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Day-By-Day: Higher Education in Afghanistan

David J. Roof

Ball State University, djroof@bsu.edu

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Abstract

This paper examines higher education in Afghanistan. Based on qualitative research, including interviews with key policymakers and stakeholders, the paper examines the primary issues, challenges, progress, and future vision for higher education in the country. The research reveals that one of the most significant issues in the country in the post-Taliban era is female participation in higher education. It also shows the importance of alternative forms of higher education, such as two-year institutions, private education, and technical/vocational education. The paper also discusses the emergence of quality assurance mechanisms and international partnerships with other universities. Regarding the future direction and vision for higher education, the paper reveals two primary focuses: preparing students for the labor market, and the potential for education to influence democratic values and social cohesion in a divided country.

Keywords

Afghanistan, higher education, post-conflict education, gender equality, education policy

DAY-BY-DAY: HIGHER EDUCATION IN AFGHANISTAN

David J. Roof¹

Ball State University, USA

Afghanistan: A Higher Education System for a Nation Rebuilding

I have worked extensively in Afghanistan in recent years on a project to enhance higher education. Traveling in the country on multiple occasions for extended periods of time allowed me to chronicle some of the challenges and progress, as well as consider the current direction and development of higher education in Afghanistan. During a recent trip there, I conducted extensive interviews with the key individuals responsible for higher education development in the country, as well as with faculty and students.

The objective of this paper is to present an analysis of the primary policy documents shaping the direction of higher education in the country and is centered on the interviews with those directly impacted by such policies. Included in this paper is an examination of issues relevant to higher education and the emerging vision for higher education in Afghanistan. Much progress has been made with increasing enrollment, leading to ongoing challenges such as limited funding, corruption, and administrative issues.

One of the most pressing issues discussed in this paper is the state of women in higher education and ongoing efforts to increase female participation in post-secondary education. This issue has personal relevance, as the project I am involved with is focused on raising the population of women in higher education to 30 percent.

Post conflict areas require detailed knowledge and understanding of what is generally a very complex and rapidly changing reality (Barakat, 2002, p. 814). This paper seeks to provide some insight into what is certainly the very complex and rapidly changing reality of higher education in Afghanistan.

Perspectives: The Context of Higher Education in Post-Conflict Afghanistan

War, Instability, and the Challenge of Rebuilding

The condition of Afghanistan is best understood by examining the narrative of invasions and war that characterizes much of the country's recent history. Following British colonization, Afghanistan experienced a period of relative stability and openness. Higher education in Afghanistan was strongest in the late 1960s (Giustozzi, 2010, p. 1). The 1960s and 70s in Afghanistan saw the formation of an educated class interested in politics. This period

¹ *Correspondence: David J. Roof, Ball State University, Department of Educational Studies, Teachers College (TC), Room 805, 2000 University Avenue, Muncie, IN 47306-0610, USA; E-mail: djroof@bsu.edu.*

also saw an educated population and more open debate (Giustozzi, 2010, p. 2). The relative stability was interrupted by the Soviet invasion (Karp, 1986). Following the communist coup in 1978 and Soviet invasion in 1979, schools were burnt and teachers killed as many argued that education itself was a threat to the very existence of Afghan and Islamic values. A generation of educated Afghans was decimated, with thousands dead or having fled the country (Sau, 2002, p. 118). The period of Soviet occupation was then followed by the Taliban conquest and occupation of the country.

Afghanistan's post-Taliban struggles plus 30 years of war have left the country among the poorest in the world. It is ranked third to last in the UNDP's Human Development Index. Life expectancy is only 44 years, the infant mortality rate is 154/1,000, and the unemployment rate is roughly 40 percent. The environment of war, ongoing conflicts and insurgencies has left Afghans in dire need. This atmosphere challenges Afghanistan and its foreign state-builder allies with a complex and immense mission likely to last decades (Wardak, 2011, p. 36).

Rebuilding an Infrastructure for Higher Education

Within the greater rebuilding mission, the situation for higher education in Afghanistan is unique. More than two decades of conflict resulted in the loss of trained personnel. Brain drain is a major issue for Afghan universities. This means that many individuals who acquire higher education leave the country in search of employment opportunities elsewhere. This has a major impact on institutions of higher education because many of those who received advanced degrees overseas have failed to return to the country to work in the higher education system. Due to their departure and the destruction of infrastructure, the country has only just begun reconstruction and development. It will take some time until the country becomes self-sufficient. The building of basic infrastructure such as roads, schools, hospitals, etc. has started. Significant efforts are being made for the expansion of education at all levels.

In the years following the ousting of the Taliban, higher education struggled. In late 2002, police officers killed four Kabul University students who were rioting after the dormitories ran out of food (Chuang, 2004, p. 32). Over the following 12 years, however, Afghanistan has made progress in the redevelopment of their education system. For example, since 2001, the number of children attending school has increased from 1 million to nearly 6 million in 2008, according to the Afghan Ministry of Education. Some 82 percent of boys and 63 percent of girls reach the sixth grade. Unfortunately these figures drop precipitously beyond elementary school, and higher education remains an elusive goal for most Afghan students. Furthermore, a resurgent Taliban and unstable government threaten the progress made thus far (Crane & Rerras, 2009, p. 96). Nonetheless, the universities have reopened. There are now reported to be roughly 52,200 students in higher education institutions taught by 2,713 lecturers.

