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REBUILDING AFGHANISTAN'S HIGHER EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM: OBSERVATIONS FROM KABUL

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This paper describes the crucial issues and challenges facing Afghanistan's universities as they begin the demanding task of rebuilding and restructuring their university system after two decades of war and civil unrest. The setting for this qualitative study is a four-day professional development conference for Afghan university presidents and academic deans sponsored and funded by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization and the Afghanistan Ministry of Higher Education. Cooperative Studies (an NGO not-for-profit educational organization located in Kansas City) provided a team of academics to Kabul, Afghanistan, to offer professional development workshops. Using the Grounded Theory Methodology as a theoretical framework for this research, data was derived from interactive sessions, questionnaires, informal dialogue, small group sessions and question and answer sessions; the perspectives of the 39 Afghan academic leaders are presented as they describe the problems facing university administrators in their country today. Findings identify these challenges and center on 1) the lack of autonomy; 2) the need for qualified faculty; 3) concerns regarding students' access and preparation; and 4) concerns about funding and budget issues. Based on these findings, policy suggestions and recommendations are provided.

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For the people of Afghanistan, decades of war and civil unrest have destroyed the nation's infrastructure—government, educational systems, business, and social services have all been devastated by the chaos of the past 25 years. Severe drought, food shortages, the 1979 Soviet invasion, and human rights abuses under the oppressive Taliban have displaced millions of Afghan citizens. These events have crippled and virtually ruined Afghanistan's higher educational system. Afghanistan “has experienced a close to break-down of its whole education system. During the years of war, the higher education system collapsed” (Strategic Action Plan, 2004, p. 13). University library burnings by the Taliban, campuses left in rubble as a result of military bombings, and the fleeing abroad of talented and well-qualified faculty and students have left Afghan univer-

sities in absolute ruins (Higher Education, 2000; Tierney, 2005).

Besides these visible and physical traumas, isolation from the outside world under the Taliban greatly restricted Afghanistan's intellectual community. Nowhere is this more evident than in the nation's educational leadership. Contemporary thinking and new concepts of educational and leadership theories are not just weak in this nation but, in some cases, they are actually nonexistent. The world watches as Afghan academics and scholars begin the difficult task of rebuilding and restructuring their university system. More significantly, government organizations and nongovernment organizations (NGO)¹ alike are continuing to provide aid and financial support for Afghan educational leaders as they undertake this important and difficult

¹ For a list of some NGOs that provide aid to Afghanistan, visit www.afghan-network.net/Culture/aid-agencies.html.

task of rebuilding all levels of the education system (Strategic Action Plan, 2004).

Against this backdrop in March of 2006, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) provided funding and the Afghanistan Minister of Higher Education (MOHE) invited Cooperative Studies (CS; an NGO, not-for-profit educational organization located in Kansas City) to bring a team of academics to Kabul, Afghanistan, to work alongside the MOHE to provide a professional development conference for Afghan university presidents and academic deans. Cooperative Studies provided a team of six North American academics comprising three full-time university professors, two higher education administrators, and one educational writer. The CS team members corporately possessed extensive cross-cultural educational experience that has helped them understand the importance of respecting and honoring cultures and beliefs other than their own. The team members have taught or lived long-term in Bosnia, Cameroon, China, Estonia, Nigeria, the Philippines, Poland, and Russia. The experienced six-member team agreed that the West in general, and the United States in particular, did not hold the keys to Afghanistan's educational future. They all granted that the long-term solutions and resolutions for Afghanistan's educational challenges lay in the hands of its leaders. Their goals, as requested by the MOHE and UNESCO, were to start a dialogue of repair and restoration among the educational leaders of higher education in Afghanistan and to devise possible solutions for their challenges.

These goals led to convening a four-day conference, split into two two-day seminars. The first seminar focused on the challenges facing the university presidents; the second session centered on the academic deans. Also included in the four-day conference were roundtable discussions focused on the issues facing Afghan universities, their presidents, and their deans.

This article earnestly presents and analyzes the significant issues, unique challenges, and critical concerns Afghan presidents and deans face as they attempt to revitalize and rebuild their higher educational system. Based on interactive sessions, simply designed questionnaires, informal dialogue, small-group sessions, and question-and-answer sessions, the perspectives of Afghan academic leaders are presented as accurately as possible. Undoubtedly, translation concerns, English as a second language (ESL) challenges, and basic cross-cultural communications issues may have hindered perceptions by the team. By no means is this a comprehensive view of the complex cultural and economic issues that impact and affect Afghan higher edu-

cation. Rather, the article describes the perspectives of Afghan university leaders discovered as interaction took place between the CS team and these university officials during the conference.

