

# HIGHER EDUCATION IN EUROPE: A PATHWAY TO PROTECTION FOR AFGHANS?

EXAMINING THE CHALLENGES OF ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION IN EUROPE FOR 'AFGHANS AT RISK'

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ECRE WORKING PAPER **17**

NOVEMBER 2022



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European Council  
on Refugees and Exiles

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Research Context

This paper sets out to explore education pathways for Afghans in Europe with a focus primarily on four European Union (EU) countries: Germany, France, Sweden and The Netherlands. The choice of case studies reflects the position of these countries within the EU context. These are also important case studies since considerable Afghan diaspora communities already reside in all four countries both as citizens and also as refugees. While initially conceived to address the challenges of relocating to Europe faced by those who are considered to be '*Afghans at risk*', the findings and analysis are aimed to reflect on the wider context in Afghanistan after the Taliban's return to power in August 2021. This is not intended to be exhaustive research; conducting such a comprehensive study is mainly hindered by the unfolding conditions in Afghanistan but also the evolving nature of European responses. Lack of existing data and challenges of data gathering remain in place.

This report aims to contribute to the process of meaningful conversations on advocacy in the EU for the protection of Afghans at risk. The recommendations and analysis are intended to strengthen ongoing advocacy and the demands for improvement in evidence-based policy responses and a widening of protection afforded to Afghans at risk by the EU.

To compile this report, the author has conducted extensive desk research and drawn on previous policy analyses. In addition, several qualitative interviews were conducted with Afghans who have engaged with education pathways in the respective four countries; these include Afghans who are currently in Europe and those who have tried to support family or friends in Afghanistan with qualifications and have been keen to seek protection through education pathways. Two European academics with extensive experience in supporting Afghans' attempts to access education pathways have also provided insight. Throughout the report, these inputs have been relied upon, but names have been anonymised.

The report begins by outlining the broader context of Afghanistan since August 2021 when the Taliban returned to power with a particular focus on how the extent of vulnerabilities facing Afghans has expanded. This is followed by a brief focus on the four EU member states as case studies. Finally, the report draws attention to policy recommendations based on the analysis and evidence gathered for this research.

### 1.2. Taliban's Return to Power

Afghans are facing a period of profound disruption since the Taliban seized power in August 2021. The ongoing cycle of conflict in the country, which in many ways has roots in the communist coup d'état of April 1978, has entailed disastrous episodes of instability resulting often from calamitous instances of regime change. Each time there has been a regime change in the country since 1978, it has led to considerable segments of the population facing forced outward-migrations as well as internal displacements. For over 40 years, Afghans have been forced to seek safety outside their country. Pakistan and Iran provided sanctuary for the initial population move from Afghanistan; they were Afghan refugees<sup>1</sup> who were largely driven by the Soviet Union's military invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979. Meanwhile, the number of Afghan refugees in Europe, the USA, Canada, and Australia has also increased over the past decades. The Taliban seizing power in August 2021 expectedly added to the precarious security, socioeconomic and governance problems that Afghans faced in recent years. The spiralling levels of violence in recent years that resulted in thousands of civilian deaths and injuries have largely subsided because the US-led NATO troops have fully withdrawn from Afghanistan and the former government's security services have collapsed entirely. Nonetheless, it is not unsurprising that violence, risks and threats facing Afghans – mainly as a result of the Taliban's return to

1. Throughout this report, the term "Afghan refugee" refers to any Afghan who is seeking – or has sought – asylum and protection outside Afghanistan, and who may or may not have been granted protection/asylum. The author is aware of the different legal definitions of such terms as "refugee", "migrant" and "asylum seeker". However, the utility of the term "refugee" is specifically made to underscore the forced nature of Afghans' displacement and outward migration that is often defined by violence (of all types), insecurities, and persecution.

power – have not disappeared; rather, the nature and level of violence have become even more complicated, creating multiple and multi-layered vulnerabilities that threaten Afghans. As a result, it should not come as a surprise to the policymakers in the West, especially in Europe, that the Taliban's return to power significantly adds to the sense of urgency among Afghans to leave their country for refuge outside. This urgency is most acutely felt by *Afghans at risk* who face violence, threats, and persecution as a direct result of the Taliban's return to power.

Understanding the contemporary context of socioeconomic and security challenges in Afghanistan is crucial to dissecting the unfolding situation in the country at present. Afghanistan is consistently ranked as the least peaceful country by the Global Peace Index, a position that the country has held for the past five years.<sup>2</sup> Internal displacements and a growing population of internally displaced people (IDPs) have been of key concern in recent years. Between January 2021 and June 2021 alone, at least 270,000 were internally displaced by conflict and violence.<sup>3</sup> Notwithstanding that there were significant push factors in Afghanistan predating the Taliban takeover of power last year, the collapse of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan has removed any tangible means of direction for the country and its citizens' future. Afghanistan is diplomatically isolated, risking the prospects of a 'pariah state'.<sup>4</sup> The collapse of an internationally recognised state has amplified the sense of abandonment by the international community with no clear roadmap to a political settlement in sight.

As a result, a shocking level of uncertainty has gripped the country; Afghans' sense of loss is palpable. Afghanistan under the Taliban remains heavily sanctioned, cut off from the international system and lacks any external diplomatic recognition. The banking sector is in paralysis not least because international financial institutions (IFIs) – such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) – do not recognise the Taliban's regime. Western countries, led by the United States, are looking for mechanisms to influence the Taliban, and to engage with the regime in ways that would not compromise Western benchmarks for engagement such as human rights, girls' right to secondary and higher education, and concerns over transnational terrorism. It seems so far that the aid conditionality and financial sanctions against the Taliban have not achieved the West's desire to produce any meaningful leverage against the Taliban regime. It is unclear how long the current standoff between the Taliban regime and the international community will endure. Yet, the Taliban rhetoric of a 'victory' against the US-led Western powers in Afghanistan remains unabated..

