

**Learning in the Margins: Lived Experiences, Meanings and Perceived  
Effectiveness of Educational Alternative Spaces for Afghan Women Post-2021**

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### **Declaration of AI**

During the preparation of this thesis, I used ChatGPT as a writing support tool to improve the organization and structure of the thesis and also enhance the clarity and readability of the text and refine the academic writing. This tool was used to provide suggestions on methodology and overall flow of the thesis. AI tools were not used to generate the research findings or collect or analyze the data. All research design, data analysis, interpretations, and conclusions are my own, and all external sources have been appropriately cited.

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## **Abstract**

After the Taliban returned to power in August 2021, an Islamist political movement that reimposed restrictions on girls' and women's education in Afghanistan (UNESCO, 2023), Afghan women have faced severe restrictions on their access to secondary and higher education. In response to these restrictions, alternative educational spaces have emerged to provide opportunities for Afghan women to continue their education. These spaces include online learning, language courses, vocational training, and community based educational centers and religious study. Previous studies examined the availability of these spaces and limited studies have explored how Afghan women themselves experience, understand, and evaluate these educational spaces. This study examines the lived experiences, meanings and perceived effectiveness of alternative learning spaces for Afghan women after 2021.

By using an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, this qualitative study explores the experiences of fifteen Afghan women who participated in alternative learning opportunities after the Taliban took power. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, and data were collected using semi-structured online interviews conducted via Zoom, WhatsApp and writing form.

The findings organized in six themes: (1) From Building Educational Futures to Experiencing Educational Rupture; (2) Living Under Gendered Control; (3) Reclaiming Education Through Alternative Learning Spaces; (4) Negotiating the Opportunities and Limitations of Alternative Learning; (5) Sustaining Hope Through Relationships; and (6) Reconstructing Lives Through Education. This study found that alternative learning spaces helped participants to continue their education, develop new knowledge and skills. On another

hand, maintain hope, and rebuild their personal and professional identities. However participants also emphasized that these opportunities could not replace formal higher education. Because of limitations like lack of accredited qualifications, practical training and structural barriers.

This study contributes to the understanding that educational alternative spaces work as alternative forms and also as a pathway that sustains educational continuity, agency, identity and hope during educational exclusion. These findings provide useful insights for educators and teachers, policymakers, and organizations to expand meaningful educational opportunities for Afghan women.

**Keywords:** *Afghan women, alternative learning spaces, educational continuity, higher education, education disruption, lived experiences.*

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Background of the Study

Since the Taliban, an Islamist political movement that created restrictions on women's education in Afghanistan, took over in 2021. Afghan women's access to formal education has been restricted, especially at the secondary and higher education levels (UNESCO, 2023). As a result, there is an urgent need to address how education can continue when millions of girls and women are excluded from schools and universities. These restrictions have

led the growth of informal education pathways and helped women to maintain access to their studies. This paper explores alternative educational spaces and documents their learning experience.

International legal frameworks such as the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and the *International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights* establish education as an essential right that contributes to the full development of the human personality and enables individuals to exercise other civil, political, economic, and social rights (Zendeli, 2017). In this sense, education is often described as a “multiplier right,” meaning that access to education strengthens the realization of many other human rights and opportunities (Fredman, 2018).

Education is a basic human right that drives equality, social development, and human dignity. While education has global recognition but realization of the right to education is different across countries and contexts. Worldwide many populations do not have access to education due to economic inequality, poverty, and social discrimination. Research has shown that poverty is one of the most important barriers to having access to education. This prevented millions of individuals from accessing schooling and it presented educational inequality

(Tomaševski, 2006). In many areas marginalized groups like women, children living in poverty and disabled individuals faced more challenges that restrict their educational opportunities.

These challenges are severe in regions that are affected by political instability, conflict and social restrictions. In these environments vulnerable populations such as women and girls were affected more, and their educational journeys were disrupted. Educational exclusion in these settings can result in long term social and economic consequences, gender inequality and limited opportunities for personal and professional growth.

Afghanistan represents a conflict-affected and politically restrictive context where women's access to education has been profoundly shaped by political instability and restrictive government policies. The Taliban first ruled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001, during which girls and women were largely denied access to formal education (Human Rights Watch, 2001). Girls and women were largely denied access to education. It leads to a near total female education collapse in many parts of Afghanistan (Human Rights Watch, 2001). After the Taliban fell in 2001 access to education for Afghan girls and women increasingly improved. By the support of the government and international organizations, millions of girls returned to schools. Over two decades Afghan female enrollment increased. By 2018 more than 3.5 million girls were enrolled in schools across Afghanistan. This shows significant progress in expanding access to education for Afghan women (UNESCO, 2021). Despite these improvements, challenges like insecurity, poverty and cultural barriers continue to limit women's educational participation (Human Rights Watch, 2017). When the Taliban took power in 2021 this progress disrupted and new restrictions created educational exclusion in secondary and higher education. As a result many Afghan women returned to alternative education such as ( home based learning, community initiatives,

online platforms, vocational training and religious studies) as means of continuing their education (Sarwari & Adnan, 2024; UNESCO, 2023).

### **Alternative Educational Spaces**

Alternative educational spaces refer to learning environments that function outside the traditional or formal education system and provide flexible opportunities for individuals who cannot access formal education. These spaces include community based programs, self directed learning, online platforms, that help learners to continue their education despite social, political or economic barriers (Lombardi, 2018). These spaces are very important for contexts where formal education is restricted or disrupted.

Many forms of alternative educational spaces have been defined in the literature. Community-based education provides learning opportunities within local communities and is often organized and supported by local educators and organizations. Home-based learning refers to small classes held in private homes or safe spaces especially in contexts where girls and women are restricted. Online learning provides access to education through digital platforms. Non-formal education includes opportunities like English language courses, vocational training, teacher training, professional workshops and digital skills that offer flexible opportunities outside formal education (UNESCO, 2021).

In Afghanistan alternative learning spaces have always played an important role in expanding access to education especially for girls and women in rural or conflict-affected areas. Community-based education helped women to access schools in the context of insecurity and limited access to education (Burde & Linden, 2013). After the Taliban returned to power in 2021 and denied educational access for women, these spaces once again became an important pathway for Afghan women to continue their education.

Alternative educational spaces therefore play a vital role in Afghanistan. These environments provide more flexible and accessible opportunities for Afghan women. It allowed learners to continue their education, gain new skills despite structural limitations (UNESCO, 2021). Access to education can improve personal development, strengthen social and economic participation and empower, especially for women (Fredman, 2018). As a result, alternative education can maintain educational engagement and women's learning opportunities in restrictive contexts.

## **1.2 Problem Statement**

After the Taliban's return to power in 2021 Afghan women's access to education was severely restricted. These restrictions led to a significant decline in female participation in education. In response many alternative educational spaces appeared such as religious schools, vocational training, English language courses and online opportunities. A recent survey shows that a large number of female students are engaged in at least one alternative education, through scholarships or fee based programs (Sarwary and Adnan 2024).

Existing research reported participation rates and main challenges. Most studies focus on access to opportunities and program availability. There is limited understanding of women's lived experiences and how Afghan women interpret these alternative learning spaces and how they navigate educational restrictions and what their perspective is on the value of these programs. This study is aimed at focusing on women's lived experiences in alternative learning spaces.

### **1.3 Study Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to explore how alternative education supports Afghan women to have access to education after 2021. After the Taliban's rule, millions of girls and women were banned from attending schools and higher education (UNESCO, 2023). In response to these restrictions, many forms of alternative learning spaces, such as home-based classes, community-based education initiatives, and online learning platforms have come out. These spaces helped women to continue their education outside of formal education despite educational exclusion.

This study aims to examine how Afghan women engage with these educational spaces and how they experience these settings under current socio-political situations. Specifically, the research seeks to understand in which ways alternative educational spaces support women's participation and academic goals. In addition, the study explores the challenges that Afghan women are facing such as financial hardships, security and safety, psychological and social barriers, technological and institutional barriers.

By focusing on women's lived experiences this study explores deeper understanding of how alternative learning spaces function and support in respective contexts and how they empower women (Burde & Linden, 2013).

### **1.4 Research Objectives and Research Questions**

#### **Research Objectives:**

- To identify the types of alternative learning spaces available to Afghan women after 2021.
- To explore and determine Afghan women's experiences in alternative learning spaces.

- To examine the barriers and challenges faced by Afghan women to access these spaces.
- To assess the perceived effectiveness of alternative learning in supporting Afghan women's education.
- To provide recommendations for improving alternative learning opportunities for Afghan women.

### Research Questions

- How do alternative learning spaces *support* Afghan women's access to education after the Taliban's return in 2021?
- What *challenges* do Afghan women face in accessing and continuing alternative learning?
- How are Educational Alternative Spaces (EAS) *conceptualized*, and to what extent have they *effectively* addressed the educational needs of Afghan women in the post-2021 context?

### 1.5 Significance of the Study

The main focus of this study is Afghan women's voices and lived experiences in alternative learning spaces in a context that formal education is restricted. By special attention to Afghan women's perspective the study addresses a gap in existing literature. It explores the social, emotional, and symbolic meanings of education for Afghan Women and how alternative learning spaces work beyond knowledge acquisition as sources of resilience, identity, and connection.