Objectives of This Study

The purpose of the study is to describe and analyze the crucial issues and unique challenges facing Afghanistan's university presidents and deans as they begin to rebuild higher education in their nation. The study asks

- 1) What are the problems and issues facing Afghan higher education as described by university presidents and deans?
- 2) What do the participants see as possible responses to the issues?
- 3) Based on these findings, what are possible policy suggestions?

The Setting and Participants

Cooperative Studies, Inc., is a 501(c)3 professional academic organization that promotes cooperation throughout the higher education community around the world. CS establishes exchange programs, sponsors guest lectureships, distributes library collections, and participates in consultation for academic programs as well as professional and curriculum development. This was the organization's second conference in Kabul. The first took place in March of 2003 when CS was invited by Afghanistan's MOHE to hold a two-week faculty development training seminar for 120 university professors reentering the university classroom, many of whom had not been in a classroom in over 20 years.

In 2006, the MOHE, in conjunction with UNESCO, invited CS to return to Kabul to conduct a four-day conference for the nation's 19 university presidents and 24 academic deans. The 2006 conference was organized into two separate sessions in an effort to meet the complex needs of Afghan academic leadership as it begins the difficult task of restructuring and rebuilding higher education after decades of turmoil and oppression. During the four-day conference, there were a total of 39 official participants, including all 19 university presidents representing the nation's 19 city and provincial universities. For the deans' session, 20 of the 24 invited academic deans participated, representing the country's four leading universities, all of which are located in Kabul (for a complete listing of Afghan universities represented, see Appendix A).

The workshops and sessions presented at the conference addressed a variety of topics, including the role of the university president, philosophy of education, adult educa-

tion programs, current issues and trends in university leadership and international higher education, issues facing Afghanistan university presidents and deans, principles of leadership, and helping faculty succeed. In addition to the above education topics, small-group workshops were conducted in an effort to meet the specific needs of the participants, to hear more clearly these Afghan leaders' voices, and to begin the transition from theory into practice.

One of the purposes of the conference, beyond the element of professional development, was to provide an opportunity for presidents and deans to present their perspectives regarding the problems they face at their universities. At the request of both the Ministry of Higher Education and UNESCO, the CS team developed a report after the conference presenting the challenges that Afghan university presidents and deans face and possible suggestions to aid in the rebuilding process. All participants in the four-day conference were aware that the CS team was asked by the MOHE and UNESCO to write this formal report of their findings, and they were aware that a copy would be available to each of the university presidents. This report was forwarded to the MOHE and UNESCO by the CS team and each university president requested and received a copy of the team's final report and evaluation.

The Research Methodology

Grounded Theory

The design of any study begins with the selection of not only a topic but also a theoretical framework that guides the research. For this study, the Grounded Theory Methodology is the framework used because grounded theory seeks to construct concepts and categories about issues of importance in peoples' lives (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Grounded theory is used here as a research philosophy because the researcher approaches the situation with no *a priori* framework and has no preconceived ideas to prove or disprove. The aim is to develop concepts and theory that are grounded in the accounts and experiences of the participants. Through participants' interactions with the researcher, issues emerge, categories are identified, and relevant examples are used to support the data. This qualitative approach is characterized by an emphasis on describing, understanding, and explaining complex phenomena (Sofaer, 1999). Stern (1995) argued that one of the best uses of grounded theory is to gain a fresh perspective in a familiar situation. This is certainly the case regarding this study and the focus on Afghanistan's higher educational system. Grounded theory not only provided a framework to analyze and categorize

themes emerging from the conference, but also provided the scaffolding for developing a series of policy recommendations.

Research Tools

The qualitative research tools used in this study include observation, informal conversations, small-group sessions, and questionnaires. Observation is a valuable tool for qualitative researchers because it provides in depth here-and-now experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), so participant observation was the main research tool used in this study. Observations are useful because they enable researchers to describe existing situations and provide a "written photograph" of the situation under study (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). According to Pascarella and Terenzini (1996) observational and naturalistic approaches to research are actually more "capable of providing greater sensitivity to many of the subtle and fine-grained complexities" (p. 272) of research than more traditional quantitative approaches.

