English and Higher Education Strategic Planning in Afghanistan: Exploring Opportunities and Challenges

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Abstract

The current study aimed to explore opportunities (i.e., English as a subject of foreign Language (FL) and as a Medium of Instruction ('MoI') and challenges for English Language Teaching (ELT) in the subsequent National Higher Education Strategic Plans (NHESPs) of the Afghan Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE). The study used a mixed (quantitative and qualitative) research method, employing a survey and follow-up interview design. A total of $N = 30$ professors participated in this research from the select nine public central universities of Afghanistan. The analysis revealed that (1) the MoHE set objectives for ELT before the actual needs-analysis was conducted; (2) there was a lack of comprehensive engagement in the process of strategic plan development; (3) there was a lack of coordination between the two education ministries; and (4) finally, school education in terms of EFL is unable to prepare students for higher education where English is the MoI.

Keywords: *Afghanistan, NHESPs, English, FL, MoI*

1. Introduction

The new government installed by the Bone Conference on Afghanistan, held in 2001, was a new chapter in the modern history of Afghanistan. It was the time when everything, especially education, was damaged due to the civil war and the war that occurred between the Taliban regime and the United States of America. The country, under the presidency of Hamid Karzi, with the extended support of the international community, slowly moved towards development. Thus, the first National Development Strategy of Afghanistan (NDSA) was developed in 2005 and was valid for five years. The NDSA acts as a fundamental guideline for all the operational bodies to further develop their strategies following the vision and goals of the NDSA. The scope of higher education is discussed in chapter eight of the NDSA (National Development Strategy of Afghanistan, 2005). Similarly, the Afghan Ministry of Higher Education developed its first strategic plan in 2005, which clearly mentioned "Establishing English as the medium of instruction in select institutions and encouraging full fluency in English throughout the system." as one of the twelve objectives under the chapter of Curriculum and Academic Reform—Faculty Development. Similar objectives were set for ELT in the subsequent strategic

plans of 2009 and 2015. However, the reality on the ground tells another story. Dooris *et al.* (2012) believe "planning, if properly implemented, can have a powerful impact on advancing and transforming colleges and universities".

To analyze the topic, the study first ascertains the literature review for defining the key concepts such as strategy, strategic planning, and tools and techniques of analysis for strategic planning, which constitute the background to explore the status of ELT in the National Higher Education Strategic Plans of Afghanistan, developed in 2005, 2009 and 2015. The study then discusses the methodology used for data collection and data analysis. The discussion of English as a subject of EFL and as a MoI in the subsequent strategic plans of MoHE is based on the survey and interview data. The analysis and discussion explores whether policy makers in MoHE applied the tools and techniques of strategic planning before they set objectives for ELT in the country. It also identifies whether MoE prepares students for higher education based on English as MoI. The last section concludes the paper and provides recommendations that help MoHE achieve its goals set for ELT in Afghanistan.

2. Literature   Review

2.1. Strategy

Mintzberg (1978) defined strategy as "a pattern in stream of decisions". Porter (1996) defined the concept of strategy as "the creation of a unique and valuable position, involving a different set of activities", while Stacey (2000) views strategic management as "the process of actively participating in the conversations around important emerging issues". Thus, the three defining lines identify the importance of technically and professionally refined conversations leading to effective decisions that become the strategy for a particular organization.

2.2. Strategic Planning

There are numerous definitions of strategic planning in the existing literature, yet there is not one commonly and universally accepted definition (Quinn, 1980; Brews and Purohit, 2007). Stone House and Pemberton (2002) defined it as "the devising and formulation of organizational-level plans which set the broad and flexible objectives, strategies, and policies of a business, driving the organization towards its vision of the future". Besides this, strategic planning is a systematic process of factors and techniques to achieve specific tasks by having clear objectives in mind (O'Regan and Ghobadian, 2002; Armstrong, 1982). Strategic planning is also the management of tasks and decisions defining the long-term performance of a company (Wheelen and Hunger, 2003). Similarly, McNamara (2006) defines strategic planning as determining where a particular company will be in the next year and the years to come, how it will get there, and whether it will go there or not. For more detailed elaboration of strategic planning, also read (Yarmohammadian *et al.,* 2011; Bryson, 2011; Wan-Hamdan *et al.*, 2011; Arslankaya and KorkusuzPolat, 2010; Toma, 2010; Sanaghan, 2009; Rudd, 2008; Nolan *et al.*, 2008; Corrall, 2008; and Barsdale, 2006).

