



The Voices of the Afghan Students at AUCA

July 2020

Zarlasht Sarmast (2020)

Maryam Ranjbar (2020)

Hezbollah Shafaq (2021)

Maryam Yari (2022)

Abdul Walid Azizi (2022)

&

Prof. Tamo Chattopadhyay
(Faculty Advisor)



*American University
of Central Asia*

Acknowledgment

The Voices of the Afghan Students (VOAS) at AUCA project was supported by a Presidential Research Grant in January 2020. The Team appreciates the endorsement of AUCA President Andrew Kuchins for this project and his continued support to the Afghan student community.

The Project Team acknowledges the advice it received from Ms. Ekaterina Sanamiants, Coordinator for Afghan Students at the International Student Office in reaching out to the 100+ Afghan student community at AUCA. The Team is also grateful to Ms. Viktoriia Petrova, Executive Officer in the President's Office for her monitoring and support in the administrative aspects of the Grant.

A number of different units and individuals at AUCA have provided timely professional assistance in the project's undertaking: the Registrar's Office, the IT Office, AUCA Cafeteria and colleagues in the Finance Office. The project team is appreciative of this supportive environment at the university.

Finally, the Project Team expresses its gratitude to the Afghan students at AUCA who took the time in the midst of a busy semester to attend the information sessions, fill out the surveys, schedule interviews and fulfill the interview commitments online even as the semester was interrupted by the COVID pandemic. This initiative would not have been possible without willingness of the Afghan students to share their hopes, dreams and vulnerabilities. The project team is indebted to them.

Zar Sarmast, AUCA Graduate 2020 - Team Leader
Maryam Ranjbar (Graduate 2020)
Hezbollah Shafaq (Rising Senior)
Maryam Yari (Rising Junior)
Abdul Walid Azizi (Rising Junior)

Prof. Tamo Chattopadhyay, Director, Institute of Education @ AUCA - Faculty Advisor

July 2020. American University of Central Asia
Bishkek, Kyrgyz Republic



Institute of Education



American University
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The Voices of the Afghan Students at AUCA

IS DEDICATED TO

Fatima Natasha Khalil



For Natasha

The VOAS report is coming out at a time when the entire community of this university is mourning the tragic loss of one of our own: Fatima (Natasha) Khalil. Fatima was 24. She had graduated last year from AUCA with double majors in Anthropology and Human Rights, and was working at Afghanistan’s International Human Rights Commission (IHRC) in Kabul. An organization she chose precisely because she was made aware of its many challenges and felt she “could be more useful”.

Fatima died on Saturday June 27th on her way to work as her office car was hit by a magnetic bomb. The blast also killed the driver of the vehicle – 41 year of Ahmad Jawid Folad, a long term employee of IHRC. Fatima’s father said at her grave in one of the old cemeteries of Kabul, “This wasn’t just my daughter – she was struggling for the country”. It is our responsibility to honor that struggle and to keep Fatima alive in our lives through words and actions that live up to the bar that Fatima set for herself.

The Voices of the Afghan Students (VOAS) project was envisioned to explore what Afghan students at AUCA view as possible pathways for balancing their own life aspirations and their desire to contribute to their motherland. Fatima’s life was embodiment of that contribution to the motherland.

No words can perhaps truly describe the pain we are experiencing at the loss of a young life so full of hope, joy and inspiration. But this pain also reminds us that there has never been a more important moment to share the voices of the Afghan students. Hence, we dedicate this report to Fatima.

To Natasha – from Zar

I met Fatima (Natasha) when I first arrived to Bishkek in 2016. She was full of life and a very happy person. She was a straight-A student and loved and helped everyone around her. She loved her life and she always stayed positive no matter what. Natasha was one in a million. She always fought for her rights and she always did what is right. She challenged her friends with different kinds of questions about life, politics, friendship and everything else. I remember the last time I saw her in Bishkek. It was May 2019 and she was talking about going back to Afghanistan to contribute to the development of her country and spend time with her family.

Natasha was working for the Independent Human Rights Commission in Kabul as their donor coordinator. She was still in touch with her friends and was working closely with them to continue their activities for a club that she was a Co-founder of “Women and Arts”. While in Afghanistan she was working for an organization as well as a volunteer “Art Lords”. She was always in love with the idea of helping women, the youth and children in Afghanistan. That love led her to volunteer in yet another organization that is working for children with autism in Kabul.

The death of Natasha (Fatima) was of course a shock to all the Afghan students at AUCA as well as other universities around the world. But, this news has made us even more committed to return to our homeland and be the voice of young talented girls like Natasha and make her dreams come true. We will not be defeated and we will continue to fight for our rights and for our country.

Natasha may not be with us physically, but now she lives in our thoughts and in our hearts and we feel her presence every single minute of every single day. We will love and remember her forever.

Zar Sarmast, Team Leader – VOAS Project

Rationale and Context of the VOAS Project

One of the most distinctive aspects of the AUCA student body is the significant number of undergraduate students from Afghanistan – making them the largest single group among the international student population in the university. That measure of highest proportionality of Afghan students makes AUCA a unique higher education institution in the world. However, the presence of Afghan students in AUCA is not only significant for the high numbers, but also for the noticeably strong quality of their academic preparation and goal orientation. This is possibly a direct outcome of the fact that every single Afghan student admitted to AUCA comes through a rigorous competitive selection process from home, administered by the American Embassy in Kabul – which also fully funds their education at AUCA.

This combination of full-funding, transparent selection process, and the opportunity to earn an American Bachelor’s Degree in a safe and culturally proximal country in the region – makes AUCA a top destination for academically competent and socially active aspiring college students from Afghanistan. Indeed, the university has defined as one of its goals the preparation of a new generation of leaders for a new and democratic Central Asia – including Afghanistan.

However, beyond these stated visions, there is an unstated expectation that Afghan students would go back home to Afghanistan upon finishing their sponsored studies at AUCA and help rebuild their war-torn country. Given the significant investment on behalf of the American Government (and taxpayers) that goes into making the study of Afghan students at AUCA possible, such an expectation is not misplaced. However, the reality of “back home” – fragile peace, continued violence, scarcity of meaningful employment opportunities and a society haltingly embracing democratic governance after decades of sectarian conflicts and international military campaign – is not necessarily the most inviting environment for young people with a world-class

education and global mindset honed in the finest traditions of American liberal arts education. Indeed, it may be fatally dangerous to go back home – as the recent tragic loss of Fatima Natasha Khalil has reminded the world.

Informal conversations with Afghan students suggest that they are often torn between the desire to contribute to their country and to pursue their professional and academic journeys in safer and more secure societies. Unraveling this dilemma – of global preparedness of young citizens and limits to their location-bound contribution - was the point of departure in conceiving the VOAS project. It was conceived as a faculty-guided and student-led endeavor whereby a small team of Afghan students will engage in conversations with fellow Afghan students.



It was a strong faculty-student collaboration. The Faculty Advisor worked closely with the project's Team Leader - a female Afghan student in her final year of study at AUCA,

who in turn identified and led a gender balanced team of four Afghan students to carry out the project activities. The idea was to explore what Afghan students themselves viewed as possible pathways for balancing their own life aspirations and their desire to contribute to their motherland – in their own voices – hence the name: The Voices of Afghan Students (VOAS).

The project started with a Town Hall style Information Session in the AUCA Forum that gathered – in two successive sessions - Afghan students of AUCA, with communication support from the Afghan Student Coordinator. At these Town Halls, the Project Team elaborated the rationale, scope, goals and expected outcomes of the project to the assembled Afghan students, and responded to audience inquiries. This transparent and accessible Information Session – with everyone visible in AUCA’s central gathering place or Forum - provided the Afghan students a clear and compelling message about the what and why of the project, and the importance of their active participation in it.



The project team distributed a brief survey that the assembled students could fill out and leave with the Team on exit. This anonymous survey was the primary instrument of gathering Afghan students' voices and opinions about their plans beyond AUCA. In total, 109 students responded to the survey. Additionally, the Project Team reached out to fellow Afghan students and requested their time for brief one-on-one interviews. The idea was to have at least some Afghan students to have in-depth conversations with their peers – fellow Afghan students acting as part of the Project Team – about future.



Even though COVID closure cut short the spring 2020 semester, through a combination of face to face and on-line video meetings, the project team was able to hold as many as 25 such in-depth conversations with their peers. The interview participants were given the choice to remain anonymous and share their perspectives without disclosing their identity for the purpose of the report. At the same time, those who were open to be publicly acknowledged for their time, were be given that opportunity as well.

The rest of this report presents some of the key messages from the data collected and synthesized by the project team as part of the VOAS project. The original idea was to launch this Report on the eve of (or even at) the Commencement Ceremony of 2020. However, the COVID changed those plans.

Nevertheless, the Project Team hopes that the report in its current version will serve as a first step in building a stronger communication and advocacy effort around /on behalf of Afghan students studying at AUCA. The team envisioned VOAS as a project that would not only bring into the limelight the unique role AUCA plays in preparing the next generation of Afghan leaders, but it will also bring to the fore the hitherto under-explored terrains of Afghan students' own views about their futures in / for Afghanistan. Among other things, this can inform the international development partners as they continue supporting human capital and nation-building efforts in post-conflict societies.

Key Messages

This section presents a snapshot of the key insights that were captured in the course of the project through a combination of survey and interviews with Afghan students.

Afghan Students at AUCA are a highly pragmatic and self-assured group



To better foreground the personal and professional aspirations of the Afghan students beyond their time at AUCA, it was important to understand what motivated them to study at the university in the first place. Their responses reveal a unique combination of pragmatism, idealism and commitment to learning and growth. For example, as depicted in Figures 1 and 2 below, the opportunity to study in a safe environment and

availability of funding were the overwhelming rationale (80% and 81% respectively) for Afghan students to choose AUCA as their undergraduate education institution.

Figure 1.

