

**AC 2010-2354: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN STRENGTHENING  
HIGHER EDUCATION IN AFGHANISTAN**

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# Challenges and Opportunities for Strengthening Higher Education in Afghanistan

## Abstract

This paper summarizes the opportunities and challenges in strengthening higher education in Afghanistan, after a long period of war and destruction in the country. The information and experience detailed in this paper are the result of a three-year partnership between Kansas State University and Kabul University, as the first phase of a potentially 10 year project, funded by the World Bank; as well as the familiarity of a couple of the authors of this paper with the cultural, social and economical facts in the region due to their much longer periods of living in the region. The partnership started by an assessment trip to Kabul by a group of administrators and faculty members from three major engineering departments, colleges of Architecture and Planning and Department of Modern Languages at KSU, on November 2006.

Technical issues and the progress in rebuilding Kabul University Engineering Program are addressed in another paper. This paper summarizes observations related to general social, cultural and economical issues, and briefly discusses the challenges and opportunities in strengthening higher education, after a brief history of education in general and higher education in particular in Afghanistan. These challenges and opportunities that have their roots deep in the cultural and social fields in the region will be detailed followed by some recommendations and conclusions.

**Key Words:** strengthening higher education, Afghanistan, Kabul, social, economical, cultural, Islamic school, challenge, educational system

## Introduction

Afghanistan, as one of the Central Asian countries has an estimated population of 25 million inhabitants, of which some 2-3 million still live in exile. The main ethnic groups are Pashtuns (45-50 %), Tadjiks (30-35 %), Hazaras (5-10 %) and Uzbeks (5 %). Ninety nine per cent are Muslims, eighty five to ninety per cent are Sunni and ten to fifteen per cent are Shia Muslims. The country has two official languages, Pashtu and Dari, which is an Afghan version of Persian<sup>1, 2, 3</sup>.

As a so-called developing country, Afghanistan may be the only country that has not experienced any development, let alone the huge destruction of the infrastructures due to decades of occupation and war. In spite of its recent unfortunate conditions, the country has a relatively rich cultural history with outstanding literature, art and science. Afghanistan has a written history that backs thousands of years before Islam, as a dominant religion was spread to the region more than 1200 years ago.

## **Education in Afghanistan**

Islam dominates most parts of the country; hence, Islamic education has reached approximately the whole population of the country and the region, including those living in rural areas.

Teaching Quran has been the core of religious education, especially, Islamic education in the region and the country, however, reading, writing and counting were studied even in rural areas.

Educational system in Afghanistan can be divided into three main categories that include traditional, modern and Islamic education. In various regions of the Islamic world, Islam is mixed with pre-Islamic culture and customs; where some cases can be found to be contradictory to the Quran teachings. As example, revenge and blood vengeance, even on fellow Muslims is against the basic teachings of Quran. The root of most conflicts can be found in traditions and beliefs that have nothing to do with Islam but tied to some tribal practices and beliefs<sup>4</sup>.

Islamic education began with the arrival of Islam. Those with religious knowledge, usually men, have been teaching in the mosques throughout Afghanistan for many centuries. Their level of knowledge depends on the location and the size of the city or town. A man with a very low level of traditional and Islamic knowledge can be considered a Mullah in a small village while is treated as an illiterate in a larger city or town.

Today, some male children attend madrasas to receive religious education and some other children attend ordinary primary schools. Islamic education is a part of these schools as well. All children, male or female, receive some religious education in some form during their pre-school age.

## **Modern education**

Afghanistan was never colonized. British made three failed attempts to capture and hold Afghanistan. At the end of the nineteenth century Afghanistan as a consolidated and strengthened state emphasized Islam as a state religion and isolated itself from the western world. However, in the early twentieth century an attempt was made to modernize the country. The first constitution was adopted and education opportunities were established, also for girls.

Free and compulsory primary schooling dates back to 1935 in Afghanistan. Primary education covers grades one to six. Children of age six or seven start as first graders and finish the primary school when twelve or thirteen.

The first modern school, for boys only, was established in Kabul in 1903. After 1919, schools were established also outside Kabul. The first girl school was instituted in 1921. In the 1950s, the education sector expanded rapidly. In 1956, there were 126,000 students enrolled<sup>5</sup>. The constitution of 1964 guaranteed free education for all.