Today, institutions, as ever before, recognize the significance of strategic planning in order to achieve their desired goals. Therefore, most leaders understand this importance, but few of them are able to interpret their strategies into business results (Ghamdi, 2005). Therefore, "strategic planning is the principle tool of management in an organization and aims to provide direction and to ensure that the appropriate resources are available at a suitable place and time for the pursuit of its objectives" (Aldehayyat *et al.*, 2011). The advantages of strategic planning according to Greenley (1986); Koufopoulos and Morgan (1994) cited in Aldehayyat *et al.* (2011) are "enhancing co-ordination; controlling by reviewing performance and progress toward objectives; identifying and exploiting future marketing opportunities; enhancing internal communication between personnel; encouraging personnel in a favorable attitude to change; and improving the corporate performance of companies (e.g., bringing together all business unit strategies within an overall corporate strategy)".

2.3. Tools and Techniques of Strategic Planning

There are various strategic planning tools and techniques that help managers and policymakers at all levels in planning the right and effective decisions (Ramanujam *et al.*, 1986). For instance, the Bench Marking tool helps the organization/ institution understand its current position and determine the areas of improvement by making the correct comparison with similar organizations focusing on the same goals and objectives. Moreover, SWOT analysis helps a particular organization identify its strengths and weaknesses (the internal factors) and opportunities and threats (external factors) (Frost, 2003).

There are thirty (30) strategic planning tools pinpointed by Webster *et al.* (1989) cited in Qehaja *et al.* (2017) but recently, Liniski and Aruckij (2006) introduced (28) strategic planning tools, yet not all of these tools and techniques have been used by institutions across the globe (Aldehayyat *et al.*, 2011). There are few empirical studies reporting the

investigation of tools and techniques used exclusively in the process of strategic planning. For example, a recent study conducted in the United Kingdom found that three tools (SWOT Analysis, Bench Marking, and Critical Success Factor Analysis) were more exclusively used than the other tools (Gunn and Williams, 2007). Furthermore, a similar study conducted by Al Ghamdi (2005) reveals that 10% of the institutions in Saudi Arabia regularly used strategic tools and techniques. The most frequent ones were critical factor analysis, followed by bench marking, then 'what-if' analysis, while SWOT, product life cycle, and stakeholder analysis were only used moderately. In the same study, experience curve, portfolio analysis, value chain analysis, Delphi, cognitive mapping, and Porter's five forces analysis were found to be the least used strategic planning tools. Other studies conducted by Elbanna (2007) in Egypt, Aldehayyat *et al.* (2011) in Jordan, and Kalkan and Bozkurt (2013) in Turkey found bench marking, SWOT analysis, and critical success factor analysis as the most frequently used tools in strategic planning.

2.4. National Higher Education Strategic Plans of Afghanistan (NHESPs)

I.   The 2005 NHESP: This is the very first strategic plan developed as the principle guideline for MoHE and its operating bodies (universities and institutes of higher education) for a period of five years. The plan has two phases (2005-2008 and 2008-2013) for implementation under the core titles of "Quality Enhancement, System Reform and Management Improvement, Access to Higher Education and Financing". English as MoI in select institutions and as a foreign language subject with sufficient proficiency for all is discussed under the main title of Quality Enhancement and the Curriculum Reform-Academic Development (Ministry of Higher Education, 2005).

II. The 2009 NHESP: NHESP was drafted in November 2009 for the years 2010-2014. There are two programs discussed in the strategy. The first program covers important goals to be achieved in the areas of (Professional Faculty/Staff Development, Curriculum and Material Revision and Development, Infrastructure and Teaching and Learning Facilities, and Research and Graduate Instruction). The second program covers the goals to be accomplished in the areas of (Governance, Access, Expansion and Structure of Higher Education System, National Admissions Examination, Accreditation and Quality Assurance, Funding Strategies, Higher Education Management Information System 'HEMIS' and National Research and Education Network (NREN)). The mentioned strategic plan clearly highlighted and insisted on foreign language instruction, especially English, for improving quality education in Afghanistan (Ministry of Higher Strategic Plan, 2009).

III. The 2015 NHESP: This was the MoHE's strategic plan for higher education in Afghanistan for the period of 2015-2020. "The main aim of the NHESP II is to improve the quality and economic relevance of the higher education sector and increase participation in higher education, with a special focus on labor market-oriented degree programs." (Ministry of Higher Strategic Plan, 2015). The World Bank financially supported a Higher Education Development Project (HEDP) which had two components, such as a higher education development program and capacity building and monitoring and evaluation, where English as a language of instruction for market-oriented degree programs is one of the key objectives (Ministry of Higher Strategic Plan, 2015).