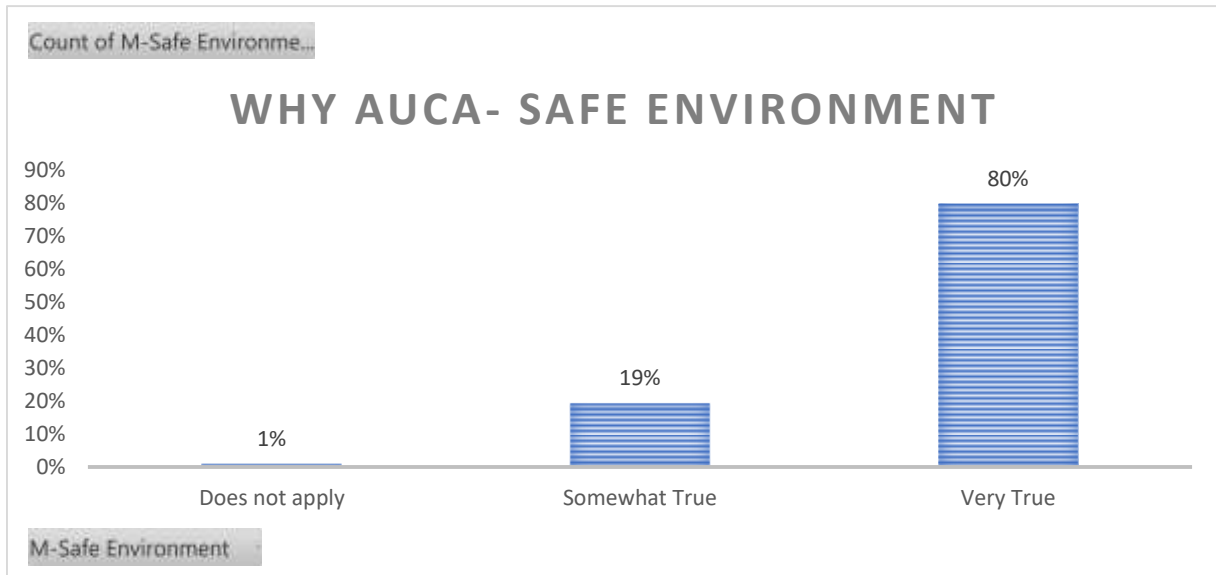
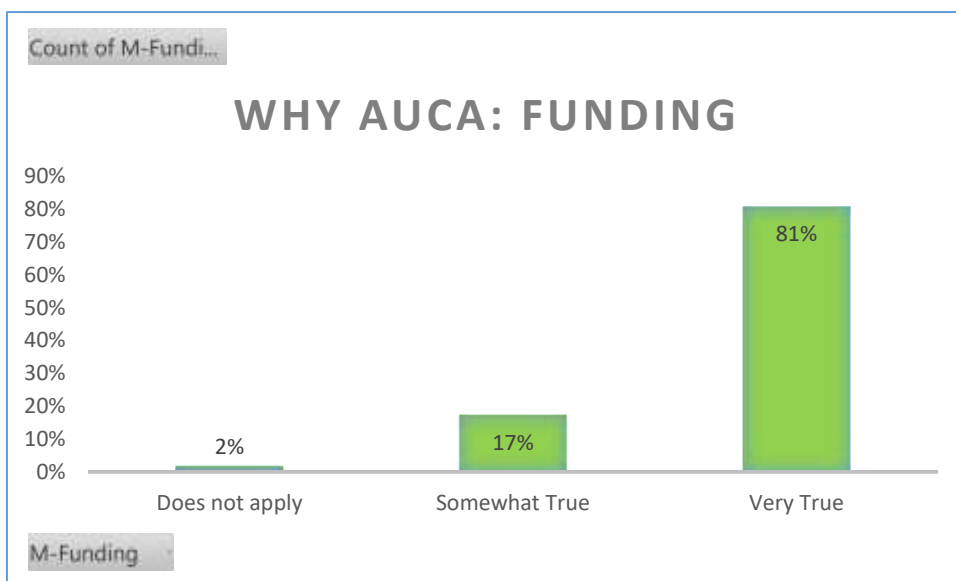
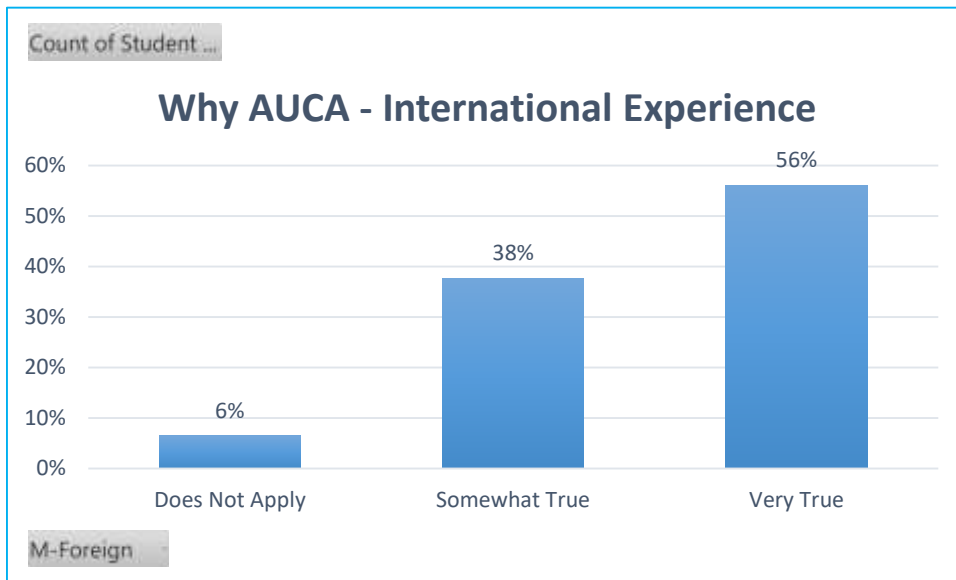


Figure 2.



Yet, beyond these pragmatic traits, the students also displayed a considerable commitment to gain a quality international educational experience: 56% considered it to be very true and 38% considered it to be somewhat true (Figure 3).

Figure 3



An equally compelling aspect was the high level of importance (70%) the students placed on their ability to experience freedom and become independent young adults in choice of an American style liberal arts educational institution like AUCA (Figure 4). Tellingly, the students' decision to study at AUCA was an affirmation of their own independent spirit and agency – as an overwhelming majority indicated that it was primarily theirs and not their family's decision (Figure 5).

Figure 4.

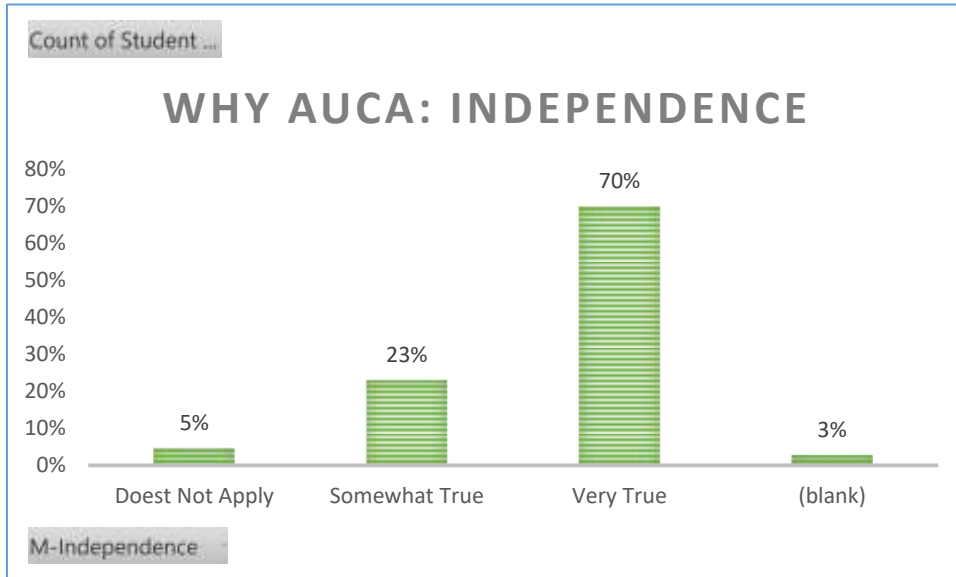
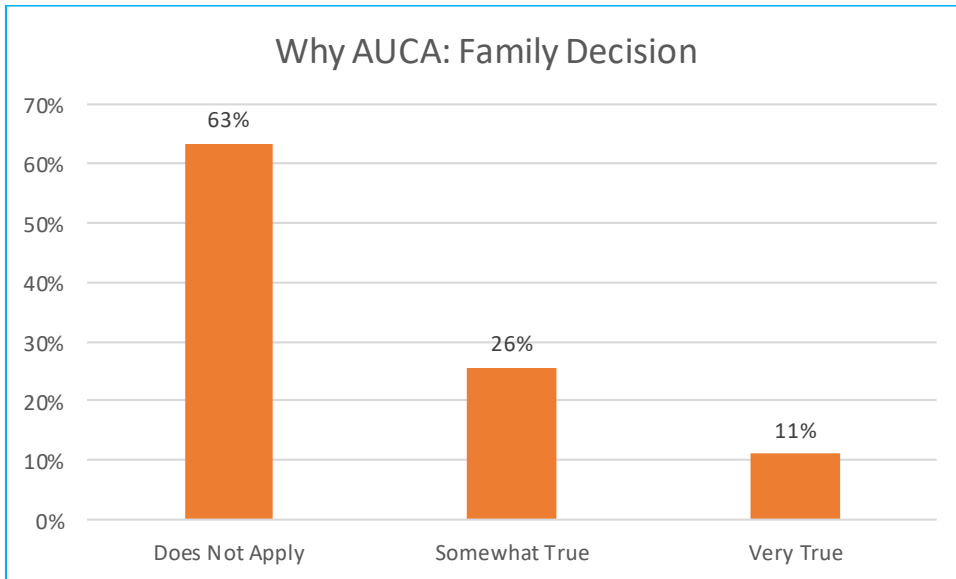


Figure 5.



While their plans after graduating from AUCA vary, all Afghan students are highly motivated to continue their professional and academic growth

In charting their trajectories after graduating from AUCA, most Afghan students (61%) indicated an international destination – such as EU or US – as their most preferred choice to continue higher education (Figure 6). This was followed by the choice of finding a job and working in Afghanistan (44% - Figure 7).