In particular, participant observation is used when the researcher joins the setting, organization, or group being studied and becomes socialized into the group under study (Schwandt, 1997). Participant observation provides researchers with the ability to record important behavior and interactions that serve as the basis for the researchers' understanding and theories (Stringer, 1996). The researcher attempts to have dual citizenship, possessing an allegiance to an academic culture, but taking up temporary residence in the targeted culture or group (Schwandt, 1997). The aim is to become part of the environment rather than maintain a detached status. This enables researchers to gain useful insights and understandings of the people involved and to observe first-hand those understandings and perspectives.

Sofaer (1999) argues that researchers can learn more from observing group meetings as a participant than by using more structured qualitative methods such as interviews or surveys. In an effort to acquire an understanding of the educational issues that face Afghan university presidents and academic deans, the CS team engaged in participant observation during the four days of interaction with the Afghan participants. In addition, information was compiled from informal conversations with participants, question-and-answer sessions, small-group sessions, and simply designed questionnaires. The questionnaires (see Appendix B and Appendix C) were translated by Afghan UNSECO staff and given to the participants. Once the questionnaires were returned, they were translated then analyzed by the CS team. It is important to note here that 18 of the 39 participants preferred to answer the questionnaire in English.

Data Analysis

For this study, research objectives guided the development of questionnaires, small-group sessions, observations, and informal conversations. Since the CS team was asked to provide a report of its findings to both the MOHE and UNESCO, team members directed their attention to what participants described as the problems they faced as university administrators and what they saw as possible responses to these problems. The CS team members engaged in participant observation and conversations, recording field notes centering on the challenges and issues faced by Afghan university presidents and deans. Field notes were both descriptive and analytical, recording dialogue and attempting to portray the context and understanding of the issues and challenges faced by the participants.

There is no easy way to analyze information produced in conversations among people. Bogdan and Biklen (2002) define qualitative data analysis as "working with data, organizing it, breaking it into manageable units, synthesizing it, searching for patterns, discovering what is important and what is to be learned, and deciding what you will tell others" (p. 145). The task is to develop complex meanings from the raw data. Qualitative researchers use inductive analysis to discern the critical themes that emerge from the data (Patton, 1990). The challenge of inductive analysis is trying to reduce the volume of information while identifying and organizing the data into important patterns and themes that reappear (Johnson, 2005). Throughout the four-day conference, team members were in dialogue, comparing notes, and engaging the data. These discussions guided additional conversations with participants to gain additional information and a more holistic picture.

After close analysis of participants' language and their responses, various implicit categories emerged and were coded or titled. For example, participants described the need for university administrators to be involved in the decision making process with the MOHE. This was coded as a lack of autonomy, and team members engaged in conversations with participants asking questions and probing deeper in an attempt to better understand the issue of autonomy in Afghanistan's higher education. The team found that the data from each research tool was consistent and supported the findings.

To provide observer reliability, the team attempted to provide two independent observers for the conference sessions, small-group sessions, and questionnaire analysis. Discussion of the field notes and observations led to agreements and disagreements of what participants were saying and what themes were considered valid or invalid. This

team dialogue provided guidance to conversations that were used to gain further insight into participant responses and clarity in developing themes.

Once the team completed these processes, the researchers reported their interpretations and conclusions by translating their findings into a research report that provides a tightly woven account of the reality and the perceptions of the group participants.

Limitations of This Study

The findings presented in this study are bound by limitations. Most of the information was gathered through translators. The issue surrounding data production and interpretation as mediated by both translators and researchers is a concern. Barrett and Cason (1997) suggest the data from discussions, dialogue observations, and even interviews are basically words. "It is tricky enough to be sure what a person means when using a common language, but words can take on a very different meaning in other cultures" (p. 337), particularly in an ESL context. The researchers' primary interest was in process rather than outcomes; context rather than specific variables. The team wanted to discover and report what was found through observations, dialogues, questionnaires, and discussions rather than confirm some end result or conclusion. However, it is still possible that a wide range of information was omitted because of language and translation issues.

Second, participant observation requires significant time for the researcher to fit into the observed group as well as considerable time for data collection. For this study, the short time spent with the participants and, at times, the language barriers raise concerns as to the depth of understanding of the data. The limited time and scale of the research leaves it open to the charges that the findings are not generalizable because of the lack of external validity. Although there was no formal research study conducted during 2003, prior knowledge gained from the 2003 experience did lend some continuity to the study. Several team members involved in the 2003 conferences used their experiences to gain in-depth insight into the problems faced by university administrators. For example, comparing the conditions of higher education with the administrators' experiences in 2003 and discussing the changes with participants (some were part of the 2003 project) enabled team members to raise questions as to why situations improved, worsened, or remained the same. This information was used in the findings and to offer responses to the complex issues in the rebuilding process.