## **Technical education history**

Academic and higher technical education opportunities were well-developed by 1978. The first college of Medicine opened in Kabul in 1932 and later faculties were joined to form Kabul University in 1946; women were admitted in 1960; and all faculties were brought to a central campus in 1964. Kabul University extended its facilities by opening the Nangarhar Faculty of Medicine in Jalalabad in 1963 which formed the nucleus of Nangarhar University in 1964 which

has been called the Nangarhar Islamic University since 1992. In addition, over the years increasing numbers of students, male and female, studied abroad.

Support for the university's faculties came from many international sources, including the United States. In 1969 Prime Minister Alexei Kosygin opened the Polytechnic Institute in Kabul where the curriculum included engineering, geology, mineral, oil and gas exploitation, roads and industrial construction, hydroelectric networks and city planning. Later, Balkh University (1986), Herat University (1988), and Kandahar University (1991) were established. In the mid-1990s, institutions were opened in Baghlan, Takhar and Bamiyan. Most higher education institutions were still functioning in 1996, albeit in severely damaged physical facilities, with next to no textbooks, libraries or laboratories, and hampered by under-qualified staff. The Taliban excluded women from universities in areas under their control<sup>6</sup>.

Due to the lack of technical facilities in the country, the development of Technical Vocational Education was slow compared to the general education of first through twelfth grades. Most of the TVE institutions, especially the successful ones, were established with the help of other countries such as the US, the USSR, Germany, the United Kingdom, and others. Technical Education in Afghanistan was initiated at the university level with the establishment of the Faculty of Agriculture and Engineering in 1956, with the help of the USAID, and the establishment of Kabul Polytechnic in 1968 with the help of USSR<sup>7</sup>.

During the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the occupation and war led to destruction of the physical infrastructure for higher education, including classrooms, laboratories, dorms and libraries. Faculty were killed, or exiled.

### **Observations, Challenges and opportunities**

There are many challenges in strengthening higher education in general; and technical education, in particular, in Afghanistan. This seems to be a natural consequence of a long period of war and destruction and related economical, social and cultural issues. These challenges can be divided into two different categories. One category has its roots in the overall country-level cultural, economical, social and legal system while the second category is mostly individual, or limited to a tribe, region or specific ethnicity. Most of these challenges have been gradually recognized and the missions stated in the strategic plans, especially those in the recent plan with the implementation period of 2010- 2014<sup>8</sup> have been developed considering these challenges as bare realities surfaced during the implementation of the first strategic plan, by various agencies in different forms and situations. There is a wealth of literature available on the subject, and this paper is not to repeat that.

Here, some of the observations by the members of the engineering team of the KSU/ Kabul University Partnership team are listed. The root of most of these simple facts that may be considered as a challenge or in some cases as an opportunity can be traced back into a tribal or national culture, religion and tradition.

Tribal conflict can be explicitly seen in a classroom or even in the highest level of the administrative body of the higher education. This is one of the main sources of numerous challenges. This fact should be considered in any plan, keeping in mind that the educational improvement should be structured to eliminate these conflicts in long term. As an example, an instructor, teaching in Dari, may raise the sensitivity of Pashtun students in the same class or vice

versa. Switching the instructional language to a neutral language such as English may address the issue. However, the other side of the problem considering the conservative religious nature of the society should carefully be studied for a proper decision.

Some observations were reflective of the religious, yet mostly traditional teachings. As example, despite the low quality of instruction, professors enjoy a very high social status at least among their students. There is a well known sentence in the Islamic texts that says “whoever has taught me a single word has made me his or her slave forever”. This can be an opportunity for a responsible and knowledgeable professor to act as a role model for the students, but is unfortunately abused by most of the instructors by not getting involved in the physical activities that are critically needed for a course. As an example, the laboratory technician, students and local faculty members at the engineering school at the Kabul University were surprised when our colleague, a full professor at Kansas State University, started to open the tool-boxes sitting in the laboratory for years to examine their usability. This also may be one of the reasons that “research” and “experimental” components of courses are either nonexistent or extremely weak. Nobody has access to laboratory facilities even for a simple test, since the technician is the only person holding the key as well as the responsibility for the laboratory, instead of the pertinent faculty members. This, in turn, leads to scientific incompetency of faculty members and outdated knowledge on their subject of expertise. Most of Afghan students who have come to US for their graduate level studies are completely unfamiliar with research and its key role in graduate level academic work. It should be noted that there are other influential factors that bilaterally affect this problem. Nationwide, doing research and laboratory work is not rewarding and has no effect on the quality assessment of the faculty and college, if any assessment process in place at all.