The study contributes to educational research by adding understanding of nonformal and informal conflicted and restrictive environments. It also provides practical insights and recommendations for NGOs, educators, policymakers, educational organizations. Finally this research provides a deeper understanding of how education can remain meaningful and empowering for women especially under situations of education exclusion and uncertainty.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1 Women's Education and Educational Restrictions in Afghanistan**

Education has been recognized as an important tool for empowering women and their social participation and economic development. However Afghan women experience being affected by decades of political instability, war and changing regimes. Since the Taliban returned to power in August 2021 Afghan women have significantly restricted access to formal education. These educational restrictions include closure of secondary schools and higher education. As a result these restrictions have severely reduced educational opportunities for Afghan women and have created extreme challenges for women to continue their education (Sarwari & Adnan, 2024).

Recent studies show that Afghan women have continued to pursue alternative forms of education despite the restrictions. Research reported that many Afghan women joined in informal education such as religious learning, vocational training, language courses, and online educational programs to continue their education and gain new skills (Sarwari & Adnan, 2024). These programs often provide substitute educational opportunities for individuals who are not able to access formal education. Also studies on digital and non-formal education in restrictive contexts emphasized that these spaces can provide flexible and accessible opportunities for women to continue their education (Dawodi et al., 2023; UNESCO, 2021).

However access to these opportunities remains unequal due to technological, economic, and social challenges.

Other studies highlighted the resilience and agency of Afghan women in navigating restrictive educational contexts. Women's engagement in alternative education shows their effort to maintain personal and professional development (Mujadidi & Mujadidi, 2024). Also a study on gender and education in conflicted societies suggested that alternative education can provide important opportunities for women to maintain educational engagement for formal education is disrupted (Hussain, 2023).

Other restrictions also had influenced Afghan women's educational experiences like social challenges, gender norms, lack of resources and poverty. Studies on women's education in weak contexts show that these challenges limit access to education for women and equal educational opportunities (Rahman, 2025; Karim & Ahmed, 2025).

In summary these studies illustrate that formal education systems have become inaccessible for Afghan women. Alternative education became an important tool for maintaining education continuity. However most studies focus on program availability, policy change or main barriers. This study highlights the need for research that focuses on Afghan women's lived experiences and their perspective on alternative education.

## **2.2 Alternative Learning Spaces and Non-Formal Education in Crisis Contexts**

Alternative learning spaces and informal education are important substitutes when education is disrupted by war, regime change, political instability and social inequalities. Studies show that most of the time formal education cannot work effectively in crisis because of insecurity, school closure and political restrictions (UNESCO, 2025). In these situations alternative education provides flexible learning opportunities for learners (Nicholson, 2023).

Research on the history of the development of alternative education highlights that these spaces rise in response to social or political exclusion from traditional schooling. Alternative education has emerged to provide flexible learning programs for learners who cannot access formal education (Miller, 2014). These programs mainly focus on flexibility, self directed learning and community support especially in areas with political restrictions or other crises that disrupt formal education.

Alternative education is linked to crisis and conflicted contexts. The aim is to help learners to continue their education. Beyond academic achievements these programs support students in other aspects such as well-being, resilience and future academic and professional opportunities. International agencies help vulnerable groups like women and girls to continue their education when formal education is inaccessible (UNESCO, 2021).

On the other hand, many studies argue that learning is not limited to formal education; it can be taken in places like homes, community settings and online environments (Nicholson, 2023; Dalsgaard & Ryberg, 2023). These findings emphasized the importance of flexible alternative educational programs which can help marginalized groups access education to address the inequalities and restrictions.

While alternative learning spaces are known as important opportunities in crisis the effectiveness of these spaces is different across contexts. Studies show that their success depends on different factors such as availability of resources, community support and political situation (Rogers, 2004; Nicholson, 2023). These spaces in contexts where formal education is restrictive often face barriers like accreditation, sustainability and validation of the qualifications and are unable to fully replace formal education (Karimy et al., 2024).

Overall this literature shows that alternative learning spaces play a vital role in maintaining education and creating opportunities for academic and personal growth. Many existing studies focus on structural aspects of these programs such as program design and policy, but there is a lack of studies on how learners themselves experience these spaces. This study emphasizes the lived experiences of Afghan women who participate in alternative learning spaces.

### **2.3 Digital and Informal Learning Pathways for Women's Education**

Recent studies show the growing role of digital and non formal education among marginalized groups especially women. Online learning platforms, distance education, and digital universities provide more accessible and flexible learning programs for those who are not able to access formal education due to geographical, social or institutional challenges. In Afghanistan also studies have shown that these spaces helped women to continue higher education and professional growth when formal education is inaccessible. For example, Quraishi (2024) found that Women Online University supported Afghan women's educational participation offering remote classes and providing educational resources and academic communities.

Besides online education, non-formal education has been recognized as an important way to support educational continuity for learners who are restricted from formal education. It includes organized and flexible opportunities outside of formal education and they try to meet diverse educational needs (Coombs & Ahmed, 1974).

Scholars also highlighted the importance of learning environments and their role in shaping educational experiences. Classrooms are not the only place that learning can take place. It could

be homes, community settings, and online platforms (Cook, 2016). These spaces support different forms of education, for example; collaborative, self-directed, and experiential learning. In addition a lot of adults learn through everyday experiences, social interaction, and practical activities which are outside of formal education (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007).

In addition research shows that community education and non-formal learning can improve social participation and empowerment especially for marginalized groups. It helps them to build new skills and access to education which can lifelong support through professional growth (Rogers, 2004).

The literature generally suggests that digital learning, community based and non formal education provide important programs when formal education is inaccessible. Non formal education expands access to education and supports learning and educational continuity (Rogers, 2004). On another hand Community based education supports girls' educational participation in conflicted areas (Burde & Linden, 2013). Studies in Afghanistan found that online education helped women to continue their education while the Taliban created severe restrictions on girls' education (Dawodi et al., 2023; Karimy et al., 2024; Quraishi, 2024). These findings show that alternative learning spaces have a great potential to support Afghan women during periods of educational disruption.

## **2.4 Alternative Educational Spaces for Afghan Girls after 2021**

When the Taliban returned to power in August 2021 women and girls faced severe restrictions regarding their educational participation. These restrictions led to excluding millions of Afghan women from attending schools and universities. In response, different forms of

alternative education rose to support Afghan women to continue their education in flexible pathways (Sarwari & Adnan, 2024; Ghulami, 2024).

One of the most important forms was online education. Through mobile phones, virtual classrooms and online programs many Afghan women are enabled to continue their education from homes. Research suggests that online education significantly reduces barriers such as school closure, geographical distance, and gender-based restrictions by offering more accessible and flexible education (Dawodi et al., 2023).

Another important finding is that online education and artificial intelligence helped Afghan women to access more flexible and personalized learning (Karimy et al., 2024). While there are some factors that limited the effectiveness, such as poor internet connection, electricity shortage and unequal access to digital devices.

Besides online learning, informal education also plays a vital role in helping Afghan women. Research shows that private organizations and local community learning centers offer classes like English language courses, and vocational training despite educational restrictions. These programs alongside learning, provide motivation and encouragement, social participation and a sense of belonging (Sarwari & Adnan, 2024). Also a study found that alternative learning through online education maintains hope, motivation, confidence and aspiration for future education despite social and educational restrictions (Behmanush et al., 2025).

Despite these opportunities, studies show that these programs are limited due to challenges such as functioning informally, lacking official recognition, and also poor internet access, limited funding, and inadequate resources. As a result, access often depends on technology, financial resources, and community support. While these spaces help women they

can not fully replace formal education. These spaces are viewed as temporary or complementary solutions (Karimy et al., 2024; Dawodi et al., 2023).

## **2.5 Challenges and Barriers**

Despite these spaces playing a critical role in helping Afghan women to continue their education, there are many limitations that learners face in accessing these opportunities. Barriers such as political situations and restrictions, gender norms, financial situations, and technological barriers are the main challenges that learners are faced with.

One of the biggest challenges is political restriction. After secondary schools and universities closed for Afghan girls their access to education greatly reduced. As a result, many returned to English language courses, vocational training, and online learning. However, these programs have some limitations such as working informally and lacking official recognition. These limitations create barriers to these programs to long term sustain and accredited qualifications (Sarwari & Adnan, 2024).

Besides political restrictions social and cultural norms also limit Afghan women from continuing their education. Studies show that factors such as gender roles, family expectations and restrictions on women's mobility can limit Afghan women's access to formal and alternative education opportunities. These barriers prevent Afghan women from attending educational settings outside their homes (Mujadidi & Mujadidi, 2024).

Economic hardship is another important barrier to education. Many alternative learning programs are offered by private organizations or local organizations which need to pay tuition fees, making it hard for them to join the programs due to financial challenges. As a result,

financial hardships limit Afghan girls' attendance to educational opportunities, especially in low-income families (Sarwari & Adnan, 2024).

Limited access to technology is another major barrier. Especially for learners who join online education. Many Afghan women face challenges like poor internet access, unreliable electricity, and a lack of digital devices. Especially in rural areas, these challenges make it difficult to access education (Dawodi et al., 2023; Karimy et al., 2024).

Finally, security concerns also affect women's participation in alternative learning. Many informal educational centers work hidden because of safety and security concerns. It might have some political and social consequences that create uncertainty for both learners and educators.

In conclusion, while literature shows educational alternative spaces provide valuable opportunities for Afghan women, their access to these opportunities and educational continuity are shaped by political conditions, social, economic, and technological barriers. These findings show the need for exploring Afghan women's perspectives on these limitations.