Finally, when viewing the findings, the extent to which the participating researchers influenced the participants

must be acknowledged. Nonetheless, this study does present issues and unique challenges facing Afghanistan's higher education officials.

Findings

The Educational Concerns of Afghanistan University Presidents and Deans

University officials voiced several issues and concerns pertaining to the difficulties of rebuilding Afghanistan's higher educational system. Some of the problems seemed insurmountable to the participants, including a lack of physical infrastructure and facilities. These needs were also observed in the 2003 faculty development seminar. Of the 19 university presidents, 15 said that the campus buildings were literally stripped by looters during the most recent civil war with the Taliban. Presidents reported that looters took everything—desks, chairs, doors, windows, even light fixtures and wiring. The Taliban ordered thousands of library books and textbooks into the campus courtyards and burned them. These conditions are what one might expect of a country that has been war-torn and oppressed by over two decades of conflict. However, higher education officials still face more challenges and roadblocks as they begin the process of rebuilding their higher educational system. Some are unique to Afghanistan.

In what follows, we present four challenges that Afghanistan university leadership officials face as they attempt to rebuild their higher education system. These challenges emerged from the analysis of the various data sources associated with the conference including observations, informal conversations, questionnaires, and small group sessions. More important, this discussion provides valuable insight that moves beyond the obvious difficulties of a war-torn country and provides information directly from the university leadership who are in the midst of rebuilding Afghanistan's higher education system.

Challenge #1—Lack of Autonomy. Tierney (2005) points out that Afghanistan's higher educational system is one of the most centralized in the world. This centralized governance of the universities was introduced during the Soviet occupation. The presidents strongly believe that the current "command-and-control" structure is hindering their restructuring efforts and that it is inappropriate for educational goals of the 21st century.

With that in mind, the most frequently cited problem expressed by both Afghan university presidents and deans is the issue of autonomy and independence from the MOHE. The university presidents believe it is vital for them to have the final say in hiring faculty, determining budget

priorities, and deciding acceptance policies for students. (Currently students are assigned by the central government to a university and are told what to major in according to their nationalized test scores). Lack of autonomy and freedom from a centralized bureaucratic governmental structure coupled with micro-management are at the center of Afghan university presidents' and deans' struggle to rebuild.

In addition to tight governmental control, other groups maintain power and control over university administrators. Rubin (2006) points out that Afghanistan has "an economy and administration heavily influenced by drug traffickers" (para.5). More importantly, "the distribution of the proceeds of narcotics trafficking, not elections, largely determines who wields power in much of Afghanistan" (para. 5). For example, 6 out of the 19 universities are located in provinces ruled by warlords and drug cartels that have no regard for education and threaten anyone who opposes them. The warlords and drug traffickers actually tell the university presidents who is allowed to attend their universities and even threaten university officials if certain students do not "pass" courses. In addition, corrupt provincial governors are known to use funds allocated to the universities for more self-serving purposes. One university president pointed out that his provincial governor only allocates enough money to buy food for 350 students even though there are 700 students enrolled at his university. The university president has to cut the food allowance in half every day to have enough to go around.

Almost all of the 19 university presidents said they were frustrated by interference from government officials telling them which students they could or could not admit and which professors they could and could not hire. Some presidents found fault with governmental officials who micromanage the universities, even though the majority of these individuals have no experience in education and few even possess a university degree. All the Afghan university officials (both presidents and deans) admitted they did not have enough funding, properly working equipment, or qualified personnel to operate their universities.

In spite of widespread corruption and the lack of resources, these educators had a strong desire to improve their education system and were dedicated to developing excellence in education. Even if they had adequate authority and independence from the government, they still lack the facilities, sufficient funding, and the equipment to effectively develop and expand their institutions. Adding to the current turmoil, Dr. Amir Shah Hassanyar, the minister of higher education, was dismissed by President Karzai during the week of the conference. The new minister of higher education became Afghanistan's third in as many years,

and the university presidents pointed out that the lack of consistent leadership only magnifies the problems.

Challenge #2—A Lack of Qualified Faculty. There is a dire need for qualified professors. Finding and retaining faculty members is one of Afghanistan's major educational problems. "Of the approximately 2,000 professors at Afghanistan's 19 higher-education institutions, only 6 percent hold Ph.D's (half of which were earned in the former Soviet Union), 34 percent have only master's degrees, and 60 percent have only bachelor's degrees" (Zoepf, 2006, para 31).