3. Methodology

This section of the paper contains the key features of the research, such as objectives of the study, research questions, population and sample of research, and tools of data collection and analysis. The individual conduct of quantitative and qualitative methods has its own weaknesses. Therefore, the study used both quantitative and qualitative (mixed) research methodology. Using both quantitative and qualitative methods together, the strength of each approach can make up for the weaknesses of the other. A mixed approach also provides a more complete and comprehensive understanding of the research problem than either a quantitative or qualitative approach alone (Creswell and Creswell, 2017).

4. Objectives

The key objective of this study was to explore the status of ELT both as an EFL and as a MoI in the subsequent NHESPs of Afghanistan. With this key objective in mind, the following are the key questions addressed in the study.

1. To what extent did the members of strategic planning committees across the select universities read the NHESPs of Afghanistan?

2. To what extent did the Central Strategic Planning Committee of (MoHE) apply the tools and techniques of strategic planning to set objectives for ELT?

3. To what extent was there comprehensive engagement (departmental level, faculty level, university level, and ministry level) in the process of strategic planning for ELT?

4. To what extent was there coordination between the (MoE) and (MoHE) when it came to setting ELT objectives?

5. To what extent is the (MoE) able to prepare students for higher education based on English as a MoI?

In light of the above research questions, the study intends to test the following two important research hypotheses:

Null Hypothesis H_0 : Those who are part of the strategic planning committees, did not even have the chance to study/ read the NHESPs.

Alternative Hypothesis H_1 : Those who are part of the strategic planning committee, study/read the NHESPs) was accepted.

4.1. Sample of the Study

The sample for this study is $N = 30$ subjects, derived from nine $N = 9$ Afghan Universities, namely, Nangarhar University, Kabul University, Kabul Education University, Laghman University, Sayed Jamaluddin Afghani University, Paktia University, Paktika University, and Kandahar University.

4.2. Tools of Data Collection and Analysis

The current study's quantitative data were collected using a survey-questionnaire (Ahmad *et al.,* 2018; Kalkan and Bozkurt, 2013; Akyel *et al.,* 2012; Aldehayyat *et al.*, 2011), which was distributed to the nine universities mentioned above. Interviews were conducted with ten (10) experts from the abovementioned $N = 9$ universities. This census was conducted to ensure that the sample was representative. Hence, the questionnaires were shared and interviews were conducted specifically among the strategic planning committees of the abovementioned universities since it was believed that they are the right people most likely to use strategic planning tools to help their decision making (Gunn and Wiliams, 2007). Besides, the Central Strategic Planning Committee for MoHE is made up of members representing the central universities in the country. The universities mentioned are the member universities of MoHE's Central Strategic Planning Committee.

A total of 45 questionnaires were sent to the target universities, out of which 30 valid responses were received. The percentage is 66.6%, which is considered a good number as compared to similar other studies. Aldehayyat *et al.* (2011) and Saunders *et al.* (2003) suggest that when questionnaires are delivered and collected by hand and receive 30–50% of responses, they are considered valid. The Covid-19 pandemic was one of the critical reasons behind the lack of access to all the research subjects.

4.3. Questionnaire

There were five sets of questions in the questionnaire. The first set measured whether the respondents had read or gone through the NHESPs of MoHE. The second set of questions measured the viewpoints of respondents regarding the implementation of strategic planning tools and techniques by MoHE. The third set of questions measured the perception of the respondents regarding the comprehensive engagement of all the required parties/actors in developing the NHESPs. The fourth set of questions was used to identify the points of view of respondents regarding the coordination between the MoE and MoHE. The fifth set of questions measured if the Ministry of Education prepares students with adequate English proficiency to study in a department where the MoI is English. The above set of questions were based on a five-point likert scale rating from (0 = Not at all; to 5 = A very great extent). This particular technique of rating was found in the literature to be one of the very common ones used in surveys on strategic planning (Aldehayyat *et al.,* 2011; Aldehayyat and Anchor, 2008; Al Ghamdi, 2005; Stonehouse and Pemberton, 2002; Glaister and Falshaw, 1999; and Ramanujam *et al.,* 1986). Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) Version 26.0 was used for analyzing the data. Some of the primary and most of the secondary data in this research has come from archival and published sources.

4.4. Semi-Structured Interview

In order to further justify the data collected through questionnaire, the study conducted interviews with ten participants, each representing one public university and the central strategic planning committee of MOHE. There were open-ended questions in which the respondents were given the free hand to express their thoughts in a more comprehensive and coherent way.

4.5. Validity of the Questionnaire

The researchers consulted with colleagues for constructive feedback and comments in order to secure the validity of the questionnaire before it is given for pilot testing. The consultation focused on the context, content, structure, and to

make sure that the survey covered all features and objectives of the research. It was further conducted to ensure that the questionnaire is based on correct wording and is free of grammatical errors that could affect the result of the study.

