



My opinions, Suggestions & Advices on Higher Education in Afghanistan

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1. Chapter, Textbook or Internet?

Is this believable that most Afghan students do not have textbooks and use ten to twenty years old chapters (papers or translated notes by instructors from a book on an issue or subject) as the only teaching materials?

Well, I would not have believed it if I had not seen the situation in Kabul and some other provinces which makes a person tearful. Students carry twenty or thirty pages in plastic bags, memorize them mechanically and jot down in examinations, and this way they pass the exams. In contrast, students in other countries have access to a large number of books and they can refer to libraries several times each week.

Elsewhere in the world, university is considered the main center of new knowledge, technology and investigations but unfortunately in Afghan universities still (in 21st century) students have to be content with the learning materials of 20th century. Nevertheless some lecturers have written, translated and published books in their fields. This work is exceptional and is done in few fields.

In the last 13 years, no systematic work has been done for providing new standard textbooks. However, in 2014, the Ministry of Higher Education published a curriculum in several volumes for 50 fields. That was the first positive step but unfortunately it is not being applied in every field. As a curriculum makes the plan and framework of teaching better, the books of the curriculum should be available for each teaching subject in the native language of lecturers and students in order to be taught by the lecturer within the framework of the curriculum and be learnt by the students. Some others suggest that the lecturers and students should use English books or the internet. But not all of our lecturers and students are familiar enough with the English language to take full advantage of English books. Also the internet can never substitute books because books have been the

best way of transferring and learning knowledge for thousands of years. I cooperated in starting an online course from 2003 to 2005 and worked as its tutor in InWEnt gGmbH/Bonn for doctors in Asia, Africa and Latin America who had studied in Germany. That course was about HIV/AIDS in German language and later on it was translated into English. In such a developed country like Germany, still works and investigations are done in this area; e-learning is getting more common but it is not replacing classroom learning. The majority of trainings in institutions occur in the classrooms as usual.

Although the number of users of new technology in Afghanistan is getting more and more year by year, the internet does not work continuously because of absence of electricity or other technical problems.

Another problem is the language. Although teaching is possible through internet, the learning materials should be provided in a language which is understandable for students. And then those materials can be conducted in courses in foreign countries by organizations and people who have provided their teaching materials in their own languages. Then only a part of those materials is offered via internet to those who are interested.

Another issue is that learning through internet is not inexpensive; it costs a lot. It requires complete technical facilities such as electricity, computer and internet access.

In addition, learning content should be existed, and the texts should be stored in computers to be advantageous for the students so they can refer back to the texts later on. Also texts only without charts, pictures, audio and video can be boring. Still, all over Afghanistan, there is not even a specialized and professional organization in this field to work in this sector. Though there are some advance courses of English language, they are for those who have full command of this language.

Some years ago, an online program GLP was started in the Ministry of Higher Education by USAID. Their experiences gained should be followed. They spent a lot of money but were not very successful and could not fulfill the expectations, though.

Elsewhere in the world, textbooks for students play the main role in learning every field of study. Every year lecturers and authors write books in each subject and translate standard international books. The libraries of every university purchase many books in both their native and in the English language on the basis of their students' needs, and then they offer those books to their students. Every university has a bookstore, either inside or outside the campus. Let's do the same.

Do our universities do so? Thousands of new students every year come to universities. How many books do we provide for them? Unfortunately, there is no portion allocated from the budget of the ministry for writing, translating and publishing books.

Classroom, teacher and book are the base pillars of studies. And online learning can be the fourth pillar. Therefore, let's first build the base, and then we will construct the other pillars. At the end I would like to quote a Greek saying: *"A student without book is like a soldier without weapon."*

Suggestions:

- ▶ In the budget of the ministry and every university there should be a specific portion for writing, translating and publishing textbooks.
- ▶ National Textbooks Program should be started by the Ministry of Higher Education and it should be one of the priorities of the ministry.
- ▶ Financial facilities should be provided for this program.
- ▶ Aid for this program should be appealed for from the USAID, DAAD, World Bank etc.

- ▶ The purpose should be that every subject in our universities should have curriculum and at least one textbook.
- ▶ The newly provided books should be introduced to the lecturers who teach them.
- ▶ As the libraries of our universities and faculties are like piles of books, this situation should be ended immediately.
- ▶ At least one professional librarian should work in every library.
- ▶ Each library should have a specific budget for purchasing new books every year.

2. Medium of Instruction: English or National Languages?

Whenever some foreign and local experts witness the low standard of Afghan universities and lack of standard and new textbooks, they immediately suggest that both instructors and students should use English textbooks and that the medium of instruction should also be English. Nonetheless, these suggestions seem correct and a logical solution to the problem but this solution might not be practicable.

