

Afghanistan: On the Razor's Edge

Fred M. Hayward

Fred M. Hayward is an independent higher education consultant who has worked in Afghanistan for long periods, starting in 2003. E-mail: haywardfred@hotmail.com.

In the context of the ongoing war in Afghanistan it is easy to miss the progress made in higher education over the last few years. Nonetheless, higher education is on a razor's edge. Significant government and donor support could move it in the direction it is now ready to go—toward quality improvement, thoughtful expansion, and provision of a sound foundation for development. It could also easily falter amid demands for unlimited growth and lower standards, as well as the near constant pressure of corruption.

Higher education in Afghanistan was once a leader in the region. More than 30 years of war have left it among the region's laggards. Enrollments fell from 24,300 in the 1990s to 7,800 in 2001. At that time there were no women students or women faculty members, since they had been excluded by the Taliban. More than half the faculty members had fled, some killed or imprisoned; several higher education institutions were closed. Every campus suffered damage. Some had neither water nor electricity; most labs were no longer functional. During part of this time Kabul University was a military base with classes taught elsewhere. Quality fell, with many graduates no longer meeting the needs of employers.

Since 2001, the Ministry of Higher Education has worked to repair and improve the infrastructure. Some new laboratories have been established or upgraded in engineering, information and communications technology, pharmacy, agriculture, and several other faculties; new classrooms and dormitories have been built, though many more are needed. About 500 Afghans have been sent abroad for PhD and master's programs and more than 60 have returned and resumed teaching. Nonetheless, by 2010 only 8 percent of staff had PhDs, 32 percent master's, and the rest only bachelor's degrees. Student numbers have increased by more than 40 percent over the last five years to 63,800 today. Only about half the students who take the *Kankor* (admissions examination) are accepted to higher education institutions. Over the last few years former minister of higher education, Dadfar, and deputy minister, Babury, have cleaned up corruption in the admissions process, restoring integrity to the Ministry of Higher Education and reestablishing the legitimacy of the national entrance examination.

The higher education system suffers from overcentralization. Institutions have little incentive to carry out entrepreneurial activities, since all funds earned must be sent to the Treasury and are seldom returned. The Ministry of Higher Education is committed to decentralization of both finances and administration, but the functional legislation has been stalled in the Parliament for the last two years.

Working with university leaders, the ministry has set the stage for major transformation in higher education. Leaders now recognize the need for major upgrading of the curriculum and development of pedagogy, focusing on problem solving and discussion rather than memorization. New regulations

emphasize merit-based recruitment and promotions and, for the first time in decades, there is funding for faculty research.

STRATEGIC PLAN FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

During 2009, in consultation with stakeholders, the Ministry of Higher Education developed a National Higher Education Strategic Plan: 2010–2014, which has been well received. The two primary goals are quality improvement and increased access to higher education. Quality improvement focuses on faculty and staff development, infrastructure upgrading and expansion, curriculum revision, and establishment of a quality-assurance procedure for public and private higher education. Increased access is essential to meet the country's needs, given the critical shortages of well-trained professionals and a potential number of 500,000 high school graduates per year, by 2015. The goal is to double enrollment from 62,000 to 115,000 by 2014 and to encourage the expansion of high-quality private higher education.

The Ministry of Higher Education has worked to increase the number of women faculty and students. The percentage of women students increased from zero in 2001 to 19.3 percent this year. Admissions of women is hampered by the limited number of women's dormitories; only 25 percent of high school graduates are women; and strong opposition to women's education exists in parts of the country. One of the major priorities of the ministry is building more women's dormitories. The number of women faculty members has increased from zero women to 15 percent in 2010. The ministry's efforts are hindered by the small number of women in higher education, social conditions that prevent

many women from going abroad for graduate study, the limited number of master's programs in Afghanistan (six), and total lack of PhD programs.

MAJOR CHALLENGES

In spite of substantial progress, the challenges are Herculean. To date, only 10 percent of the projected US\$560 million needed for the strategic plan has been provided, most of it by the World Bank. While donors have been supportive in approval of the strategic plan, little funding has been forthcoming. Although the leadership is committed to change, the process of implementation is daunting. Older faculty members, in particular, are fearful of change. Political and other pressures to thwart the merit system in admissions, recruitment, and promotions present an ongoing struggle. The most difficult issue is that higher education is not a priority of the current government. Only a few national leaders recognize its centrality to economic development and to social progress, nationally. Similarly, for many students and parents the primary interest is jobs, with little concern about knowledge. On the other hand, a growing number of students are demanding quality—worried about their lack of access to current findings in their disciplines, up-to-date-texts, and faculty members active in their fields. Most leaders are committed to high quality and to making higher education relevant to the needs of Afghanistan. They see many jobs in Afghanistan taken by graduates from India, Pakistan, Turkey, and elsewhere because local graduates do not have the needed training.

Higher education is at a critical juncture in Afghanistan, with the stage set for transformation. With a rather small amount of funding, a major long-term contribution could be made to the future of Afghanistan, creating the conditions

for economic and social development, a new culture of learning, and the basis for developing the social conditions for a more open, competitive, and democratic society. The question is whether or not the current opening for transformation will be seized by those donors and others who could do so, or whether in their haste to withdraw from Afghanistan, they will miss the opportunity to leave a legacy that will last far into the future for the young people of Afghanistan.