Overall 86% of respondents viewed the EU-US study option as preferred while the preference for working in Afghanistan was a comparable 80%. Together, these figures capture the dilemma of competing choices that Afghan students at AUCA grapple with—the desire to work in Afghanistan, and the promise of further education internationally.

Figure 6.

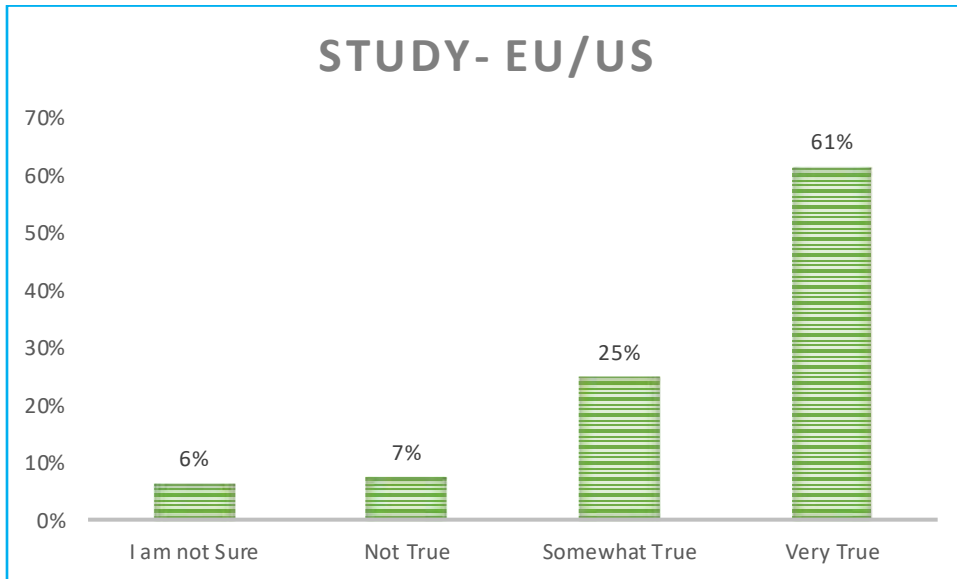
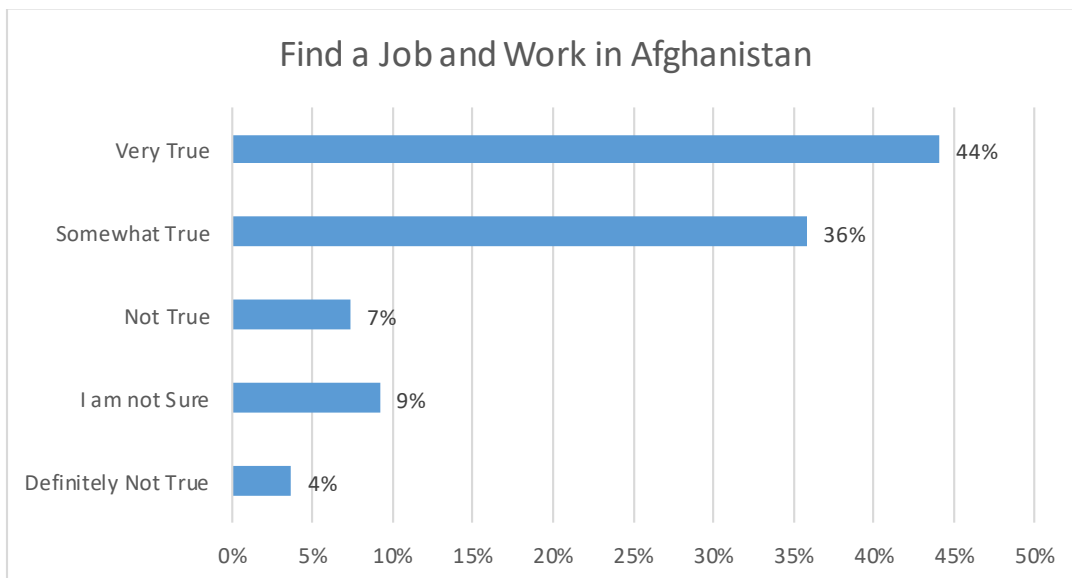


Figure 7.



Importantly, continuing their education in Afghanistan or Kyrgyzstan beyond AUCA fared similarly – and markedly lower - on their preferences, as the Figures 8 and 9 depict below. However, the slightly higher preference for continuing further studies in Afghanistan over Kyrgyzstan is telling – and possibly demonstrates that with

comparable educational value proposition, the students would rather to be in Afghanistan than elsewhere.

Figure 8

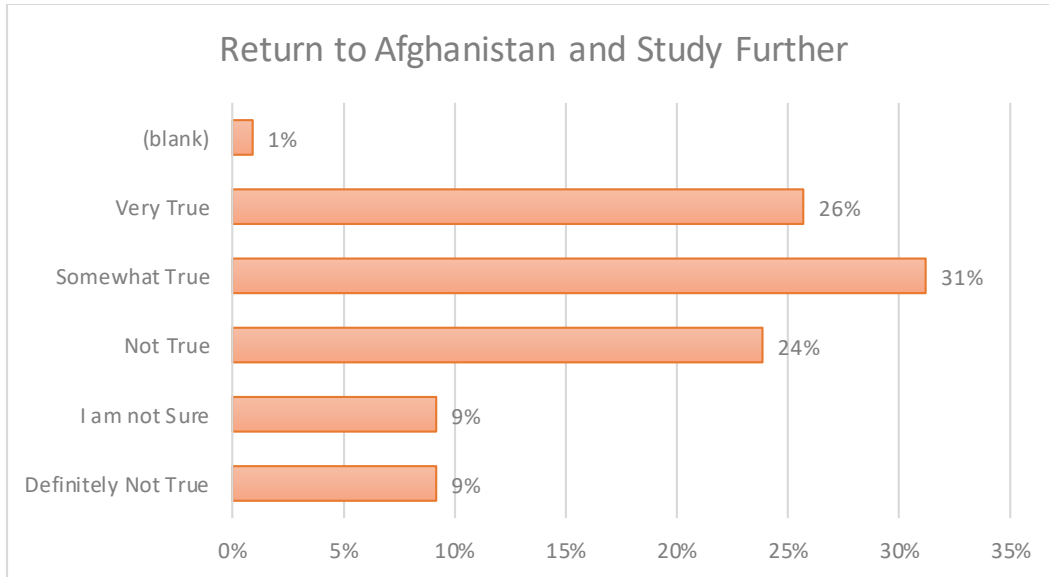
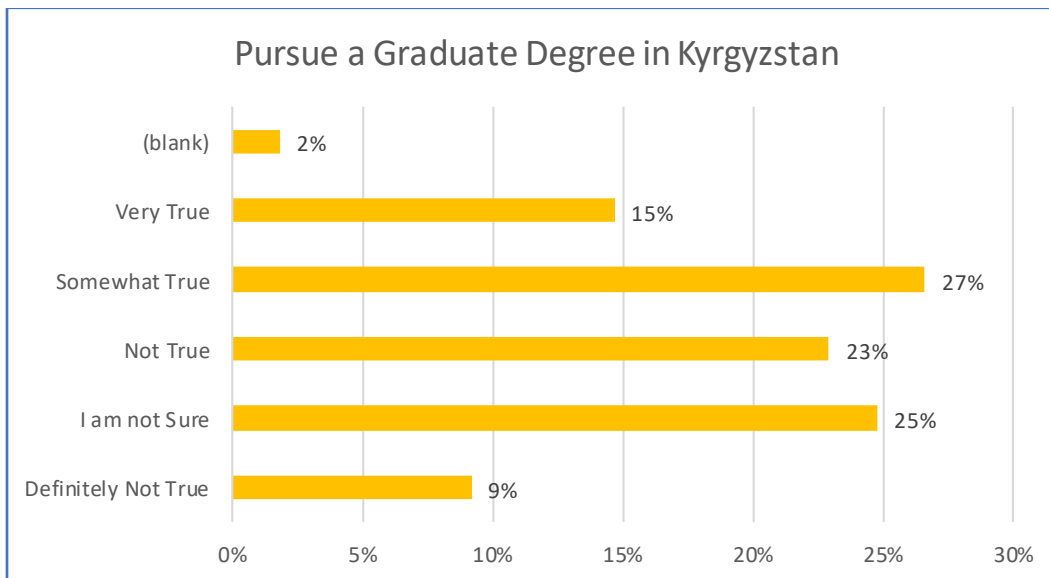
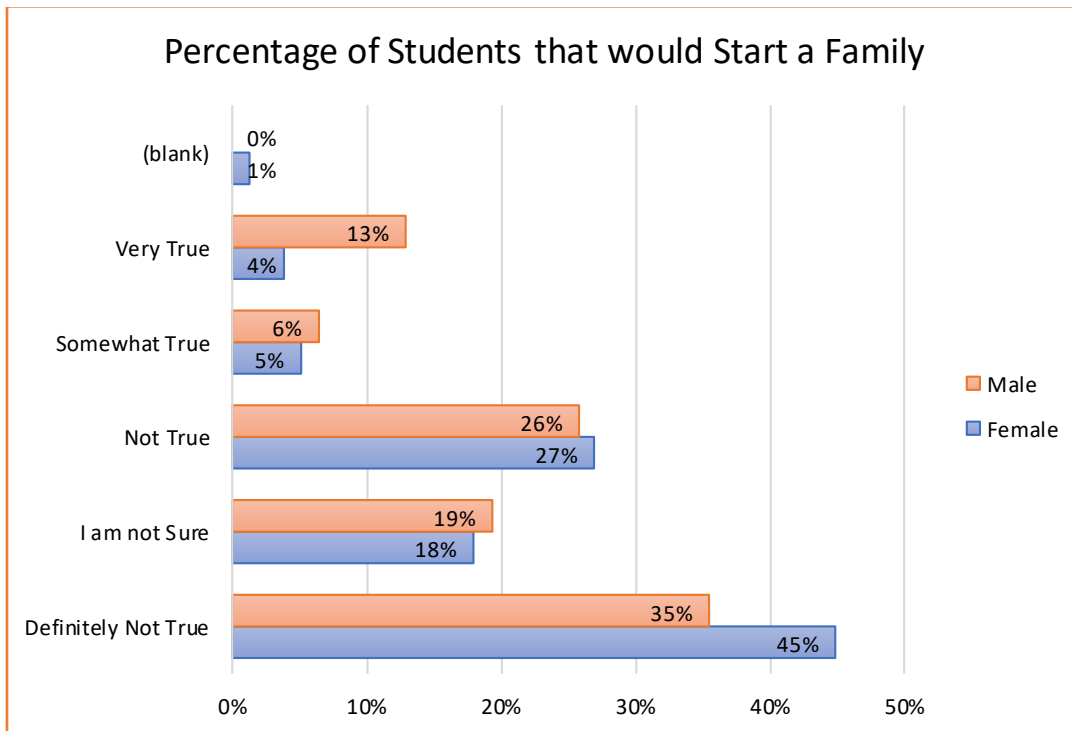


Figure 9



An important finding was the markedly low preference the students placed on the consideration of starting a family right after graduating from AUCA (Fig. 10). It was remarkable that even fewer proportion of female students saw this as a very likely option than male students (4% female as opposed to 13% male). This is a significant statement from young female students coming from a conservative and patriarchal society! It speaks volumes to the resolve and commitment of the Afghan students at AUCA in continuing their academic and professional growth.