Feeling buoyed by their rapid grip over the country and the spectacular speed of their return to power last year, Taliban leaders have largely ignored Afghans' and international calls for inclusivity and moderation. Taliban's Islamic Emirate has appointed clerics, or staunch loyalists, to the leadership roles across the governmental structures and other institutions it controls.<sup>5</sup> As the world's attention has shifted to different spotlights, such as the war in Ukraine, Afghanistan has fallen from the headlines as well as from the priority of European and Western policymakers. Meanwhile, the Taliban has failed to transform from an insurgent group to a political movement that is capable of governance. Humanitarian and socioeconomic conditions have drastically worsened. The United Nations estimates that nearly 25 million Afghans, well over half of the population, require humanitarian support.<sup>6</sup> At least 20 million Afghans face acute food shortages according to international donors.<sup>7</sup> Data by UNICEF indicates that of the number in need of humanitarian assistance, at least 13.1 million are children while over 1.1 million children also face severe acute malnutrition.<sup>8</sup> Afghans face one of the toughest winters as socioeconomic difficulties loom large, and Afghanistan's woes are exacerbated by unfolding challenges related to climate change and natural disasters.

2. Global Peace Index 2022 <https://www.economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/GPI-2022-web.pdf>

3. UNHCR (2021) '**UNHCR warns of imminent humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan**', 13 July 2021, <https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2021/7/60ed3ba34/unhcr-warns-imminent-humanitarian-crisis-afghanistan.html%20>

4. Hameed Hakimi and Mark Bowden (Aug 2022) "Western Disengagement Will Turn Afghanistan Into a Pariah State", *The Diplomat*, 17 August 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/08/western-disengagement-will-turn-afghanistan-into-a-pariah-state/>

5. For a more detailed recent analysis of the unfolding challenges in Afghanistan, see: Mark Bowden, Hameed Hakimi, Ben Ramalingam (May 2022) "Confronting New Realities: Actions and Priorities for the International Community in Afghanistan", Afghanistan Strategic Learning Initiative (ASLI), United Kingdom Humanitarian Innovation Hub (UKHIH) <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/2022-05-26-confronting-new-realities-actions-priorities-afghanistan.pdf>

6. United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) press release, 11 August 2022 <https://unama.unmissions.org/un-humanitarian-coordinator-reaffirms-commitment-supporting-vulnerable-communities-across>

7. Ambassador Kariuki of the UK at the Security Council briefing on Afghanistan, 29 August 2022 <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/on-top-of-the-humanitarian-crisis-in-afghanistan-the-human-rights-situation-is-stark>

8. UNICEF Afghanistan Situation Report No. 10, September 2022, <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/unicef-afghanistan-humanitarian-situation-report-10-01-30-september-2022>

### 1.3. Western-assisted Evacuations

Last year's extraordinary scenes from Kabul International Airport – including those of young people hanging from departing American military aircraft – were heart-breaking. They also proved to be glaring evidence of a precipitated international withdrawal from Afghanistan. There is a real feeling of abandonment among Afghans who believed in progression and a pluralist vision for their country. In the course of two weeks after the Taliban entered Kabul on 15 August 2021, over 170,000 people (both Afghan and other nationalities) were evacuated from Afghanistan.<sup>9</sup> International media frenzy continued while American troops coordinated evacuations from their station within the airport. On social media and major Western media outlets, images of tens of thousands of people, desperately waiting at the gates of Kabul airport for a chance to leave their country on an evacuation flight, captured the agonizing fracturing of optimism among millions of Afghans. The evacuations caused panic across Afghanistan: not all Afghans who wanted to leave were able to get on a flight, but the spectacle of departures caused a nationwide alarm which is still lingering.

Subsequently, the US-led evacuations have come under deep criticism. A recent report by some members of the House Foreign Affairs Committee in the US House of Representatives criticised President Biden's administration for lack of adequate planning and 'disorder' that prevented many Afghans who are at risk to leave their country.<sup>10</sup> Similarly in the UK, a parliamentary inquiry by the Foreign Affairs Committee criticised the British government agencies – particularly the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) – for 'systematic failures of leadership, planning and preparation' in the course of withdrawal from Afghanistan.<sup>11</sup> There is ample evidence, including media reporting, of Afghans who are at risk but were unable to leave their country through the evacuations. Amidst all this turmoil, Afghans who are seeking safety outside their country are practically trapped in Afghanistan; this includes Afghans who want to pursue educational routes and higher education in Europe, and beyond.

While the problems in Afghanistan persisted for years, policymakers in Europe, however, should appreciate that the overall sense of insecurity felt by Afghans has increased since the Taliban's return to power. Categorisations such as '*vulnerable*', '*at risk*' and so on must be expanded. There is a clear need, therefore, to also accept that in certain cases these labels might simply be misnomers that lead to artificial distinctions in the current context where the extent and layers of vulnerability have spread deeply. For instance, in the latest report after an extended visit to the country, UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan, Richard Bennett, concluded that the loss of rights experienced by Afghan women was 'unprecedented in the country's history'.<sup>12</sup> Against such a discouraging backdrop, it is safe to say that Afghan women as a whole segment of society are becoming vulnerable in their entirety in an exceptional manner.

