

Depoliticizing and improving higher education in Afghanistan

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The education system in Afghanistan had been misused for political short-term gains during the last two and half decades and the subsequent results have been a complete devastation of the whole infrastructure in the country. In order to overcome this catastrophic destruction, the authorities in Afghanistan should make every effort to isolate all political activities from higher educational institutions in the country. Furthermore, the present and future generations of Afghanistan should make every effort to keep education and politics separate from each other and follow international norms and standards at higher educational institutions.

At the present situation in Afghanistan, depoliticizing the education system is not an easy task; however, it is recommended that strong steps are taken in the following three main areas:

1. Political Front

- Political parties should be encouraged to refrain from using higher educational institutions throughout the country for political activities.
- Educate parliamentarians in Afghanistan about educational development at the developed world, where educational institutions are free from political activities.
- A subject that discusses the role law and responsibilities of individuals within a society should be integrated within the curriculum of all courses throughout the universities in Afghanistan.
- Media services such as radios, TVs should be encouraged to broadcast programmes that will help to depoliticize educational system by discussing various educational issues at developed world with Afghan and non-Afghan experts.

2. At government level, Better management

- Improving the management at ministry of higher education and within higher education institutions is essential. The management at MoHE and KU is not very strong; the management at KPU is non-existent and outdated. It is impossible to make any progress under the present management at KPU.
- A regulatory body needs to be established to monitor the standards of all courses throughout the universities in Afghanistan including any private institutions that may emerge in the future. This is a common practice in the modern world and by this way the standards can be maintained.

- Awareness seminars and workshops should be held for all senior managers at MoHE, KU and KPU about educational development throughout the world.
- The management at all the ministries including MoHE, KU and KPU should identify and prioritise projects within higher education sector and then ask USAID and other donors to conduct such projects. Stop some US opportunistic companies and foreign organisations to use Afghanistan for huge financial gains from their governments and aid organisations to conduct ineffective projects at all sectors including higher education in Afghanistan. The output of the following USAID and other agencies funded projects should be fully assessed by the Afghan government and less effective projects must be identified and USAID should be urged to redirect the resources to more effective projects in higher education sector.

List of USAID funded projects at the education sector in Afghanistan:

- i. Basic Education Project (\$75 M) – A 5 year project providing training for teachers, those who support teachers and capacity building for MOE. This project has the lead for setting up an education management information system in conjunction with the Ministry of Education and other donors.
- ii. Community Based Education Project (\$24 M) – A 5 year project improving the quality and scope of community schools, teacher training and linkages of community schools to MOE.
- iii. Higher Education Project (\$40 M) – A 5 year project improving 16 faculties of education pre-service teacher, and support for ensuring sustained quality.
- iv. Literacy and Productive Skills Project (\$20 M) – A 5 year project to build capacity of private providers of development-focused literacy & vocational skills.
- v. Capacity Building for Ministry of Women's Affairs (\$2.5 M) – A 2 year project to build capacities of Ministry of Women's Affairs in advocacy & policy development, programming & management of Women's Resource Centers.
- vi. American University of Afghanistan (17.5 M) – In cooperation with the Ministry of Higher Education of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and private donors, the United States Government is supporting the establishment of American University of Afghanistan, a private, independent American-style university.
- vii. Washington State University (11 M) – A 4 year project designed to establish educational and e-learning alliances in institutions of higher education. These alliances will be both regional and international in scope.
- viii. APEP Extension (\$7.5) – A 1 year extension of the Accelerated Learning program through February 30 2007, to enable all currently enrolled students (170,000) to complete their course work.
- ix. Part of Bearing Point recently awarded contract from USAID, which is worth \$218 M will also be spent on Capacity Building at education and higher education in Afghanistan.

Proper utilisation of foreign aid has to be a major priority of our government.

3. Improving Educational programmes

- **Committing all academics to their jobs**

According to the limited experience of the author, it is regrettable to report that most academics within certain faculties at KU and KPU are not fully committed to their academic jobs and have 2nd jobs elsewhere, any possible progress without their full commitment is impossible.

