AIEA STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES

SEPTEMBER 2025

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Hometown: Kabul, Afghanistan

University: University of Mississippi

Tell us a little about yourself, including your current major/degree program and hometown.

I am Mahdia Yari, an international student from Kabul, Afghanistan, a recent graduate with a Bachelor's degree in Political Science, and now beginning graduate school in Political Science with a minor in Comparative Politics at the University of Mississippi. I come from a middle-class family with an educated mother, a medical doctor, and an educated father, an engineer. I grew up in a patriarchal society, yet within an open-minded family that shielded and protected me from the harsh realities of my environment. These life experiences shaped me into the strong woman I never expected to become. Everything happened step by step, leading me here, and I am still on that journey, this time racing against the past version of myself to refine and build the best version of who I am.

I earned my Bachelor's degree in Political Science in the spring of 2025 from the University of Mississippi, after first completing a Bachelor's in English Language and Literature in Afghanistan. My educational journey began nearly a decade ago at age 17, when I studied English Language and Literature at a teacher training college. When the college shut down due to political unrest, my classmates and I launched a movement to turn it into a university. Although the effort failed, costing me nine months of education, it was during that time that I worked as a language instructor, which became the foundation of my English proficiency. I also took part in movements and gave speeches on inclusion and advocacy for my college.

Majoring in Political Science had been a dream since high school. I first pursued it at the American University of Afghanistan before transferring to the American University of Central Asia in Kyrgyzstan. From there, I applied to several institutions. Initially, I continued my studies in Comparative Politics at the American University of Central Asia as an exchange student. However, uncertainty around my exchange status forced me to look elsewhere. Eventually, I enrolled at the University of Mississippi as a transfer student through placement by the QSAP and IIE organizations. The road to Ole Miss was long and winding, but I made it!

Internationalization looks different on each campus. What does "internationalization" mean to you? Can you provide us with an example of "internationalization" from your campus?

For me, internationalization means when individuals' cultural, linguistic, and identity knowledge collide with other diverse environments. It means coming from different backgrounds while learning and striving toward similar goals with support and encouragement. In such an atmosphere, students, diverse as individuals and learners, exchange and absorb elements of each other's cultures.

Globalization, in this sense, is when students grow both personally and academically, provided the institution is supportive and collaborative. At the University of Mississippi, events are organized to bring students from different parts of the globe together, connecting them through education, networking, progress, friendship, and the exchange of ideas. These events introduce students to new ways of learning and foster connections from the very beginning of their academic journey, helping them find peers with similar interests. For example, our welcome dinner gives students the chance to meet and form bonds that often last a lifetime. We also host a Cultural Café, an opportunity for intercultural exchange where students experience the richness and diversity of other cultures. In addition, study abroad programs offer valuable opportunities for students to immerse themselves in another culture by staying, studying, and exploring at a host institution and within its community.

Internationalization introduces students to new and interesting environments and experiences, allowing them to interact with different cultures, perspectives, languages, and identities. This helps them express themselves freely and pursue shared goals with others.

What are some of the biggest challenges facing internationalization at university campuses as seen through the lens of graduate students? What solutions might you offer to these challenges?

Internationalization comes with challenges; it is not an easy decision to step onto this path, since there is always something lost when something is gained. With change and success come thousands of hurdles that individuals must face and accept in order to succeed in the process of internationalization. Resistance is required. Hard work is required. Sacrifice means being away from home, yet it also means meeting great individuals who foster resilience. On one hand, balancing existing cultural and identity differences with adapting to a new culture is essential along this path. It will be hard, but it will be worth it, since it transforms students into strong and mature individuals, marking a powerful period of growth toward becoming future leaders.

What has been the most transformative and rewarding ways international or intercultural experience have been for you and students?

All international and intercultural experiences push students to step outside their comfort zones and expand their horizons, shaping them into powerful and globalized individuals with wisdom not only about their surroundings but also about the wider world through learning about other cultures and people. In addition, diverse classroom perspectives, where students study global issues and openly share their opinions with instructors, create an atmosphere where students feel comfortable and confident.

Working on and exploring global problems within their field of study, with the freedom to design research papers, is itself a transformation that gives a sense of power over their own ideas. It is an investment that strengthens adaptability. As someone who studied in four different institutions across three countries, I have been empowered by the values of inclusiveness, belief, and respect. My personal experience with intercultural learning has given me open-mindedness, deeper empathy, and the drive to invest in my future so I can use this vast experience to support others selflessly, especially voiceless individuals, regardless of culture, color, or language. This path has taught me resilience and broadened my understanding of people, while also improving my ability to tackle the complexities of global issues.

What are some key ways that higher education administrators or faculty members might increase international and intercultural experiences on campuses?

The key way for education administrators to increase intercultural experiences is by providing more support, since there are hidden skills and brilliance within every individual; if they are nurtured and polished, they will shine. What is needed is simply a guiding hand to help that light reach the globe and represent new ideas. Working with such intelligence will never be worthless; rather, it will be a valuable investment when individuals have clear intentions and goals and are committed to being part of this larger change. There should also be more opportunities to connect international and local students, as already happens at the University of Mississippi, but could be expanded further. Overall, when global education focuses on bridging perspectives rather than merely crossing boundaries, it truly succeeds.