There is ample evidence of Taliban revenge attacks against members of the former government's civilian and military institutions. Shia and other minority groups have endured brutal attacks in recent months, some claimed by the Islamic State Khurasan Province (IS-KP). Journalists and civil society actors have also faced threats and violence. Amid a crackdown on media freedoms by the Taliban's regime, a survey by Reporters Without Borders found that Afghanistan has lost nearly 40% of its media outlets and 60% of journalists – including a large number of women journalists – since August 2021.<sup>13</sup>

9. Sky News (August 2021) "How many people have been evacuated from Afghanistan?", 30 August 2021 <https://news.sky.com/story/how-many-people-have-been-evacuated-from-afghanistan-12395265>

10. The Washington Post (August 2022) "Biden botched Afghan withdrawal, new GOP House report claims", 14 August 2022 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/08/14/republican-investigation-biden-afghanistan/>

11. UK Parliament Committees (May 2022) "Systematic failures of leadership, planning and preparation: MPs slam Government role in UK withdrawal from Afghanistan", 24 May 2022 <https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/78/foreign-affairs-committee/news/171010/systemic-failures-of-leadership-planning-and-preparation-mps-slam-government-role-in-uk-withdrawal-from-afghanistan/>

12. Khaama Press (Oct 2022) "Regression in Afghan Women and Girls' Rights is 'Unprecedented', Says Bennett", 27 October 2022, <https://www.khaama.com/regression-in-afghan-women-and-girls-rights-is-unprecedented-says-bennett-37642/>

13. Reports Without Borders (August 2022) "Afghanistan has lost almost 60% of its journalists since the fall of Kabul", 15 August 2022 <https://rsf.org/en/afghanistan-has-lost-almost-60-its-journalists-fall-kabul>

## 2. CASE STUDIES: GERMANY, FRANCE, SWEDEN AND THE NETHERLANDS

Historically, prospective students from Afghanistan have not featured prominently among international students in European universities. While it is likely that Afghans who reside in Europe - either as refugees or other categories of legal residents – have entered mainstream higher education pathways, it has been far more difficult for students from Afghanistan to have the same access. Many factors have prevented Afghans from having access to education pathways in European universities. Arguably, the most significant factors, in historical terms, are two: Afghanistan is one of the poorest countries in the world with one of the lowest incomes per capita, hence poor spending power; secondly, Afghanistan is one of the most enduring source countries for refugee migration to Europe for many years. This second factor has, in part, contributed to a hostile political environment in the EU against Afghans who have been faced with arduous visa processing procedures in order to travel to Europe. In 2015, the United Nations Higher Commissioner for Refugees (UNCHR) acknowledged that Afghans faced tighter immigration rules and ‘overall stricter asylum policies’ in trying to seek asylum in Europe and Australia; this had contributed partly to a declining number of asylum applicants in some European nations – such as the United Kingdom and Norway – in the 2010 period.<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, even before the Taliban seized power, several EU member states’ diplomatic missions in Kabul had decided not to operate visa processing centres or consular sections with visa-issuing facilities; the only exceptions were made in the case of high-ranking Afghan officials and those with diplomatic passports visiting Western countries on official trips. For instance, starting from September 2017, Germany required Afghans to file their visa applications at the German Embassy in Islamabad for family reunion, Schengen and other long-term visas.<sup>15</sup>

According to some estimates, since 2015 alone, around 570,000 Afghans have applied for asylum in Europe.<sup>16</sup> The number of Afghans seeking refuge in Europe is unlikely to go down in the foreseeable future given the dire security and socioeconomic situation in Afghanistan. As stated, European universities have not viewed Afghanistan as a key market for international students; historically, there is no evidence of information campaigns targeting students from Afghanistan. Afghans interviewed for this research pointed to a lack of efforts by the European universities to provide specific information on access to higher education courses – or any other programmes offered by the universities – targeted at Afghans. One interviewee who is currently in Germany stated that the universities in many EU countries had taken active steps to provide detailed information campaigns aimed at Ukrainians fleeing the conflict in their country. The Afghans who spoke to the author were questioning the reasons behind the lack of apparent empathy and targeted information campaigns to help Afghans in the same way that efforts have been made to support the Ukrainians in the EU.

There is no single repository of information available to Afghans who would like to access education pathways in any of the above four countries. This problem seems to apply to all other European countries too. Prospective Afghan students need to rely on extensive internet searches; for those inside Afghanistan, access to the internet costs significantly relative to the current financial situation in the country and the connection also suffers from technical glitches. As a result, a significant amount of time, resources and energy are spent on attempting to differentiate between potentially fake and genuine sources of information. The other crucial resource for prospective Afghan students is their contact with Afghans who are in Europe, especially those who have experience with the European higher education system. In some cases, prospective students might know or reach out to academics or professionals at European universities – or other European entities – who can provide guidance and advice. Overall, there are significant hindrances to Afghans seeking education pathways at present in the four countries listed, and indeed across the EU..

In conducting interviews and undertaking desk research, it was particularly difficult to gain equal insight into each of the four countries. Germany seemed to have featured prominently among Afghans as a potential destination for higher education. Access to online information about Germany’s support to Afghan students and scholars has been wider not least because several German institutions had offices in Afghanistan. Deutsche Welle (DW), Germany’s public and state-owned broadcaster, maintains a strong presence in Afghanistan’s media landscape through its Dari and Pashto services including websites and social media.

14. The New Humanitarian (November 2015) “Afghan asylum-seekers hit by tighter immigration rules”, 03 November 2015 <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2011/03/31/afghan-asylum-seekers-hit-tighter-immigration-rules>

15. German Missions in Pakistan (April 2019) “Visa: Afghan Applicants; Information for applicants from Afghanistan”, 09 April 2019, <https://pakistan.diplo.de/pk-en/service/-/2208620>

16. France24 (August 2021) “EU pledges to help Afghanistan’s neighbours to cope with refugees”, 31 August 2021 <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20210831-eu-holds-emergency-meeting-on-possible-influx-of-afghan-refugees>

This ostensibly reflects the size of Germany compared to smaller countries such as the Netherlands. Those interviewed for the current research had significantly less familiarity with the opportunities and channels available to Afghans in the Dutch context, for example..