Figure 10



This low preference to start a family immediately after graduation from AUCA is not just an important fact by itself, rather its accentuates further the combined high values the students placed on their professional growth in Afghanistan (Figure 6) and academic growth in more competitive international contexts such as EU /US (Fig 7).

Indeed, a closer look at the data on preference to work in Afghanistan right after graduating from AUCA reveals a stable pattern – across cohorts and among genders. For instance fresher cohorts (New Generations Academy and freshmen) indicate

working in Afghanistan after graduation from AUCA at the same overall level of priority and preference (80%) as older cohorts – sophomores, juniors and seniors combine.

Figure 11

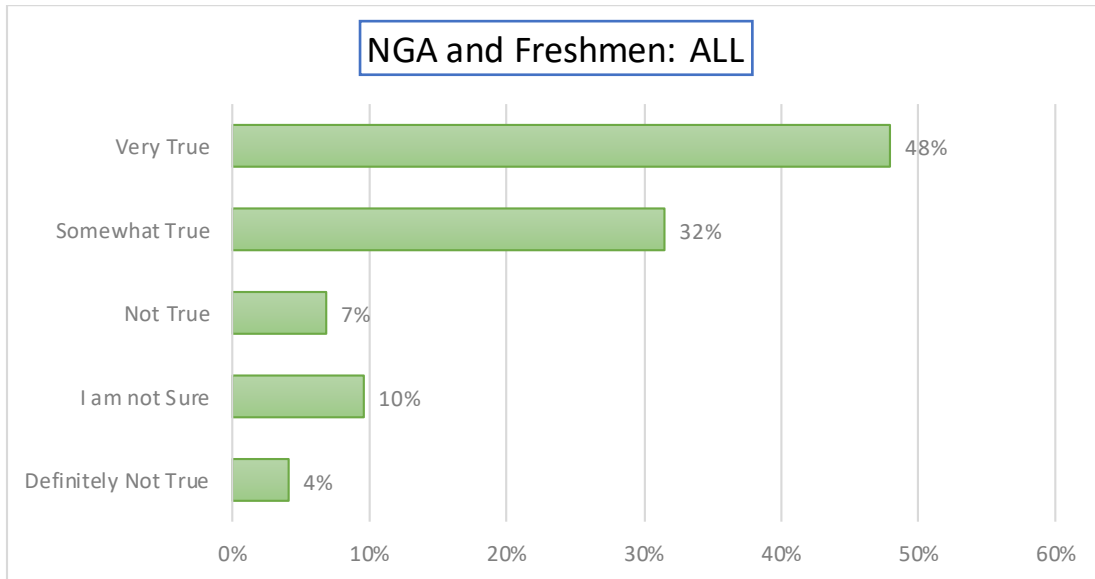
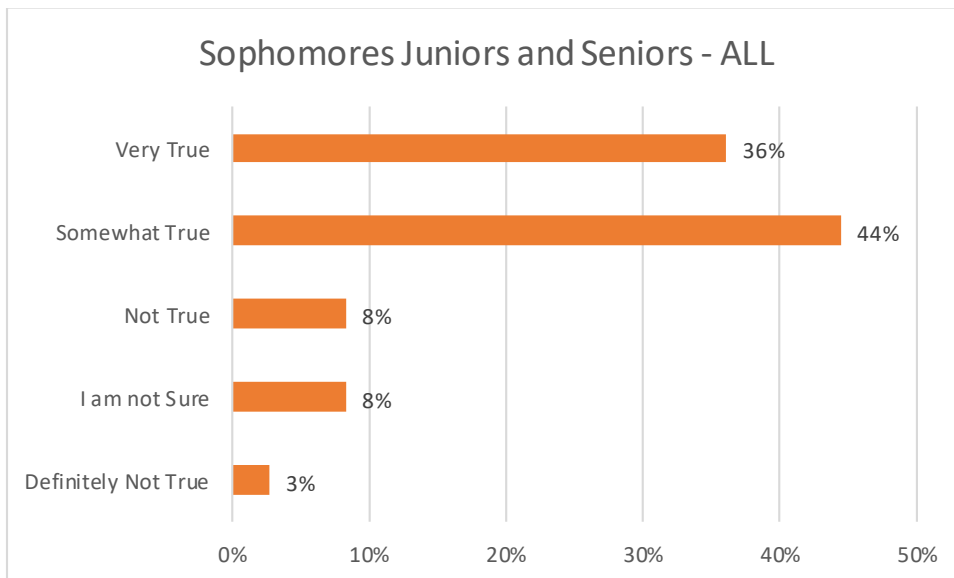


Figure 12



These similar levels of preference hold as one considers further the responses from male and female students within and across these groups (Figure 13, 14, 15, and 16). This

relative stability in preference – even after passage of time in a foreign country and enjoying international experience (in Kyrgyzstan) is testimony to the fact that the desire to engage professionally “back home” and rebuilding their own country remain unfazed in the hearts and minds of young Afghan students of AUCA.