In spite of the progress, there are serious challenges facing higher education development in the country. Afghanistan remains one of the least developed countries in the world (Crane & Rerras, 2009, p. 99). The country is less developed and more conservative than neighboring regions, and these factors greatly impact higher education. The higher education enrollment ratio in Afghanistan, for example, is roughly 5 percent, one of the lowest in the world. Only three countries have lower rates worldwide (Aturupane, 2013, p. E2). There are two suspected reasons. The first is the impact of war and instability. The second is the low level of educational attainment among females (Aturupane, 2013).

Formal Education for Women

The reestablishment of education and higher education is a priority for the country (Marsden, 2003, p. 104). Another primary objective is providing formal education for girls, in areas where access to education was previously denied (Johnson & Jolyon, 2002, p. 866). Special attention is being given to the education of girls and women and a geographically balanced development of education. Women's higher education was severely impacted in recent decades.

Women gained access to higher education in the 1950s, as a small minority began attending universities (Giustozzi, 2010, p. 3). Women's attendance in higher education, however, rose in the 1980s. By the early 1990s women equaled roughly 40 percent of the student body (Giustozzi, 2010, p. 3). Before the Taliban took control of Kabul, schools were coeducational and women accounted for 70 percent of teachers, 50 percent of civil servants, and 40 percent of medical doctors (Iacopino & Rasekh, 1998). Taliban rule changed this progress dramatically.

Girls were barred from school by the Taliban who ruled the country from 1996-2001 (Chuang, 2004, p. 31). After the Taliban prohibited women and girls from attending school, females who previously worked or attended school were forced to stop (Press, 1998). By the 1990s, the Taliban gained control of virtually all of Afghanistan. Immediately after taking Kabul in September 1996, the Taliban issued edicts forbidding women to work, attend school, or go anywhere in public, including hospitals and clinics, without wearing a burqa and without a close male relative chaperone.

Regarding cultural constraints, life is separate for men and women, with men occupying the public sphere and women occupying the private sphere (Crane & Rerras, 2009, p. 100). As noted by researchers in 2009, "There are few places in the world where women have fewer rights than in Afghanistan" (Crane & Rerras, 2009, p. 100). More than 90 percent of women in Afghanistan are illiterate; most are not allowed to leave their homes or work outside; only five percent of girls enrolled in primary school complete the twelfth grade (Crane & Rerras, 2009, p. 100).

As Anne McDaniel notes, "Gender ideologies and support for women's rights represent an important cultural value that shape women's status within countries" (McDaniel, 2014, p. 4). Afghan society is characteristically patriarchal (authority lies in hands of the oldest males), patrilineal (inheritance of property and status is through the male line), and patrilocal (women are forced to move to the husband's place of residence) (Riphenburg, 2004, p. 405). In addition, religion seems to correlate with women in education worldwide (McDaniel, 2014, p. 12). Afghanistan is deeply religious as well as conservative and women's rights suffers (Crane & Rerras, 2009, p. 100). Religion is used as proxy for cultural acceptance of gender inequality, and Muslim countries have less parity and less women in higher education (McDaniel, 2014, p. 5).

In Afghanistan, there remain significant disparities in educational opportunity. In 2009 researchers reported that more than 90 percent of women in Afghanistan are illiterate (Crane & Rerras, 2009, p. 100). Women who are employed often resign after marriage due to pressure (Crane & Rerras, 2009, p. 100). Women in Afghanistan are often traded like animals, and child marriage remains an ongoing problem in the country (Crane & Rerras, 2009, p. 100). More than 50 percent of girls in Afghanistan are married by the age of 15 (Riphenburg, 2004, p. 406). Furthermore, researchers have reported that girls as young as 10 have been sold as brides for a 220-pound bag of flour (Riphenburg, 2004, p. 406). Women in Afghanistan are vulnerable to physical violence and sexual abuse (Riphenburg, 2004, p. 420).

In 1998 in celebration of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, The President and Fellows of Harvard College stated, "Taliban policies of systematic discrimination against women, including restrictions on education, undermine the physical, psychological and social well-being of Afghan women. Such discrimination and the

suffering it causes constitute an affront to the dignity and worth of Afghan women, and humanity as a whole” (Iacopino & Rasekh, 1998, p. 98). The declaration of human rights, declared that education is not only a right, but also an essential condition for the health and wellbeing of individuals (Iacopino & Rasekh, 1998, p. 98). The Taliban has denied this right for women (Iacopino & Rasekh, 1998, p. 98). The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights in the promotion of human dignity and wellbeing stated that, “everyone has the right to education” (Iacopino & Rasekh, 1998). Research has also confirmed that education is essential for health and helps individuals make informed health decisions (Iacopino & Rasekh, 1998, pp. 100-105).

Still today gender disparities exist across all sectors, but they are most evident in education and health where few service providers and service beneficiaries are female. According to estimates by the Afghan government in 2011, only 17 percent of the population aged 25 years and over has received any type of education, and for women this figure is as low as six percent (Wardak, 2011, p. 9). My personal experience suggests that statistics related to gender parity and female participation in higher education are often over reported. For example, I have seen administrators report 20 to 30 percent female participation only to discover much lower actual enrollment rates among females upon further inspection. These experiences are anecdotal and limited.

Building a New Nation

In Afghanistan, a major problem is how the country is comprised more of ethnic identities than national unity (Crane & Rerras, 2009). Today there are populations returning home from the diaspora, creating new ethnic polarization in different areas of the country (Barakat, 2002, p. 814). Afghanistan is, to some extent, engaged in a “nation building” enterprise, which has shown to be a difficult and complicated process (Kuek, Velasquez, Castellanos, Velasquez, & Nogales, 2014, p. 23). More than three quarters of the country cannot read (Crane & Rerras, 2009, p. 99). The government is dependent on foreign aid. For example more than 40% of the government’s administrative expenses and 100 percent of its operational budget come from external international aid agencies (Crane & Rerras, 2009, p. 99). Afghanistan’s future is dependent upon its capacity to extract taxes, accountability necessary to attract foreign capital, (Riphenburg, 2006, p. 508). A stable government, Internet usage, and political transparency in the form of a free press are all essential for the future direction of the country.