Due to thirty years of war all Afghan institutions have fallen behind of the global advancement of knowledge. Furthermore, during the 1980s the foreign language taught in schools and universities was not English, rather it was Russian. (I studied Russian from 9th until 12th grade.) Similarly, thousands of Afghans and a great number of university instructors have got higher education in the former USSR. Still today those instructors work and teach at most Afghan universities.

On the other hand, the instruction of English in schools is not so good to expect that high school graduates should be able to grasp the English

medium instructions or English textbooks. Another problem is the level of English sources. The instructors and students may understand English well but unfortunately they may not be able to comprehend the textbooks written in foreign countries because the educational level of our students is different from that of foreign students.

The countries where English is not the medium of instruction in schools do not use English as a medium of instruction in universities. Rather, they use their national languages. However, some higher educational institutions use English for instruction.

Only the countries where English is the medium of instruction in schools adopt English for universities too. In such case, neither students nor instructors have language problems because both have already learned English with full command at school.

It is therefore crystal clear that access to the global knowledge is easier with English but this can be achieved only by the ones who have learned English and they can get the benefit of it.

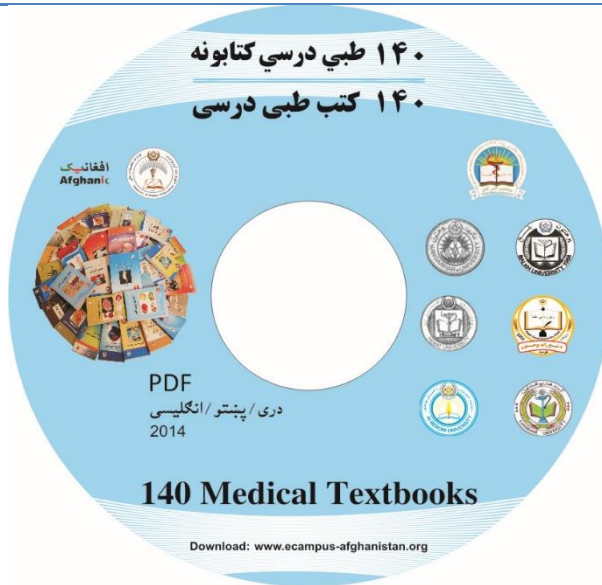
Instructions through English are possible in some universities of Afghanistan. However, this process needs a mid-term strategy, the execution of that strategy and persistent effort.

In accordance to that strategy, the high school graduates should have full command of English, and all the young instructors of the universities should be able to give instruction in English. Then the prerequisites of English instructions will be fulfilled and the strategy will be implemented.

Otherwise, the universities should continue using the national languages as source of instructions. In addition, textbooks should sooner be prepared, published and given to the students.

The instructors should acquire the global knowledge through English. Then, they should prepare teaching material in national languages and in agreement with the level of the students.

3. Textbooks on DVD the First Effective Step towards a Digital Library in Afghanistan



Afghanistan is considered amongst the countries with few publications in limited number of prints—usually 1,000 copies. However, with the help of new technology, books are now available in digital format and can easily be distributed among the interested readers.

Therefore we published 140 Medical Textbooks in English, Pashto, and Dari languages. Most of them were written by the instructors of Nangarhar, Khost, Kandahar, Herat, Balkh, and Kapisa universities. Some of them were also written by the professors from Germany and America. Besides publishing these textbooks, they were also saved on DVDs and distributed among all the medical faculties throughout Afghanistan. Every instructor, student and reader can easily access these 140 textbooks. They can run the DVD on their computer for reading or one can also

download them from www.ecampus-afghanistan.org. Nonetheless, the Ministry of Higher Education, the universities and NGOs always suggest a Digital Library in their plans, projects and programs. Furthermore, USAID has spent some money on Digital Library. Usually such projects include foreign books instead of Afghan writers', or they mainly serve as a link to other digital libraries. For instance, you can view the same problem in the Ministry of Higher Education website: go to www.mohe.gov.af and then click on Electronic Library. My humble suggestion to Ministry of Higher Education and the university instructors is that they should also publish their works via CD or DVD and upload them to their university websites too. As the print limit is usually a thousand copies, they cannot satisfy the needs of all the interested instructors and students. So if every textbook is published electronically, all students and instructors will be able to access the new books easily and quickly for use. This approach will definitely improve the learning process and the teaching quality. In addition, it will also accelerate academic ties and joint practical projects among the professors of Afghan universities.

4. Correlative Theoretical and Practical Education

Four years ago, I invited an engineer to the Engineering Faculty of Nangarhar University for giving a professional presentation. At the end of the presentation a student raising his hand said that he had heard such academic and important information about practical works for the first time. However he was a student of fifth semester of that faculty, he had not touched even a brick for practical constructional work.