Figure 13

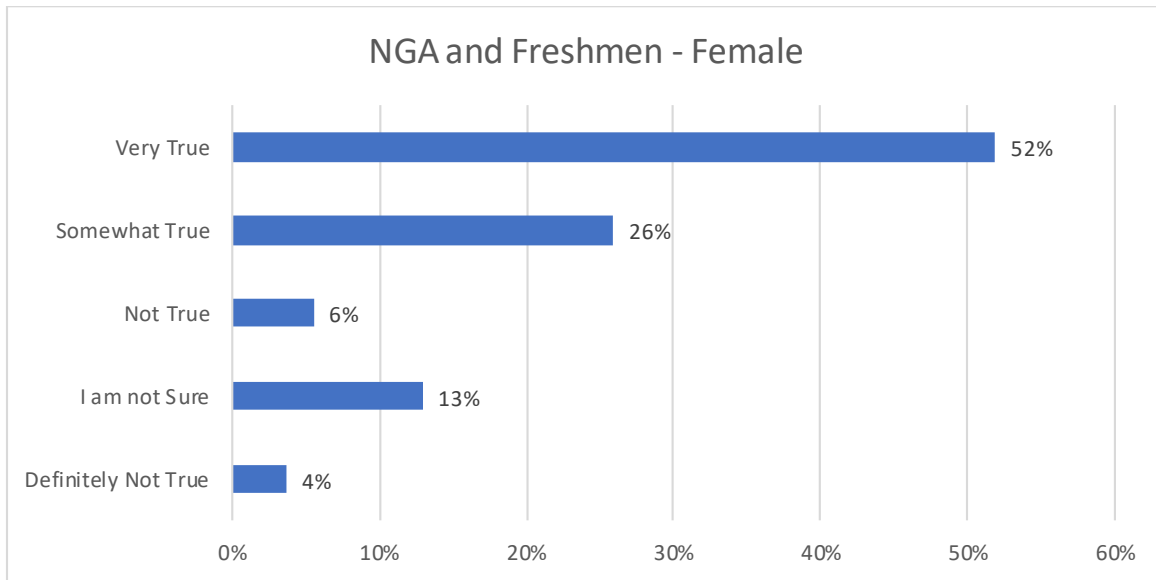


Figure 14

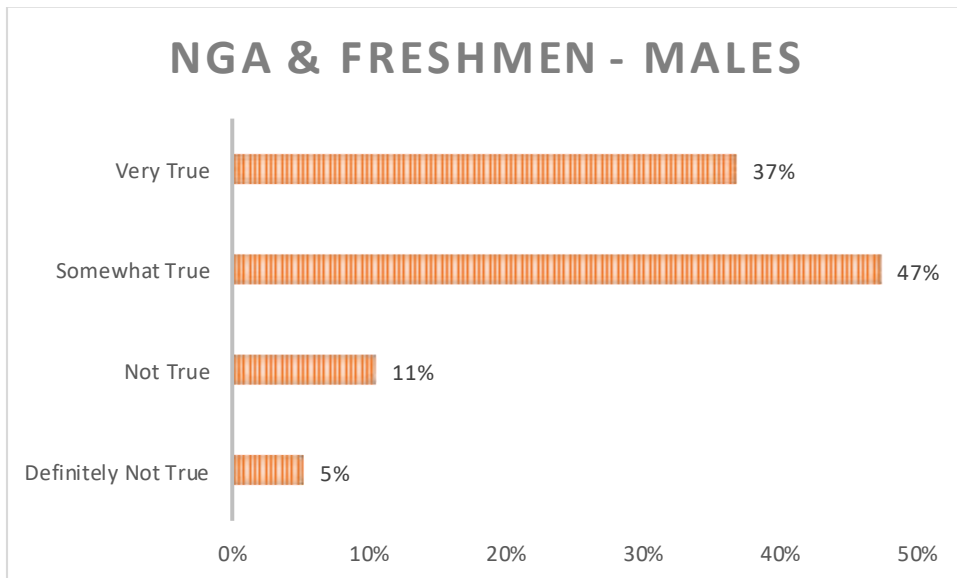


Figure 15

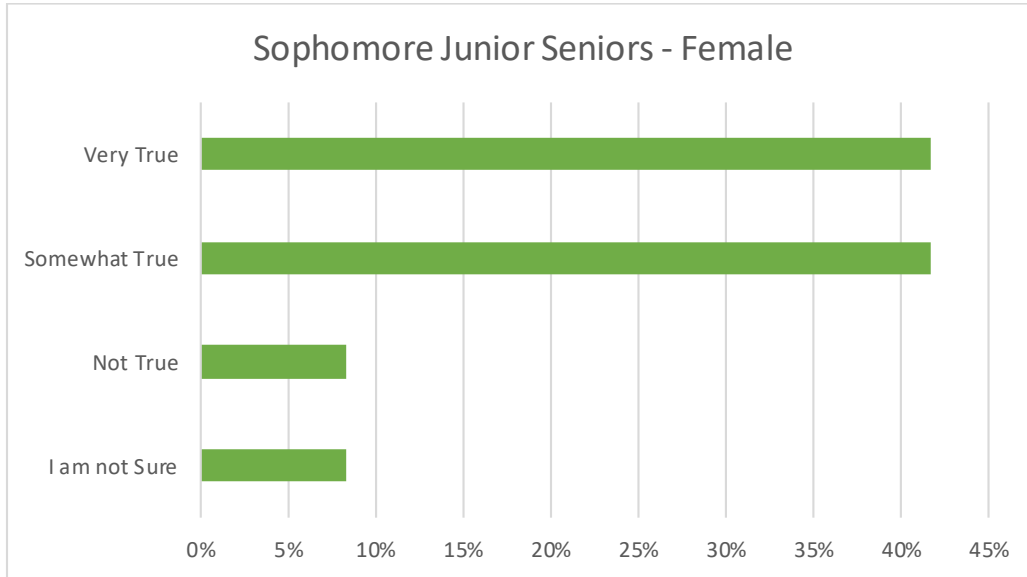
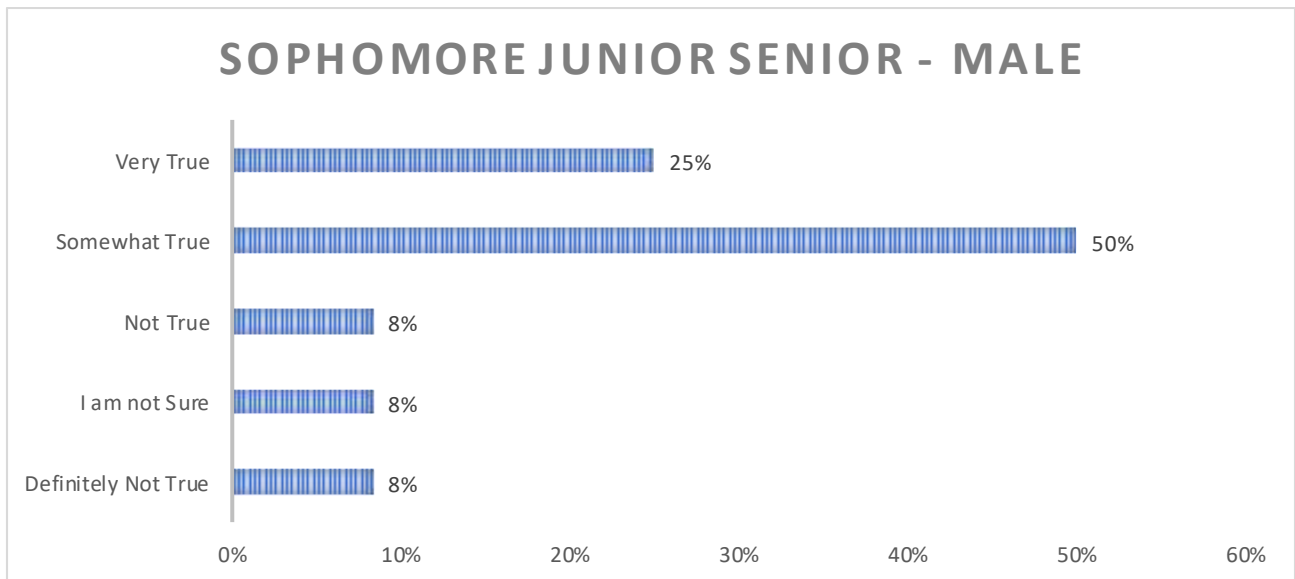


Figure 16



The fact that the desire to find a job work in Afghanistan after graduating from AUCA decreases a little for male students in older cohorts compared to fresher cohorts (from 84% to 75%, Figure 14 and 16), while that same preference increases for corresponding female cohorts (78% to 84%, Figure 13 and Fig. 15) is also revealing. It shows that as they progress through their studies, the female Afghan students become particularly

keen to take up professional leadership roles in their society upon completion of their education at AUCA.



Security back home remains a key concern. However Afghan students at AUCA remain committed to contributing to Afghanistan’s development whether at home or from abroad.

Afghan students at AUCA were remarkably candid about the security concerns that always remains an unavoidable reality in any conversation about returning to Afghanistan. As figures 17 and 19 demonstrate, roughly similar proportion of male and female students (52% and 55%) agreed with the statement that considering the security situation in Afghanistan they would prefer to study / work abroad.

Figure 17

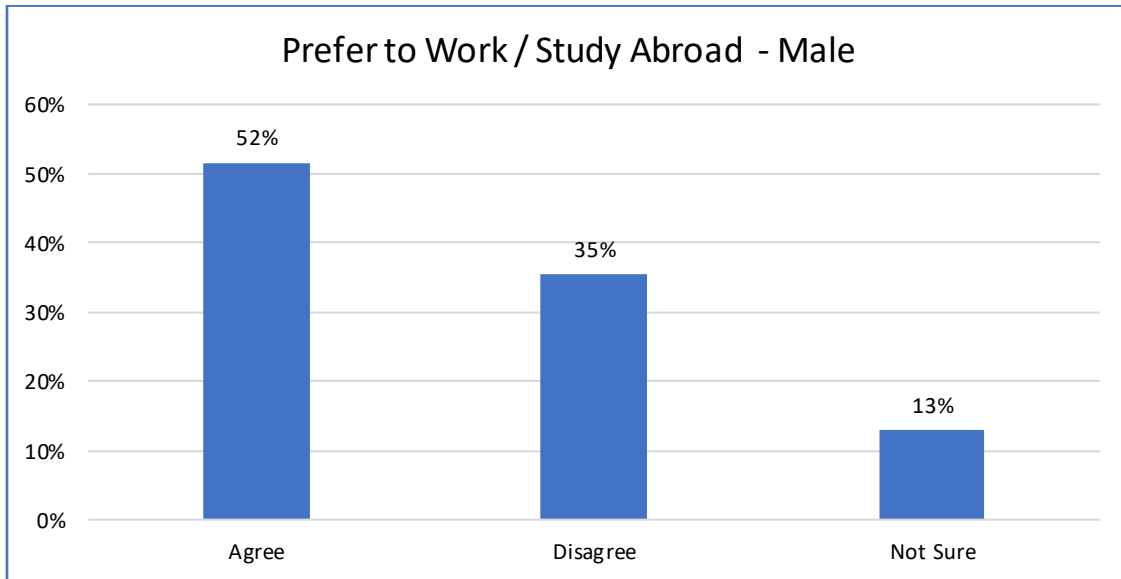
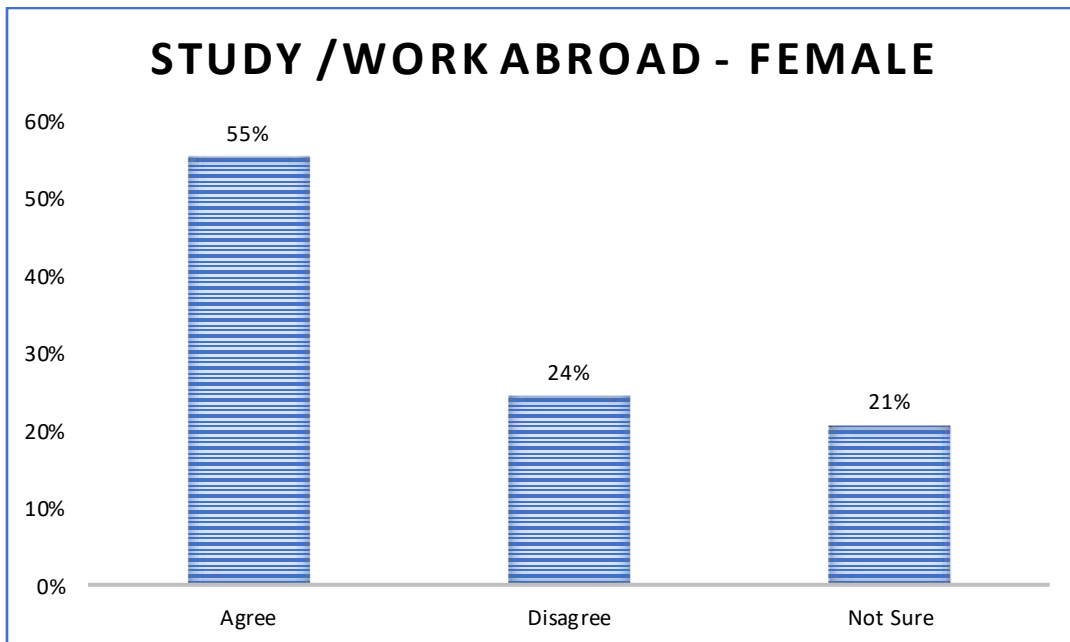


Figure 18



The fact that safety and security in Afghanistan is a genuine concern can be also observed from the almost mirror reflection in the responses of the students when they were asked whether they planned to return to Afghanistan when it would be more

secure (Fig. 19 and 20). However, it is important to note that while slightly above half the female students (53% - Fig. 20) agreed with that proposition, markedly less male students (42% - Fig. 19) felt that way. This is sign that beyond security there may be other factors that are holding back Afghan students to consider a future in Afghanistan.