## **2.6 Research gap**

The existing literature found important insights into education for women and the role of alternative education after 2021. Studies show that political restrictions like women's educational exclusion led to millions of girls being left out of schools and universities (Sarwari & Adnan, 2024). In response, researchers have examined alternative education such as community-based education, home-based learning and online education. These programs helped women to continue learning outside formal institutions (Burde & Linden, 2013; Lombardi, 2018). Recent studies have also explored the potential of online learning and community based education and

how they expand access to education in restrictive contexts (Dawodi et al., 2023; Karimy et al., 2024; Rogers, 2004; Nicholson, 2023).

However, most of this research focuses on educational policies, limitations to access and the design and implementation of alternative education. Much less attention has been given to how Afghan women themselves experience these educational alternative spaces and what is their perspective on alternative learning spaces after 2021. Consequently, there is limited understanding of how alternative learning influences and shapes women's educational continuity, aspirations, identities, and future opportunities.

This gap is important because educational alternative spaces are more than places where learning takes place. It may also represent how women respond to educational disruption and exclusion, how they maintain hope and pursue their educational goals in very restrictive contexts.

Therefore, this study addresses this gap by exploring the lived experiences of Afghan women participating in educational alternative spaces after 2021. By using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, the study provides a deeper understanding of how women experience, interpret, and evaluate these spaces and their role in supporting women in long-term educational exclusion.

## **2.7 Contextual Framework**

This study is situated within the context of Afghanistan after the Taliban took power in August 2021. The new regime created severe restrictions on access to secondary and higher

education. This led many women to seek alternative ways to continue learning outside the formal education system.

In response, alternative educational spaces rose in multiple forms such as online learning, community-based centers, language courses, vocational training, and other non-formal educational opportunities. These spaces provided more flexible and accessible opportunities to continue their education and gain new skills. It helped them to remain connected to education despite the absence of formal educational pathways.

At the same time, there are many factors that influence learners' participation, such as gender-based restrictions, mobility limitations, financial hardship, limited internet access, and uncertainty about educational opportunities. These limitations shaped Afghan women's experiences and access to these spaces (Sarwari & Adnan, 2024; Dawodi et al., 2023; Karimy et al., 2024; Mujadidi & Mujadidi, 2024).

Within this context, educational alternative spaces are understood as learning environments that exist beside formal education. But these spaces could not replace formal education. This study explores how Afghan women experienced, interpreted, and evaluated these spaces while navigating prolonged educational exclusion after 2021.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter describes the methodology used to explore the lived experiences of Afghan women participating in alternative education after the Taliban's return to power in 2021. It explains the research design, participant selection, data collection methods, and the process used to analyze the interview data.

This chapter also shows the purposive sampling strategy and the use of semi-structured interviews. Also it shows how Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to interpret participants' experiences. Also develop themes according to participants' individual stories and interviews.

Finally, the chapter presents the ethical considerations. Participation was voluntary; informed consent was obtained from all participants. Their permission was taken during interviews and considered their privacy, confidentiality, and safety throughout the research process.

#### 3.2 Research Design

This study used a qualitative **Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)** research design to explore the lived experiences of Afghan women who engaged in alternative learning spaces after 2021. IPA is a phenomenological approach that seeks to understand how individuals make sense of significant life experiences from their own perspectives. IPA explores how participants understand and describe their experiences. It also recognizes that the researcher interprets participants' accounts to understand their meanings. (Smith et al., 2009).

IPA was selected because the purpose of this study was to explore how Afghan women experienced, interpreted, and gave meaning to these educational opportunities within a context of political restrictions and educational exclusion. Their educational journeys were shaped by complex social, political, cultural, and personal circumstances, requiring an approach capable of capturing the depth and complexity of these experiences.

The study followed an exploratory and inductive approach, allowing themes to develop naturally from participants' narratives. This approach was particularly appropriate because little research has examined the lived experiences of Afghan women participating in alternative learning spaces after 2021. By focusing on participants' own interpretations, the study developed a contextualized understanding of how they navigated educational disruption, accessed alternative learning opportunities, and explored their future educational and career opportunities.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, a method well suited to IPA because it encourages participants to describe their experiences in their own words while allowing the researcher to ask follow-up questions and explore important issues in greater depth. (Smith et al., 2009).

### **3.3 Research Setting and Participants**

The study was conducted in the context of Afghanistan following the Taliban's return to power in August 2021. When educational restrictions in Afghanistan led to millions of girls left behind in schools and universities, many Afghan girls joined alternative learning spaces. Despite restrictions, alternative learning spaces played a vital role in supporting Afghan girls. The study included fifteen Afghan women between the ages of 19 and 28 from three provinces of Afghanistan. Living in Afghanistan during the interviews. Participants were selected through

purposive and snowball sampling. They selected that they had direct experience with educational disruption and participation. And some of them were introduced to other participants.

Participants were from diverse educational backgrounds. Some had been secondary school students, while others were enrolled in universities or professional programs in fields such as medicine, dentistry, engineering, finance, and journalism before their education was interrupted. After education disruption, they joined different programs such as online education, English language courses, teacher training, vocational programs, internships, self-directed digital learning, religious studies and community based centers.

Participants shared common experiences of educational disruption and challenges. To protect participants' privacy, all identifying information has been removed. Throughout this study participants are identified only by pseudonyms (P1–P15). Also any identifying details have been changed to generalize or keep confidentiality.

### **3.4 Sampling Strategy**

This study used purposive and snowball sampling to interview participants which have direct experience of educational disruption and participation in alternative education after 2021. Purposive sampling was used to identify participants who met the study criteria and snowball sampling helped to connect additional participants through other participants' referral. This approach was appropriate because of participants' security and sensitive research context. The criteria for participants were Afghan women who experienced restricted access to formal education after 2021 and had participated in at least one form of alternative learning. The participation was completely voluntary and informed consent was obtained before each interview.

The final sample included fifteen Afghan women between ages 19 and 28 who participated in at least one form of alternative learning space.

### **3.5 Data Collection**

Data for this study was collected through semi-structured interviews. Interviews conducted one-on-one with fifteen Afghan women who experienced educational disruption after 2021. The participants had to participate in alternative education. The interview included ten open-ended questions that were used to examine participants' educational backgrounds, experiences of educational disruption, participation in alternative learning, challenges, sources of support and future goals. Follow-up questions were asked when needed to clarify responses or discuss issues in depth.

The interviews were conducted in Dari, the participants' preferred language. The interviews are conducted through WhatsApp, Zoom, or written responses, depending on participants' preferences and security considerations. With participants' permission, the interviews were documented and transcribed for analysis.

Interviews translated by the researcher manually and from Dari into English. Minor corrections to spelling, grammar, and punctuation were made to improve clarity. The original meaning and context of participants' interviews were carefully protected. For confidentiality, all identifying information was removed, and participants were assigned pseudonyms (P1–P15).

### **3.6 Data Analysis**

The interview data were analyzed using the procedures of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) described by Smith et al. (2009). The analysis followed an inductive and interpretative process, allowing themes to emerge from participants' accounts while focusing on the meanings they attached to their experiences. The main focus is on how

participants experience alternative educational spaces. After each interview was taken, transcribed, and translated. The transcripts were read several times to become familiar with the data. Further, the researcher then conducted detailed, manual coding on a participant-by-participant basis to preserve the uniqueness of each participant's experiences. At the end of the coding process for each transcript analytical notes and memos were used to capture the interpretations.

After analyzing each individual case, the patterns among them were examined in all interviews. To notify shared experiences and important differences. Then, related codes were refined into themes. Final themes show both shared meanings and the unique experiences of participants.

### **3.7 Research Ethics**

Ethical approval for this study was taken from the Ethical Review Committee at AUW before data collection began. Ethical principles were considered throughout the study to protect participants' rights, privacy and well-being. Especially in a sensitive context in which women are banned from formal education.

Before each interview, participants were informed about the purpose of the study. The participants were voluntary, and before each interview, the participant was informed. Written or verbal informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were also informed that they could decline to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences.

For confidentiality, all participants' actual names are to (P1–P15). All identifying information was removed from the data. Any detailed information that could reveal participants' identities was removed or generalized.

All interview recordings, transcripts, and research data were stored in password-protected digital files accessible only to the researcher. All stages of the transcription, translation, and analysis process were done very carefully to keep the original meaning of the participants' stories and explanations.

### **3.8 Research Limitations**

This study, like all qualitative studies, has several methodological limitations. First, the sample was fifteen Afghan women from three provinces; as a result, the findings do not represent the whole of Afghanistan. Second, because of sensitive context interviews were conducted through WhatsApp, Zoom, or written responses to protect participants' safety and the location of the researcher. Third, the interviews were conducted in Dari and translated into English by the researcher. Despite every effort to keep the participants' original meanings some little differences may be lost during translation. Finally, because of the sensitive topic and participants' location, some participants may have been cautious when sharing their experiences. Despite these limitations, the study provides a rich understanding of Afghan women's experiences in educational alternative spaces after 2021.

Since I am an Afghan woman and a researcher with a strong interest in women's education, my personal background and experiences may have influenced how I interpreted participants' narratives. To minimize potential bias, I followed a systematic IPA analytical process, remained closely grounded in the interview data and also maintained reflexive awareness throughout the research process and based interpretations on participants' own narratives rather than personal assumptions. Despite these limitations, the study provides a rich and clear understanding of Afghan women's experiences and perceptions of alternative learning spaces after 2021.

