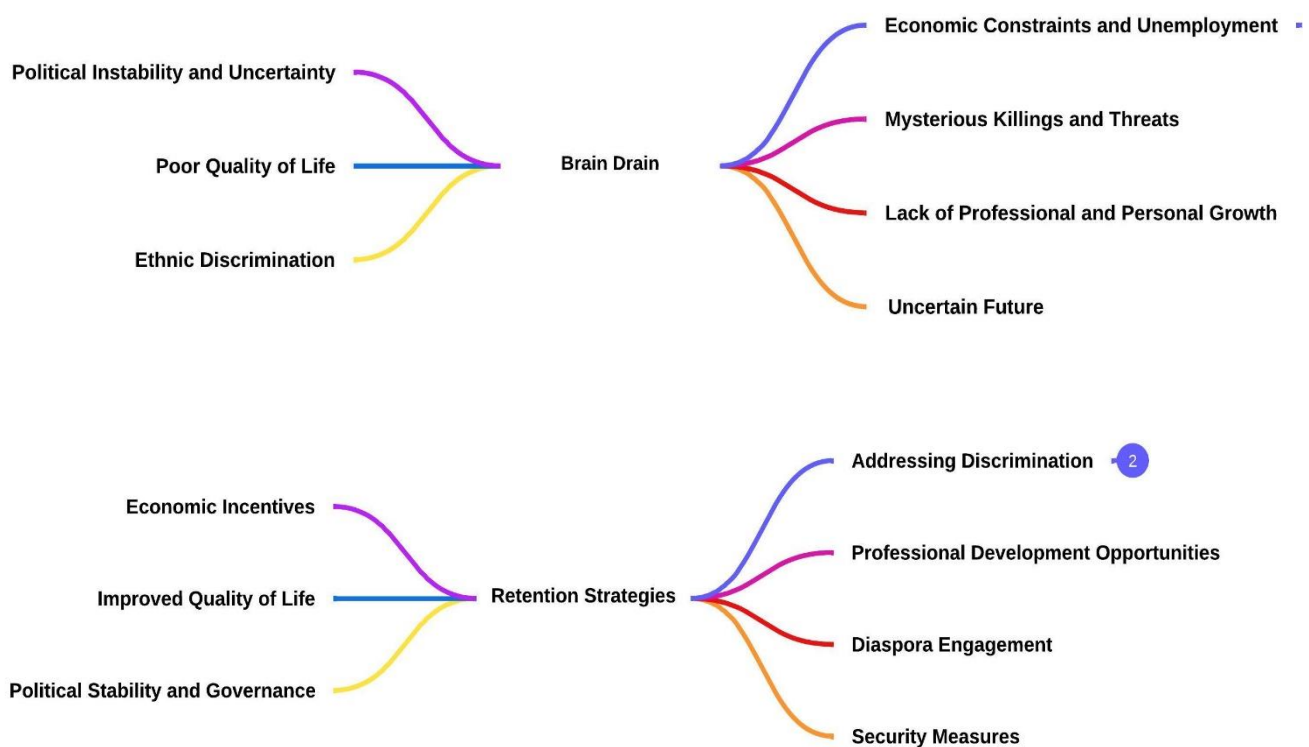
1. Promoting political stability and transparent governance.
2. Improving infrastructure, healthcare, and overall quality of life.
3. Reducing ethnic discrimination and fostering inclusivity.
4. Providing financial incentives, job opportunities, and support for entrepreneurship.
5. Ensuring the safety and protection of citizens.
6. Offering platforms for career growth, mentorship, and intellectual development.

7. Engaging the Afghan diaspora to contribute to national progress.

By implementing these strategies, Afghanistan can create a more supportive environment for its skilled professionals, ensuring their contribution to the country's development and reducing the outflow of talent. Addressing the root causes of brain drain is essential for the nation's sustainable growth and prosperity.

Conceptual Framework

The thematic analysis of the transcriptions resulted in the development of a detailed conceptual framework that identifies the key factors driving brain drain in Afghanistan. The study explored the phenomenon from the perspectives of Afghan intellectuals, professionals, and skilled individuals, uncovering seven core themes that entice migration: political instability and uncertainty, poor quality of life, ethnic discrimination, economic constraints and unemployment, mysterious killings and threats, lack of professional and personal growth, and an uncertain future.



Contribution and Implication

This study makes a significant contribution to the existing literature on brain drain and human resource management by providing a comprehensive analysis of the factors driving intellectual migration from Afghanistan. By exploring these dynamics from the perspectives of Afghan professionals and

academics, the research sheds light on the socio-political and economic challenges compelling skilled individuals to emigrate. The findings have practical implications for policymakers and the government of Afghanistan. They offer a new perspective for devising strategies to mitigate brain drain and encourage the return of skilled professionals. Recommendations such as fostering political stability, enhancing quality of life, and promoting inclusivity, ensuring personal and professional growth, and engaging the Afghan diaspora provide actionable pathways for addressing this pressing issue. By integrating these insights into policymaking, Afghanistan can build an environment that retains talent, reverses the brain drain trend, and facilitates sustainable national development.

Limitation of the Study

This research faced several limitations that should be acknowledged. Firstly, recruiting participants for the study proved challenging due to various factors such as their lack of availability, busy schedules, and concerns over the potential misuse of shared information. These barriers limited the number of participants, which in turn constrained the breadth of insights and the statistical robustness of the findings. A larger and more diverse participant pool would enhance the reliability and depth of future research. Additionally, this study utilized a qualitative approach, which, while effective in capturing nuanced perspectives, limits the ability to generalize findings. For future research, it is recommended to adopt a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative techniques. This methodology would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the brain drain phenomenon by balancing in-depth individual insights with broader, statistically robust data.

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