Figure 19

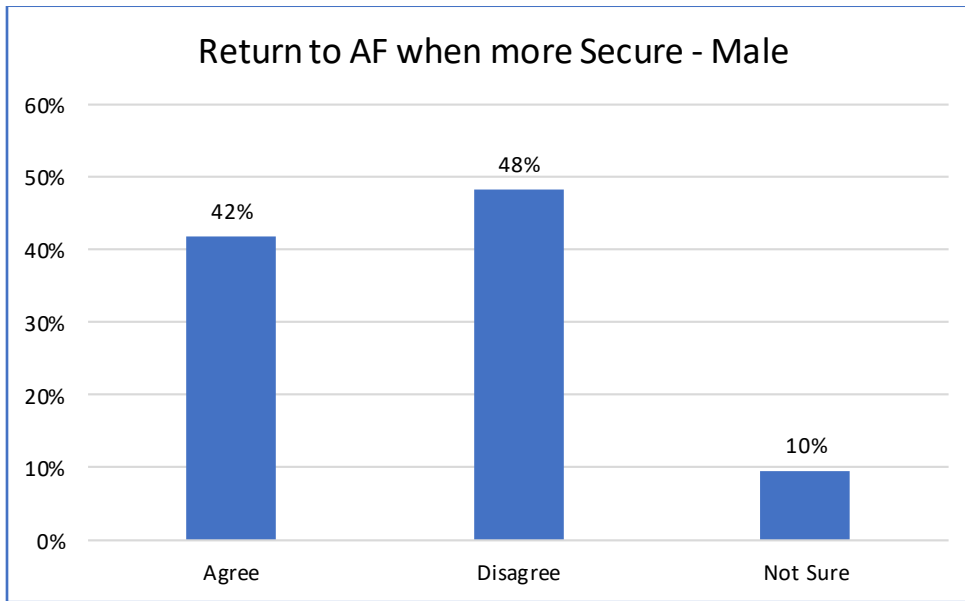
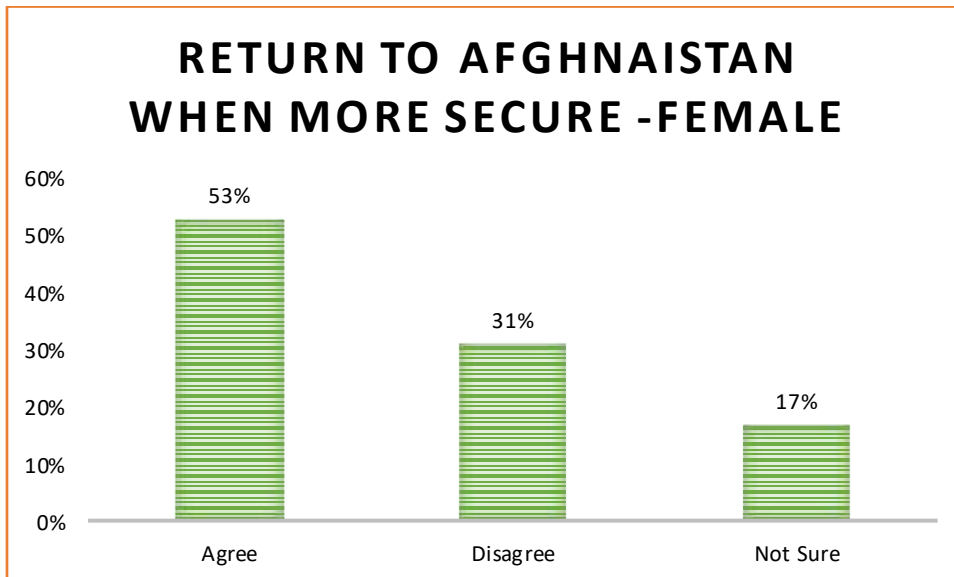


Figure 20



One could consider as a possible explanation -for the responses in Figures 19 and 20 - the difficulty of cultural re-adjustment to a conservative patriarchal society after experiencing a considerable degree of freedom of expression and socialization at an American university in a more “Westernized” and cosmopolitan city like Bishkek. However, this was not supported by data. Less than a third of male students (29% - Figure 21) and less than a quarter of females (23% - Figure 22) considered cultural adjustment to be a consequential barrier for envisioning their future in Afghanistan.

Figure 21

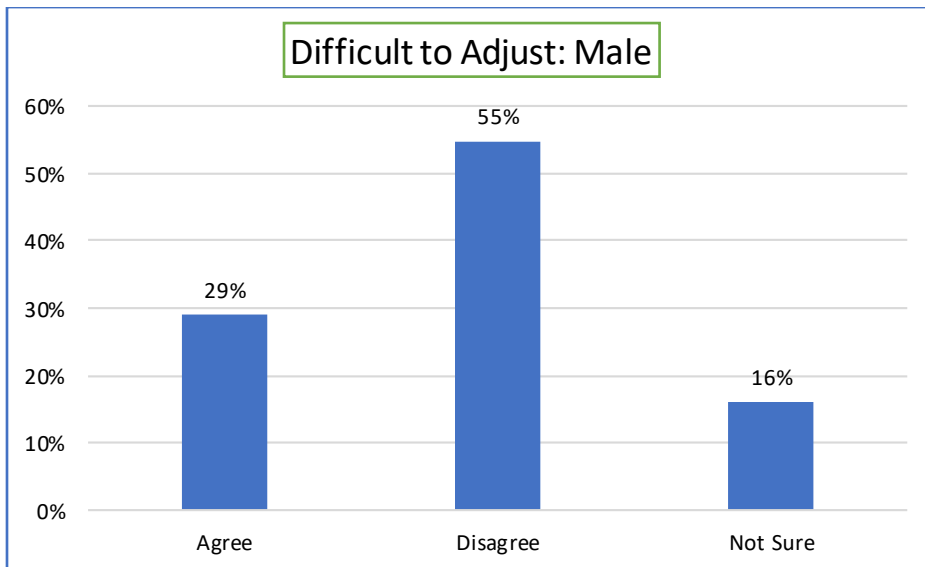
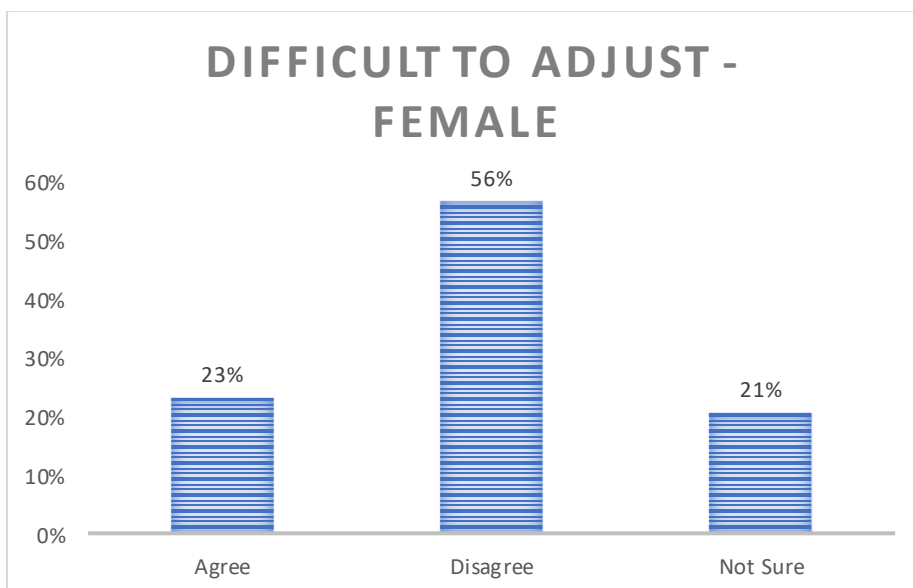


Figure 22



Probing the concerns about finding gainful employment in Afghanistan’s fragile economy seemed to present a more complex dynamic at play. Given the value of ethnicity and identity based networks of reciprocity, the level of informality in social contract, and the widely noted problems of corruption in the economy, it was not surprising that almost a quarter (23% - Fig.23) of male students, and third (32% -Fig. 24) of female students felt their job prospects were minimal given their lack of resourceful social connections. However, it was noteworthy that a fairly large proportion of male students (42%) were unsure about their prospects of securing employment through reciprocal social ties. A higher proportion of women (54%) on the other hand seemed more optimistic and confident in themselves – and did not view the presence of absence of social connections being factor in their future employment prospects.

Figure 23. Male students’ response to the statement: I would not find a good job in Afghanistan because I do not have good connections

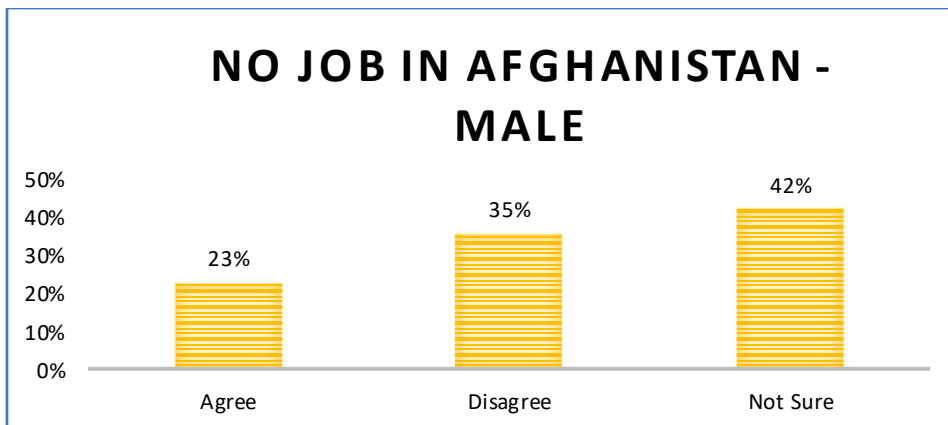
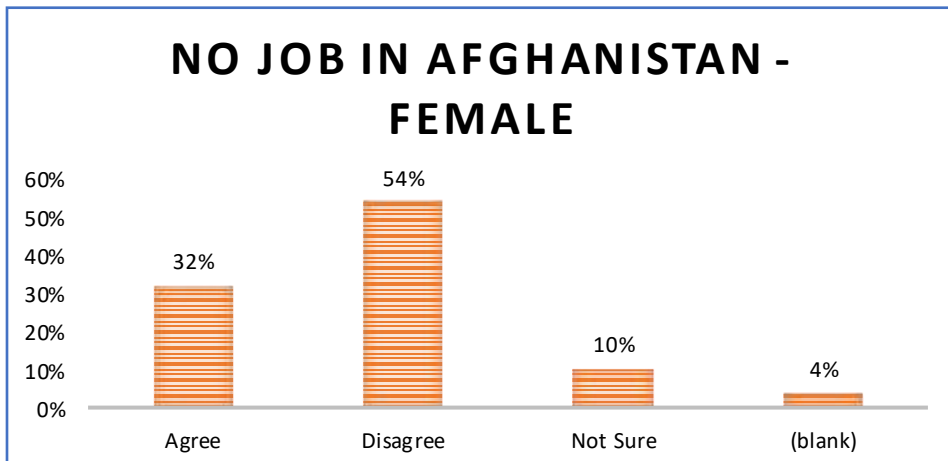


Figure 24.