## 4.Findings

### 4.1. From Building Educational Futures to Experiencing Educational Rupture

Students describe their experiences not by talking about losing access to formal education but also by showing that education was the most important part of their lives. Before the Taliban took power in August 2021, education in Afghanistan meant much more than attending school or university. It represented hope, purpose, independence, and the promise of having social and financial stability. Participants spoke about preparing for Kankor (national university entrance examination in Afghanistan); entering university and the job market; taking medical specialty courses; and pursuing a career that can secure support for them and their families, communities, and Afghan society. From secondary school to graduate students, all participants describe education as a great way to shape their identities and achieve their goals.

The educational pathway suddenly got interrupted following the political change in August 2021.

Participants consistently narrate the closure of schools and universities as a moment that completely changed their educational journey. They described a profound rupture in structural educational pathways, bringing uncertainty about the future and their dreams. This study found that participants experienced this education exclusion not only as a loss of access to formal education. Disruption of their identities, dreams, and hard work. The study also suggests participants endured immense amounts of suffering during their education journey through past years. The analysis identified six overarching themes that describe Afghan women's experiences of alternative learning spaces after 2021. These themes are (1) From Building Educational

Futures to Experiencing Educational Rupture; (2) Living Under Gendered Control; (3) Reclaiming Education Through Alternative Learning Spaces; (4) Negotiating the Opportunities and Limitations of Alternative Learning; (5) Sustaining Hope Through Relationships; and (6) Reconstructing Lives Through Education. Together, these themes illustrate participants' educational journeys from disruption and exclusion to adaptation, support, and personal transformation. Each theme is presented in detail in the following sections using participants' narratives to illustrate their lived experiences.

#### **4.1.1. Building educational future before 2021**

Before 2021, participants viewed education as a pathway to achieving their personal, academic, and professional aspirations. Although they were at different stages of their educational journeys, they consistently described education as central to their future goals, identity, and independence. The following narratives illustrate how participants understood the importance of education before the Taliban's return to power.

Participant 2 talked about the significance of entering the University of Kabul Medical University after successfully passing the Kankor exam.

*"After successfully passing the national university entrance examination (Kankor), I was admitted to my preferred field of study, stomatology (dentistry). This was an important achievement for me because it allowed me to pursue my academic and professional goals."*

For this participant, entering university was not an academic achievement, but it was the beginning of a professional journey that she had worked so hard for through the years.

Participant 13 also described the same, entering Kabul University as the fulfillment of a lifelong dream.

*"Receiving my acceptance into this major felt like the beginning of a promising future, and I was excited to start my higher education journey."*

She described the university as a place of hope and opportunity. The phrase *"the beginning of a promising future"* shows how education is a symbol of achieving personal goals and ambitions and a meaningful social contribution.

Not all participants had yet entered university. Participant 5 was just completing Grade 12 and preparing for the Kankor exam when she reflected on her future.

*"My dream was to complete school, pass the Kankor examination, and study medicine because I wanted to serve my community."*

While participant 5 did not enter university, her narrative shows how education was the center of her life and how she imagined her future. Like many other participants, she doesn't see education as a qualification but a way to serve people and build professional identity.

#### **4.1.2 Experiencing Educational Rupture**

Participants explained the sudden interruption in their education as a moment that certainty in university almost overnight changed. This abrupt interruption was a fundamental disruption in their future education. School and university closure was a loss of years of construction.

Participant 5 vividly recalled the day her educational journey came to an unexpected break-off.

*"We were in the middle of our midterm examinations, and three of my exams were still remaining. On that day, schools were closed to girls, and we all left school with fear and tears in our eyes. Since then, I have never returned to school."*

This sentence captures the sadness and mental pressure of school closure. Unlike many other participants who were attending university, participant 5 was in a secondary school and even denied for the Kankor examination. Her experience shows that regardless of Afghan girls' education level, by this interruption they are all reporting a similar sense of profound loss. Participant 11 experienced it from a different position. She almost completed her degree.

*"I had almost completed my degree, but suddenly we were told that female students could no longer continue. It felt as though years of effort had disappeared overnight."*

Although both participants 5 and 11 were at different stages of their educational journey, they described the educational disruption as the loss of a future they had carefully planned. For participant 11 it was a suspension of professional identity that she had developed.

Participant 13 similarly reflected on completing only one semester of university before university closure.

*"I had just started university. I was excited to learn and continue my studies, but after one semester everything stopped."*

Her narrative shows how suddenly hope was replaced by uncertainty. The excitement of beginning university was removed by quick disappearances of opportunities that before seemed secure.

Across participants, school and university closure was experienced more than institutional closure. They described losing professional identity, the opportunity to achieve long term goals, fulfilling responsibility that they planned for their communities and families. It was not just education interruption but also the future that participants had imagined through education.

#### **4.2. Living under gendered control**

Following the closure of schools and universities, participants described educational exclusion as navigating a broader system of gender based restrictions that shaped every aspect of daily life. This restriction was not only applied in education but in movement, gender segregation, institutional regulation, and the context of education ban surrounding women's participation in public life. This restriction transformed education from a daily routine to an activity that needs a lot of negotiation, caution, and adaptation.

Across interviews, participants explained their interconnected experiences in attending learning centers, travelling to classes, or participating in educational activities often involving concerns about safety, inspections, transportation, and compliance with changing regulations. Rather than a challenge of being educationally isolated.

##### **4.2.1 Restrictions on Mobility and Educational Access**

One of the most significant barriers that participants emphasized in interviews was restriction on mobility. Although some alternative educational opportunities remained available, reaching these opportunities was often surrounded with circumstances beyond their control.

Many described that traveling alone was no longer possible. There were some requirements according to dress, gender segregation, and a mahram (a male guardian), which added more limitations for mobility.

Participant 1 described how her everyday life changed after the Taliban returned to power.

*"I could no longer travel freely on my own, and my mobility became highly restricted. Whenever I went outside, I was required to wear a full covering and, in many situations, to be accompanied by a male guardian."*

Her narrative shows how restrictions on women's movements directly affected her education participation. Participant 8 similarly explained that attending educational programs required navigating multiple restrictions.

*"We could not enter the educational center openly. We had to use a different entrance, wear appropriate clothing, and sometimes arrange for a mahram to accompany us. Even going to class required careful planning."*

For participant 8, participation in education was no longer a straightforward activity; instead, it required adapting to the situation of where women could go, what they should wear and how educational spaces could be accessed.

Participant 12 also explained how geographical mobility became an additional challenge. After moving from a province (Ghazni) to Kabul to pursue education, she faced difficulties finding a place to stay. Many girls' hostels had closed. Even after enrolling in educational programs, the center itself later closed, forcing her to return home.

*"I came to Kabul because I wanted to continue my education, but after the center closed, I had no choice except to return to Ghazni and begin searching again."*

While Participants 1, 8, and 12 experienced different circumstances, their narratives show a common pattern. Education participation depended more on women's ability to negotiate restrictions on movement, access and public participation rather than on their academic achievement.

#### **4.2.2 Learning Under Surveillance and Everyday Gender Policing**

Participants also described learning within environments that are known for surveillance, uncertainty, and fear. There were always concerns that classes might be inspected, interpreted, or closed without warning. This concern affected not only where they learned but also how they experienced education itself.

Participant 11 described how educational centers frequently cancelled classes because of concerns about inspections.

*"Sometimes we received messages only a few hours before class saying that it had been cancelled because there was a possibility that officials would inspect the center."*

This uncertainty meant that educational participation could never be taken for granted. Even after successfully enrolling in a program, participants remained unsure whether learning could continue from one day to the next.

Participant 9 described another form of adaptation. She explained that the beauty training course she attended operated discreetly because of security concerns.

*"The classroom looked like a sewing center. Sewing machines were placed inside so that if anyone came to inspect the building, they would think sewing classes were being held instead of beauty training."*

Participant 14 also explained that she decided not to participate in the Grade 11 examination because she feared it might be used to identify girls wishing to continue their education.

These narratives show that surveillance extended beyond formal education to participants' daily lives. Participants explained carefully considering where they learned, who they learned with, and whether educational activities could safely continue.

#### **4.3. Reclaiming Education Through Alternative Learning Spaces**

Although participants experienced schools' and universities' closure as a profound disruption to their educational journey, they consistently rejected staying home and learning should come to the end. They reconstructed their educational journey by searching among multiple learning spaces. These spaces included online universities, English language institutes, vocational training centers, community workshops, teacher training programs, religious schools, internships, digital platforms, and informal peer networks. They did not depend only on educational opportunities, instead they combined multiple learning spaces, creating personalized educational pathways that can help them to connect to learning despite prolonged educational exclusion.

Participants described that rarely did these opportunities appear easily. They relied on friends, teachers, social media, educational organizations, and online communities to discover

new opportunities. This suggests that reclaiming education was not just replacing a university with another program; it was reconstructing an educational ecosystem.

#### **4.3.1 Searching for New Educational Spaces**

Participants described themselves as active seekers of educational opportunities. After schools and universities closed, they intentionally searched for spaces that they could grow academically, professionally, and personally.

Participant 12 explained how she continuously searched for opportunities after returning from Kabul.