## 2.1. Germany

In recent years for Afghans in Afghanistan, DAAD (Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst) or the German Academic Exchange Service has been the main channel to access higher education in Germany. Between 2002 and the Taliban's return to power in 2021, DAAD has reportedly spent over 50 million Euros in higher education cooperation with Afghanistan; this has included supporting students, researchers and projects.<sup>17</sup>

With the Taliban's return, DAAD announced that support for students from Afghanistan would be repackaged to reflect the absence of international organisations and the departure of international security guarantees in the country. The repackaged version of support included four core areas:<sup>18</sup>

- » Expanding funding for Afghan students in Afghanistan's neighbouring countries, also in Turkey.
- » Providing funding to 'particularly vulnerable' Afghan students and researchers who were already in Germany but no explanation provided on how these categories would be defined in practice.
- » Developing programmes for leadership 'to prepare the young Afghan generational for a post-Taliban era'; yet, this seemed to be more a statement on DAAD's stance against the Taliban rather than detailing what such programmes would entail.
- » Maintaining and expanding existing programmes within Germany that are aimed at 'integrating refugees at German higher education institutions'.

Subsequently, prospective Afghans at risk have been directed to the 'Students at Risk – Hilde Domin Programme'. Another DAAD scholarship programme that Afghans previously benefited from, the Helmut Schmidt Program, no longer lists Afghanistan as a country that meets its eligibility criteria.

The Hilde Domin Programme is managed by DAAD under funding from Germany's Federal Foreign Office (AA).<sup>19</sup> Launched in April 2021, Hilde Domin Programme has certain restrictions; these limitations make it harder for Afghans at risk to rely on the initiative with certainty. First, potential candidates cannot apply through the Programme as they are required to be nominated by an institution that is "a legal entity domiciled in Germany and which carries out an activity in the field of science, research and/or the protection of human rights, the promotion of peace and democracy or the rule of law."<sup>20</sup> Such eligibility criteria make it almost impossible for any Afghans at risk who do not enjoy established relationships with German entities. Nominations require a series of form-filling that the nominating entities must complete. Following on, if DAAD feels the nominee is 'suitable' after 'an initial plausibility check', the candidate is contacted to submit documents and answer any questions. The final selection process involves a DAAD-appointed selection committee that is considered to be independent; the committee not only assesses the academic performance of the candidate but also decides the status of risk facing the individual.

Nomination requirements – such as asking candidates to 'credibly demonstrate' threats to their well-being or fear of violence – make it hard for prospective Afghan students and scholars to provide evidence under the current circumstances in Afghanistan. For instance, Taliban authorities have been involved in extensive house-to-house searches in major cities since coming to power to seek opponents and those whom the Taliban regime considers the enemy.<sup>21</sup> In many cases, as confirmed by interviewees of this research too, to avoid or minimise the threat of detention and Taliban violence, Afghans facing possible risks have had to destroy documents about their affiliation with the former regime or where they have worked with foreign entities. This has also included in some cases educational certificates and degree manuscripts. It is difficult to imagine how candidates succeed in proving their risk status and how the assessment process functions where a candidate has destroyed documentary evidence on risks and their academic background.

17. DAAD (August 2021) "AFTER THE END OF EVACUATION: Support for Afghanistan's Students and Researchers", 30 August 2021 [https://www.daad.de/en/the-daad/communication-publications/press/press\\_releases/afghanistan/](https://www.daad.de/en/the-daad/communication-publications/press/press_releases/afghanistan/)

18. Ibid

19. DAAD (undated) "Students at Risk – Hilde Domin Programme" <https://www.daad.de/en/study-and-research-in-germany/scholarships/hilde-domin-programm/>

20. Ibid

21. Reuters (February 2022) "Taliban begin house searches, sparking fear, diplomatic criticism" 28 February 2022 <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/taliban-begin-house-searches-sparking-fear-diplomatic-criticism-2022-02-28/>

While Hilde Domin Programme remains popular among Afghans, based on the interviews by the author of this report, the initiative is not fit to respond to the scale of demand from the Afghans. Around 18 months after it was launched, the Programme has enabled only 135 individuals to enter Germany, most of them Afghan nationals.<sup>22</sup> This is clearly not at the scale required to respond to the Afghans' situation. Earlier DAAD had reported that 350 nominations out of a total 450 in the period January - March 2022 were from Afghanistan.

Challenges in German language skills were highlighted by the respondents of this research. One female scholar based in Afghanistan who provided evidence to this research was refused by Ruhr University Bochum (RUB) because of confusion on her part about 'ticking' the correct box on her required academic documentation. The university refusal letter additionally lists the German language skills required at least at level B1/B2. However, she is unable to proceed due to the limited availability of preparatory colleges in Germany despite her readiness to attend the required level of language training. She has also been advised by RUB that it would be unlikely that she meets the academic eligibility threshold for Hilde Domin Programme although she is an at-risk Afghan potential student. Her case is illustrative of the extremely daunting prospects facing Afghan students and scholars.

It is difficult to establish the exact figures for the total number of Afghans that Germany has welcomed since August 2021. In June this year German Foreign Minister, Annalena Baerbock, said that Germany had taken in approximately 21,000 people from Afghanistan;<sup>23</sup> a significant number of these evacuees reached Germany via Pakistan under bilateral cooperation between Berlin and Islamabad. By contrast, Germany evacuated at least 5100 people, including 3600 Afghans, during the two-week operations in August last year.<sup>24</sup> According to DER SPIEGEL reporting, around 30,000 Afghans had been granted early approval for entry into Germany.<sup>25</sup> This ostensibly leaves around 10,000 Afghans who are yet to be admitted into Germany.