One of the socio-cultural damages inflicted by long periods of occupation and civil war is a sense of pessimism and suspiciousness developed in most of the people. There were cases that an individual was hesitant to cooperate for a case that had an obvious benefit for the college and even the individual. Most of the beneficiaries of the partnership, including some graduate students, have a very unrealistic perception of some of the activities, even the whole partnership.

The engineering team has had numerous unforeseen challenges that were beyond individual behaviors, beliefs and perceptions; or scope of the college, school or partnership. These nationwide obstacles included not only security related problems but also paralyzing problems tied to the legal and administrative system. Working through the legal system, and achievement of a goal of the partnership in a centralized educational system is extremely difficult, if not impossible.

Despite these obstacles, there are some unique opportunities that can be utilized to overcome these problems at least in long term, and elevate the level of higher education to an accepted world class standard. In general, people are interested in learning and thirsty for education. Lack of enough capacity of the higher educational institutes to absorb all of the interested students graduated from high school; brings very few selected students to these institutes. These are very talented and smart students. They are quick learners with a deep interest in learning. This is a huge asset that can potentially revolutionize the higher education in Afghanistan if utilized wisely, properly and timely.

Establishment of educational partnerships between schools like KSU and the higher educational institutes in Afghanistan is one of the efficient ways to accelerate the positive change towards enhancement of higher education in Afghanistan. The opportunity of “graduate studies” in

countries such as US, for these students who will hopefully return to their homeland after graduation, strengthens the higher education and also helps breaking the walls of suspicious and pessimism. Educational partnership projects, with all of the obstacles are still the best, if not the only, way to elevate the level of understanding of the administrative body of the higher educational system in Afghanistan. This will eventually increase their involvement and leadership which is the key to their success.

## **Conclusion**

Reconstruction of the nation in its different forms and fields depends on the nation's education, and higher education is the backbone of any economical, social and cultural development. As stated in the Strategic Development Plan by the Ministry of Higher Education of Afghanistan, a strong system of higher education is essential for the development and progress of a nation. The economy, culture, and strength of a modern society are supported by education of its citizens, and particularly through institutions of higher education that meet national needs and international standards. Beyond basic education, higher education produces thoughtful, informed and highly skilled leaders for building and maintaining a civil society with a growing economy where problems of unemployment, poverty, and conflict can be intelligently resolved. Afghan universities and colleges must provide rigorous learning opportunities for youth to ensure the nation's future supply of educated professionals who contribute to national development in all fields. These institutions of higher learning must be widely accessible to qualified youth in order to ensure new generations of educated leaders, scientists, scholars, and professionals who contribute to the growth of a stable democratic society.

Afghanistan today needs to restore its former excellent institutions of higher education, as well as create new and diverse institutions. Universities in Afghanistan can once again become producers as well as consumers of knowledge<sup>9</sup>.

“A high quality public and private higher education system that responds to Afghanistan's growth and development needs, improves public well-being, respects traditions, incorporates modern scientific knowledge, is well managed, and internationally recognized”, is the main vision of the Higher Education Strategic Plan, as stated in the Executive Summary of the National Higher Education Strategic Plan for 2010-2014<sup>8</sup>.

Understanding and recognizing the challenges and opportunities detailed in this paper, plays a key role in proper implementation of various missions set by the Ministry of Higher Education to achieve the visions described in the Strategic Plans. During the implementation period of the first strategic plan developed by the Ministry of Higher Education in Afghanistan, some of the aforesaid challenges as well as opportunities were uncovered, recognized, and experienced firsthand by the agencies and individuals involved in various activities related to strengthening higher education in Afghanistan. The material in this paper was mostly based on the experience gained by the members of the KSU/ Kabul University Partnership Project Engineering Team involved in a wide range of activities that were tied to rebuilding, revising and strengthening the engineering programs at the Kabul University. Addressing the roots of the aforesaid observations in design and implementation of any plan to reconstruct the educational infrastructure and strengthen the higher education in Afghanistan plays a critical role to achieve the pertinent goals. This complements the keen interest of the Afghan nation in the education of their generation. This is well stated by Samady<sup>10</sup> that: "Despite the tragic war, Afghans inside Afghanistan and as

refugees outside the country, in conditions of poverty and despair, showed a keen interest in the education of their children".

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