



DIALOGUE BRIEF

# The Future of Higher Education in Afghanistan

Dialogue Snapshot

JANUARY 2023



the Hollings Center  
*for international dialogue*

# The Future of Higher Education in Afghanistan

---

The Hollings Center for International Dialogue brought together administrators and faculty from public and private universities inside and outside Afghanistan, education officials, and specialists from international organizations to discuss *The Future of Higher Education in Afghanistan*. The discussion highlighted both the gains and challenges of the past twenty years, and the generational danger posed by repressive Taliban measures that impact students and scholars, particularly women. More importantly, dialogue participants formulated several recommendations for preserving the gains, overcoming the challenges, and supporting the higher education community in Afghanistan. Given negative developments in late 2022, the recommendations from dialogue participants are now even more urgent and timely.

Universities in Afghanistan have long been centers of not just education, but also of culture, political activity, and civil society interaction. This has made their relationships to both the international community and the Taliban difficult. During the 2010s, private institutions like the American University of Afghanistan, public institutions like Kabul University, as well as individual scholars and students, were targeted by the Taliban and other insurgent groups. Since the Taliban takeover of Kabul, the Taliban's policies of power consolidation have eroded many of the gains of the past twenty years.

## Gains of the Previous 20 Years

The dialogue conference reflected on the past 20 years of higher education in Afghanistan, noting:

- **Great strides were made** in increasing the number of public and private institutions of higher education. In 2020, there were 39 public and 128 private universities.
- **By 2021, almost 400,000 students were in higher education, 110,000 of whom were women.** While problems with equity and access persisted, particularly for women and minorities, progress had been made.
- **A robust private sector of education (of uneven quality), emerged** to complement the public sector.
- **Higher education institutions provided a nexus of civil society** groups, human rights organizations, media, and scholars that contributed to civil discourse in the country.

- **Accreditation standards and other mechanisms of quality assurance had gained traction** and were being implemented by the Ministry of Higher Education.
- **A new, diverse generation of Afghan scholars emerged that has focused on Afghanistan in a variety of disciplinary perspectives.** This is due to the growth of higher education in Afghanistan and the support of Afghan graduate-level students abroad.
- **A variety of international partnerships had been established** between universities and internationally-sponsored scholarship programs to facilitate the movement of scholars and ideas, improving links between Afghan higher education and the rest of the world.

## Immediate Effects & Challenges of the Taliban Takeover

The Taliban reversed much of this progress in August 2021 after the takeover of Kabul. While much of the international attention on education since has focused on the ongoing exclusion of women from secondary schools, higher education has also suffered. In particular:

- **Many faculty and administrators from both private and public universities have fled the country.**
- **Some private universities have closed** or are on the verge of collapse.
- **Universities that have reopened have done so at limited capacity** and only in specific fields considered non-controversial.
- **The ongoing humanitarian and economic crises have made it more difficult for students to attend class,** as they need to work to provide for their families.

Since the dialogue took place in the summer of 2022, conditions have worsened, especially for women. The Taliban announced on December 20, 2022 that female students would no longer be permitted to attend university. The international community widely condemned this development, and it has put international aid supporting education in Afghanistan at risk.

International support has allowed many scholars and students to leave Afghanistan and continue study elsewhere. The majority of these have been given temporary positions in international institutions, which while helpful, do not provide much long-term stability. Other students remain enrolled in institutions like the American University of Afghanistan, which is currently offering its curriculum remotely. A smaller group of universities and

schools have been attempting to help students inside Afghanistan by offering remote courses and degrees to Afghan students at no or reduced cost.

Significant challenges remain, beyond Taliban hostility towards most internationally-accepted versions of higher education:

- **Since December 2022, women are no longer permitted to attend university.** Even if the ban were lifted, women are prohibited from traveling without a male chaperone, making it difficult for female students in the country to attend classes and almost impossible for women to study abroad.
- **Those scholars and students who remain in the country are subject to direct and self-censorship,** living in fear of Taliban reprisals.
- **Faculty and staff at government institutions have been replaced by unqualified Taliban appointees.**
- **Scholars and students,** both abroad and inside Afghanistan, have been traumatized by the events of the past year and **rarely have access to mental health support.**
- **Scholars within the country have little means of continuing** research or other forms of professional development, **and those outside of the country are often in temporary, precarious positions.**
- **The ongoing economic struggles of the country make it difficult for all but the wealthiest to study.** Tuition for private universities was already out of reach for many Afghans, and with Afghanistan's economy collapsing after August 2021 this problem has amplified. Private institutions within or outside Afghanistan may not be a viable option for most.
- **Both electricity and the internet remain unreliable in some areas for Afghan students to take advantage of online courses.**

The Hollings Center dialogue meeting pointed to the need for a more sustained, coherent discussion of how to assist higher education in Afghanistan, that included stakeholders and organizations with a history of partnering with the sector in Afghanistan. Programs that work both around the current Taliban regime and those that have attempted to pressure the Taliban directly both have potential, but without a more comprehensive strategy, and funds to support it, the majority of the gains of the past twenty years will soon be lost.

