

Afghanistan University Linkages with North American Institutions of Higher Education

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Purpose: This historic international conference brought together for the first time in one setting higher education leaders in Afghanistan and representatives of 14 Canadian and U.S. universities that have developed linkages with Afghan universities. The purpose of the conference was to share information about university partnerships, to identify lessons learned and to chart a way ahead to make these relationships as rewarding as possible for all parties. A focus was the Afghanistan Ministry of Higher Education's Strategic Plan and the role that partnerships with North American universities can play in its fulfillment. The past accomplishments and future intentions of some of the major international donors to the higher education sector in Afghanistan were also highlighted.

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Summary of Discussions Regarding Partnerships Between Afghan and North American Universities

A. LESSONS LEARNED

1. Historically, partnerships have been a primary resource for the development of Afghan universities. Before the Communist coup of 1978, the educational system of Afghanistan was blooming as a result of partnerships from abroad. The partnerships were the result of governmental initiative and the support of the foreign universities, many of which were in the United States. These partnerships were funded by the United States Agency for International Development and were a consequence of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union.
2. The most successful relationships between North American and Afghan universities are those that are mutually beneficial. Benefit to the Afghan university includes overcoming isolation from the outside world and catching up to international standards after a long period of stagnation (1978-2002). Partnerships are an efficient way to revive Afghan higher education after a long period of decline and neglect. Students and faculty who study in the United States and Canada gain a much better knowledge and more positive feelings toward North America and

its people. Benefits to the North American partner include research opportunities and access to Afghanistan culture, people, archaeology, agriculture and natural resources that provide the basis for joint research and projects. Institutions in the United States and Canada acquire a much broader understanding of the world as a result of these partnerships.

3. Ways must be found to sustain these relationships without relying on donor funds. It is difficult, however, to sustain a partnership once the donor funding has ended. Partnerships that tend to last are those where there is something concrete to hold the relationship together, such as friendships among faculty and administrators and alumni of the Afghan university living in the North American university community. Sustainability is also enhanced through exchange of faculty, joint research, opportunities for Afghan students to visit the United States and Canada, and student projects (such as writing textbooks) at the North American institution.

4. Partnerships are expensive to maintain, in part because of the distance between Afghanistan and North America.

5. Partnerships can help with one of the critical needs of Afghan higher education—curricular reform. The current higher education curriculum does not meet the rehabilitation and development needs of Afghanistan.

6. Partnerships can help with another critical need—faculty qualifications. Only 8% of Afghan faculty members have PhDs and only 38% of them hold a master's degree. The remainder have only a bachelor's degree. Afghan bachelor degree holders can go to universities in Canada or the United States, earn a Master's degree or Ph.D. and return to Afghanistan to teach, conduct research and implement higher education reforms.

7. Some of the faculty who came to the United States and Canada for advanced degrees did not return to Afghanistan. From the viewpoint of the Ministry of Higher Education, these individuals acted unethically and their families should repay the scholarship to the government.

8. Strong partnerships develop slowly. It is important for the two institutions to gain trust in each other. Consistent communication and clear expectations allow for strong relationships to be formed.

9. The length of the partnership is important. A minimum of 5-6 years is needed in order to see the complete result of the partnership. Ideally, a partnership should be continued for many years, well beyond the typical funding period of two to three years.

10. Funding for partnerships is very limited. Higher education has not been a priority for the major donors to Afghanistan.

11. Partnerships can help address another critical need—equipping and maintaining laboratories and libraries. Partnerships can help make new equipment and books sustainable by training technicians and librarians, for example.

12. Follow-up is important. Partnerships should think about Afghans who return home to work in higher education. A seminar for returned graduates to Afghanistan, such as that provided by the University of Massachusetts and Indiana University, can produce lasting benefits. Sometimes these graduates get quite frustrated upon their return, and information sharing is important. North American universities can keep track of their Afghan graduates by e-mail and during visits by their faculty to Afghanistan. Returning faculty members need encouragement to continue to teach at the university level.

13. Partnerships can help with another critical need—modernization of teaching methods. Current methods focus on lecture and regurgitation. Partnerships introduce Afghan lecturers to student-centered learning, including lively exchanges in the classroom between students and their teacher.

B. THE WAY AHEAD

1. U.S. and Canadian universities can maximize their ability to partner with their Afghan counterparts by forming a consortium, which can distribute some of the costs among its members. The members of the consortium can share resources, including databases and faculty expertise. The National Academy for Sciences has promoted consortia of U.S. universities effectively in efforts to assist in the development of Africa. A consortial approach is also desirable because of the shrinking aid dollars that will be available to support higher education beginning this year.

2. Partnerships can show Afghan universities how to generate revenue. The entire educational system, by the Afghan constitution, is free. In order for Afghan universities to keep income earned by consulting, for example, the Higher Education Law must be amended. The current bill before Parliament will also grant greater autonomy to individual universities in order to decentralize the higher education system—a “best practice” by international standards. Partnerships can demonstrate to Afghan institutions of higher education what an “autonomous” university looks like.

3. Better donor coordination is desirable in order to reap the maximum benefit from the limited aid dollars available for higher education in Afghanistan. Some countries are donating expensive laboratory equipment but no funding is provided to train faculty and technicians on how to use and maintain the equipment. Some donor funds overlap and lead to wasteful duplication.

4. Emphasis is needed to help Afghan universities match their curriculum to the needs of the workforce and the emerging private sector of the economy. Partnerships can help open a dialogue with the business community on what types of skills are needed in university graduates. Are companies willing to assist Afghan universities in modernizing their curriculum?

5. Partnerships can help the Ministry of Higher Education make a plan to use revenue generated by Afghanistan's vast mineral resources to sustain development of higher education to meet international standards.
6. Partnerships can help build a nationwide curriculum in each discipline. One university could pilot the new curriculum and then submit it for approval by the Ministry of Higher Education which will share it with universities throughout the country.
7. U.S. and Canadian universities could make retired faculty members available to teach and consult on curriculum and teaching method improvement at Afghan universities. Also, partnerships could provide visiting faculty during the summer months when they have no teaching responsibilities back home.
8. Partnerships can more closely align their assistance efforts with Afghanistan's National Higher Education Strategy and work more closely with the internal processes and systems now being set up by the ministry to support reform. This strategy is especially important since more and more donor funding will soon be "on budget" and go to the Ministry of Higher Education instead of being "off budget," passing directly to contractors such as U.S. universities.
9. Often over time, things change and there are no records of past partnership agreements. With any partnership there should be clear records of activity and documentation of accomplishments.
10. Partnerships can do more to encourage Afghan faculty members earning graduate degrees in the United States or Canada to return to Afghanistan. Last year, 1,300 university teachers received scholarships to study abroad and some of them will not return.
11. More Afghan faculty studying abroad should focus on curriculum development, one of the most pressing needs of Afghan higher education. The Ministry of Higher Education will develop a system to evaluate the curriculum and require its updating and modernization.
12. There needs to be a mechanism within the Ministry of Higher Education for monitoring and evaluating partnerships, in order to assure quality.
13. Partnerships can help replace faculty members who get scholarships to earn graduate degrees in the United States, leaving a hole in their academic department's teaching staff.
14. Partnerships can help train faculty members in management skills, which are in critical short supply at Afghan universities.
15. As security improves in Afghanistan, there will be more opportunities for partnerships.
16. Partnerships can assist Afghan universities in making their own strategic plans, with an eye to reaching international standards, and matching the partnership activities to the plan.