A major problem that the whole education system is facing is the salary structure of academic and technical staff, which is currently much lower than similar roles in international and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The government urgently needs to address this issue. Attractive remuneration packages should be offered to suitably qualified and well motivated professionals. Rules and regulations should be introduced and all academics should be encouraged to conduct research and consultancy for other organizations in a transparent way that is governed by a suitable body within their institutions. These activities will also boost the motivation of academic staff within the university.

- **Extensive review of Curricula**

The curricula of most faculties have not been updated for decades as there are many academics that are unaware of the recent development in the development in science and technologies. The authorities need to assess the suitability of all the courses within the university, revise some courses, introduce new courses and perhaps drop some old courses all together.

Some of the courses are based on notes, which were prepared decades ago, such notes should be updated with a view to integrate the recent development in all subjects.

- **Training of academic staff**

This is one the main issues to be addressed with urgency as all the courses will be delivered by academic staff. Academic staff can be trained using the following methods:

1. Scholarships to obtain higher degrees
2. Seminars and conferences
3. Creating subject groups
4. Inviting expatriate Afghans from western world to present seminars and deliver advance courses in one or two weeks
5. Introducing academic staff to research and scholarly activities.

- **Learning resources**

The learning resources, i.e. text books, laboratory equipment, computers and related software are not adequate and outdated; the problems related to learning resources should be addressed with urgency.

- **Promotion of science and technology**

The issues of promoting science and technology and initiatives on knowledge transfer should be seriously investigated by the authorities. Suitable steps should be taken to address these important issues. The developments in science and technology during the last three decades brought prosperity and better economic conditions in the modern world. Higher educational institutions such as Kabul University should take a leading role that will guide the Afghan people to more prosperity and good standard of life.

- **Equipping the labs**

It is well known that all educational establishments were severely damaged and in most cases all the buildings and other facilities were burned in the civil war. The equipment and furniture was looted, laboratories were demolished and libraries burned to ashes. Equipping the laboratories throughout all the faculties should be in a high priority list of the authority as without proper labs, the education in some science and engineering based subjects are meaningless.

At present, there is little or no laboratory equipment at most education institutions in Kabul or around the country. For instance, students who are educated at engineering and technical education institutions may not have seen electronic components such as diodes, transistors, operational amplifiers nor have they access to basic laboratory equipment such as multi-meters, oscilloscopes, signal generators etc.

- **Promotion of practical courses**

Kabul University should be a leading player promoting Technical, Vocational Education (TVE) by training the instructors, preparing curriculum and other TVE activities in Afghanistan.

The curriculum of engineering education establishments should be reviewed extensively and updated in the light of recent advances in engineering. Beside traditional analytical courses, there is also a need to train engineers and technicians suitably for the desperate local needs. Engineering programs should be adaptable and the courses must be reviewed and modified from time to time, as in the past some inappropriate foreign models and methodologies have been imposed on vocational and technical education.

The economy of Afghanistan was based on agriculture with little use of modern technology and hence there is no significant industrial base in the country. This represents a disadvantage for Afghan graduates, as they have no means of gaining work experience in industry compared to graduates in other countries. Therefore, it will be essential for there to be a practical element relevant to local needs embedded within certain disciplines, especially in engineering and science subjects.

Practical courses should be developed for less motivated students and the UK model of Higher National Diploma (HND) and Higher National Certificate (HNC) should be introduced at Kabul University. Kabul University should be able to facilitate and major TVE and other programs

that may be launched by the Afghan government with the help of international organizations.

Kabul University should develop programs for technical colleges and high schools to develop vocational education courses for skilled workers according to local needs, such as car repair, repair of electrical and electronic appliances and computing equipment.

- **Establishing computer centres**

Computer centres should be established and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) should be introduced at all the faculties, as it is essential that the students have familiarity and access to ICT. The students and staff could then collaborate and interact with other people throughout the world and find out information about advances in many fields of technology using ICT tools.

- **Creating a Website for Kabul and other Universities**

Kabul and other Universities in Afghanistan should be on the world digital map is essential and the authority needs to develop ICT policies and promote ICT with immediate effect. All academic and admin staff should be encouraged to participate in the learning process of ICT tools and the use internet. Websites can play a major role for information and exchange and communications within the educational community.