## Options for Support and Funding

Based upon the various findings of the dialogue meeting, there are several areas of urgent need in the Afghan higher education sector to prevent further deterioration of past gains, and particularly to continue to provide women with access to education. In some cases, these programs, working around Taliban control, offer new opportunities for rethinking higher education in Afghanistan. More broadly, the Afghan case can be used as a model for how to handle higher education for other nations in crisis. The case and its response can provide valuable lessons for countries affected by repressive governments, crises caused by climate, and other events that could generate refugee students and scholars in coming years.

Participants in the dialogue program discussed multiple initiatives to support Afghanistan's higher education. With proper funding, a will for experimentation, and fast action, participants expressed some confidence on measures that could arrest further deterioration of the sector. These opportunities for support include:

### Support for Faculty and Students Who Remain in Afghanistan

While many faculty members have fled the country, many more still remain, as do hundreds of those of students who need support. While there are certainly important concerns about legitimizing the Taliban government, much of this aid can be delivered independently from the state:

- **Faculty development programs.** These programs could virtually link Afghan faculty with scholars in South Asia and beyond to work on specific research projects (e.g. on water use or education techniques), which could give new Afghan scholars further experience. It can also be a source of income for Afghan scholars while collecting data for joint research.
- **Student retention support.** Students in Afghanistan are increasingly dropping out of higher education due to the need to provide for their families as well as psychological trauma:
  - **Online counseling platforms** have already been set up for some young Afghans and these could be significantly expanded.
  - **Cash stipends** could give students, females in particular, the means to continue their educations.
  - **Tuition remission**, particularly for programs abroad can make education more affordable to Afghan students.



- **Dependable high speed internet.** This includes both national-level upgrades to the cellular network, but also potentially, mini-learning hotspots or secure locations with dependable wireless connections that students, particularly women, could take advantage of in private.

## Support for Faculty and Students Who Have Fled Afghanistan

- **Long term funding for positions.** Many appointments for faculty in the diaspora have been temporary visiting positions or short-term postdoctoral fellowships. With many of these appointments now expiring, long-term appointments need to be funded.
- **Scholarships.** Like faculty, many students in the diaspora face high costs of living and high tuition fees at their new institutions. Increasing both the number and funding levels of scholarships is critical to supporting continued education.
- **Trauma management and other forms of healthcare.** This is not just an education crisis, but also a crisis in mental health. Not only do students and faculty have to deal with the trauma aftermath from leaving Afghanistan, but the stress of adjusting to new homes and customs. Providing mental health support, along with other healthcare needs, is important.
- **Course material and curriculum.** Afghan students and faculty should get free or subsidized access to digital courses, publications, archives, and curricular modules. Some efforts with Western companies specializing in online learning and massive open online courses (MOOCs) are underway.
- **Language support/assistance.** Better training in language for instruction and research is greatly needed. Fluency can not only help displaced Afghan scholars maintain long-term positions at universities abroad, but can also help in getting articles published in international journals.

## General Support

- **Support civil society programs.** Programs that nurture the connections between higher education, journalists, civil society and other non-government actors that contribute to the growth of democracy and civil debate should be supported.
- **Continue research of Afghanistan.** Support for the continued research of Afghanistan, particularly by young scholars from Afghanistan, and further networking of those centers already focused on Afghanistan studies.

- **Survey the actual state of Afghanistan's education.** There is a lack of reliable data from Afghanistan about institutions operating, faculty remaining, censorship, and other systemic changes to the higher education system. Data will help better target support efforts.
- **Save and open up the archives.** Throughout the U.S. involvement in Afghanistan, projects to digitize archives, records, and other scholarly material were undertaken to preserve Afghanistan's heritage and culture. Locating, protecting, and providing access to these digital repositories should be a priority. Particular care should be given to give scholars and students inside Afghanistan access to these digital archives abroad.

Dialogue Brief by: Dr. Noah Coburn, Bennington College

Edited by: The Hollings Center for International Dialogue

This dialogue conference was jointly designed and organized by the Hollings Center for International Dialogue and Dr. Noah Coburn (Bennington College).

Cover Photo: Kabul Education University - 2014. Michael Foley. Rights Reserved.



The Hollings Center for International Dialogue is a non-profit, non-governmental organization dedicated to fostering dialogue between the United States and countries with predominantly Muslim populations around the world. In pursuit of its mission, the Hollings Center convenes dialogue conferences that generate new thinking on important international issues and deepen channels of communication across opinion leaders and experts. The Hollings Center is headquartered in Washington, D.C. and maintains a representative office in Istanbul, Türkiye.

To learn more about the Hollings Center's mission, history and funding:  
<http://www.hollingscenter.org/about/mission-and-approach>  
[info@hollingscenter.org](mailto:info@hollingscenter.org)