For those Afghans at risk who successfully secure a place to study in Germany, the journey to their destination is far from straightforward. They have to contend with a slow process of acquiring visas and making travel arrangements. In the absence of any Western diplomatic missions in Afghanistan, while the Taliban regime is internationally unrecognised, Afghans at risk most likely need to enter a neighbouring country such as Pakistan before eventually traveling to Germany; such a journey would entail risks too. Afghan refugees – and those evacuated since August 2021 – face no less uncertainty in Germany. While they may be safely in Europe, accessing any higher education programmes aimed at students and scholars at risk is a challenging endeavour without a sense of assuredness.

## 2.2. Sweden

For nearly a decade – since 2013 – Afghanistan was the largest recipient country of overall foreign Swedish development assistance.<sup>26</sup> The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, or SIDA, continues providing funding to the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. Some of this funding is delivered through the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan (SCA) which is one of the largest development agencies in Afghanistan with a track record of 40 years. During the Western evacuations in August 2021, Sweden evacuated over 1100 people. This included Swedish Embassy's local Afghan employees, guards and their families and more than 500 Swedish nationals.<sup>27</sup>

Through desk research for this report, it has been difficult to situate any scholarship opportunities or educational routes in Sweden for Afghans at risk – including those Afghans who may already be in Europe or a third country such as Pakistan.

Afghan journalists and media workers at risk, particularly women, have received some assistance toward

22. DAAD (October 2022) "The Hilde Domin Programme: The DAAD records a positive first balance sheet for its academic protection programme", 13 October 2022, [https://www.daad.de/en/the-daad/communication-publications/press/press\\_releases/daad-zieht-positive-erste-bilanz-fuer-akademisches-schutzprogramm/](https://www.daad.de/en/the-daad/communication-publications/press/press_releases/daad-zieht-positive-erste-bilanz-fuer-akademisches-schutzprogramm/)
23. DW (August 2022) "Taliban hamper evacuations to Germany: report", 08 August 2022 <https://www.dw.com/en/taliban-blocking-afghan-evacuations-to-germany-report/a-62736934>
24. DW (August 2021) "Afghanistan: Final German evacuation flight leaves Kabul", 26 August 2021 <https://www.dw.com/en/afghanistan-final-german-evacuation-flight-leaves-kabul-airport/a-58978041>
25. Christopher Reuter (August 2022) "The Taliban Catastrophe: Afghanistan One Year After the Takeover", DER SPIEGEL, 16 August 2022 <https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/the-taliban-catastrophe-afghanistan-one-year-after-the-takeover-a-a65b99e7-ed9c-4a95-9d19-fe3c5624d049>
26. Government of Sweden (August 2021) "Sweden's engagement in Afghanistan", 27 August 2021 <https://www.government.se/articles/2021/08/swedens-engagement-in-afghanistan/>
27. Ibid



emergency support from IMS (International Media Support).<sup>28</sup> IMS receives part of its funding from SIDA. However, it's unclear if any Afghan journalists at risk have been offered an education pathway, or indeed assisted relocation, into Sweden since August 2021.

The Swedish King Carl Gustaf Scholarship at Uppsala University lists citizens of Afghanistan as one of the eligible categories. The scholarship is aimed at “students who live in unsafe and dangerous conditions in areas affected by conflict or natural disasters”.<sup>29</sup> However, the scholarship is only for master's programmes. Applicants are required to fulfil the entry requirements and pay an application fee, but it does not specify whether the eligible citizens – such as Afghans – should be in their country of origin. Crucially, it requires that the applicant provides evidence to prove a particular vulnerability and hence the need for a safe environment at Uppsala University.

The author spoke to a former SIDA employee who was evacuated from Afghanistan in late 2021 and has been seeking higher education opportunities since arriving in Sweden. He has struggled to find coherent information about what support is available – particularly scholarship opportunities for Afghan scholars and students in Sweden. The Swedish Institute Scholarship for Global Professionals, the Swedish equivalent of British Chevening Scholarships or German DAAD scholarships, is currently open to 41 nationalities, but Afghan nationals are not eligible.<sup>30</sup> According to the former SIDA employee, Afghanistan was removed from the Swedish Institute's programme in 2018. In the absence of this flagship funding channel, Afghans at risk both inside Afghanistan and outside – including those in Sweden – are faced with uncertainty.

Unlike the care shown to the Ukrainians, the lack of empathy in Swedish society for Afghans' deteriorating situation inside Afghanistan was underscored as a key factor behind the absence of any tangible solidarity in support of Afghan refugees in Sweden.<sup>31</sup> Several recently arrived Afghan refugees – some of whom are highly educated – have been trying to galvanise solidarity for Afghans through mobilising diasporic activism within universities in Sweden. Yet, this is seemingly a slow-moving effort that requires external support. It should be noted that several institutions in Sweden have been signatories to the Scholars at Risk appeal in support of Afghan scholars, students and civil society actors. These Swedish entities include: Stockholm University, the University of Gävle, and The Association for Swedish Higher Education Institutions (SUHF).<sup>32</sup> In December 2021, SIDA announced that it was funding an initiative under Scholars at Risk (SAR) Sweden to finance a support programme ‘during the years 2022 – 2024’ which will aim to provide ten at-risk researchers from Afghanistan ‘with temporary academic sanctuaries at one of the 22 Swedish universities’ that have signed up to SAR.<sup>33</sup> SIDA has handed the grant management responsibilities for this initiative to the University of Gothenburg.