Universally, economic issues play a role in obtaining quality faculty. However in Afghanistan, these struggles are not about development but about survival. With basic salaries ranging from US\$35 to US\$60 per month, this is an enormous stumbling block in recruiting quality faculty to educate Afghan students. The presidents and the deans indicated that the second greatest challenge in rebuilding their universities is finding an ample supply of qualified and capable faculty and staff. In fact, only 6 of the 19 presidents possessed a Ph.D. Nine presidents had master's degrees and four held bachelor's degrees. One university reported that out of 206 teaching faculty, only 2 have Ph.Ds.

Furthermore, the lack of qualified professors also stems from the fact that many left the country during the past 25 years of occupation and civil war and those who stayed in the country have been isolated from the outside world and are out of touch with current developments in teaching and research. In addition to this, their curricula, teaching materials, and pedagogical methods are grossly out of date.

The presidents and deans alike explained that in an attempt to make a living or survive, it is not unusual for faculty members with English language skills to earn an additional US\$500 a month working as translators for various NGOs. This however, is a catch-22. Although NGOs can pay the higher salaries, their existence has influenced the cost of living—at least in the capital city of Kabul—by raising property value well outside the reach of university faculty members. Small apartments now rent for US\$1,500 per month, while modest homes can rent for US\$3,000 or more. If faculty lived in Kabul before the rent increase, they remain unaffected, but those who want to move back to Kabul, either from other areas of the country or as part of the diaspora returning home, are prohibited by these costs. The 15 universities located outside of Kabul reported that one of the major drawbacks in finding well-qualified personnel for teaching was the lack of housing in their cities and provinces. Many provincial cities have no place for the faculty to live, and in Kabul, where there is housing, it is too expensive.

Not only does housing expense affect the faculty quality, additional issues move beyond finances. Tierney (2005) points out that senior faculty base their understanding of what it means to be an academic from experiences of over a quarter century ago . . . faculty in general have limited expectations of their colleagues and evince no sense of ownership over critical matters such as academic freedom, curriculum development, faculty-student relationships, or intended outcomes for degree programs. Finally, the profession is no longer viewed as a respected calling but instead is a poorly paid civil service job. (p. 2)

This corroborates the CS team's experiences and illustrates the complexity of the concerns that face the development of qualified professors.

Challenge #3—Students Access and Preparation.

During the convocation, both university presidents and deans noted that nearly 16 years of war, first with the Soviets and then followed by civil war among the competing factions of the Mujahedin warlords, prevented students from getting an adequate foundational secondary education that would prepare them for studies in the university. These conditions were further aggravated under the six-year Taliban rule in which females were denied any access to basic education and men were mostly limited to Islamic religious indoctrination.

To exacerbate the problem, Afghan universities are facing an exploding university enrollment. Recently, Bollag (2005) reported, "When the Taliban were overthrown in 2002, there were 4,000 students at six institutions. Now there are 40,000 at 19 institutions, and enrollments are expected to increase to 100,000 by 2010" (p. 36). Because the demand for university spaces is overwhelming, students are arbitrarily assigned to departments based on their entrance examination score. Some students who are not admitted to the department of their choosing elect to enroll in popular correspondence degree programs at Pakistani universities (Zoepf, 2006). With a rapidly increasing enrollment, a shortage of qualified faculty, and a lack of infrastructure, including dormitories, Afghanistan's higher educational system is not well positioned to deal with such a rapid expansion.

Another cited problem was the low quality of primary and secondary education. It is important to receive a solid foundational education prior to entrance to the university. Any comparison of the current education in Afghanistan with that of the international community will quickly show that Afghan's educational system is substantially lower in quality. Presidents and deans are concerned that this low quality hinders students' chances for academic success in the university, limits their chance of employ-

ment, hampers their attempt for a better life, and places Afghanistan at a disadvantage when competing in the global market. This problem is magnified because of the need for at least 100,000 more secondary and primary teachers nationally. A cycle occurs—students are not prepared for the university but universities need prepared students to fill teaching positions in order to prepare students for the university.

Of 19 presidents, 10 placed this concern in their top five problems for university reconstruction. In conversation as well as the questionnaires, both presidents and deans expressed concern that students entering their universities lack the necessary skills and preparation for higher education, citing illiteracy, poor critical thinking skills, and no emotional maturity or stability.

Additionally, universities must equip these unprepared students for the international community. To accomplish this goal, students need to develop competitive and adequate English language skills, which are necessary for students to study and earn advanced degrees abroad. For an impoverished country like Afghanistan, English is the international language that opens doors for education abroad, economic growth, and a host of other opportunities that will build the individual. Without exception, all the university deans and presidents agreed that the educational system must focus on developing English language skills among their students as well as among their faculty as a part of the reconstructing process.

