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During the Republic, the [United Kingdom was one of the largest bilateral donors](#) to Afghanistan's education sector, supporting the construction of schools for girls, providing teacher training, and assisting with curriculum development. The UK's investment in education not only strengthened the country's schools but also helped develop future leaders and professionals, contributing to Afghanistan's overall development.

On 9 March 2026, during a [UN Security Council](#) meeting on Afghanistan, Baroness Smith of Malvern, the UK Minister of State for Skills and for Women and Equalities, reaffirmed the United Kingdom's support for Afghan women and girls and strongly condemned the Taliban's restrictions on their rights.

Similar, in December 2025, [Ambassador Archie Young](#), UK Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN said that the UK continues to condemn the violation of women's rights in Afghanistan. Yet despite these pronouncements, the UK Home Office has recently decided to refuse student visa applications from Afghan students, many of whom are the very girls and women they have said deserve an education. With this new development, one of the most basic human rights, the right to learn, is slipping further out of reach for Afghan girls and women.

It has been 1208 days since Afghan women and girls have been shut out of universities, chaining their dreams of becoming teachers, engineers, doctors, and leaders. The severe deterioration in their quality of life and mental health has worsened with the Taliban's new legalization of violence against women. The silence from the international community towards their plight has often felt deafening. Yet Afghan students remain resilient. They are not giving up but are searching for alternatives. For them, opportunities outside of Afghanistan is the key to reopening doors that have been forcefully closed.

With its rich university culture, the UK has been a beacon of hope for many of them. Its universities cultivate some of the world's most promising leaders. Afghan girls and women have been preparing for years, making financial, physical, and mental sacrifices to apply and have finally been accepted to UK schools. Many spent months upskilling, studying for English exams, writing essays, and gathering references. Some families needed to borrow money to cover the steep cost of application and English test fees. Others traveled to neighboring countries simply to apply for the visa process and wait for it. After all these sacrifices, the last step they needed to take has been now taken away from them. The students who have successfully been accepted to universities in UK have proven that they have potential to dedicate themselves to their education. All they need is the opportunity. If democratic nations do not keep educational doors open for them, who will?

Security and immigration management are legitimate concerns for any government. However, Afghan students applying for study visas are not seeking alternative migration pathways; they are seeking classrooms, degrees, and the knowledge that will equip

them to rebuild their country in the future.

Supporting Afghan students is not just an investment in both Afghanistan's future, but in the UK's as well. The Chevening Scholarship was created in the UK's interests to provide educational opportunities to potential leaders from conflict-affected countries. Education, after all, is one of the most powerful tools against extremism. Before 2021, youth in Afghanistan, particularly women, enrolled in universities, many of these graduates became leaders in their communities, actively participated in government decision-making processes, and [UNAMA documented](#) youth-led initiatives in Kabul where more than 80 young leaders gathered to promote peace and reject violent extremism. The education and opportunities provided today will strengthen the human capital that Afghanistan will need when the country is ready to rebuild beyond Taliban rule. It is in the UK's best security interests to allow Afghan students better access to education.

When Afghan students are given access to education, they gain hope. They gain skills. They gain the capacity to contribute meaningfully to society. At Afghans for Progressive Thinking, we have built a network composed of women and girls who return to Afghanistan after receiving their degree, and guide and support hundreds of other students in their applications for higher education opportunities. The experience of each individual multiplies and creates a ripple effect that benefits entire communities. While the new visa policy comes from a place of fear, the reality is that security and compassion are not mutually exclusive. Humanitarian considerations can and should be integrated into screening processes. Safe and accessible education study routes for those at risk, particularly women, can uphold both the UK national interests and its global responsibility.

For more than two decades, the UK has invested in advancing education and empowerment for Afghan women and girls because it clearly sees how Afghanistan's development intertwines with its own. Suspending student visas will undermine those long-standing commitments and especially the years of progress. How the UK responds to the plight of Afghan women and girls today will define how history remembers this moment. This is not a question of whether security matters—it does. The question is whether we can respond with both vigilance and compassion, both in the service of international security. Because when doors close on education, they close on hope.