Despite several attempts, the author was unable to obtain information on opportunities and education pathways for Afghans at risk from Afghan refugee and community organisations based in Sweden. Afghans interviewed for the Swedish case have told the author that in their experience Afghan diaspora organisations in Sweden invest resources and energy in organising cultural events, protest marches and some activities specifically targeted at Afghan families at the local level. However, there is a glaring absence of advocacy for educational opportunities and calling on Swedish universities to offer scholarships to Afghans.

Another key difficulty in accessing education pathways in Sweden seems to be the language requirements and inconsistency in the degree verification/conversion process implemented by universities. A female Afghan prospective student in Sweden was unable to enter higher education because the university in Sweden refused to accept her undergraduate degree from a major university in India. While master's level programmes may not necessarily require Swedish language skills since they are taught in English, it is not the case for

28. IMS (August 2022) “Afghan media establishing themselves in exile”, 15 August 2022 <https://www.mediasupport.org/afghan-media-establishing-themselves-in-exile/>
29. Uppsala University (undated) “The King Carl Gustaf Scholarship” <https://www.uu.se/en/admissions/master/scholarships/uppsala-university-scholarships/#King%20Carl%20Gustaf%20scholarship>
30. Swedish Institute (undated) “Applying for SI Scholarship for Global Professionals” <https://si.se/en/apply/scholarships/swedish-institute-scholarships-for-global-professionals/>
31. Interview with former SIDA employee, 10 October 2022
32. For a full list of signatories to the Scholars at Risk (SAR) appeal in support of Afghans at risk see: Scholars at Risk Network (January 2022) “Urgent appeal to European Governments and EU Institutions: Take Action for Afghanistan's scholars, researchers, and civil society actor”, 19 January 2022 <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Afghanistan-Urgent-appeal-to-European-Governments-and-EU-Institutions-with-logos-19.1.2022.pdf>
33. University of Gothenburg (December 2021) “Researchers from Afghanistan receive academic sanctuaries in Sweden”, 21 December 2021 <https://www.gu.se/en/news/researchers-from-afghanistan-receive-academic-sanctuaries-in-sweden#:~:text=At%20the%20initiative%20of%20SAR,members%20of%20Scholars%20at%20Risk.>

undergraduate degrees.<sup>34</sup> It is also a significant challenge to afford higher education in Sweden without scholarship funding, a relatively more expensive country, as a refugee or an Afghan scholar or student at risk.

## 2.3. France

Like Germany and Sweden, France also participated in last year's evacuation operations after the Taliban seized Kabul in August 2021. Within two weeks, France airlifted approximately 3000 people including over 2600 Afghans.<sup>35</sup> The French government faced criticism shortly after concluding the evacuations for leaving prospective Afghan students 'in limbo' following their application to the *Boursiers du Gouvernement Français* (BGF) scholarship scheme, the French government's scholarships programme, to study in France.<sup>36</sup> France has continued evacuations from Afghanistan, mostly via Pakistan, over the past year. Nonetheless, it is likely that eligible students who had secured admission at French universities prior to the collapse of Afghanistan to the Taliban have also been taken to France. The author spoke to a European academic based in France who has worked in Afghanistan previously and has been involved in helping Afghan students and scholars at risk. This academic believes the French Embassy in Kabul was doing 'a good job' with issuing visas to prospective Afghan students and scholars before its closure last year. The academic considers the higher education route to be effective and feasible for Afghans at risk only where the prospective candidates have financial resources and strong networks of contacts in place;<sup>37</sup> this applies to France as well as other European countries.

Another Afghan interviewee for this research reflected on his challenges in accessing higher education since arriving in France under government-assisted evacuation via Iran. French language skills are essential before any prospects of a funded master's programme materialise. "I need to reach at least B1 level or higher in my French language programme", he said.<sup>38</sup> He was lucky to have had uninterrupted support from the French entity that acted as his sponsor/referee which enabled him to qualify for entry to France. "The organisation had already put my name down for a French language course even prior to my arrival in Paris".<sup>39</sup> According to this interviewee, French language programmes offered by voluntary and non-academic institutions often fail to equip newly arrived refugees with the essential capacity to enter higher education. Without proficiency in the French language, the Afghan interviewee felt that holding even a master's degree from a university in France would not be sufficient for gaining proper employment.

France has been more welcoming to the Afghans who have been arriving on government-assisted resettlement – and evacuation – since August 2021. However, the profound difficulties and widespread experiences of trauma mean that seeking higher education does not necessarily feature in the priority list of many newly arrived Afghans in France. Experiencing trauma and psychological distress is common as highlighted by Human Rights Watch in a recent report.<sup>40</sup> The experiences of Afghans seeking asylum in France can also vary significantly depending on how they arrived in the country. The Afghans who were airlifted last year and those who have 'quietly' arrived through evacuations from Pakistan and Iran have received preferential access to housing while their asylum claims have also been fast-tracked.<sup>41</sup>

Research for this report on the context of reception and access to higher education for Afghan scholars and potential students has been revealing. A lack of readily available information for Afghans on potential education pathways, emphasis on proficiency in the French language, and the pressures of integrating into a new environment mean that major hurdles remain in place for prospective Afghan scholars and students to enter mainstream higher education. For Afghans at risk who are still in Afghanistan, it is extremely unlikely that they will be able to secure a visa for France (after the Embassy shut down in Kabul) even if they happen to be fortunate enough to secure an offer of study from a French university.