Challenge #4—Funding and Budgets. The economic growth and potential for the development of higher education in Afghanistan is grim. Today the country is ranked “approximately 173 out of 178 countries in the basic index of human development, effectively putting it in a tie for last place with a few African countries” (Rubin, 2006, para. 5). A recent report stated that despite four years and \$10 billion of promised aid, the infrastructure of the Kabul is still frustratingly unattractive to investors. The city’s electricity grid offers four hours of power every other day; there will not be a continuous supply until at least 2008. The road network is decrepit and the water mains do not provide drinkable water (“Creeping Towards,” 2006).

From the team’s experiences, the above description appears accurate and serves as the main reason for slow development of higher education. Universities are not immune to infrastructure problems. In fact, Kabul University, considered the nation’s leading university, still does not have running water and electricity on a daily basis. All 19 of the nation’s universities have limited, if any, access to necessary teaching tools such as science labs and medical research equipment. There are very few textbooks;

little, if any written curriculum; no access to the Internet; few updated computers with current software; and no access to academic or professional journals.

In addition to the crippled infrastructure, the drug trade plays a role in hindering the development of higher education and the country, in general. For example, “The most buoyant sector of the economy remains the drug trade, which is currently equivalent to around a third of GDP and, at an estimated \$2.7 billion, dwarfed government revenues of \$260m last year” (“Creeping Towards,” 2006, p. 42).

Certainly, funding is an issue with all education institutions. For example, American higher education might be concerned for a lack of funds that prevents the development of research or the development of new fields such as biomedical studies and genetics. However, in Afghanistan, universities need funding for the basics such as textbooks, desks, chairs, and chalkboards. Computer equipment, lab equipment, and technological equipment are needed but are out of the reach of Afghan’s universities. As previously stated, even the nation’s leading university, Kabul University, suffers from a lack of simple utilities such as running water and electricity. Furthermore, universities do not have budgets and all requests involving such things as income, hiring, and the development of new departments must be requested and then approved by the MOHE (Tierney, 2005). This, in turn, discourages and frustrates university officials whose leadership and management abilities are limited by rigid administrative regulations and rules.

Beyond mere budget numbers, the governance and management structure and operational practices are outdated. For example, one UNESCO official who works closely with the participants and took part in the workshops noted that because of a lack of management skills, the presidents had only spent one-third of the higher education budget allocated to them. Although failing to spend budgeted allotments may indicate a lack of management ability, the constraints and need for approval by the MOHE may also contribute to this partial paralysis. However, three university presidents explained that reasons for not spending their allotted budgets was first, fear that there will be no funding in the future and therefore they are trying to be fiscally responsible, and second, there were no goods or much-needed items available to purchase.

Policy Suggestions and Recommendations

Clearly there is a long road ahead for Afghanistan university presidents and deans as they begin the process of improving higher education. We acknowledge that changes will be slow and that the scope and scale of Afghanistan’s

problems make it impossible for the country to overcome these on its own. Long-term international support and a willingness to restructure the system, from its very roots, are needed. This restructuring of Afghanistan's higher education is vital for the overall rebuilding of the country. Particularly, we believe that with positive effective leadership, the educators of Afghanistan can move from their current problem-oriented focus to a solution-oriented focus. Several policy suggestions can be inferred from these findings and are supported by other research.

1) Providing Hope

To begin with, the Afghanistan university leadership needs hope. They need to see an example of a country that has suffered a similar plight that has overcome enormous obstacles, such as China after the cultural revolution. Afghanistan's university officials seem to need a road map, a strategy, or a guide to escape the current state of emergency (Strategic Action Plan, 2004). We argue that China could actually serve as a model for Afghanistan in its reconstructing process because of the similarities.² After China's Cultural Revolution, in which Mao Ze Deng reigned in terror over China's citizens, the Chinese educational landscape looked much like Afghanistan's today—campuses and entire library collections burned and destroyed, qualified university faculty either dead or forced to flee to other countries, and no modern textbooks or materials to bring students into the modern world (McCarthy, 2000). Yet, China today “is the most populous, fastest-growing major economy in world history” (Solman, 2005 para. 3). Its universities now offer graduate and doctoral degrees and the government has set up “academic cities” for research and to develop cutting-edge technology. China's economic development is directly linked to its focus on education and restructuring its higher educational system, starting in 1979. There are three primary components in China's strategy that can be followed by Afghanistan: importing expertise and faculty from abroad, exporting students to study in other nations, and focusing on learning the English language—the *lingua franca* of technology and science.