The primary agency responsible for higher education development in Afghanistan is the Ministry of Higher Education. The primary international aid agency involved in shaping higher education in Afghanistan is the World Bank and its higher education project (Dadfar, 2009). For this reason, I interviewed leaders in these agencies as well as some of the primary stakeholders in higher education.

Mode of Inquiry

Engaged qualitative research on higher education in Afghanistan has been extremely limited over the previous ten years due to security concerns. A review of the scant research literature indicates that the nation’s health problems have received more attention than traditional education (Kuek et al., 2014, p. 23). Therefore I examined primary sources from newspapers, policy documents, and research completed by international aid agencies. In addition, I spent a significant amount of time in Afghanistan. This time provided me with extensive access to research, policy documents, and information on higher education in the country. My time spent working in the country has allowed me to build relationships with

individuals that shape higher education in the country and give me a unique opportunity to collect extensive interview data.

This study received IRB approval in the spring of 2014. The corresponding summer I traveled to Kabul to conduct the interviews. All of the interviews were conducted in person, in English, in Afghanistan during the summer of 2014. All five participants consented to the interview with an understanding that their identity would remain anonymous. I conducted one-to-one interviews with standardized questions, which meta-analysis has revealed to be most valid and reliable in terms of interrater and internal consistency (Conway, Jako, & Goodman, 1995).

International aid agencies are guiding higher education development in the country based primarily on the contemporary economic context. Therefore, my research focuses on the social function of education, including democratic values and education. My work draws on interviews of high-ranking officials from the World Bank, the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry of Higher Education in Afghanistan. I completed the interviews during my travels in Afghanistan over the previous two years.

My research relies on standardized, semi-structured open-ended interviews where the same open-ended questions were asked of all interviewees; this approach allowed me to facilitate multiple interviews to produce data that could be analyzed and compared. To analyze the interviews, my work utilizes grounded theory with a data-coding scheme. Consistent with qualitative methodology, my work utilizes codes to categorize the data as opposed to quantify it. My study utilizes a multiple coding protocol to capture the interactions among the various key figures in higher education in Afghanistan. As a component of grounded theory, my work also incorporates phenomenological research methodology. The predominant method of data collection in phenomenology is in-depth interviews.

Participant Description

Conducting interviews in Kabul is challenging, due to security concerns. The author was responsible for conducting the interviews. Interviews were conducted in person, in Kabul, Afghanistan in the summer of 2014. A participant sampling method was utilized, comprised of personal contacts through relationships built over time working in Afghanistan. Previous research has shown that participant sampling methods through personal contacts is an effective means of qualitative research in developing countries (Kuek et al., 2014, p. 25). None of the participants are related. The exact ages of the participants was not disclosed. All of the participants currently reside in Kabul, Afghanistan. The identity of each interviewee remains confidential. As previously noted, the research is based on interviews and is considered to be qualitative.

Table 1 presents feedback on questions asked of the participants focused on the challenges facing higher education in Afghanistan and their vision of higher education in the country. The responses to the questions were varied in length. Key elements of the responses are summarized in table 1. Additional aspects of the interview are discussed throughout this paper.

Table 1. Participant responses to the key question posed by the interviewer.

Participant	Participant Responses
Senior Official,	A major problem in Afghanistan in 2005 was that our public universities did not have qualified faculty. Most faculty members have only a bachelor's degree. So we decided to enhance the master's degree

Ministry Of Higher Education, Afghanistan	<p>programs for faculty in the six public universities. We also developed around thirteen international partnerships, among these six universities. We managed to send some professors to neighboring countries like Pakistan, India, and Malaysia for advanced degrees.</p>
Vice Chancellor, Kabul University	<p>The direction of higher education is getting better day-by-day with regard to the quantity and quality. We cannot compare this situation with ten years back from now because now we have over 25,000 students at the university. We have a lot of academic partnerships with well-known universities and we are offering more master programs in different fields and in local languages. We now have PhD programs, which is something previously missing. We also have challenges, such as not enough financial support, buildings, nor enough funding to hire more faculty. Another problem is security, because we cannot have guest professors from well-known universities. We don't have the type of competencies that we should provide to our students.</p>
Senior Education Specialist, Human Development Sector, The World Bank Kabul, Afghanistan	<p>Afghanistan has a very centralized government system of higher education. There needs to be major reforms. For example, giving universities more financial and academic autonomy, enhancing research quality, modernizing methods of teaching, and so forth. Afghanistan still has one of the lowest numbers of girls enrolled in higher education in the world. We also need to increase the number of female faculty. The National Higher Education Strategic Plan 2009-2014 promoted higher education for economic growth. This is a key aspect of our mission. But the ultimate goal of education is social cohesion and a peaceful world. The vision, for us, is promoting economic growth, increasing female participation and provision of scholarships for those who cannot afford to attend the university.</p>
Female Faculty Member and Lecturer, Kabul University	<p>I can say, that things are much better, and everything is getting better in terms of quality. There are more women in higher education. More women are going abroad for advanced degrees. We have more female faculty. But we still have problems. I have classes with too many students. Right now we have over 100 students in a class. We manage, but it is difficult for me and also for the students. The curriculum is also a problem. Some lecturers do not want to change their content and methods. We also have some administrative problems. My vision for higher education is one focused on social issues and also on the labor market. Graduates should be prepared for the labor market. However, the students are very concerned with politics.</p>
Female Undergraduate Student	<p>In the Taliban time there was no opportunity for girls to continue their studies. Now there are more opportunities. I am trying my best to become more educated to help the people of Afghanistan. As a girl, it is difficult for me. I face a lot of difficulties with my family and relatives who are resistant to education for girls. Girls here are fighting. We want to be educated and to do something for our country. But, it is very difficult. My mother believes I should be married and that education will do nothing for me. The situation is wrong. Every day there are bomb blasts. People are killing girls who pursue higher</p>

education. This makes it difficult to travel to the university and to study in the evening. My vision for higher education is for people to have more independence. It should be normal for girls to go to school and have jobs according to their interest. This is my vision.