These perceptions about future employment prospects in their homeland probably feed into male and female Afghan students' differential prioritization of continuing their higher education internationally beyond AUCA (Fig 6). This also underscores the idea that international development partners supporting higher education of Afghan students need to complement that support with more efficient and transparent youth engagement and labor market policies for the Afghan society at large.

Lastly, the students also seemed ambivalent about their prospects of contributing to homeland if they were not physically located in Afghanistan. Noticeably more male students (55% - Fig 25.) felt that they could contribute to Afghanistan's development even if they were not based there, compared to female students (40% - Fig 26)

Figure 25. Male students' response to the statement: If I do not live in Afghanistan, I will not be able to contribute to the country's development

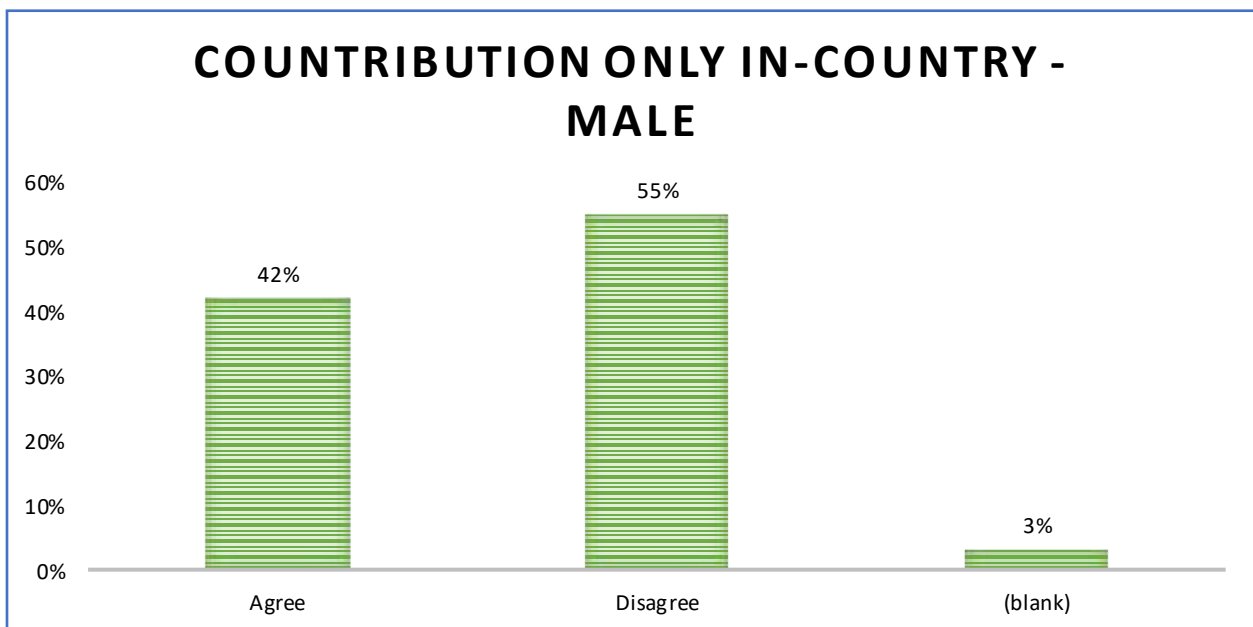
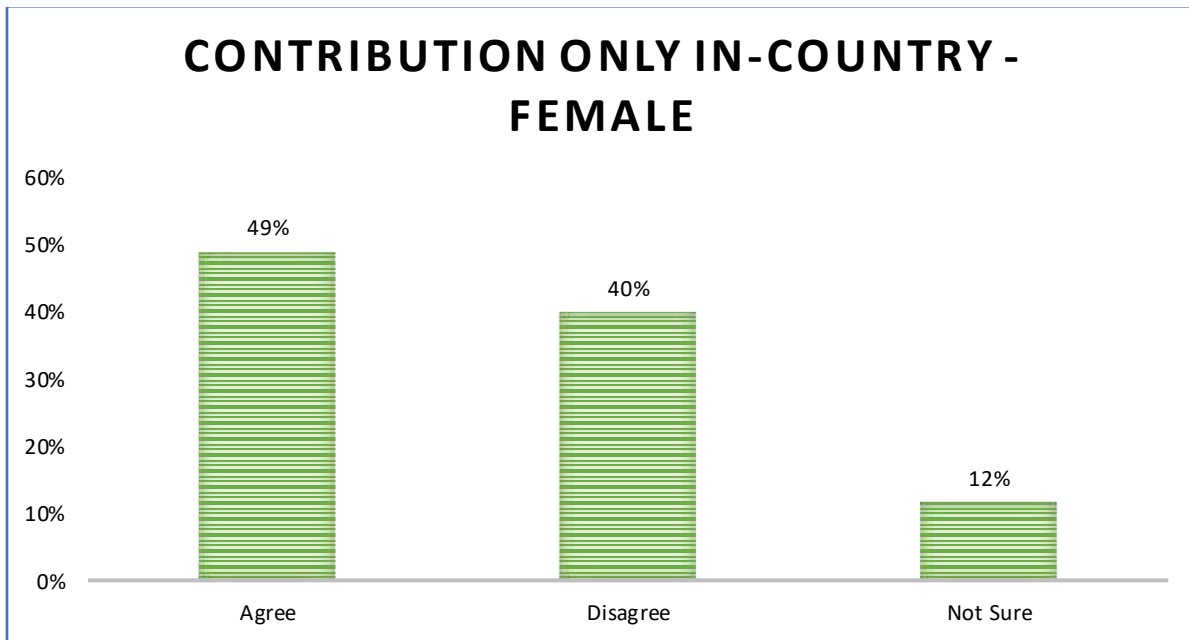


Figure 26. Female students' response to the statement: If I do not live in Afghanistan, I will not be able to contribute to the country's development



This was a surprising finding given that for young people with a quality higher education, the opportunity to contribute should not necessarily be location-bound. Global learning and global engagement are prominent markers of American liberal arts education. Indeed, a globally connected and interdependent world should in principle offer greater opportunities for mobility to AUCA graduates beyond the home-abroad binary. Consequently, making those opportunities more expanded, explicit and intentional should remain an area of continued focus for AUCA and other higher education institutions serving Afghan students internationally.

In Their Words

When asked how they saw themselves contributing to Afghanistan's development in the future, the students gave powerful and authentic responses – responses that reflect the unique vulnerability of young adults studying far from home and looking at the future with trepidation and hope. It was particularly striking how much the students wanted to give back to their country even as some of them were just getting started with their education. Working in social sectors, with international organizations, with and for government were frequently mentioned as ways the students wanted to contribute to Afghanistan's future after their studies. Working to improve conditions of women, children, people in need were also recurring themes. These are some of their voices:

- I as individual would contribute in small project mostly for women and children.
- “I want to devote sometime in studying women's condition in rural areas in Afghanistan”
- Would work in my province to educate other girls
- I will work to enhance women's capacity.
- By working closely with people in need
- I prefer for all Afghan Girls to consider many projects to participate for helping Afghan people. That is what I will do too

As visible from some of these statements above, there was an undeniable ethos of empowerment and rights in some of the responses of the Afghan students - an awareness of their agency and potential in unlocking the agency of others:

- “I can see myself as a person who works for Afghan children and working for Afghan people's rights”
- “By working with other young people.”
- If I find a job, I will bring more opportunities for Afghan Students in my community especially for the poor families.

There were clear intents of action and engagement reflected in this ethos of agency:

- I see myself as a successful business woman that will serve her people in order to contribute towards the development of Afghanistan

- When I return to Afghanistan I will try to make a situation for other male and female so they can follow their dreams.
- Helping women to know and fight for their own rights and freedom

At times the agency to empower was expressed eloquently, as one student saw contributing:

- ‘By telling stories that would create hope and by keeping people informed.’

It was also evident that some of the students came from familial or social backgrounds where their progressive values were tested. For them the work of contributing to the nation’s transformation started from their own homes. As one student wrote:

- “I will start changing from my family then society.”

There were thoughtful and specific ideas of combining economic and social concerns:

- “I wanna work for violence against women and open a factory for afghan woman.”

This intent to engage in the country’s development in concrete ways was visible even when they envisioned themselves continuing their studies abroad after AUCA

- I plan to finish my master's degree somewhere and then go to Afghanistan and start my own business which would be counseling people specially women for their psychological problems and treat them, so people with healthy spirit can do everything better, thus it is very important for the development of Afghanistan in my idea.

And there were expressed commitment to support their motherland even if they saw themselves beyond the borders of Afghanistan in future:

- I can help Afghanistan new generation from being abroad and can represent Afghanistan in foreign countries.
- “...if I do not live in Afghanistan due to security I will contribute by another way for the country development”

Encouragingly, many saw working with the Government and transforming the society as a viable path.