Several initial steps begin the implementation of the “Chinese model.” First, assistance in curriculum development should be offered to each university. Because the study of English opens doors for study abroad in the United States, Canada, Great Britain, Australia, and other English-speaking countries, development of a quality

English language program seems to address some of the concerns of university presidents: (a) university faculty development through study abroad opportunities, and (b) university student development through study abroad opportunities. English language programs in the universities can impact primary and secondary schools by preparing these students to enter the universities and the world community. Such curriculum development should be focused not only in the provincial capitals, but throughout the entire Afghanistan university system.

Second, Afghanistan must adopt an “open door policy” for modernization of university instruction based on the China model in which North American bachelor's degree holders volunteer to teach in the university classrooms for an academic year. This model has several advantages. First, the guest foreign teachers will provide all the necessary materials. Within two to three years, many Afghan universities could have several English teachers in each foreign language faculty. Within five years, Afghan students should be able to compete in English at a level that would allow them to study abroad in North American universities. Within 10 years, a number of these students, after completing their degrees abroad, could become the backbone of instruction for higher education in Afghanistan. Certainly, the funding and security for the guest English-speaking teachers is a major requirement for success, but this suggested model addresses several problems raised by the presidents and deans, such as the lack of materials and learning supplies, the lack of professional development, and the limited opportunities for abroad fellowships for faculty members and students.

2) Needed: Up-to-Date Academic Resources

Global aid agencies and foreign universities can help with the rebuilding of Afghan higher education by providing up-to-date academic resources (Hayward & Amiryar, 2004). Each university and academic department should develop a comprehensive list of their specific needs, such as equipment, software, and books that will be entered into a database maintained by UNESCO and used as an information point for international organizations interested in providing equipment and books for universities.

The CS team identified many infrastructure needs such as buildings, libraries, laboratories, classroom equipment, office building, support (heating, electricity, water sewerage systems), and computers (Strategic Action Plan, 2004). In particular, the universities need current quality

² This argument is based on three CS team members' combined 10 years of experience living and teaching in China, our colleague's dissertation (McCarthy, 2000) that addresses the China model, and other sources such as Agelasto & Adamson (1998).

textbooks and teaching aids in all fields to update the knowledge of students and professors. There is a need to identify funding and establish programs devoted to the translation of contemporary textbooks and related publications into Pashto and Dari. In addition, a system must be developed for the acquisition of donated academic books and the wide distribution of textbooks to the nation's higher education institutions and libraries.

Outside agencies can provide facilities and equipment such as computers, laboratories, audio-visual equipment, and other tools necessary for contemporary education. For example, the international community could provide computers and up-to-date software for schools of engineering. However, such investment increases the need for qualified faculty to train Afghan professors on the software and equipment. It is often the case that agencies provide the facilities and equipment but fail to provide adequate training; thus, the equipment is not used because of the lack on training. In addition, up-to-date technologies require qualified technicians to ensure it is maintained and kept in working order. The MOHE should seek funding to establish an Internet and computer center at every university in the country to help universities build or rebuild adequate buildings for classroom, administration, and student and faculty housing.

3) Relationship Building

Afghan universities need to develop relationships with foreign universities to break the isolation of the Afghan higher education system from the rest of the world. Academic leaders around the world recognized the importance of having support from colleagues and encouragement from others to be successful. This is especially true in the current setting of Afghanistan with its extreme lack of infrastructure and resources. It is important to note that the rebuilding of Afghanistan needs to move beyond the West, because accompanied with Western influence is a set of cultural presuppositions that could possibly develop into cultural conflict that may hinder the rebuilding process. This influence extends in areas such as pedagogical approaches, administrative practices, academic expertise, and management. To avoid these concerns, some of the expertise that is needed could also come from academic institutions in the East. In particular, countries with a great Muslim influence such as Turkey, Jordan, and Iran, as well as Asian countries, might prove helpful.

So how might this relationship-building look? The affiliation would include fellowships and exchange pro-

grams for university professors. In addition, Afghan professors holding master's degrees could be given the opportunity to study abroad to complete their PhD's. Also, to develop support for Afghan academic leaders within Afghanistan, quarterly meetings should be sponsored for all university presidents and deans. The CS team was told by the MOHE that the two, two-day convocations were the first meetings where they had the opportunity to discuss issues with one another, to seek solutions to common problems, and to build relationships among themselves. The agenda should be open and set by the leaders themselves to address issues of critical concern. The travel and lodging expense of those outside of Kabul should be paid by the MOHE.