Discussion: Understanding the Direction & Vision for Higher Education

Enrollment & Funding

All of the interview respondents reported that higher education in Afghanistan has come a long way, or made progress, since 2002. In 2001, Afghanistan had the lowest overall enrollment rate and lowest female enrollment in the world. Compared to 2001 the country has made progress. Enrollment is increasing and such progress is causing a strain on facilities and problems with funding. The interview respondents were equally united in their agreement that much improvement is still needed.

Afghanistan is facing problems seen in other developing countries where student enrollment is vastly outpacing higher education funding (Nyangau, 2014, p. 12). Officials in Afghanistan report the need for more universities. The demand for higher education is currently four times greater than the available places in tertiary education institutions. According to the strategic plan for Afghanistan, “the issues of access, relevance, and quality extend to higher education, where opportunities for enrollment are severely constrained and formal educational offerings are few. Not surprisingly, universities are unable to provide the quality or quantity of professionals needed for the labor market, particularly in the management and technical fields where demands are critical” (“Prioritization and Implementation Plan,” 2010, p. 32). The Ministry of Higher Education is focused on improving the quality of education in existing institutions and expanding the number of places available.

An issue highlighted in all the interviews was the lack of funding for higher education and how that lack directly affects the quality and opportunities offered. The Afghan system has a very limited capacity for funding through taxation. This has led to underfunded universities and overcrowded classrooms. As the female professor at Kabul University stated, “the main problem I face is that we have more than 100 students per class, we manage but it’s difficult” (Roof, 2014). The lack of tax revenue has perpetuated a continued reliance on international aid and dependency on foreign labor. Further challenges are human resource development as it pertains to equity, quality and access to educational opportunities, and issues that are particularly acute for girls and women (Wardak, 2011, p. 49).

The interviews all spoke of the challenges posed by inadequate facilities and lack of facilities for females. Most universities lack adequate facilities, and particularly lack of facilities for females. The lack of facilities for women is a significant issue because most women cannot attend a university unless there are facilities such as hostels available. This resonates with my experiences working in Afghanistan. I have worked with institutions without any representation of women from the provinces because they lack adequate hostel facilities.

Despite significant improvements over the past nine years, human resource development in Afghanistan continues to be a challenge. Improving the quality of education, expanding opportunities, addressing equality, and closing the skills gap between labor supply and market demands are of the utmost importance. The World Bank, therefore, has a stated aim focused on the development of human capital (Aturupane, 2013, p. E1). Despite a wide range of educational initiatives, including formal and informal education, literacy programs, technical and vocational skills-building programs, neither recent graduates nor the labor force

as a whole are meeting the skill demands of the market. As a result, according to recent estimates, 35% of Afghans are not employed (2008 est.). Closing the skills gap calls for much improvement and the assurance of a solid education for all.

Quality Assurance – Systems and Agencies

The Afghan National Development Strategy states, “Universities have reopened and there are increasing opportunities for vocational training. Although the expansion of education has been impressive, there is an urgent need to improve the quality of education” (Afghanistan, 2008, p. 10). Accordingly, enhancing the quality of university education is both a key challenge and central focus for Afghanistan (Aturupane, 2013). The World Bank is recommending that institutions develop internal quality assurance self-reviews (Aturupane, 2013, p. 35).

The Constitution of Afghanistan mandates that the Government “establish and administer higher, general and specialized education institutions” (“Constitution of Afghanistan,” 2004, pp. Articles 43-47). The constitution calls for the development of education programs that are “effective” and “balanced” (“Constitution of Afghanistan,” 2004). The *Afghanistan National Development Strategy* has emphasized the importance of “quality education” for all Afghans. It calls for “an increase in the quality and independence of the Higher Education system” among its “priority policies” (Afghanistan, 2008, p. 114). To address the issue of balanced and effective higher education, the Ministry of Higher Education has established systems to address and improve the quality of higher education (Afghanistan, 2011, p. 1).

The World Bank and the Ministry of Higher Education have both embraced the development of quality assurance systems for higher education in Afghanistan. The focus is on quality of academic performance of students relating this factor to international standards, the economic and social relevance of graduates, and the research output of academic staff in the form of journal publications, books, and monographs (Aturupane, 2013, p. 24). The World Bank is also targeting quality at the national level focused on agencies and policymakers, individual level focused on lecturers and professors, and the institutional level focused on academic managers within universities. The move toward quality assurance also involves policies and the strategic framework for institutions.