*"After returning home, I enrolled in an English language institute because I believed English would help me in the future. I also participated in youth leadership programs, attended workshops, and later joined online educational courses whenever I found new opportunities."*

She gradually reshaped her education by combining language learning, leadership programs, workshops, and online education. This narrative shows that educational continuity emerged through participation in multiple learning spaces.

Participant 7 described a similar process.

*"I joined English language classes, computer courses, and teacher training because I didn't want to stop learning. Even though I couldn't continue university, I believed that learning new skills would prepare me for future opportunities."*

Her experience shows how participants responded by seeking opportunities wherever they became available.

Participant 10 likewise described combining nursing education with online courses and professional training.

*"I continued my nursing studies whenever possible, attended online courses, and participated in different training programs because I wanted to improve myself instead of waiting."*

Across interviews, educational continuity was by moving between different spaces.

#### **4.3.2 Building an Educational Ecosystem**

Participants described creating interconnected combined educational pathways including formal, informal, digital, and community-based learning spaces.

Participant 3 described how she continued learning dentistry by herself after university closure:

*"I searched for videos, online lectures, and educational materials related to dentistry because I didn't want to forget everything I had learned."*

Her narrative shows how digital educational resources reconstructed her education. The online platform became an extension of her interrupted education, not a replacement of it.

Participant 6 described a similar experience.

*"I kept reading, watching lectures, and studying online because I wanted to protect the knowledge I had already gained."*

Both participants saw online learning as a way to gain professional knowledge rather than waiting for formal education.

Participants also explained how relationships help them to discover educational opportunities.

Participant 9 explained that learning opportunities circulated through informal networks.

*"Whenever someone found a new course or workshop, they shared it with everyone else so that nobody would miss the opportunity."*

This quotation shows that education continuity depended not only on individual effort but also on the help and involvement of the whole community. Teachers, friends, classmates, and educational organizations became important parts of the educational ecosystem. They shared information, encouragement, and opportunities.

Participant 13 explained another important perspective, by attending religious education after university closure. Her narratives illustrated that alternative educational spaces extended beyond online platforms and vocational training.

*"Currently, I am studying religious subjects in a madrasa, including Quran recitation (Tajweed), Quran memorization, and other Islamic studies. A friend recommended this madrasa to me as a way to continue my education after universities were closed to women. I have now been studying there for approximately two years."*

Taken interviews show that participants reconstructed education through an interconnected network of learning spaces. This educational ecosystem became an adaptive response to long-term educational interruption.

### 4.3.3 Alternative Learning as Continuity Rather Than Replacement

Although participants were grateful for the opportunities provided by alternative learning spaces, they consistently emphasized that these experiences could not fully replace formal education. Professional and valid degrees in medicine, dentistry, engineering, journalism, finance and economics, and other courses and degrees need accredited higher education that alternative learning spaces could not provide.

Participant 15 explained about limitations:

*"These courses helped me develop new skills, but they could never replace my university education. My dream has always been to complete my degree."*

Similarly, Participant 9 explained,

*"Learning these skills gave me confidence, but I still hope one day I can continue my formal education."*

Participants therefore differentiate between continuing to learn and achieving their educational future that they imagined. These alternative educational spaces helped them to stay active academically, pursue knowledge, prepare for scholarships, and develop new skills. However, they continued to consider university or school education as a center of fulfilling their long term professional goals.

Educational alternative learning became a bridge between participants' interrupted past and future education that they continued to pursue, rather than a formal education. These educational spaces helped them to continue their education and refusing educational interruption defined their destinies.

#### **4.4 Negotiating the Opportunities and Limitations of Alternative Learning**

Another important theme is negotiation of the opportunities. Although participants described educational learning spaces as very essential for continuing their education, they also described how these spaces could not fully replace the formal education they had lost. Participants do not view these spaces entirely positively or inadequately; they described living with a continuous tension between opportunity and limitation. Alternative spaces enabled them to stay academically engaged and gain hope and new skills, but they also reminded them of what they had lost by university closure. In interviews, they explained that they valued alternative education because it prevented complete educational discontinuity. But these spaces do not resort to normal education.

Participants repeatedly explained that alternative learning spaces should not be understood as a replacement for university education. Instead, these spaces work as adaptive educational spaces that allow participants to continue learning and at the same time, face the limitations of learning outside formal education.

##### **4.4.1 Alternative Learning as Opportunity**

Participants described alternative learning spaces as opportunities that could never exist after 2021. They found these spaces have more flexible schedules, supportive educators, access to online classes, and these diverse programs help them to stay connected to education despite severe restrictions.

Participant 1 reflected on the opportunities created through online education.

*"Studying online allowed me to continue learning even though I could no longer attend university. I could study from home, manage my time, and participate in courses that would otherwise have been impossible."*

Participant 1, through online education created a new space that could continue developing her academia and adapt to realities of her life after education exclusion.

Participant 8 also explained the experience of the importance of supportive instructors.

*"The teachers encouraged us, understood our situation, and always motivated us to continue learning despite the difficulties."*

For participant 8, alternative spaces provided more than education and classes. They also provided emotional support like encouragement and a sense of belonging to their class. While many participants felt uncertain about their educational future.

Participants also described how flexible schedules helped them to balance their education and personal responsibilities. For example participant 14, as a mother, narrates,

*"Because the classes were flexible, I could manage both my household responsibilities and my education."*

Unlike traditional university education, flexible learning helped them to continue studying while managing family responsibility, childcare, and household duties. For some women, especially for those who were married, this online learning space helped them to continue their education; otherwise, it might be impossible.

Across interviews, alternative learning spaces were as important educational opportunities that helped to continue their education in a situation in which formal education was no longer available for them.

#### 4.4.2 Alternative Learning as Incomplete Education

Although participants described these opportunities, they also emphasized that alternative learning spaces could not provide the experiences that they had in universities. Their disappointments were not directly from the programs themselves, it was about the limitations that were not in their control.

Participant 6, who was a dental student at Kabul Medical University, explained why online learning never fully replaced professional education.

*"Watching lectures online could never replace working in laboratories or treating patients. Practical learning is something that cannot be learned through videos alone."*

Her narrative shows how online education limits her access to practical knowledge, clinical training, and interaction with patients that alternative learning spaces could not provide.

Participant 11 described another aspect of educational inequality.

*"Even when universities briefly reopened, female students had fewer facilities, limited laboratory access, and fewer educational resources compared to male students."*

Her explanation shows that returning to university did not result in educational equality. Access to formal education was reminded of the unequal learning situation that affected the quality of education for women.

Participants also talked about emotional limitations with long term participation in alternative learning spaces. Participant 9 reflected.

*"Sometimes I felt that I was attending many courses but not really moving forward."*

This participant talked about one of the most important findings in the study. Participants often stayed connected to learning while at the same time feeling that they were not progressing toward the educational future that they had imagined. Educational activity did not lead to educational achievement.

Participant 15 also described same thing.

*"These programs helped me stay active, but they could never replace university. I still felt that something important was missing."*

Importantly, not every participation in alternative education spaces was experienced as supportive. One participant was forced into child marriage after school closure. She joined a sewing training program to support her family financially and ended up with ethnic discrimination within the learning environment. She experienced not being accepted and being excluded, which affected her confidence and sense of belonging. Her experience reminded us that alternative learning spaces did not automatically provide an inclusive education environment. These spaces themselves were shaped by wider social inequalities.

These narratives show that participants valued alternative learning at the same time they recognized its limitations. Participants did not view these spaces as replacements for university education, rather they described them as meaningful and incomplete educational opportunities. These spaces helped them to continue their education without fully restoring what had been lost.

## **4.5 Sustaining Hope Through Relationships**

Throughout interviews and narratives, we can obviously see that education continuity was not an individual effort and journey. Participants consistently explained that education continuity depended on relationships with family members, friends, teachers, classmates, mentors, universities, and educational organizations. These relationships provided encouragement during periods of uncertainty, shared new educational opportunities, boosted their confidence, and helped them to understand that continuing education is meaningful despite formal education exclusion.

Participants' narratives show that these relationships became an essential resource of support for Afghan girls to continue their education. They explained that education continuity depended not only on alternative learning spaces but also on people who encouraged, guided, and enabled continued learning. Families, teachers, mentors, peers, universities, and educational organizations became essential sources of emotional, practical, academic, and financial support. Educational continuity emerged from a combined process, participants' personal effort and support of the network that they were surrounded with.

### **4.5.1 Family as the Foundation of Educational Continuity**

Participants described their families as the strongest source of support during their educational journey after 2021. Emotional and financial support, practical help, and continuous motivation that helped many participants to remain engaged in education while there was no stable future for them.

Participant 1 explained the support of her family;

*"My family provides continuous encouragement and motivates me to continue my education."*

This brief sentence shows family support played a central role in her education commitment. Family helped them to not accept the end of learning; they also helped them to search for new opportunities. Participant 2 explained receiving support in multiple forms:

*"I receive substantial support from my family. They have supported me in every possible way, including financially, emotionally, and practically. Their encouragement and assistance have played a vital role in helping me continue my education."*

Her narrative shows that educational continuity was possible with personal motivation and practical help that was provided by family. Participant 7 described continuing education as a way of honoring her family's sacrifices:

*"My family is my greatest source of support during these difficult circumstances. They consistently encourage me to continue my education, motivate me to pursue my goals, introduce me to educational opportunities, and provide financial assistance whenever possible. One of the reasons I remain committed to my education is that I do not want the sacrifices and support provided by my family to go to waste."*

This participant understood her education continuity as a shared family investment. She recognized her family's support as a sacrifice for her.