One of the main issues missing from the overall education system in the past was the development of personal communication skills. Presentations and report writing skills are an essential part of any education system. It is highly recommended that the introduction of such communication skills be started at an earlier stage in education. These skills should be integrated within all courses at Kabul and other universities in Afghanistan.

- **Research and scholarly activities**

Most academic staff should be encouraged to participate in research and scholarly activities and it will be a challenging task to retrain academic staff to participate in such activities. Programs for research seminars and conferences would facilitate the research and scholarly activities. The creation of at least two journals, one for science based subject and the second for social sciences subjects is highly recommended in the first place.

The formation of subject based societies should be investigated and established in the future and these societies should be encouraged to communicate with international institutions such as the Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers (IEEE) in the U.S.A, the Institute of Electrical Engineers (IEE) in the U.K., medical societies around the world etc.

- **Establishing regulatory body**

A regulatory body needs to be established to monitor the standards of all courses throughout the universities in Afghanistan including any private institutions that may emerge in the future. This is a common practice in the modern world and by this way the standards can be maintained.

- **Extensive review of all the regulations**

Most rules and regulations at Kabul University were developed over three decades ago and have not been updated because of the war and instability in the country. All the regulations should be extensively reviewed and modernized according to international standards, specifically in the following areas:

- i. Recruitment and promotion of academics
- ii. Academic ranking
- iii. Reviewing various committees

- **Close collaboration with other higher educational institutions**

Establishing close collaboration with institutions inside and outside Afghanistan is an essential step that the authority at Kabul University has to take as most future scientist; politicians and managers will graduate from Kabul University. The university should establish close ties with other higher education institutions and ministries specially education, communication, economics, energy, mines and industry, etc.

Similarly, the authorities at Kabul University should establish collaboration with outside world through the following channels:

- 1- Through governments
- 2- Institutions such as USAID, British Council
- 3- Expatriate Afghans working at various institutions in the western world
- 4- Encourage expatriate Afghans to participate in rebuilding the education sector in Afghanistan
- 5- Through visiting professorships.

- **External Advisors to Kabul and other Universities**

Kabul University and other higher educational institutions need to consider appointing external advisors; Afghan expatriates teaching at Universities in the developed world can play an important role that will help in the following areas:

- A. Curricula development
- B. Training teaching staff in advance subjects

- C. Teaching some advanced subjects (concentrated on two or three weeks) to the final year students.
- D. Setup of laboratories as most science and engineering subjects should be supported by proper lab programs. Engineering graduates must be equipped by both analytical and practical skills.
- E. Develop Lab programs
- F. Training teaching staff and senior students basic computer technology and ICT
- G. Identify textbooks for all the courses.
- H. To establish regulatory body to monitor the standard of education throughout all higher education institutions.
- I. Organize and participate in seminars and conferences about the re-establishment of proper education system in Afghanistan.
- J. Develop programs, which are suitable for local needs.
- K. The Afghan expatriates who work at educational institutions in the modern world should share their experience with their counterparts at Kabul University and other educational establishments in Afghanistan.
- L. Knowledge and experience can be transferred through expatriates.
- M. Consideration should be made to invite expatriates Afghans teaching at the universities in the modern world to act as external advisors for most courses at Kabul and other Universities.

- **Physical infrastructure**

The majority of the buildings of all educational institutions including Kabul University have been severely damaged by war and neglect. Those buildings that survived the war are in a poor state of repair, i.e. leaking roofs, damp etc. These buildings have not been maintained for at least twenty years. In addition, there is shortage of running water and electricity and the sanitation facilities are very poor. The authorities should rectify these problems with urgency.

Furthermore, the lack of any major work at the campuses of Kabul based higher educational institutions is disappointing, which was very nice during 1980's. The authorities need to urgently improve the physical appearance

of the University by cleaning the gardens, trimming the tree and bushes, planting flowers etc.

- **Improving the process of entry examination (Kankoor) to higher educational institutions in Afghanistan**

The ministry of education and local education authority should make every effort to improve the primary and secondary education system as some of these students will continue into higher education institutions. The entry examination should be extensively reviewed and an atmosphere should be created where the students can set this exam with great confidence on the system.