The Ministry of Higher Education has approached quality assurance by developing a new agency tasked with overseeing the quality of the education and creating a framework for education. The concept of quality assurance is new in Afghanistan. The concept was introduced in 2009, and agencies began to develop ideas of how to improve the quality of education. In 2011 the Ministry of Higher Education decided to create a quality assurance agency. Afghanistan’s Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) established a Quality Assurance Department to review public universities (Aturupane, 2013, p. 35). The Ministry of Higher Education’s office of quality assurance intends to provide oversight and accreditation for both public and private institutions (Afghanistan, 2011, p. 2)

The quality assurance agency provides oversight by reporting to the deputy minister of academic affairs. The goal is to allow the agency to be largely autonomous within the framework of the ministry and independent including having its own budget within 5 to 6 years. The quality assurance agency will have a governing board made up of 7 to 9 academics and professionals with experience in higher education. These individuals will serve the five-year term, with the possibility of one reappointment. This portable office will oversee the accreditation process, review recommendations of site visit teams, admit institutions to candidacy status, make final decisions on accreditation, and so forth (Education, 2010).

The 2010 strategic plan for Afghanistan calls for the development of an effective quality assurance and accreditation at the national level (Education, 2010, pp. 23-24). The agency is intended to oversee accreditation as an external quality review of higher education. The intention is for institutions of higher education to be accredited and for reaccreditation to occur every five years. In fact, external and internal reviews have been conducted for about three to five years in Afghan universities (Aturupane, 2013, p. 35).

These agencies are also involved in the development of standards for higher education quality improvement, and ongoing monitoring of quality. Beyond accreditation such checks as site visits will help avoid diploma mills and substandard tertiary education providers. The establishment of the higher education system within the Ministry of Higher Education is outlined in the Afghan National Development Strategy (ANDS) (Afghanistan, 2008, p. 207). The Afghan National Development Strategy states, "Monitor the activities of sector administrative units to confirm adherence to ethical standards, professional service and staff integrity, based upon relevant laws, codes of conduct and standardized procedures and protocols" (Afghanistan, 2008, p. 225).

The quality assurance systems and agencies still have many challenges to overcome. In Afghanistan, the reality of the situation is at times different than how things are reported. As the female faculty interviewee stated, "they say everything is okay on paper, but as I have found through interviews, they do not implement. They say they do, but they do not" (Roof, 2014). This makes oversight of universities very important to the improvement of higher education.

Quality Assurance - Faculty

Part of quality enhancement involves improving the quality of faculty members as well as the credentialing of faculty members in the form of master's and PhDs. The Vice Chancellor of Kabul University noted, for example, that the majority of the lecturers at his institution only hold a bachelor's degree and suggested that faculty need to leave Afghanistan temporarily to obtain a higher degree overseas. The World Bank estimates roughly 500 faculty members are currently pursuing master's degrees overseas. A much smaller number are pursuing PhD degrees (Aturupane, 2013, p. 26). The majority of university-level teachers are not well educated. In 2004 the majority of university-level teachers, about 70%, only had bachelor's degrees (Chuang, 2004, p. 32). Today little more than 50% of faculty members only have a bachelor's degree. Creating a quality standard for faculty needs to include teacher training materials and revised curricula. In addition, the lack of faculty education impacts research. All the administrators interviewed for this paper mentioned the lack of faculty research and publications.

The World Bank and Ministry of Higher Education are attempting to send faculty abroad for masters and PhD. A problem is that as the number of qualified faculty increases, the student population exceeds that number. The country has been sending faculty to Japan, the United States, South Korea, and other countries to get additional education. The national strategy has a goal of recruiting 3000 new professors including both Afghans and professors from India, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Iran (Afghanistan, 2008, p. 226). However, Afghanistan is still waiting for the new generation of academics.

Challenges notwithstanding, Afghanistan has made progress in the development of higher education. Afghanistan has established relationships with a handful of American universities, such as Indiana University, the University of Massachusetts, and Purdue University. These partnerships allow Afghanistan to exchange faculty and to benefit from some of their resources. Partnerships with foreign universities and other educational institutions have been introduced in about half the universities. Such partnerships foster and provide

support to develop and enhance the capacity of these universities (Afghanistan, 2008, p. 115). However, certain capacities such as bandwidth for teleconferencing, security for visiting professors, and other factors limit the impact of partnerships with foreign universities.

Creating quality assurance systems and agencies will address some of the problems of higher education in Afghanistan. One of the major challenges of quality assurance is balancing the desire for oversight of institutions by governmental agencies with the desire for autonomous institutions of higher education in Afghanistan. This is a major challenge for the Ministry of Higher Education (Education, 2010, p. 24). The country also has to focus on quality assurance standards for faculty. While recruiting new professors and establishing relationships with international universities is helping, there is still much to be done to improve higher education.

Administration and Governance

Administration and governance of higher education is another primary issue in Afghanistan (Aturupane, 2013). Afghanistan ranks low on all three indicators of political capacity: extractive capability, institutional credibility, and transparency (Riphenburg, 2006, p. 514). The senior official in the Ministry of Higher Education noted that, “One of the main challenges is that we do not have professional capacity in the Ministry of Higher Education. Administration, and management, this is one of the main challenges” (Roof, 2014). Institutions must improve their professionalism by overcoming nepotism and corruption in order to become autonomous.

Nepotism is a major problem affecting administration and governance. The senior official in the Ministry of Higher Education noted that, “the candidates are not hired on the basis of their qualifications, rather mainly on a recommendation basis. Like you will see a lecturer from the university and he will be appointed administration director. How could a lecturer come in and become a director?” (Roof, 2014). This is consistent with my experience working in the country, as well, where unqualified individuals are placed in administrative positions.