If we observe the education in Afghan universities, we will see that in most of the disciplines practical work in the field or laboratory is rarely done by the students. It is a main cause that these students cannot find and do any work practically, after graduation. Or if they do, that will not be a good quality work.

Therefore, the authorities and faculty members of the universities should activate laboratories in order to practically educate their students.

When I was student of medicine in Czechoslovakia, we would be taught theoretical lessons and lectures from 8 am to 12 pm. In addition during first semesters we would do practical work in practice rooms and laboratories in the afternoon. In the last semesters of our studies, we, did theoretical studies for half a day, but the rest of the day we observed patients' files, examined patients and did practical work in hospital beside them. This way, we would practice what we had learned; we could learn easily and memorize the theoretical lessons. For example, when we were to study hepatitis, our instructor of practical works would take us to a patient suffering from the disease and show us the symptoms of the disease on the patient's body. We would observe the laboratory examinations and get information about the history of the illness. Consequently, anytime we faced this disease, we would recall that patient and the knowledge about the disease.

My suggestion to the authorities and lecturers is to work more on both theoretical and practical teaching and include them in their teaching plans and schedules. They should not rely only on lecture-notes and chapters because these materials cannot effectively educate engineers and doctors for their practical works.

There is a close correlation between theoretical and practical education. Since some colleges do not have teaching hospitals where students can practically learn beside the patient's bed, this situation should no longer continue. Every medical college must have teaching hospitals.

5. Master's or Bachelor's?

Universities are established for the purpose of acquiring wisdom and knowledge. During the last few decades, the horizon of knowledge has enormously expanded, and it keeps expanding every year to a level which had never happened in centuries before. In many countries, students are categorized for either science or arts disciplines in the middle schools. Then, in bachelor's degree at a university, a particular discipline is studied in general. It means that undergraduate or bachelor's degree holder is not yet the master of his/her field to be able to work independently in his/her discipline like a master. Therefore, after graduation from bachelor's degree, usually students try to complete their master's degree in a specific field of study, which advantageously differentiates them from bachelor's degree holders. They are usually successful in job acquisition.

Economics, Agriculture, Medicine and other fields of study are in dire need of such well-versed cadres. Definitely, expertise in a field does not come with bachelor's only, rather one needs to get special trainings, master's and PhD for it.

Unfortunately, Afghanistan offers very few master's and PhD programs at universities. Nonetheless, many university instructors and government officials are doing their master's and PhDs abroad, but this is not sufficient to satisfy the demand of the job market in Afghanistan. Therefore, the universities of Afghanistan should start master's and PhD programs. Some private and public universities have launched master's programs to fulfill the needs, though.

However, these programs should be launched, and their fundamental requirements should also be provided like: infrastructure, budget, curriculum, textbooks, labs, and research facilities, beside practical and academic cadres. If a university or faculty has few or no PhD cadres, they should promptly send abroad their instructors for PhD. In addition, they should hire some Afghan or foreign PhD professors till the return of their own cadres.

Similarly, since some Afghan universities have partnerships with foreign universities, they should definitely take advantage of this opportunity in establishing their master's programs. Afghan universities should launch the

master's programs in collaboration with the partner universities. Part of the programs should be implemented domestically, and the rest should be done abroad in the host university. In addition, foreign professors should be invited for the implementation and teaching of Master's and PhD classes.

If foreign universities are training Afghan master's degree holders, these programs would be automatically shut in case of stopping or decreasing foreign assistance. Then, we would not be able to have any more masters'.

One of the best advantages of master's programs in our own country would be the increased participation of females. In addition, the money given to the foreign universities to provide assistance for Afghanistan is so much; using that amount can fund infrastructure, course material and even professors' salaries here in Afghanistan. So all that money would not seep out of the country, rather it would stay and be utilized domestically.

6. Higher Education Research Center (HERC)

There is no doubt that "Higher Education" plays a very significant role in the long-term development of a community. In fact, university is the citadel of producing academic, knowledgeable, political and anthropological experts. It is university that educates and prepares young academics on Bachelor's, Master's and doctoral levels. Then, these graduates perform a fundamental role in the improvement of society and economy.

Although higher education system in Afghanistan has shown some improvement over the last thirteen years, it still faces many challenges. Without proper focus and attention, these challenges are definitely going to increase instead of decreasing. For instance, the number of high school graduates increases every year. In 2015, there will be around four hundred thousand high school graduates. However, all public and private higher education institutions together can accommodate only one hundred thousand students while the rest would remain devoid of any higher education.

In addition, universities do not produce experts for the employment market in Afghanistan. The reason can be the graduation of a huge number of bachelor's degree holders while the master's and doctoral are very few.