Across interviews, families provided multiple forms of support, such as encouragement, financial assistance, and emotional, practical, and moral support. These supports helped participants to enter many programs, despite prolonged educational exclusion.

#### **4.5.2 Communities That Sustained Learning**

Besides family, participants consistently emphasized the importance of support from teachers, mentors, classmates, universities, and educational organizations during their educational journey.

Participant 1 narrates how teachers and mentors increased her confidence and encouraged her to be more committed to education.

*"My teachers also support and guide me throughout my learning journey. Their encouragement has been very important in helping me remain committed to my studies. I have delivered two online seminar presentations and received significant praise and recognition from my instructors. Such encouragement increases my confidence and strengthens my motivation to continue learning and improving myself."*

For her, teachers are more than people who gave her instruction. Teachers in educational spaces keep her motivated to have continuous effort to continue despite her studying outside traditional university settings.

Participant 13 explained support from teachers, classmates and the university as creating a community of learning.

*"I have also received support from my university, instructors, and fellow students. They have been willing to provide guidance, assistance, and encouragement whenever needed. This support network has made it easier for me to overcome challenges and remain committed to my studies."*

This participant described education not as learning alone but as a collaboration and encouragement that was sustained through relationships.

Participant 10 talked about a very important part of support that Afghan girls have received, organizational support. This support was beyond financial assistance. By covering internet costs, providing a laptop, and covering tuition fees, the organization removed practical barriers that might prevent her from educational continuity:

*"I received financial assistance from an organization that supports Afghan women. The organization covered my internet expenses, provided me with a laptop, and paid for one semester of my studies. This support made it much easier for me to continue my education through the online program."*

Unlike family and teacher support, which often focused on emotional support, organizations provided sources and materials that removed practical barriers.

Participant 12 described the importance of mentors who had. These mentors provided direction during periods of difficulty.

*"I have benefited from the guidance of mentors who have supported my academic growth and helped me remain focused on my educational aspirations."*

Mentorship there went beyond academic assistance, they helped participants to have more confidence, direction, and long-term goals.

Importantly, participant's 5 explanations show that these experiences were not shared equally by everyone. She described facing challenges without external support:

*"I have not received significant external support in continuing my education... Apart from one former classmate who suggested someone might help with educational expenses, no one has provided direct assistance to help me continue my education or achieve my academic goals. As a result, I often feel that I have very limited pathways available to pursue my aspirations."*

This narrative shows that educational continuity strongly depended on supportive relationships. Participants with leaks of these networks had less sense of hope and opportunities to continue education.

#### **4.6 Reconstructing Lives Through Education**

Although formal education had been interrupted, continuing education itself had a profound meaning in their lives. It was not just gaining a degree or professional qualification, it was about a source of confidence, purpose, independence, leadership, and responsibility toward others. This educational exclusion not just transformed their lives but also the meaning of education itself as well. For many participants continuing education had the meaning of working toward long life progress, personal growth, community service, and social contribution. It is important to mention that transformation was not experienced by all participants similarly. While some participants rebuilt new skills and identities and discovered a new future, others continued education as the only option after losing access to formal education.

#### 4.6.1 Education as a Process of Becoming

Participants described how learning changed their knowledge about themselves. Alternative learning spaces helped them to rebuild confidence, gain new skills, and discover roles they had never imagined before. They actively reconstructed their new identities by continuing learning.

Participant 1 reflected on the personal impact of continuing education.

*"These educational opportunities have the potential to transform my future in positive ways. By developing new skills and expanding my knowledge, I can improve my abilities and become better prepared for employment opportunities. They also help increase my self-confidence and support my goal of becoming more independent."*

Her explanations show that education is a source of personal growth and preparation for employment. Confidence and independence come from learning under difficult situations not only by receiving a degree from a university.

Participant 12 described a more important transformation:

*"These alternative educational programs have helped me develop valuable skills, particularly in language learning, communication, and leadership. For example, I now teach English, applying many of the skills I gained through these educational opportunities. The ability to earn an income through these skills has also increased my independence and confidence."*

Her narratives show by attending alternative learning opportunities she is a learner and also an educator and a leader. These spaces helped her to continue her education and also created opportunities for herself.

Participant 15 similarly reflected,

*"I learned sewing through a paid educational center, and now I teach sewing to other girls."*

Both participants 12 and 15 reconstructed their sense of purpose by sharing their knowledge with others. These narratives show that education could shape identities in alternative educational spaces after formal education was banned for Afghan girls.

Across interviews it was obvious that education was not just simply acquiring knowledge. It became a transformation to be more confident, more independent, more capable, and more able to contribute to others' lives.

#### **4.6.2 Redefining the Meaning of Education**

Across interviews, participants also described a profound change in how they understood the purpose of education. Before 2021 education may be defined by university degree, professional career, and employment. After a prolonged exclusion, education became connected with service, leadership, empowerment, and creating opportunities for Afghan women.

Participant 2 explained how education became a service for others, in her perspective:

*"My aspiration is to use my education in service of my faith, my people, and my country. I hope that the knowledge and experiences I gain through this educational*

*journey will enable me to make a positive difference in the lives of others and contribute to the development of my community in the future."*

Her narratives show that education was more than a personal growth, it was an achievement that could help her to serve her people and community.

Participant 4 connected to support other Afghan girls:

*"I hope to pursue an international scholarship and continue my studies abroad. I am also motivated by the desire to advocate for the rights of girls who have been deprived of educational opportunities and to contribute to expanding access to education for them."*

For this participant, alternative educational spaces were meaningful because they created the possibility to improve other Afghan women.

Participant 13 described education as a powerful tool for transformation.

*"My greatest motivation is the belief that education can help me become a better person and create a better future. I view education not merely as the acquisition of knowledge but as a pathway to personal growth, empowerment, and social contribution."*

This equation has the most common content of meaning of education for many participants across interviews after formal educational exclusion. Education became a way of becoming a better person and contributing positively to society.

At the same time, participant 5 reminded us that this transformation was not uniform for all participants:

*"I do not believe that this training program will enable me to achieve my original educational goals. My primary dream was to pursue higher education and become a doctor... However, tailoring may help me achieve a secondary goal in life if I am able to remain in the program. Although this work is not my passion, it may allow me to earn an income and meet my basic daily needs."*

Unlike other participants who rebuilt new educational identities, this participant described alternative learning as a painful comparison, not her ambitions. Her narrative shows that after educational exclusion some participants were forced to accept the future which is profoundly different from their dreams. This educational exclusion meant for them learning to live with the loss of formal education and continuing to move forward.

## **5. Discussion**

### **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter discusses the findings presented in the previous chapter in relation to the study's research questions and the existing body of literature on alternative learning spaces for Afghan girls after 2021. While the previous chapter focused on participants' lived experiences, this chapter moves beyond description to interpretation. By interpreting the meaning of Afghan girls' lived experience and examining how those experiences help us to better understand alternative education in a place where people have been denied education for a long time.

According to the principle of interpretive phenomenological analysis, the discussion explores how participants describe educational experiences and how these experiences relate to wider social, cultural, and educational contexts. The discussion synthesizes findings across themes to answer the three research questions. Also the study adds to existing knowledge. Main focus was on how alternative learning spaces support Afghan women to continue their education, their challenges to access and sustaining educational continuity, and how participants conceptualized the role of the effectiveness of these spaces after 2021.

The chapter starts by discussing how alternative learning spaces helped participants to continue their education despite the education ban for Afghan women. It then describes the structural and gender-based barriers that shape participants' educational experiences. Finally the chapter examines how alternative learning spaces were understood by participants, in which spaces their needs were addressed and discusses the implications of these findings for policy, practice and future research. The chapter ended with the limitations of the study and recommendations for policymakers, educational institutions, NGOs and future research.

## **5.2 Discussion of Research Question One**

### **How do alternative learning spaces support Afghan women's access to education after the Taliban's return in 2021?**

The findings of this study show that alternative learning spaces have a big role in supporting Afghan women's access to education after the Taliban took power in 2021. However, participants described that these spaces provided more than courses or temporary learning. These spaces helped them to continue their education, supporting self directed learning, maintaining hope through supportive relationships, and creating opportunities for personal and professional growth. These findings support and extend existing literature on alternative learning spaces.

#### **5.2.1 Alternative learning spaces expanded educational access through diverse learning pathways**

A major findings of the study show that participants did not rely on only one alternative educational opportunity. Instead, they combined multiple learning pathways, including online universities, English language courses, TOEFL preparation, teacher training, vocational training, professional workshops, internships, religious education, and self directed learning. This suggests that educational participation after 2021 became very flexible and individual.

This finding supports previous studies that argue that alternative education became essential when formal education systems were banned. Nicholson (2023) argues that alternative learning spaces are flexible opportunities when traditional schooling become inaccessible. Rogers (2004) similarly argues that nonformal educational systems create opportunities when students are excluded from formal education. Burde and Linden (2013) also state that community based education increasingly improves educational access for Afghan girls in conflicted settings.