4.6. Reliability of the Questionnaire

To examine the internal reliability of the questionnaire, the coefficient alpha method was executed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) Version 26.0. Coefficient alpha is used to evaluate the internal reliability (Huck, 2008). Based on the collected data, the reliability of the instrument was calculated as (0.791), which is acceptable.

5. Results

5.1. Demographic Results

Table 1: Demographic Information of the Respondents in this Study			
		Frequency	**Valid Percent**
Age	Under 30	2	6.6
	30-40	25	83.3
	41-50	2	6.6
	51- and above	1	3.3
	Total	**30**	**100.0**
Gender	Male	27	90
	Female	3	10
	Total	**30**	**100.0**
Education/Qualification	Ph.D.	2	6.6
	Master	27	90
	Bachelor	1	3.3
	Total	**30**	**100.0**
Teaching Experience	5-10 years	21	70
	11-15 years	6	20
	16 and above years	3	10
	Total	**30**	**100.0**

5.2. RQ1: To what extent did the members of strategic planning committees across the select universities read the NHESPs of Afghanistan?

In this section of the questionnaire, the respondents were asked to express their views if they really read the NHESPs of Afghanistan, which were developed in the subsequent years of 2005, 2009, and 2015 respectively. This question is therefore important since the study has noticed rumors among the academics that those who are part of the strategic planning committees did not even have the chance to read or at least preview the mentioned plans. Therefore, the subjects were asked to choose the value point rating from (0 = not at all) to (5 = to a very great extent). The results in this section are presented using the mean score and standard deviation.

Table 2 shows that respondents have good knowledge of the national NHESPs of Afghanistan. Hence, the null hypothesis of this study (H_0 *those who are part of the strategic planning committees, did not even have the chance to study/read the NHESPs*) is proven wrong because the average mean score is (M = 4) with (SD = 0.024316) as standard deviation, which means they have read the NHESPs. So, the alternative hypothesis (H_1 *those who are part of the strategic planning committee, study/read the NHESPs*) was accepted.

Table 2: Respondents' Perceptions on Reading the (2005, 2009 and 2015) NHESPs of Afghanistan		
Statements	**Mean Score**	**Std. Deviation**
I have read the NHESP of Afghanistan developed in 2005	4	0.57735
I have read the NHESP of Afghanistan developed in 2009	3.933333	0.628932
I have read the NHESP of Afghanistan developed in 2015	4.066667	0.628932
Overall Average	4	0.024316

5.3. RQ2: To what extent did the Central Strategic Planning Committee of (MoHE) apply the tools and techniques of strategic planning to set objectives for ELT?

In this portion of the questionnaire, the study asked the respondents to what extent did the central strategic planning committee of (MoHE), which is composed of members of the select universities, set objectives for ELT by applying the tools of strategic planning. Following a thorough review of the literature, the survey questionnaire included the SWOT Analysis, needs analysis, benchmarking, analysis of key (critical) success factors, value chain analysis, strategic planning software, stakeholder analysis, core capability/competence analysis, and scenario construction. The respondents valued their responses from (0 = not at all) to (5 = to a very great extent).

Table 3 above reflects the respondents' viewpoint that the central strategic planning committee of (MoHE) has not frequently applied the tools/techniques of strategic planning when setting goals for ELT in particular. The most agreeable tool is the stakeholder analysis, which received the mean score (M = 3) with (SD = 0.68313) as standard deviation. This means that the strategic planning committee of MoHE applied the stakeholder analysis to a moderate extent. SWOT analysis is the second tool with a mean score (M = 1.833333) which shares a border with the value point (2 = to some extent). The rest of the tools received a value point below one as a mean score, which means that the committee did not apply any of the tools except the SWOT analysis and stakeholder analysis. The analysis shows that the committee still lacks expertise with sufficient technical and professional knowledge of strategic planning.

Table 3: Tools/Techniques of Strategic Planning		
Statements	**Mean Score**	**Std. Deviation**
Tools/Techniques of Strategic Planning	Mean Score	Std. Deviation
SWOT Analysis	1.833333	0.819892
Needs Analysis	0.9	0.907377
Benchmarking	0.766667	0.955103
Analysis of Key (Critical) Success Factor	0.8	0.909212
Value Chain Analysis	0.1	0.3
Strategic Planning Software	0.033333	0.179505
Stakeholder Analysis	3	0.68313
Core Capability/Competence Analysis	0.633333	0.912262
Scenario Construction	0.733333	1.123487
Overall Average	**0.977778**	**0.297237**

5.4. RQ3: To what extent was there comprehensive engagement (departmental level, faculty level, university level, and ministry level) in the process of strategic planning for ELT?