- I think I will work with government and develop my country in several fields.
- Through working in government and running independent projects
- I will try to be as productive as possible in the political sector of Afghanistan in the future.

Like college educated young adults they saw themselves contributing to the society through their professional skills and vocations. They were making connections with their own education and training while charting their path

- “As a human right student I would definitely work for the welfare of my country. Specially for the betterment of women and children rights.”
- Probably by starting my own business
- As a software developer
- I will be a future researcher who will carry out research in Afghanistan.

The students were not shy to express their dilemmas: “I am not sure to share this at the moment” - said one when asked about how they see contributing to Afghanistan in future. And the students did not shy away either from pointed criticism about the challenging socio-political reality that lies ahead: I would love to, if country will be ready to accept.

Equally significant was the way the students declared the value they attached to good education as such - as they contemplated their own future contribution to their motherland. As one student wrote: ‘Working as an educated person in itself is a contribution to Afghanistan’; while another echoed: ‘My education will help me to do something in Afghanistan and be useful person in Afg.’

Such articulation is markedly different from the dominant instrumental view of education for individual welfare and social mobility that one often encounters in higher education discourse. These same sentiments were picked up by the project team

members as they engaged in conversations with their peers around post university plans and aspirations. The main insights from these conversations are presented below.

What We Heard

In the conversations with our fellow students, each of us –student Team Members of the VOAS Project – were left with the unwavering impression that all our interviewees deeply believed in contributing to the future of Afghanistan. Upon returning to Afghanistan – if not right after AUCA, then after graduate studies abroad – many seemed keen to work in the sectors of women’s rights and youth’s rights.

It is important to note how aware the interviewees were of their responsibility to uphold the expectations that came from their relative privilege of an American college education in Kyrgyzstan. For example, some students felt that by their choice to work inside Afghanistan and contribute for the future of the country, they could become a role model for other students who were studying outside of Afghanistan

As such, all interviewees seemed very passionate about their future plan and goals – most of them wanted to pursue their masters’ degree after undergraduate studies at AUCA and then start their career in Afghanistan. Their biggest motivation to return back to Afghanistan was to serve their people who continue to live in very difficult conditions. Our peers felt responsible to dedicate their time and energy for helping their fellow citizens back home. Equally important –being engaged in politics was an option that came up in conversation with a small group of female students from different parts of the country.

For one of our team members, all of the four interviewees explained that they will immediately pursue their Masters studies after graduating from AUCA and will return to

Afghanistan to contribute to her development. The interviewees were highly motivated to return to Afghanistan, either now or then, and to contribute to their country as educated young leaders. They also said that even if they are not in the country (Afghanistan), they would try their best to somehow contribute to their country. Something that came out in the interviews – even when students wanted to pursue a Master’s degree abroad right after their AUCA studies – was that our peers saw a Master’s degree as a further preparation for them to secure meaningful jobs in the country upon return.

Despite being passionate about their future goals, interviewees also had shared concerns when it came about returning to Afghanistan. The barriers pointed by them were security issues, discrimination against women, and low employment opportunities, among others. Some of the female interviewees were concerned about the problems they would face as a woman in a male-dominated country and challenges they might face in finding appropriate jobs – possibly experiencing gender wage gaps. At the same time, the students were also appreciative of the family bonds and social support of the Afghan culture, and that was one important consideration for them to return back home - to live beside their family.

The interviewees were well aware of the barriers and challenges that they would face upon returning to Afghanistan after AUCA- especially, the uncertainty of finding jobs. However, even when students were apprehensive that they might not secure good paid jobs right away, most still wanted to start their professional life by working independently “to help young Afghans through carrying personal businesses or organizing projects.” In short, all our interviewees were motivated to go back to Afghanistan despite all the challenges, and they viewed themselves as responsible young leaders.

When asked about the prevalent corruption and challenges in finding employing without powerful social connections, unlike many other Afghan students our self-selected interviewees were surprisingly optimistic and motivated to succeed. Some

strongly expressed the belief that in order to find a job in Afghanistan “the only thing you need is talent and hard work. Corruption and networking does not matter it exists in all countries around the world.” It was also interesting that some students saw the current lack of efficiency in the public sector as an indication that there is a great skills vacuum that they – young Afghan graduates of AUCA – would be best prepared to fill.

The interviewees also spoke about the importance of international development organizations in Afghanistan. There was a high level of interest to work in such organizations and NGO’s because of better payment and work effectiveness. And yet they expressed the view that such organization could do more to truly optimize their investments in Afghanistan’s young generation. Paraphrasing one of the interviewees: if embassies and international organizations considered that the Afghan students educated abroad must return to Afghanistan, then these organizations should create re-entry mechanisms and opportunities for those students on the ground in Afghanistan, so that upon return students would have a job pathway or at least some funding opportunities for carrying out independent projects.

When our interviewees were asked about the security situation of Afghanistan and how it affects their decision on returning to Afghanistan, they agreed that the security situation was an obstacle to their return. When they were asked on whether they can contribute to the development of Afghanistan while being abroad, the interviewees affirmed that even if a student cannot or does not want to return back to his/her home country, she or he could still contribute for the development of a country for example by creating online courses and sharing their knowledge with the young generation of the country. The interviewees elaborated on this idea by giving an example of the current situation and how everyone was still continuing to work and study using Internet and online resources. Indeed, much of these peer conversations took place online - as the university had moved to remote teaching due to COVID lockdown. Other possibilities mentioned were - organizing fundraisers that would send funds to Afghanistan to help the Afghan citizens, and implementing different kinds of projects through friends and colleagues who reside

in Afghanistan. While the interviewees shared these ideas of remote contribution, they also acknowledged the importance of returning to Afghanistan and being their physically for working towards improving the future of the country.

Yet, the concern about security was not an absolute deterrent. Indeed some of the interviewees expressed that they strongly believe in the importance of returning to the country and contributing to resolving the problems of continued violence and lack of security in everyday life. In other words, even though they acknowledged the problem of security, some students saw their return as part of the solution. At the same time, these interviewees acknowledged that security could be a real factor for some to not consider a return to Afghanistan for professional life. In other words these students were non-judgmental and indeed mentioned that returning home is a personal choice and all students should be free to decide what is best for them.

As such, we heard a diversity of approaches about pursuing life beyond AUCA, yet there was convergence on one key issue – Afghan students’ keen desire to contribute to Afghanistan.

The Project Team

Zarlasht Sarmast: Team Leader



Zarlasht Sarmast is an independent Afghan filmmaker/photographer/researcher born and raised in Kabul Afghanistan. Zarlasht recently graduated from American University of Central Asia with a degree in International and Comparative Politics. She has previously served as the Spokesperson for the International Committee of the Red Cross in Kabul, Communications specialist for GIZ in Central Asia, Voice of America in DC, US embassy in Kabul, and many other well-known national and international organizations. She is an active member of Bard Center for Civic Engagement Program in New York and she is the Director and CEO of the project “Afghanistan Politics on the Verge of Transformation”. Zarlasht currently works as a coordinator of Global Engagement Fellows for Open Society University Networks at the American University of Central Asia.

Contact: zarsarmast@gmail.com

Maryam Yari: Team Member



Maryam Yari is a junior student of Economics department minoring in Business Administration at AUCA. Currently, she works as a Tutor of Economics at Writing and Academic Resources Center (WARC), AUCA. Besides, she is a Peer Advisor of economics courses for freshman students and a head of “Young Leaders’ Association” club. She has previously worked as a member and a team leader in AIESEC Kyrgyzstan. She also served as a mentor and Orientation Leader for New Generation Academy (NGA) students. She received an appreciation certificate for being active both in academic and extra-curricular activities from the Ambassador of Afghanistan in Bishkek-Kyrgyzstan, as well as the Dean’s List award in recognition of her outstanding academic achievement, at AUCA (2018-19).

Maryam Ranjbar: Team Member



Maryam Ranjbar graduated from American University of Central Asia, majoring in International and Comparative Politics and minoring in Human Rights. She wrote her senior thesis on the topic on UN security councils' responses to conflicts in Afghanistan. She has been an active member of Voices of Afghan Students Project at AUCA. Her previous experiences include working with USAID as a Geographic Information System specialist, working with Agha Khan Foundation as an IT manager and Ministry of Border and Tribal affairs as a data collection and analysis officer.

Abdul Walid Azizi: Team Member



Abdul Walid Azizi is a junior student at the American University of Central Asia (AUCA), majoring in International and Comparative Politics and minoring in Literature and History. Walid is an Access micro-scholarship alumnus of the U.S. Embassy in Kabul. He is also the organizer & director of Summer Camp Afghanistan 2018 and 2019.

Hezbollah Shafaq: Team Member



Hezbollah Shafaq is a senior student at the American University of Central Asia in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. He is the founder and director of New Hopes of Afghanistan Social Association and A Million Smiles for Peace Global Campaign. As a social activist, Shafaq has been engaged in organizing tens of youth supportive projects not merely in Afghanistan but also in India and Kyrgyzstan. His goal for life is to work as a young leader towards enriching the lives of youth and making them capable of dwelling and contributing to the welfare of the community.

Prof. Tamo Chattopadhyay: Faculty Advisor



Tamo Chattopadhyay is an Associate Professor and Founding Director of the Institute of Education at the American University of Central Asia (AUCA) in Kyrgyzstan. At AUCA since August 2017, he currently serves as the Dean of the Social Sciences Division. A Fulbright Awardee, Prof. Tamo studies education and social development in Asia and Latin America, consults with Ministries of Education and international development organizations, and serves as a Research Associate at the National Center for Study of Privatization in Education at Columbia University in New York. Previously, he was an Assistant Professor of Practice at the University of Notre Dame, USA, and an Adjunct Assistant Professor at the School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA) at Columbia University in New York. Tamo holds a Doctorate (Ed.D) in International Educational Development from Columbia University's Teachers College, and an MBA in Finance from Baruch College, City University of New York. Prior to academia, he was a Vice President at J P Morgan, a global financial institution, based in New York City.

Contact: tamo.chattopadhyay@gmail.com



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