Corruption is a major issue, and Afghanistan is consistently identified as one of the most corrupt nations in the world. In higher education, corruption manifests itself in a variety of ways. The Ministry of Higher Education official noted, for example, the tendency for individuals “getting a salary and not doing the job” (Roof, 2014). The issue of people getting a salary and not working is consistent with my experience in Afghanistan. I have worked at an institution where several teachers, who were being paid to teach, worked different jobs and never appeared in the classroom. Other forms of corruption include loss of funding for procurement, stealing from students, and so forth. Nepotism and corruption have created significant challenges for Western aid agencies. Anatol Lieven has noted that, “Afghanistan cannot be developed by its existing weak and deeply divided government—an administration only in name— or by current Western approaches to aid, which depend on working through that government. Yet if the country is not to sink back into the conditions that produced the Taliban and the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Afghanistan must see real development” (Lieven, 2003).

Another primary factor related to administration and governance is the issue of autonomy. Stemming from the era of Soviet control, Afghanistan’s institutions of higher education remain centrally controlled by government agencies, and lack virtually any level of autonomy. This includes academic autonomy, financial autonomy, and so forth. Afghanistan is consistent with other developing countries in trying to develop greater autonomy in higher education (Aturupane, 2013, p. E4). A major component issue emerging in Afghanistan is

academic and fiscal autonomy of higher education institutions. This issue was mentioned as one of the most significant affecting Afghanistan among the interviewees. Currently, institutions of higher education are controlled in terms of curricula, pedagogy, and budget.

The *Afghanistan National Development Strategy* reports, “There are plans to provide universities with greater autonomy” (Afghanistan, 2008, p. 118). In addition, the plan calls on administrators to, “investigate possible funding models that would provide greater autonomy” (Afghanistan, 2008, p. 225). The World Bank is exploring regional examples of higher education funding options (Aturupane, 2013, pp. 60-62). The challenge is to balance the transition from the Soviet model of centralized state funding of higher education with alternative revenue streams such as tuition. The focus on decentralization is consistent with the broader reconstruction effort which is focused on rebuilding critical physical infrastructure and converting public sector institutions from Soviet-style central planning to market-led development (Rippenburg, 2006, p. 515).

The World Bank is promoting two forms of autonomy in Afghan universities: substantive and procedural. Substantive refers to such matters as curriculum design, research policy, entrance standards, academic staff appointments, and the award of degrees (Aturupane, 2013, p. 45). Procedural autonomy is related to university management and refers to budgeting, financial management, procurement and purchasing, appointment of non-academic staff, and contractual arrangements (Aturupane, 2013, p. 45). Beyond substantive and procedural autonomy, institutions of higher education must address issues of fiscal autonomy.

Regarding fiscal autonomy, institutions cannot raise funds to support the institution. In addition, they have a very difficult time procuring necessary funding for adequate facilities, curriculum, labs, and so forth. As the World Bank official stated, there is “nowhere in the world where higher education can sustain themselves solely on a centralized budget” (Roof, 2014). Universities are dependent on centralized governance, and therefore cannot adequately procure necessary funds.

Controlling nepotism and corruption as well as working towards substantive, procedural, and fiscal autonomy pose many challenges to higher education in Afghanistan. Afghanistan has made very limited progress in moving toward semi-autonomous institutions, and there is still a long way to go. Time is needed to build up public universities with more autonomy.

Private Higher Education

In addition to the public universities, the private higher education sector in Afghanistan is growing. There is a strong demand for higher education, pushing the expansion of private institutions. There is a pressure for expansion of higher education through public and private institutions (Aturupane, 2013). As enrollment expands and public universities work to fulfill needs, private education in the country is also growing.

Private higher education institutions are new phenomena in Afghanistan. Currently, there are about 70 private institutions in the country and about 52,000 students attending these institutions (Aturupane, 2013, p. 18). The ratio of private higher education institutions is now at 34 percent (Aturupane, 2013, p. 18). There are roughly 70 private institutions serving about 52,000 students (Aturupane, 2013, p. 18). This stems from the fact that demand for higher education is currently exceeding the supply (Aturupane, 2013, pp. 18-19). The country is currently looking at how to regulate private institutions. This includes looking at regional examples of how other governments regulate private institutions (Aturupane, 2013, p. 50). Private institutions in the country have come under close scrutiny. Students of private institutions often do not enjoy the same rights as those at state institutions. For example, they

cannot transfer schools (Royee, 2011). President Karzai spoke out about private institutions preying on vulnerable students and simply selling useless certificates. He noted that private institutions were damaging academic quality (Royee, 2011). Currently, private institutions are in need of standards and rules of operation.

In addition to private higher education, the government is trying to promote the establishment and expansion of technical, vocational, and 2-year tertiary education. The Ministry of Education, as opposed to the Ministry of Higher Education, oversees technical and vocational tertiary education. Technical and vocational education uses the abbreviation TVET. The World Bank, UNESCO, and other world aid agencies are promoting TVET schools in the country. In 2001, around 1,500 male students were attending 38 semi-functioning TVET schools. Today, 20,524 students (15 percent female) are attending 61 TVET schools and institutes. In 2009, the government reported that 61 vocational schools were active in 30 provinces. A new curriculum is being developed. However, TVET can absorb only two percent of general school grade nine graduates. Female enrollment is low, there are no TVET schools at the district level, and a lack of school buildings and workshops persists. Due to the importance of technical and vocational education for the country, the Technical and Vocational Education Department has been upgraded to the level of Deputy Minister in the new Tashkeel (Wardak, 2011, p. 22).