In this section of the survey, research participants were asked to express and share their realistic opinions regarding the engagement of various actors, ranging from departmental level all the way to ministry level, in the process of developing Afghanistan's national higher education strategic plan development, particularly when it comes to setting objectives for English as a subject of EFL and as a MoI. Hence, the study believes that without comprehensive engagement of all the

relevant actors in the process, any plan that is developed for the nation's development would be imperfect and would not fulfill the actual needs of academia and the employment market. In this part of the questionnaire too, the participants valued their responses from (0 = not at all) to (5 = to a very great extent).

Table 4 gives a clear picture that there is a lack of engagement among the related entities of strategic plan development, ranging from departmental level to ministry level. The overall average mean value is (M = 1.116667) with a standard deviation of (SD = 1.051465), which means there is a (1 = small extent) engagement in the process. However, there had to be at least a (4 = to a great extent) engagement of all the mentioned actors when developing the strategic plans in general and setting objectives for ELT both as a subject of EFL and as a MoI. Hence, the MoHE and its related institutions need to work more in order to increase the level of engagement and coordination.

Table 4: Respondents' Perceptions on Holistic Engagement in the Process of NHESP Development		
Statements	**Mean Score**	**Std. Deviation**
There was departmental level engagement in the process of NHESP development.	0.8	0.6
There was faculty/college level engagement in the process of NHESP development.	0.966667	0.752034
There was university level engagement in the process of NHESP development.	1.7	1.615549
There was ministry level engagement in the process of NHESP development.	1	1.238278
Overall Average	**1.116667**	**1.051465**

5.5. RQ4: To what extent, was there coordination between (MoE) and (MoHE) when it came to setting ELT objectives?

This section of the research investigated the required coordination between the two Afghan education ministries. The respondents were asked to respond to how far there is adequate coordination/communication between the MoE and MoHE when developing the national higher education strategic planning in general and setting objectives for ELT in particular. The respondents valued their answers from (0 = not at all) to (5 = to a very great extent).

Table 5 gives us some clear statistics that show there has been a lack of coordination and effective communication between the MoE and MoHE. These two ministries have the responsibility of providing education services to more than 10 million Afghans who go to schools, colleges, and universities (Wekipedia). MoE serves the nation from primary to high school and mid-higher education, especially the training of teachers and providing technical education, while MoHE covers higher learning from bachelor's degree to doctoral studies. The overall average mean score is (M = 0.7), which is close to (M = 1), indicating that coordination between the MoI and MoHE is limited. In order to set objectives in the national higher education strategy, the related institutions must set these objectives that are smart, measurable, achievable, relevant/realistic and time-bound. However, the study shows that when setting objectives for ELT, the central strategic planning committee did not apply at least the SMART model of setting effective goals and objectives.

Table 5: Respondents' Perceptions about the Coordination Between MoE and MoHE		
Statements	**Mean Score**	**SD**
There was coordination between the (MoE) and (MoHE) in general.	1	1
There was coordination between the (MoE) and (MoHE) when setting objectives for ELT in the NHESPs	0.6	0.663325
The objectives MoHE set for ELT was SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-Bound)	0.733333	0.997775
Overall Average	**0.777778**	**0.158188**

5.6. RQ5: To what extent is the (MoE) able to prepare students for higher education based on English as a MoI?

The first goal of Afghanistan's subsequent NHESPs developed in 2005, 2009, and 2015 was to make English the language of instruction in select technical disciplines such as medicine, engineering, veterinary sciences, and so on (NHESP, 2005; NHESP, 2009; and NHESP, 2011). This particular trend of English-medium instruction was well-supported by ex-Afghan presidents Hamid Karzi and Mohammad Ashraf Ghani. However, the ground reality tells another story, meaning the goal still has not been achieved. It is believed that the school education system managed by the MoE prescribed English as a subject of foreign language from fourth grade onwards (National Education Strategic Plan, 2016)

to high school, which is the 12th standard in the Afghan school education system, should send students with adequate proficiency and fluency in English communication to easily get along with higher education and research based on English. Hence, the study in this section of the questionnaire asked the respondents if the Afghan MoE is able to prepare students for higher learning where the MoI might be English.

To know if schools in Afghanistan are able to educate students with adequate communicative competence in English language, the study selected three areas (curriculum, teaching aids, and qualified teachers) to be investigated that were previously researched by Mankhil (2019). The study asked the respondents if the MoE has a well-developed English curriculum, enough teaching aids, including technology, and qualified English teachers to effectively teach the subject of English. The responses are valued from (0 = not at all) to (5 = to a very great extent).