34. Interview with former SIDA employee

35. The New Arab (August 2021) "France ends its air evacuations from Afghanistan", 28 August 2021 <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/news/france-ends-its-air-evacuations-afghanistan>

36. Rosie McCabe (August 2021) "Afghan students left in limbo over French scholarships", The New Arab, 28 August 2021 <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/news/afghan-students-left-limbo-over-french-scholarships>

37. Interview with European academic, 23 September 2022

38. Interview with Afghan candidate in France, 11 October 2022

39. Ibid

40. Human Rights Watch (March 2022) "France: Afghan Evacuees Need Mental Health Support", 24 March 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/03/24/france-afghan-evacuees-need-mental-health-support>

41. Sophie Stuber (December 2021) "Two different paths: The barriers facing some Afghans seeking protection in France", The New Humanitarian, 22 December 2021 <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2021/12/22/barriers-facing-some-Afghans-seeking-protection-France>

## 2.4. The Netherlands

The Dutch government evacuated a total of 4400 people from Afghanistan to the Netherlands between 15 August and 10 October 2021; this included 1860 people who were airlifted from Kabul International Airport while the rest consist of Afghans who were brought to the Netherlands on flights via Qatar, Pakistan and Iran.<sup>42</sup> The Dutch approach to the situation in Afghanistan can be concluded as one of utmost caution and a lack of willingness to welcome any Afghans beyond those who were directly employed by the Dutch entities in Afghanistan (e.g., interpreters working with the Dutch ministry of defence; local employees at the Dutch embassy in Kabul). In relation to the at-risk Afghans, the government in the Netherlands has expressed an interest to accept only 25 human rights defenders and journalists out of a list of 650 Afghans at risk that the European Union has put together.<sup>43</sup>

Afghan interviewees in the Netherlands who spoke to the author were unable to confidently point out any education pathways available to the Afghans at risk. Similar to the preceding cases, Afghans keen to study in the Netherlands must rely on any pre-existing network of contacts, and approach higher education institutions directly where possible. The closure of the Dutch embassy in Kabul adds an additional layer of complexity to the Afghans' plight inside Afghanistan who would need to go to Pakistan or another country in the region even if they are successful in securing an offer from a university in the Netherlands.

Crucially, the Dutch context illustrates the practical challenges facing vulnerable groups, such as Afghans at risk, in accessing protection in European Union countries when an individual member state is not forthcoming. The lack of publicly available, and coherent, information hubs that could guide Afghan students and scholars at risk to education pathways is a key obstacle to establishing what possible level of protection is available.

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42. Government of the Netherlands (undated) "Frequently asked questions about the situation in Afghanistan", <https://www.government.nl/topics/afghanistan/faq-about-evacuation-from-afghanistan>

43. Ibid.

### 3. CONCLUSION AND WAYS FORWARD

The category, 'at risk', is a crowded domain, and a contested one depending on who defines 'risk' and who approves the claim to being 'at risk'. Meanwhile, since the Taliban regime has taken control, vulnerability – in all its forms – has expanded across Afghanistan, threatening both lives and livelihoods of Afghans.<sup>44</sup> Both risk and vulnerability define the challenges facing Afghans today.

In a vital contribution to the analysis of pathways to protection, Ceri Oeppen and Tahir Zaman contend that “education is a possible pathway to protection for a small subset of Afghans, in practice implementation is complex and often ad hoc, and it should not be used by Western governments as a political justification for eroding or erasing other routes to protection.”<sup>45</sup> As highlighted by the interviews and analysis in the previous sections, the offer of protection by European states to Afghans at risk must take a broader view to consider 'vulnerability' as a key component of the situation facing Afghans. Ordinarily, education pathways – naturally – include non-vulnerability criteria such as academic background, language skills and networks. Notably, as Oeppen and Zaman emphasise, Afghanistan has hardly featured in the global flows of tertiary students based on the data by UNESCO as late as 2019. Since 2001, when a limited number of Afghans have been able to obtain scholarships for higher education abroad, the main aim of such opportunities has been capacity building as opposed to pathways to protection in another country.<sup>46</sup> However, with the collapse of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan last year, international efforts toward state building and capacity building within Afghanistan have ceased.

The lack of a central and coherent information hub for prospective Afghan students and scholars at risk is one of the main issues. As underlined, respondents of this research were unsure how to meet the various – often divergent – criteria of 'at risk' categorisation by European entities such as universities or funding agencies. This problem was especially acute for Afghans inside Afghanistan. A young lecturer at a private university in Kabul who is known for his anti-Taliban views – while his father has fought the Taliban in the past - has been struggling to access any scholarship programmes. Speaking to the author, this prospective scholar at risk can seemingly fulfil academic requirements including the English language skills test to apply for a higher education degree at a European university. But he has received contradictory advice from different universities; those responding to his application have advised that he leaves for a neighbouring country where European diplomatic representations still function and could assess his visa application. His diaspora contacts in Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom cannot advise whether he should stay in Afghanistan or leave. The recent announcement by Germany to take in 'people from Afghanistan who are at particular risk' is also confusing as it does not define the categories clearly.<sup>47</sup>

The four countries examined in this report have major differences in the way they have responded to the crisis in Afghanistan since the Taliban's takeover and hence have offered protection to Afghans at risk in disparate ways. It is difficult to estimate the total number of Afghans who benefited from education pathways in Europe since August 2021. It is safe to conclude, however, that the numbers are significantly small vis-à-vis the numbers of evacuees and those resettled in the EU via Afghanistan's neighbouring countries. Nonetheless, any over-emphasis on higher education as a pathway to protection risks creating an unfair advantage in favour of some Afghans over other Afghans regardless of the levels of risks facing them. For instance, those with existing contacts in Europe and with substantial social and cultural capital (for instance the ability to confidently communicate with Europeans in the English language) are likely to hold an advantage over those without such means.