However, this study provides new insights on these findings. Existing research primarily discusses different forms of alternative education as separate forms such as community-based, online education, or vocational programs. In contrast, participants in this study rarely relied on a single educational pathway. Instead, they combined multiple educational opportunities according to their situations. Alternative learning in Afghanistan works as an interconnected educational ecosystem. This finding shows the contribution of the study because it shows that educational access after 2021 was achieved through a combination of multiple learning opportunities.

### **5.2.2 Alternative learning spaces supported educational continuity rather than replacing formal education**

Another important finding is that participants understood these spaces as a means of remaining connected to education. They described that they are grateful for these opportunities, but these spaces can never be a full replacement of formal education.

This finding aligns with previous research that alternative learning spaces help maintain educational engagement during conflict and political instability. UNESCO (2021) argues that education in emergencies help students to maintain access to education when formal schooling is disrupted. Dawodi et al. (2023) and Quraishi (2024) also argue that digital learning platforms have created important learning opportunities for Afghan women to continue education despite institutional restrictions.

Participants in this study introduced a more comprehensive understanding of educational continuity. Although they valued these spaces, they repeatedly emphasized that these opportunities could not replace university education, professional training, and recognized qualifications. For participants who had previously studied medicine, dentistry, engineering, and

journalism, alternative learning preserved academic engagement but did not fulfill their original educational aspirations.

The difference between **educational continuity** and **educational replacement** is one of the study's key findings. This finding suggests that alternative learning spaces should not be understood as replacements for higher education.

### **5.2.3 Educational access depended upon supportive social relationships**

One important finding of the study is that participants' educational continuity depended on both availability of the opportunities and receiving support from family members, teachers, mentors, peers, universities, and educational organizations. Rogers (2004) argues that non-formal education is strengthened through community support. Research on education in crisis emphasizes that educational initiatives are maintained through local support networks Dryden-Peterson, S. (2020).

However, participants described that support extended more than support to access to education. Families are supported through emotional encouragement, financial assistance, child care, and practicality. Teachers, mentors, and educational organizations also played an important role in helping them by providing emotional and financial support, scholarships, internet access, laptops, and tuition fees. This finding illustrates educational continuity dependent on not only individual effort but also support of others.

### **5.2.4 Alternative learning spaces supported personal and professional transformation**

Finally, the findings show that participants described increased confidence, new professional skills, greater independence, leadership development, and new goals for their

community. Many participants also transitioned to educators by teaching English, sewing, or other skills to other women.

Previous studies argued that alternative education can promote empowerment, resilience, and lifelong learning for marginalized students (Fredman, 2018; Rogers, 2004). Recent studies conducted in Afghanistan reported similarly that online learning increased students' confidence, motivation, and educational aspirations (Behmanush et al., 2025; Quraishi, 2024).

This study supports these above findings and provides a deeper understanding of participants' experiences. They viewed alternative education as gaining knowledge, rebuilding confidence and identities, achieving financial independence, and supporting families and communities.

Overall, the findings show that alternative learning spaces helped Afghan women to continue their education, providing support, and promoting personal and professional growth. However, participants emphasized that spaces could not replace formal education.

### **5.3 Discussion of Research Question Two**

#### **What challenges do Afghan women face in accessing and continuing alternative learning?**

The findings show that participants faced many challenges to continue alternative education. Although these spaces provided opportunities, political, economic, technological, and educational barriers limit participation. These findings suggest that restrictions on Afghan women are more than school closures.

### **5.3.1 Educational exclusion extended beyond the closure of schools and universities**

One of the main findings of this study is that participants explained a broader exclusion for them, not just educational exclusion. which affected their academic identity, career goals and future plans.

This finding supports previous research showing that the Taliban's education policy significantly reduced Afghan women's access to schools and universities (Sarwari & Adnan, 2024; UNESCO, 2023). However, this study shows participants understand educational exclusion not only as the school closure but also as the loss of their future career and life plans. Participants enrolled in university explained it was losing years of preparation for professions like medicine, engineering, and journalism. They described that educational exclusion affected their learning opportunities and future aspirations.

### **5.3.2 Gendered restrictions continued to shape educational participation**

The findings show that participants' education was affected by gender-based restrictions, such as limits on mobility, Mahram requirements, fear of inspections and public harassment. These findings are aligned with previous studies, that political restrictions and gender norms limit Afghan women to access to both formal and alternative education (Mujadidi & Mujadidi, 2024; Rahman, 2025).

This study further shows that these restrictions affected participants' daily learning experiences. Many described studying with uncertainty, as class could be cancelled without warning and they had to carefully plan how to travel and attend safely. This finding suggests that women's access to education was shaped by broader systems of gender-based control.

### **5.3.3 Structural and technological barriers limited educational opportunities**

Participants also described economic hardship, limited internet access, electricity shortage, technological inequality, and program instability as major challenges.

These findings align with previous research that limited technology, poor internet access, and financial challenges restrict Afghan women's participation in alternative education (Dawodi et al., 2023; Karimy et al., 2024; Sarwari & Adnan, 2024).

This study confirms these challenges and shows that they often occurred together. Participants described problems like poor internet, electricity cuts, tuition fees, transportation costs, and uncertainty about the program which made it difficult to continue learning. These findings suggest that to improve women's access to education, financial and technological barriers must be addressed.

### **5.3.4 Alternative learning reduced educational exclusion but did not eliminate educational inequality**

Despite participation appreciation for these opportunities, they recognized their limitations. This study supports previous research showing that alternative education faced challenges like accreditation, quality, and sustainability (Nicholson, 2023; Rogers, 2004; Karimy et al., 2024). Participants appreciated the flexibility of these programs but noted concerns about limited practical training, lack of recognized qualifications, and uncertain educational pathways. Overall, they viewed alternative learning as helpful but not a replacement for formal higher education.

Overall, the findings show that Afghan women faced many challenges in accessing and continuing alternative learning spaces. Besides school closure, gender restrictions, financial hardships, limited access to internet and technology affected Afghan girls' educational

continuity. Consequently, the effectiveness of alternative learning spaces depended on situations for women attempting to pursue education.

## **5.4 Discussion of Research Question Three**

**How are Educational Alternative Spaces (EAS) conceptualized, and to what extent have they effectively addressed the educational needs of Afghan women in the post-2021 context?**

The third research question examined how participants understood and evaluated the effectiveness of educational alternative learning spaces. Participants saw them as spaces that helped them to continue learning, rebuild confidence, and maintain hope for the future. However they also agreed these spaces could not replace formal education.

### **5.4.1 Educational Alternative Spaces as Spaces of Educational Continuity**

One of the main findings of this study is that participants viewed educational alternative spaces as a way to continue their education. They saw these spaces as helping them stay connected to learning and maintain their knowledge, skills, and future goals.

Previous research shows that alternative learning spaces provide access to education when formal education is unavailable (Nicholson, 2023; Rogers, 2004). This study supports these findings but also shows that participants saw alternative learning as a way to continue their education that had already started. This finding suggests that alternative education helped Afghan women to stay connected to education despite being excluded from formal education.

### **5.4.2 Educational Alternative Spaces as Spaces of Agency and Identity Reconstruction**

Participants also viewed educational alternative spaces as places where they could take control of their learning despite many limitations and restrictions. They actively seek new opportunities to learn new skills. Many participants became English teachers, sewing instructors, mentors, or community educators. It illustrates that these spaces supported both personal and professional identities.

Previous studies show that alternative education can promote empowerment (e.g., Rogers, 2004; Nicholson, 2023). This study supports these findings by showing that participants rebuilt confidence, maintained a sense of purpose, and created new opportunities for themselves and other women. Participants described that they succeed through their own effort as well as through alternative education.

### **5.4.3 Educational Alternative Spaces as Spaces of Hope and Future Preparation**

Another important finding is the role of alternative education in sustaining hope. Across interviews, participants consistently described alternative education as an investment for the future.

Previous research shows that learners saw alternative education as a way to prepare for future education, employment, and personal growth (Dryden-Peterson, 2016, 2019). This study supported these findings and found that participants valued alternative education for both what it offered in the present and also for what it might enable for the future.

### **5.4.4 The Effectiveness of Educational Alternative Spaces: Meaningful but Incomplete**

Previous research suggests that alternative education can improve access to education during times of crisis but can not fully replace formal education (Rogers, 2004; Nicholson, 2023; Karimy et al., 2024). This study supports these findings. Participants valued alternative education because they helped them continue learning, develop new skills, and prepare for the future. However, they also emphasized these programs can not provide accredited degrees, practical training, or recognized university qualifications. These findings suggest that the value of educational alternative spaces lies in helping Afghan women stay connected to education and maintain hope until formal educational opportunities become available. But it should not be understood as a replacement for formal education.

In conclusion, findings show that participants viewed alternative education spaces more than places to learn. They saw them as spaces that helped them continue their education, build confidence, maintain hope, and prepare for future opportunities. However, these spaces could not replace formal higher education.

## **5.5 Overall Contribution of the Study**

This study contributes to the literature by providing a deeper understanding of how Afghan women experienced and understood alternative learning after 2021. While previous research has mainly focused on access to education during crisis, this study shows that alternative learning spaces are more than places to learn.

First, participants combined different learning opportunities to continue their education. This suggests that alternative learning spaces worked as a connected educational ecosystem rather than a single program.

Second, participants valued these opportunities because of educational continuity, not as a replacement for higher education. It helped them stay connected to education while preparing for future opportunities.

Third, the findings highlight Afghan women's agency. Participants actively searched for new learning opportunities, developed new skills, built learning networks, and adapted to changing situations despite many challenges.