Table 6 shows that the MoE is unable to have a well-developed English curriculum for school students. Here the mean score is (M = 0.4) with (SD = 0.711805) as a standard deviation. Moreover, when it comes to teaching aids, including technology for effective ELT teaching, the study also found that the MoE is also unable to provide the required teaching aids. Here, the mean score is again (M = 0.466667) with (0.561743) as standard deviation. The research finally found that MoE-related schools across the country do not have adequate numbers of qualified and professional English teachers to execute various teaching methods depending on the situation and level of students. In this connection, the mean score is (M = 1.233333) with (SD = 1.085766) as standard deviation. The findings in this part of the study are quite similar to a study previously conducted by Mankhil (2019). From the findings, it is clear that MoHE and its related institutions do not receive students with adequate proficiency and fluency in English for communication in order to easily adjust to English medium based higher education. Therefore, strong policy level discussion in the MoE is required to take measures that can meet the requirements.

| Table 6: Respondents' Perceptions on if MoE Prepare Students Eligible for Higher Education based on English as a Medium of Instruction		
Statements	**Mean Score**	**SD**
The (MoE) has well-developed English curriculum to prepare students for English based higher education.	0.4	0.711805
The (MoE) related schools across the country have all the required teaching aids for effective English language teaching.	0.466667	0.561743
The (MoE) related schools across the country have qualified English teachers to execute various teaching methods depending on the situations and levels of students.	1.233333	1.085766
Overall Average	**0.85**	**0.220345**

5.7. Findings of Interviews

In order to further justify the findings of the quantitative data, a qualitative interview was conducted with nine members of the strategic planning committees across the select universities and with one member of the central strategic planning committee of the MoHE. They were interviewed to provide their thoughts about if the three strategic plans so far developed by MoHE, already discussed in the review of literature, have been able to achieve their objectives, especially set for ELT. The analysis in this section is reflected in a pie-chart for better representation and explanation. Figure 1 gives an outline of the key points discussed by respondents.

In Figure 1, interviewees comprehensively discussed that experts of various disciplines should be involved in the process of strategic plan development. For instance, when setting objectives for ELT, it is important that senior researchers/experts in English language from across various public and private universities should be invited to develop the goals/objectives after critically and analytically observing the situation, in addition to applying the key tools and techniques of strategic planning. Moreover, interview participants strongly believed that members of the strategic planning committees in all the public and private Afghan universities need to be trained with the key and most frequently used tools and techniques of strategic planning before their selection as members of these committees. Similarly, respondents pressed for comprehensive engagement of all the actors/entities (departmental level, faculty level, university level, and ministry level) in the process of strategic plan development. This means that everyone required must have their voice in the process. Finally, the experts indicated that strong coordination must be conducted between the MoE

and MoHE. They believe that such coordination will put both the education entities on the right track when developing policies and planning for education development in Afghanistan.

Figure 1: Interview Findings
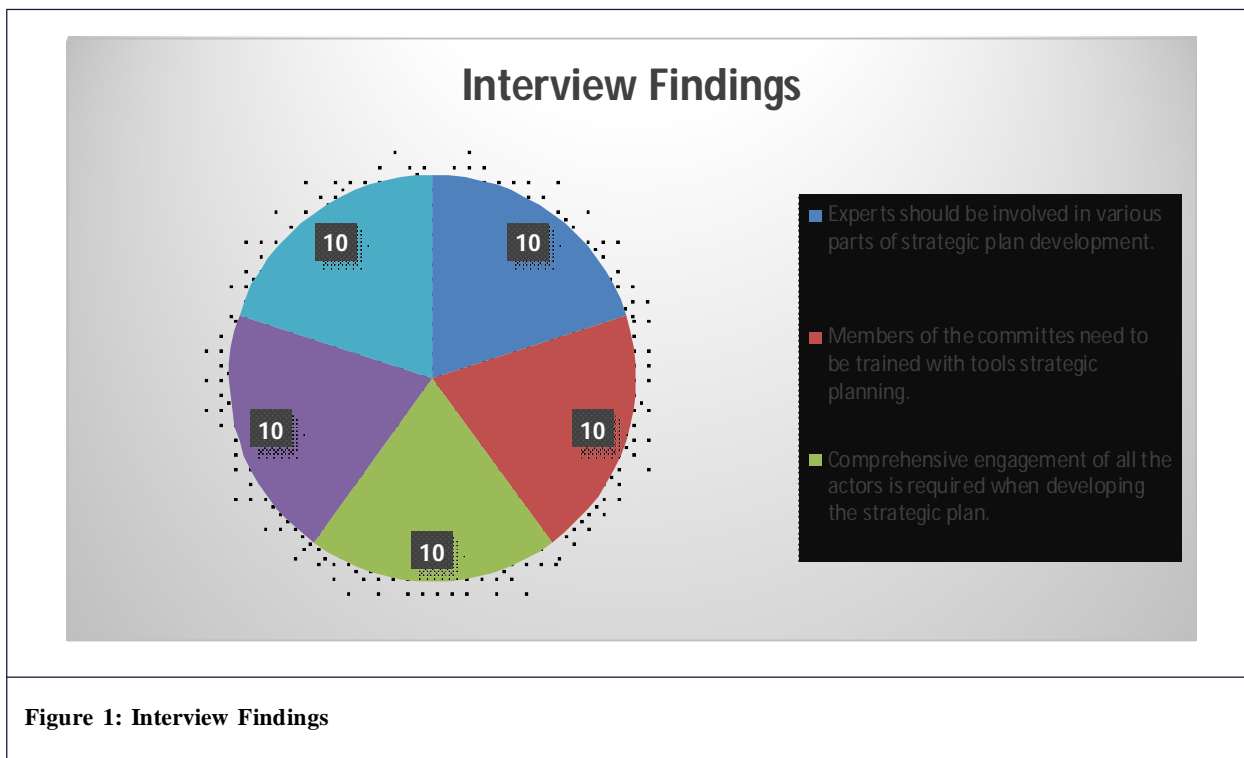
6. Discussion