Other big concerns are: how can the teaching quality be improved? Are short-term training programs better or Master's and doctoral programs? Should the medium of instruction be English or any national languages? Do we need textbooks or should everything be available online? Should there be any entry test (Kankor) or not? Should Kankor be a separate entity apart from MoHE? What are the advantages and disadvantages of this removal? Should private higher institutions be increased or are there already more than enough? These and other similar questions should never be coped with on someone's personal insight; rather they should be meticulously studied with empirical research, verification and both national and international experiences.

Unfortunately, neither MoHE has done any research in this regard nor any of the national universities. So far five ministers have worked in MoHE in the last 13 years, but none of them has continued the previous minister's work. Rather, they set their own priorities and kept them going till another minister took over.

Keeping the aforesaid points in mind, we would like to make a suggestion that a specific research center should be established regarding Higher Education in Afghanistan. This center should work under the auspices of relevant governmental organization in accordance with the central governmental plan. Furthermore, it should commence study on the basis of specific branch of education.

We believe that this would be an effective initiative of the academic policy which will be free from the copycat models of foreign countries. So, it would be a national, academic and educational policy. Therefore, we should not solve the issues of Higher Education with copying the foreign models. Rather, we, along with the help of foreign experts, should study the issues lurking at higher

education, discuss their solutions with each other, develop a plan and then implement it. In fact, the experiences and suggestions of some countries can definitely help to complete this policy and make it successful.

7. Afghan-German University in Kabul

Fifty years ago, Germany, besides USA and the former USSR, was the first country which assisted higher education of Afghanistan in a long-lasting and effective way.

In the 1960s, Germany established the German Language Department at Kabul University and it started supporting Science and Economics Faculties in academic affairs. Many German professors visited Kabul University and taught in the classrooms. Textbooks for the Afghan students were published in collaboration with Afghan professors. Germany took an active part in building construction, equipping the laboratories, developing curriculum and publishing of textbooks. Every year, some instructors were sent to Bochum, Bonn and Cologne universities to gain Master's and Doctoral degrees in Science and Economics. The academic assistance and partnership resulted in the construction of infrastructure, the arrangement of all teaching conditions and improvement and continuation of teaching and learning quality.

Due to unfavourable conditions and war that assistance stopped but restarted in 2002. In the last ten years, joint programs resumed with German Language, Economics, Science and Computer Science faculties. In addition, Germany also extended some short-term assistance to Medical, Engineering and Pharmacy faculties. Within the last few years, as a part of the same assistance, some instructors got their Master's from Germany. They were very effective in the relevant faculties.

However, the academic community of Afghanistan has lagged behind the global knowledge for more than 30 years. On the other hand, knowledge and technology has vastly expanded and advanced in the last few decades. Therefore, our universities are in even greater need of updated infrastructure, laboratories, curriculum, teaching material and furthering the education of our instructors to Master's and Doctoral degrees. All this can be achieved with the establishment of Afghan-German University. According to the new constitution, it is now possible for the foreign countries to launch educational facilities in Afghanistan. The Afghan-American University is its first instance, and an Afghan-Turkish University is also going to be set up soon as another one. Keeping in mind the needs of Afghanistan and the academic assistance of Germany, this new Afghan-German University may have the following faculties: Economics, Science, Medicine, Computer Science, Engineering, Geology and Public Administration. It will definitely be a new chapter in the 100 year friendship and academic assistance between Germany and Afghanistan. With the 100th anniversary (Diamond Jubilee) of German-Afghan relationships in 2015, it is highly expected that an Afghan-German University will be announced by the leaders of both countries during the celebration of the anniversary.

8. The Importance of Higher Education for the Future of the Country

You might have heard many times that youths make the future of a society, and they will be the future leaders. It is right. How do we value the youths who are called the future of our society and country? And how much do we invest

in them?

If leaders of a society have gotten good education, professional knowledge and work experience during their youth, they can be better ones. Unfortunately, Afghanistan, among some other countries, invests less in its future generation i.e. insufficient attention is given to higher education, and very little is invested in it.

Academic and professional cadres play a very important role in a society's improvement plan. As well as, with the fast improvement of knowledge and technology, the importance of higher education has increased more in the recent years.

If a community has youths who are familiar with modern knowledge, new innovations, fundamental problems of their society, finding ways for resolving the problems, this society improves quickly.

A student graduated from 12th grade of school without getting higher and professional education is not effective since he/ she cannot perform an occupational task. As well as, their and an illiterate's incomes are different in contrast to one who has gotten higher education, and finding a job is also difficult for them.

Thus, Afghan government should pay more attention to universities where the future leaders get training. In order to train theoretically and practically educated students for the society, the government should provide more financial facilities for the students, encourage lecturers of universities and pave the way for other students to study in universities. After few years, this will have positive effects on the development and good management of Afghanistan.

University means the motor of development; university means the future experts and leaders of a country.

If we consider the future of the country important, we should consider higher education important, as well.

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