Finally, the study shows alternative education supported participants more than academic development. It helped them to build confidence, strengthen their professional identities, and take new roles as teachers, mentors, or community contributors.

Overall, this study suggests that educational alternative spaces play an important role in helping Afghan women continue learning, maintain hope, and prepare for the future during prolonged educational exclusion.

## **5.6 Implications of the Study**

The findings of this study have theoretical, practical, and policy implications for Afghan women to support them during long-time educational exclusion.

### **5.6.1 Theoretical Implications**

This study adds to existing literature that educational alternative spaces are more than substitute learning programs. Participants understood these programs as helping them to continue their education, build confidence, maintain hope, and prepare for the future. The findings also show that Afghan women actively created their pathway by combining different educational opportunities even with many restrictions.

### **5.6.2 Practical Implications**

The findings suggest that alternative learning programs should adopt a holistic approach that could provide more than academic instructions. Participants emphasized the importance of mentorship, emotional support, financial assistance, peer support, and flexible learning opportunities alongside education. They also highlighted the importance of English language courses, digital skills, teacher training, vocational training, and leadership skills that can help Afghan women for scholarships, employment, and future higher education. Improve connection between these programs and accredited educational pathways. creating stronger links to higher education and support for long term goals.

### **5.6.3 Policy Implications**

This study shows that alternative learning is valuable but can not replace formal higher education. Policymakers and educational organizations should continue supporting these programs. They also should address barriers like financial hardships, improved digital access, and lack of educational resources. Educational policies like; expand scholarships , supporting internet access and strengthening partnerships between educational organizations and universities may enhance the effectiveness of alternative learning spaces.

Finally this study suggests that educational policies should recognize the diversity of Afghan women's educational experiences, aspirations and backgrounds to provide more flexible, leaner, center-based policies.

## **5.7 Limitations of the Study**

Like all qualitative research, this study has many limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings.

First, this study used an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach with a purposive sample of 15 Afghan women. The findings provide an in-depth understanding of participants' lived experiences but are not intended to be generalizable to all Afghan women. Second, all participants had access to some form of alternative learning space. This study does not capture the experiences of Afghan women who were not able to join these programs due to financial, geographical, security, and disability or other barriers.

Third, the interviews were conducted online. It may limit nonverbal communication and report.

Fourth, participants' experiences reflect a specific period within Afghanistan's rapidly changing political and educational context. As policies and educational opportunities continue to evolve, women's experiences may also change over time.

Finally, this study only focuses on Afghan women's perspectives. It did not include educators, policymakers, family members, or representatives of educational organizations, whose views could provide a more comprehensive understanding of alternative learning spaces. Despite these limitations, this study provides valuable insights into how Afghan women experienced, understood and navigated alternative learning spaces.

## **5.8 Recommendations**

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed to improve alternative learning opportunities for Afghan women.

### **5.8.1 Recommendations for Educational Organizations and Alternative Learning Providers**

These spaces should continue expanding programs in English language education, digital skills, vocational training, teacher training, leadership skills, and professional growth. Programs

should provide a clear learning pathway, besides mentorship, academic advising, career guidance, and professional support. More opportunities for peer interaction and discussion. Feedback by instructors should improve engagement among students.

### **5.8.2 Recommendations for Universities and Higher Education Institutions**

Universities should expand flexible learning opportunities for Afghan women and increase access to valid qualifications. They also should improve credit transfer, recognition of background and prior learning, scholarships, and partnerships with organizations to support Afghan women's access to education.

### **5.8.3 Recommendations for Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and International Organizations**

NGOs and international organizations should continue to help to overcome financial and technological barriers by providing scholarships, tuition support, internet access, laptops, and other learning resources especially in provinces. They should also focus more on mentorship, leadership development, networking, and professional growth to help women remain engaged in education.

### **5.8.4 Recommendations for Policymakers and the International Community**

Policymakers and the international community should support alternative learning while advocating for the reconstruction of Afghan women's access to formal higher education. Policies should improve safe, inclusive, and flexible learning opportunities that combine academic, technological, and professional support.

### **5.8.5 Recommendations for Future Research**

Future research should explore the experiences of women who cannot access alternative learning, particularly those in provinces and rural areas. Longitudinal studies could examine the long-term impact of alternative learning on women's educational and professional outcomes. Comparative studies of different types of alternative learning programs could identify the most effective approaches among these programs. Future research should also include the perspectives of educators, policymakers, program providers, and family members to provide a more comprehensive understanding of alternative learning spaces.

## **5.9 Conclusion**

This chapter discussed the findings related to the three research questions. Compared existing literature on alternative learning spaces for Afghan women after the Taliban took power in 2021. The findings showed alternative education, despite long-term educational exclusion, helped participants continue their education, develop new skills, stay hopeful and prepare for better future opportunities. However, participants also explained that these opportunities could not replace formal university education.

The study also described the many challenges participants faced, including gender-based restrictions, financial challenges, limited technology, and the limitations of alternative learning itself. These findings show that access to education is shaped by broader political, social, and economic situations.

One of the most important contributions of this study is its finding that participants viewed educational alternative spaces more than places to learn. They saw them as spaces that

supported educational continuity, personal agency, identity development and hope for the future. This study contributes to the existing literature on education in conflict contexts by providing an in-depth understanding of Afghan women's lived experiences. While previous studies have primarily focused on educational restrictions and barriers this research highlights how women actively navigated these challenges, perceived the effectiveness of alternative learning opportunities, and reconstructed their educational goals through these spaces. By using interpretative phenomenological analysis, the study offers a participant's perspective that deepens understanding of educational continuity in contexts of educational exclusion.

Finally, this chapter presented the study's contributions, implications, limitations, and recommendations. It is hoped that these findings will support future research, policy, and practice aimed at expanding meaningful educational opportunities for Afghan women living under prolonged educational exclusion.

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## Appendix A:

| Partici pant | Age Range | Province | Highest Education Before 202 | Current Learning Activities                                                                                |
|--------------|-----------|----------|------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| P1           | 18–25     | Kabul    | Bachelor's Degree            | Online university, , English language, computer and professional skills, online courses                    |
| P2           | 26–30     | Kabul    | University Student           | Computer science, islamic studies, Arabic language, education, psychology, low, economics                  |
| P3           | 18–25     | Kabul    | University Student           | Master of Islamic psychology                                                                               |
| P4           | 25–29     | Kabul    | University Student           | English language, Artificial intelligence, computer skills, educational videos on Youtube                  |
| P5           | 18–25     | Kabul    | Secondary School Graduate    | Vocational training                                                                                        |
| P6           | 25–29     | Kabul    | University Student           | TOEFL preparation, academic writing, online mental health course, online business course, English language |
| P7           | 25–29     | Kabul    | Bachelor's Degree            | Orthodontics workshop, TOEFL preparation, academic writing                                                 |
| P8           | 18–25     | Kabul    | Secondary School Graduate    | Online school, teacher training, leadership internship                                                     |
| P9           | 25–29     | Bamyan   | University Student           | English language, sewing and beading                                                                       |

|     |       |        |                           |                                                              |
|-----|-------|--------|---------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|
| P10 | 18–25 | Kabul  | Bachelor's Degree         | Online university Bachelor's Degree                          |
| P11 | 25–29 | Kabul  | Dentistry Student         | English language course, special dental course               |
| P12 | 18–25 | Kabul  | Secondary school Student  | Writing skills, public speaking, personal development skills |
| P13 | 18–25 | Ghazni | Secondary School Graduate | Religious study                                              |
| P14 | 25–29 | Ghazni | University Student        | Vocational training, teaching sewing                         |
| P15 | 25–29 | Kabul  | Medical Student           | English language and web development                         |

## Apadix B:

### Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. The purpose of this study is to understand the educational experiences of Afghan women before and after 2021 and how they continue learning through alternative means. Your responses will remain confidential and will only be used for academic purposes. You may skip any question or stop at any time.

#### Question 1

Before 2021, what level and type of formal education were you enrolled in?

*Could you tell me more about your level of education, the type of school or university you attended, and your field of study?*

**Question 2**

How did your access to education change after the Taliban returned to power in 2021?

*Could you provide specific examples of what changed and what restrictions you experienced?*

**Question 3**

What type of alternative learning are you currently participating in?

*Please describe how you found these learning opportunities and what kinds of educational activities they involve.*

**Question 4**

How would you describe your experience in your current learning environment?

*Could you tell me more about your feelings, the quality of the education, and your interactions with teachers and other learners?*

**Question 5**

How does your current learning experience differ from your previous formal education?

*Please describe the differences in terms of educational quality, accessibility, and the learning environment.*

**Question 6**

How did you gain access to this learning opportunity?

*Were you introduced to it by someone, or did you find it on your own? Please describe the process.*

#### **Question 7**

What motivates you to continue your education?

*Could you tell me more about your personal goals, hopes, and motivations for continuing to learn?*

#### **Question 8**

What are the main challenges you face in continuing your education?

*Please share any real-life examples of difficulties or barriers you have experienced.*

#### **Question 9**

What kinds of support have you received from your family, teachers, or others?

*Could you explain how this support has helped you continue your education?*

#### **Question 10**

To what extent do you think these alternative learning opportunities will help you achieve your future goals?

*Please explain how you believe these educational opportunities may influence your future educational, personal, or professional aspirations.*