The current study explored the opportunities and challenges of ELT in the subsequent NHESPs (2005, 2009, and 2011) of Afghanistan developed by MoHE. Two significant opportunities in the form of objectives have been selected for ELT in these strategic plans, which are that English should be taught as a subject of FL in the entire education system while it should be the MoI in select technical disciplines, as the strategic idea was supported by the two ex-presidents of Afghanistan, Mr. Hamid Karzi and Dr. Mohammad Ashraf Ghani. Five research questions guided the study. The research question one sought to explore if the members of the strategic planning committees across the select universities themselves are aware of or read the NHESPs, which are the principle guidelines for them in the light of which they should develop planning for effective policy implementation. Results from N = 30 research respondents show that they critically read the NHESPs with the mean value of (M = 4) and (SD = 0.024316) as standard deviation. Hence, the common null hypothesis in the case was that (H_0 *those who are part of the strategic planning committees, did not even have the chance to study/read the NHESPs*) was proven wrong. Hence, the alternative hypothesis (H_1 *those who are part of the strategic planning committee, study/read the NHESPs*) was accepted. The findings in this case are consistent with the principle of the study conducted by Dooris *et al*. (2012). Insisting on thoroughly researched and effectively implemented policy and planning has a significant impact on the advancement of colleges and universities.

The second research question was concerned with to what extent the Central Strategic Planning Committee of MoHE uses strategic planning tools and techniques to set ELT objectives. As a member of the aforementioned important committee, where critical decisions for the entire higher education system of a country are made, one must have expert knowledge of the tools and techniques of strategic planning. The results revealed that the members of this committee only applied the stakeholder-analysis and SWOT analysis, each with the mean value of (M = 3, to a moderate extent) and (M = 1.833333) sharing borderline with (M = 2, to some extent). However, there are currently twenty-eight (28) tools and techniques of strategic planning introduced by Liniski and Arukiji (2006). It is a fact that not all of these tools and techniques have been used by institutions across the world (Aldehayyat *et al.*, 2011), but studies conducted by Gunn and William (2007), Elbanna (2007), Aldehayyat *et al*. (2011), and Kalkan and Bozkurt (2013) found SWOT analysis, bench marking analysis, and critical success factor analysis as the most frequently used tools in strategic planning. The present study is in line with the findings of a previous study conducted by Al Ghamdi (2005), who believed that despite the various strategic planning tools, only 10% of them are used by practitioners in Saudi Arabia. This could be one of the reasons in the context of Afghanistan that the two objectives (i.e., English as a subject of FL and as a MoI) have been

set in three subsequent NHESPs but are still not fully achieved. A complete needs analysis, in addition to other important factors, must be ensured before setting such big goals. Besides this, the interview findings further suggested capacity-building training for members of the strategic planning committees.

The third research question tried to identify if there was a holistic engagement of various actors, starting from departmental level to ministry level, in the process of NHESPs development. The findings indicated a lack of comprehensive engagement in the process. The viewpoint of respondents in this connection, according to the overall average mean score, is (M = 1.116667) with (SD = 1.051465) as the standard deviation. However, effective strategic planning, according to Stacey (2000), means that relevant actors must actively participate in the conversations around significant emerging issues. Therefore, for more efficient and effective strategic planning, the MoHE must ensure holistic participation of all the required actors/parties in the upcoming new strategic plan development.

