

with the incumbent president of his native country. He writes: "I have spoken to President Obasanjo and he is aware of my capabilities, but some suggestions I gave him were channeled to people who were supposed to implement the next step, but did not. . . . There are many Nigerian experts in different fields in the Diaspora, who are willing to offer their expertise. I had offered mine freely, but there are *too many red tapes; there are so many people who feel threatened by our presence*" (emphasis mine). ■

Partnership for Higher Education in Africa Publications

The Partnership for Higher Education in Africa—founded in 2000 by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Ford Foundation, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, and the Rockefeller Foundation—is a reaffirmation of the belief that higher education can help to create a vibrant intellectual environment in Africa that nourishes social, political, and economic transformation. The Partnership has commissioned a series of case studies on higher education, three of which were published by James Currey in 2003: *Higher Education in Mozambique: A Case Study*, by Mouzinho Mário, Peter Fry, Lisbeth Levey, and Arlindo Chilundo; *Higher Education in Tanzania: A Case Study*, by Daniel Mkude, Brian Cooksey, and Lisbeth Levey; and *Makerere University in Transition 1993–2000: Opportunities and Challenges*, by Nakanyike B. Musisi and Nansozi K. Muwanga.

A fourth volume—*National Policy and a Regional Response in South African Higher Education*, by Nico Cloete, Pundy Pillay, Saleem Badat, and Teboho Moja—is in press. Additional studies are expected later this year, on Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya; as well as a second case study on Uganda, which is an examination of the entire higher education landscape in that country. The series will conclude with a monograph that sums up overarching issues and lessons learned.

All Partnership publications will be found on its website: <http://www.foundation-partnership.org>. A limited number of free copies of these publications are still available, with preference for requests from Africa. For further information, contact: Lisbeth Levey, Facilitator, Partnership for Higher Education in Africa, 239 Greene Street, Room 324, New York, New York 10003, USA. E-mail: lal9@nyu.edu.

Higher Education in Afghanistan

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In an effort to obtain a sense of public perceptions and attitudes about higher education in Afghanistan after 25 years of war, we conducted 14 focus groups in Herat, Kabul, Kapesa, and Kundoz provinces during June and July 2003, as part of a project conducted for the Ministry of Higher Education by the Academy for Educational Development funded by the International Development Agency. The focus groups included high school and college students, parents, college and university instructors, school teachers, business people, and women professionals. They were led by an experienced facilitator in local languages.

In spite of the tremendous loss of life, widespread destruction, and years of war, most respondents were remarkably positive and hopeful. People were eager to rebuild their lives, expressed a sense of urgency about reconstructing higher education and a willingness to "make sacrifices" for it. Most of them believe that education is the key to success and without it the country will continue the cycle of violence and instability. A student in Kundoz said: "If education is not valued, encouraged, and enhanced the country will be again the center for terrorism and drug trafficking." A teacher commented: "The need for education is greater than the need for food."

Hope was tempered, however, by concerns over the challenges facing higher education, in particularly those Afghans who do not value higher education and some who militantly oppose it for women. Most participants felt that education was being hindered by both cultural and religious conservatism.

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Major Problems

One of the most frequently cited problems was low quality. One respondent argued: "It is important to receive higher education—but quality education. If we compare today's education [in Afghanistan] with the world, our quality of education is substantially lower." Students were concerned that low quality would hinder their chances for employment and a better life.

Students and faculty attributed much of the poor educational quality to the war, lack of access to computers, destroyed or primitive libraries, the shortage of textbooks, inadequate instruction, and lack of access to the vast resources on the Internet. They stressed concerns about the lack of laboratory facilities, technical training, and practical experience for students at colleges and universities.

Funding concerns. The focus groups identified the cost of higher education as a major problem. Although higher education did not require payment of tuition or fees, there were costs associated with transportation, clothing, education material, as well as food and housing in many cases. Respondents believed that both government and the donor community gave higher education too little funding and did not regard it as a high priority. An 11th grade girl in Kapesa expressed her commitment to education: “This is the time for us to study and it will not come again. Roads can be built and electricity can be restored later—at any time.” We asked who should bear the major financial burdens of higher education, and most of the respondents believed the government should be responsible.

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Given higher education’s financial problems, respondents were asked if they would be willing to contribute to the cost through fees or tuition if that was the only way to improve quality and access. While some participants stated that they would be willing to share the cost, the majority opposed paying fees or tuition, although many of these same people admitted that some fees were inevitable if students were to receive quality education. Indeed, in all but one case, parents in the Kundoz focus group were sending one or more of their children to supplemental classes for which they paid fees.

Gender equality. The issue of gender equity and access is one of the most difficult problems confronting higher education. Respondents noted strong opposition to the education of girls and women in some places, and several men stated their personal opposition to education for women. Most high school and university students, faculty and staff, professionals, and many government officials showed strong support for gender equity and equal access to tertiary education. Many respondents were critical of what they regarded as the failure of government to address these problems. In spite of the fall of the Taliban, many of

the restrictions against women remain in place. Women continue to be discriminated against and exploited. The evidence is overwhelming, not only in higher education, but in law, health care, employment, individual rights, and freedom. The most serious problems experienced by women include limited admission opportunities, lack of personal safety, and the unwillingness of families to send their daughters far from home. The safety problem is exacerbated by the lack of transportation and dormitories for women at most colleges and universities.

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Training for teachers and faculty members. Most teachers and university faculty acknowledged and expressed concerns about their own deficiencies in training and expertise. They noted the lack of opportunities caused by decades of war and were eager for further education for their own growth and to improve the quality of education. As one teacher put it, “. . . we are thirsty for education. We seek out education everywhere.” A university lecturer in Herat noted the critical need for faculty development—saying, “teachers’ knowledge is not up to standard. . . . Our students deserve a better education.”

Private education. Respondents had mixed views about private education providers. Some saw them as supplying useful services that government could not afford to provide such as computer training. It was thought that private businesses and private colleges and universities could create competition that would lead to improvement in public education. Some believed that private colleges and universities would provide up-to-date instruction and technology. On the other hand, many feared that opening the door to private colleges and universities would hurt public higher education and limit quality education to wealthy elites.

Conclusion

The findings from the focus groups in Afghanistan suggest that people are very well informed, in spite of limited communications and media access. Strong support for higher education overall was expressed, as well as near universal concern about the quality of education at all levels. Most were worried about the cost of education to students and their families. People saw the greatest challenges to higher education as the need to provide adequate funding and to establish security, peace, and stability. They had great faith in the value and the power of higher education but recognized the vulnerability of the system in the context of war. ■