Seeking education as a route to protection is considered a 'complementary pathway' that has been recognised under the Global Compact on Refugees;<sup>48</sup> it is not a substitute for the international conventions guaranteeing the right to seek asylum. Therefore, the right to claim asylum in the EU must be treated separately from any

44. For a deeper analysis on expanding vulnerabilities in Afghanistan see: Allouche, J.; Sida, L.; Nelis, T. and Shahab, S. (2022) "Needs and Vulnerability in Afghanistan", Institute of Development Studies, 24 May 2022 [https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/20.500.12413/17423/Needs\\_and\\_Vulnerability\\_in\\_Afghanistan.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/20.500.12413/17423/Needs_and_Vulnerability_in_Afghanistan.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)

45. Ceri Oeppen and Tahir Zaman (2022) "Higher education as a complementary pathway to protection for Afghan students: Historical and current experiences, and thoughts for the future", Migration Policy Practice, Special Edition on Afghanistan, Vol. XI, Number 4, December 2021 – April 2022

46. Ibid

47. Federal Foreign Office (October 2022) "Joint press release by the Federal Foreign Office and the Federal Ministry of the Interior and Community on the federal admission programme for people from Afghanistan who are at particular risk", Press release by Germany's Federal Foreign Office, 17 October 2022 <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/federal-admission-programme-afghanistan/2558756>

48. Ceri Oeppen and Tahir Zaman 2022

discussions on access to education pathways as means of protection for Afghans. Confusing the two would further restrict the overall protection environment for the Afghans in the EU. Otherwise, there may be a risk that, governments in Europe grappling with right-wing anti-immigration politics may use education or other complementary pathways as a way to detract from their legal obligation to Afghans' right to claim asylum.

Afghans interviewed for this report felt that there was a correlation between a lack of societal empathy towards their plight and a restrictive protection environment afforded to Afghan nationals in the EU. From this perspective, unless there was a similar level of empathy for Afghans that was shown to, for instance, the Ukrainians fleeing conflict, the existing limited routes to education pathways for at-risk Afghans are likely to remain wholly insufficient. The interviewees also underscored the added barriers facing Afghans beyond the lack of empathy and solidarity in the EU. These included: barriers in processing paperwork due to absence of EU diplomatic missions in Afghanistan, accessing information and filling numerous forms with no sense of direction.

While this report highlights key issues, it is not statistically representative of all the views among Afghans at risk who have successfully entered higher education programmes in the four countries discussed. Further in-depth and comprehensive analysis is required on the perceptions of at-risk Afghans who have gained access to education pathways for protection. Equally, the views and circumstances of at-risk Afghans inside Afghanistan should feature prominently in leading any tailored responses through education pathways as means of protection.

## 4. RECOMMENDATIONS

- » Facilitating higher education pathways in Europe for Afghans at risk can only deliver meaningful protection if the Afghans' fundamental right to asylum under international and European conventions remains protected.
- » Providing education pathways for protection can be meaningful if targeted as a complementary measure, but not as a substitute for other existing complementary measures such as humanitarian visas or to offering resettlement as a durable solution. None of these pathways to protection have an effect on Member states' obligation to uphold individuals' right to asylum.
- » The member states and the civil society should only advocate for higher education as a pathway to protection if this does not lead to the erosion of at-risk Afghans' right to asylum and refugee resettlement.
- » Education pathways offer protection to a likely small number of Afghans. It needs to be promoted along with all the other fundamental avenues of protection and asylum that Afghans are entitled to under international and EU conventions. Findings from this report can contribute to broader advocacy in highlighting the barriers – including procedural and logistical – that face Afghans who are seeking protection.
- » Member states, universities, funding bodies and civil society should work together to create and streamline integrated information-sharing hubs for prospective Afghan students and scholars. These should include English language material and also the translation of key documents or of main messaging into Dari/Farsi and Pashto languages. Stakeholders can draw inspiration from activism and good practice concerning the availability of education pathways for Ukrainians who fleeing conflict in their country.
- » Afghanistan should be added to – and reinstated in – all major scholarship programmes for higher education in the four countries examined. This will ensure meaningful and equitable access to education pathways by Afghans.
- » Universities, funding bodies and relevant institutions in member states should invest in providing clear guidelines to Afghan scholars and students about their degree conversion mechanisms, and the recognition of higher education programmes undertaken by Afghan candidates outside Europe including in Afghanistan.
- » Higher education programmes in general, particularly at the master's level, offer a temporary measure of legal residence due to the limited duration of such degree programmes. Afghans who arrive in the EU through education pathways should have access to asylum procedures to receive refugee status or other processes that would provide them with long-term residence status in Member States. In addition, member states, universities and funding bodies should consider innovative approaches to potentially offering at-risk Afghans work placements schemes, fellowships and internships so they can build skills while studying. It will also allow Afghans to bridge their skills with new capacity-building and training opportunities. Such an approach will also contribute to preserving the human capital of Afghans, one of the major achievements of the past 20 years in Afghanistan.
- » Research for this paper underscores the inability of Afghans to anticipate the outcomes of the processes that they engage with in seeking education pathways in Europe. The cost to their mental health is immense against the backdrop of a complete abandonment by the international community as felt by the educated Afghans in the country. Education opportunities should be decoupled from political decisions and antagonistic relations with the Taliban regime.
- » Civil society actors and universities should work in collaboration with Afghan diaspora organisations to mitigate challenges in communication with prospective Afghan scholars and students, and to amplify positive messaging on education pathways. There are instances of good practice where the Afghan diaspora has taken inventive steps to address the challenges facing Afghan scholars and students in Europe, and also Afghan students in Afghanistan who are faced with a shortage of qualified lecturers since a large number of academics have left the country.<sup>49</sup>

49. Vienna Instituted for International Dialogue and Cooperation VIDC (December 2021) "Afghan Diaspora to launch online university in Europe", 12 December 2021, <https://www.vidc.org/en/detail/afghan-diaspora-to-launch-online-university-in-europe>



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