The fourth research question exclusively focused on the extent of coordination between the two education ministries of Afghanistan. MoE has the responsibility of education services from primary to secondary and to semi-higher education, while MoHE serves its people from bachelor's degree to Ph.D. studies. The results from both the survey and interview found a lack of coordination and effective communication between the said ministries. In this regard, the overall average mean score is (M = 0.7), which shares a border with (M = 1). In addition, the fifth research question further sought to explore if the MoE is able to send students to higher education institutions with adequate English proficiency, where English is the so-called MoI. Results revealed that the said ministry, so far, is unable to educate students with sufficient English proficiency for English-based higher education. The study in these parts specifically found the weaknesses of the ELT curriculum, ELT methods, and SMART goals of lesson planning developed by the MOE's related schools. The overall average mean value is (M = 0.85) with (SD = 0.22) as the standard deviation. The findings of the current study are similar to the previous research conducted by Mankhil (2019), specifically in the context of Afghanistan.

7. Conclusion

This study was conducted to explore opportunities and challenges regarding the status of ELT in the subsequent NHESPs of Afghanistan, developed in 2005, 2009, and 2011. The study has come across five important research questions in mind, such as (1) to what extent did the members of strategic planning committees across the select universities read the NHESPs of Afghanistan? (2) To what extent did the Central Strategic Planning Committee (MoHE) use strategic planning tools and techniques to set ELT objectives? (3) To what extent was there comprehensive engagement (at the departmental, faculty, university, and ministry levels) in the process of ELT strategic planning? (4) To what extent was coordination between the (MoE) and (MoHE) when it came to setting ELT objectives? (5) To what extent is the MoE able to prepare students for higher education based on English as a MoI? The study distributed and received a total of thirty (30) questionnaires to collect quantitative data from a select nine public Afghan universities. However, interviews were conducted randomly with ten (10) subjects, nine from select universities and one from the central strategic planning committee of MoHE for the purpose of qualitative data.

The study indicated that respondents had great knowledge of the NHESPs of Afghanistan. Here, the mean score is (M = 4) with (SD = 0.024316) as standard deviation, so the common null hypothesis (H_0 *those who are part of the strategic planning committees, did not even have the chance to study/read the NHESPs*), is proven wrong and the the alternative hypothesis (H_1 *those who are part of the strategic planning committee, study/read the NHESPs*) was accepted. However, the study also found that the central strategic planning committee of MoHE did not apply most of the tools and techniques when setting objectives for ELT specifically. Here, stakeholder analysis and SWOT analysis are the two agreeable tools that received the mean scores (M = 3, to a moderate extent) and (M = 1.833333) which shared borders with the value point (2 = to some extent) respectively. The study further noticed the lack of holistic engagement among the related entities of strategic plan development, ranging from departmental to ministry level. Here the overall average mean score is (M = 1.116667) with (SD = 1.051465) as the standard deviation. The study further indicated the lack of coordination and effective communication between the MoE and MoHE. In this connection, the overall average mean score is (M = 0.7), which shares a border with (M = 1) meaning that there is (to a small extent) coordination between the said ministries. Finally, the study found that the MoE is unable to send qualified students with sufficient proficiency/ fluency in English language to meet the standards of higher education based on English as the MoI. In this part, the overall average mean score is (M = 0.85) with (SD = 0.22) as the standard deviation. Interviews justified the obtained quantitative data with similar findings. Finally, in light of this conclusion, the study suggests key recommendations to MoHE to be kept in account while developing its new strategic plan.

8. Recommendations

In light of this study, the following are the key recommendations to be applied by Afghan (MoHE) while developing its new strategic plan:

1. Experts/senior professors with adequate experience must be involved in the process of strategic plan development. The same should be suggested when it comes to setting goals/objectives for ELT.

2. Capacity building workshops must be conducted for members of strategic planning committees across the relevant institutions. The trainings should exclusively focus on the tools/techniques of strategic planning and setting SMART goals/objectives.

3. When developing the next strategic plan in general and setting goals/objectives for ELT in particular, all the actors/ entities (i.e., department, faculty/collage, university, and central/ministry level) are recommended to be engaged comprehensively in order to ensure holistic participation.

4. The entire education system in Afghanistan is managed by two entities that are (1) the MoE, covering from 1st grade to 12th and 14th grades; and (2) the MoHE, covering from bachelor's level to doctoral level. Hence, the policies and strategies for both the mentioned sectors are also prescribed and implemented by the said ministries. Therefore, it is highly recommended that both ministries should establish a plan for coordination and effective communication.

5. Since the research was specifically conducted inside the entities of MoHE, the study recommends another research to be conducted including participants from MoE. This will fulfill the limitations of this study.

9. Conflicts of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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