Afghanistan has developed a network of community colleges across the country (Aturupane, 2013). There are other specialized two-year institutes being developed in the country, as well. For example, there are schools dedicated to developing musicians. Music, a long time Afghan cultural tradition, was banned under the Taliban. In 2008 a vocational school was established in Hirat for students with hearing impairments, a first of its kind within the Technical and Vocational Program. The only school for the visually impaired is located in Kabul. In addition, there are plans to develop specialized institutes for agriculture. The Afghan economy is dominated by agriculture (Riphenburg, 2006, p. 508). The government is working to develop a policy to promote scientific culture through relevant formal and non-formal programs that will contribute to national development. The hope is that research and development related to agriculture, health, industry, and environment will accelerate economic development of Afghanistan (Samady, 2007, p. 63). These formal and non-formal programs, as well as specialized institutes, are adding to the improvement and vision of higher education in Afghanistan.

One of the issues with newly emerging options in higher education is a system for transfer credits. In Afghanistan officials are working to develop standards and processes that would allow for the transfer of credits among institutions. This is not uncommon in developing countries. In Kenya, for example, there is also a need for a standard framework for the recognition and transfer of credits (Nyangau, 2014, p. 18). As Afghanistan works to include private education in its vision for the future, many issues will still need to be addressed.

Women & Education

One of the most compelling issues in the rebuilding of the higher education system in Afghanistan is the education of women. A primary focus in all of the interviews, and consistent with my experience in Afghanistan, is the emphasis on female education. For example, the senior official from the Ministry of Higher Education noted the importance of female enrollment. However, in policy documents the specific information on how to increase female participation and how to make sure access is increased for girls is limited. The interviews revealed that there are still many security issues, and a high female dropout rate at the elementary level limits the number of girls pursuing higher education. While the economic and

social benefits of educating women are clear, raising the enrollment, providing equal access to schools, addressing the lack of security, and increasing female faculty prove to be challenging.

The economic and social benefits related to women's education are becoming better known. For example, investing in women tends to increase economic development and social stability as birth rates fall and food security increases (Riphenburg, 2004, p. 403). Perhaps few countries in the world are better poised to benefit from female education than Afghanistan. Unfortunately, Afghanistan remains one of the most difficult regions in the world for women to access higher education.

Afghanistan is focused on raising the enrollment of women in higher education to 30 percent. Today the persistent conservatism of Afghan society limits the education available to girls, with many parents unwilling to let adolescent girls attend secondary education or higher education. McDaniel notes that worldwide, "women's share of higher education (i.e. the number of women enrolled as a percentage of all students) varies from a low of 17 percent in the Republic of Congo to a high of 64 percent in Latvia, yet a pattern of female advantage is evident" (McDaniel, 2014, p. 1). Afghanistan, however, remains close to the lowest percentage of female enrollment, at roughly 19 percent as determined by the World Bank (Aturupane, 2013, p. 19). The primary reasons for the disparity in education is distance to an institution of higher education, lack of security, inadequate facilities, and cultural norms and constraints (Aturupane, 2013, pp. 20-21). Improving access for women to quality education is paramount to improving higher education enrollment.

Women's primary and secondary education, as preparation prior to higher education, is lacking. In 2009 researchers estimated that there were roughly 2.1 million girls in elementary school (Crane & Rerras, 2009, p. 98). Of the estimated 42 percent of Afghanistan's school-aged population who do not have access to basic education, the majority (approximately 70%) are girls. Enrollment in education for women drops precipitously, between elementary school and high school. Even with the improvement in elementary education, most schools for girls go only through sixth grade, and there are limited opportunities for girls to attend secondary schools (Osborn, Dalton, Ruby, & Young, 2003, p. 5). Only five percent of girls in primary school complete the twelfth grade (Crane & Rerras, 2009, p. 100). Access to quality schooling includes a great need for security for women.

The majority of Afghan women live in the countryside (Riphenburg, 2004, p. 401). Educational gender disparities in Afghanistan are even greater in the poorest, less secure and remote areas ("Prioritization and Implementation Plan," 2010, p. 32). As the female student I interviewed and others noted, girls' schools are often burned down in rural areas, and girls are threatened for attempting to attend schools. This has been documented by others, as well (Osborn et al., 2003, p. 5). The Ministry of Higher Education official that I interviewed stated, "I believe that every woman in Afghanistan wants to be educated. But somehow the political system has made them to not complete their education. Like in my province, if we build a school they will burn it after a week" (Roof, 2014).

The lack of security for women is a significant problem in Afghanistan (Riphenburg, 2004, p. 403). To expand education for females, services are needed. These include adequate sanitation on campus, secure residential facilities, and safe transportation for female students (Aturupane, 2013).

Another major factor related to girls' higher education is increasing the number of female faculty. My experience indicates that the limited number of female faculty make things challenging for girls in higher education. On the other hand, the available female faculty serve important roles as mentors and role models for girls in higher education. As the female faculty member at Kabul University stated in our interview, "For women, studying overseas offers the

only possibility for an advanced degree.” She went on to note that, “when they [female students] saw that I did my bachelor’s overseas, 4 or 5 years ago girls would say to me, ‘how could you go abroad – how could you do that?’ – But now girls say, ‘If there’s a chance maybe I will go’. — If you can do it, maybe I can go —...day-by-day” (Roof, 2014). Still, there are many obstacles for women attempting to obtain advanced degrees. As the Ministry of Higher Education official noted, “Most families do not allow a female to go to abroad and complete an advanced degree program.” The ministry noted this problem and is considering options to provide more opportunities for women. In his words, “We have come to the conclusion that if female candidates are not able to complete their education abroad, we will provide the facility for the masters programs. It means they can study inside the country” (Roof, 2014).

The closing statement of the undergraduate female I interviewed best describes the passion and demand for women’s education among the younger generation:

It is all about women’s rights! It is all about women’s rights. I am happy from that they are giving women a chance. I want this. And every meeting, in every college sanctioned by the government, should focus on the rights of women. It’s important! People think, she is a girl, don’t listen to her. But, she should know, she is deserving of better (Roof, 2014).

Other Issues

Three of the interviews mentioned problems with the national college entrance exam. Afghanistan has developed testing centers around the country to administer the college entrance examinations (Aturupane, 2013). However, the examination process is problematic. Initially, the exams were graded by local faculty. This led to a vast amount of corruption with people changing scores for money and raising the score of family members through bribes. A more centralized system was instituted. However, there are still significant problems with the exams. For most students, these exams are the primary determinant of whether or not they go on to the university and which university they go to. Afghan students often lack effective preparation for the national college entrance examination (Foundation, 2008, p. 2). In addition, the World Bank official reported that the exam is a very complicated process made increasingly difficult as the number of applications increases.

The day-to-day reality at universities in Afghanistan is difficult to convey. There is often a loss of electricity on a daily basis for extended periods of time. Based on my personal experience, the loss of electricity often impacts classes, Internet access, and makes planning for events difficult. Noisy generators also make running classes difficult. In addition, most institutions lack air conditioning and heating. Kabul, for example, gets extremely hot in the summer and cold in the winter. Universities often lack adequate restroom facilities, sanitary hostels, and clean drinking water. Basic needs must be met on a daily basis for education to actually improve.

Limitations and Future Directions

The research presented here is somewhat limited by the number of interviews and dated secondary literature. Future research on higher education in Afghanistan should include more widespread assessment of stakeholders, including more interviews and surveys. Currently, this type of research is limited because of the security situation and various logistical constraints. For example, internet access is intermittent and most universities in Afghanistan currently lack email systems making the electronic surveys nearly impossible. However, schools are currently working on developing these system and as they develop email distribution more surveys should be administered. Secondary sources are often slightly dated, due to the gap in research

conducted during the Taliban control of the country. It is incumbent upon researchers to rebuild this knowledge base. Future research might also compare Afghanistan with other countries, especially those that have dealt with gender equality in higher education and taken successful measures to address the associated challenges. Another area for cross-national comparisons would be with countries that have sought to promote democracy through higher education.

Significance and Conclusion

In closing, a final consideration on the direction of higher education in Afghanistan pertains to the future vision of education. Currently, higher education appears to be driven by economic concerns and matching students to an emerging labor market. This is understandable, given the serious economic problems facing the country. The government of Afghanistan has noted that the energy, ideas, initiatives and market savvy of the private sector remain largely untapped in the development of labor-driven human resources, which contributes to a widening skills gap and high unemployment rate (Wardak, 2011, p. 49). Subsequently, the government has placed a significant emphasis on the importance of human capital in the modern global economy.

Policy makers also recognize the contribution education can make to promoting civic values and attitudes needed for a modern, enlightened democracy, and to the development of a socially cohesive nation (Aturupane, 2013, p. E1). In addition to the development of human capital, the World Bank and other aid agencies also identified what they term 'significant social benefits' as contributions to democratic institutions, human rights, political stability, lower state welfare costs, and so forth (Aturupane, 2013, p. E2). However, interviews and experience working in the country indicates that economic factors are the primary concern driving higher education development. This has led to some criticism. Sultan Barakat argues that, "The West's starting point thus far appears to be one of opportunistic self-interest, with the perceived added benefit of controlling the drug trade while gaining access to central Asian oil and gas supplies, rather than being predicated on any coherent vision for reintegrating Afghanistan into the world community of nations" (Barakat, 2002, p. 815). This perspective appears to have validity. Ironically, those interested in the economic development of the country may benefit the most from a focus on democratic values and social cohesion, as political and social instability are two of the greatest threats facing Afghanistan.

In the 1980s, Afghans in Pakistan represented the largest refugee population in the world (Karp, 1986, p. 1044). Today these refugees have returned to Afghanistan. This diaspora has reshaped the landscape of Afghanistan, where there are many different ethnic groups living in closer proximity. This has created ethnic tensions, more complicated political problems, and struggles over scarce resources. In addition, over the past few months, Afghanistan has been in the process of completing its first peaceful democratic transformation of power under a new constitution. This process has highlighted the fragility of the political system in the country. The idea that Afghanistan has adopted and embraced democracy is complex. Anatol Lieven writes that Afghanistan "puts the widespread portrayals of societies thirsting for Western democracy in sharp contrast with the reality of local political structures and traditions" (Lieven, 2003, p. 54). This is because the primary power structures and hierarchies within the country are not democratic in nature. Furthermore, the country has not fully embrace Western-style democracy. Sultan Barakat has noted, "In the current climate, it could be argued that the emphasis is on 'Afghanising democracy', rather than 'democratising Afghanistan' (Barakat, 2002, p. 803).

Again the ironic impact might be failing to more thoroughly address social and political issues in education that might ultimately undermine the country's economic development. Corie Osborn notes, "If youth are to help build and not again destabilise Afghanistan they need a quality secondary and tertiary education system that actively engages students in reconstruction and peace building" (Osborn et al., 2003, p. 16).

The case of Afghanistan dramatically illustrates the significance and impact of higher education. The country is at a crossroads with many factors punctuating the uncertainty of this war-torn nation. The case for higher education in Afghanistan is one for carving a path toward peace and progress.

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About the Author

David J. Roof is an assistant professor at Ball State University, USA. He teaches courses in history, philosophy, policy, and ethics. He has worked in Pakistan and Afghanistan on education development and policy analysis.