The MOHE should continue to sponsor additional convocations that center on the needs of Afghan university leadership. In addition, arrangements should be made for ongoing mentoring relationships between international experts who have lectured in Afghanistan and Afghan presidents and deans. This mentoring could be carried out through mail, telephone, e-mail, or video conferencing.

The MOHE should petition the World Bank for additional funding that could be used for a variety of needed areas. First, a significant salary increase for the presidents, deans, and other academic officers of universities should be a main goal. Once a livable salary is being paid, officials will find it less tempting to engage in bribery and other forms of graft. Second, fellowships should be provided to presidents and deans, enabling them to spend two weeks or more visiting universities outside Afghanistan. The purpose of these fellowships would be to provide learning opportunities from other academic officers, to learn from successful universities, and to build relationships with fellow educators internationally. Educational journals, especially for the deans as well as for department chairs and others who have English-reading proficiency, would provide an immediate source for new ideas and for reconnecting with the international higher educational community.

4) The Importance of Autonomy

Autonomy was the most pressing issue on the minds of the presidents and deans during the convocations. The question that must be raised is, What should be the balance of power between the MOHE and universities? The MOHE must address this tension among the various levels of cooperative relationships, including the relationship between the provincial government and the universities as well as the role of and relationship with other governmental bodies.

The presidents and deans clearly felt that they needed more authority to make decisions for their universities without the interference of the MOHE or provincial government.

Afghanistan needs to develop policies that grant universities a substantial degree of managerial autonomy and accountability. It would be valuable for the MOHE and university presidents to develop a general principle for the governance of higher education that would allow the MOHE to guide higher education while respecting the autonomy of higher education institutions. However, the roles, power, and responsibilities of the MOHE and university administration officials need to be secured to a legislative framework that provides accountability. Universities should be able to enjoy academic autonomy to decide on the development of departments (to avoid the duplication of departments within different institutions) and the content of study; to exercise the freedom of each university to recruit, screen, test, and select its own students in accordance with federally or provincially approved guidelines; and to manage the day-to-day operation of the institution. In addition, each university should be given the authority to appoint its own academic officers from the level of deans and lower and each department the authority to appoint its own faculty members. However, all this autonomy must be in accordance with national education policies and requirements. Outside agencies can help provide training and consultation in leadership and management that would aid in this transition. Furthermore, the faculty requires a degree of autonomy that takes the form of academic freedom. In Afghanistan, academic freedom is absent. Tierney (2005) points out that faculty can be disciplined for exercising free speech and that there are no consistent standards to deal with this issue.

In strengthening relationships, an important question is, How can higher education institutions be encouraged to be part of the budgeting process? The MOHE must provide financial autonomy to universities so they decide how their budgets will be allocated and spent, in accordance with clear guidelines and regulations. The MOHE must ensure that the funds allocated by the federal and provincial governments are transferred to the universities in a timely manner, which will enable them to meet their financial obligations.

From a Western perspective, it makes sense for Afghan universities to move toward the autonomy and academic freedom typical in North America. However, because of the current conditions in Afghanistan, universities in provinces where corruption and crime are widespread might be served better in the short term by having the Afghan cen-

tral government maintain financial and administrative control to ensure that limited resources are not sidetracked by crime and corruption—even if the central government is not immune from the same corruption and crime.

5) Faculty Professional Development and Teacher Education

According to both the deans and the presidents, professional development for faculty is desperately needed. Hayward and Amiryar (2004) state that “most teachers and university faculty acknowledged and expressed concerns about their own deficiencies in training and expertise” (para. 9). The CS team found this to be the case and this concern leads to the need for training for Afghan administrators and professors in contemporary management, administration and teaching, and learning theories. Outside agencies could offer leadership and management training seminars that focus on the problems relevant to Afghan higher education. These seminars could introduce modern management that includes planning, organizing, implementing, supervising, and assessing. To enhance the quality of education, universities could also offer seminars and workshops that introduce and teach contemporary learning and teaching theories to professors.

Over the coming decade, universities will have to expand to meet the needs of a growing demand for secondary school teachers. The MOHE must make the establishment or enhancement of such teacher training colleges a top priority. Also, teacher training workshops for university instructors should be provided in every provincial capital and in Kabul. These need to include new pedagogical methods to increase the quality of education. Furthermore, with 10 million Afghans who are handicapped, special education needs to be a priority for the MOHE. The newly established Kabul Education University's Special Education Department should be funded and encouraged to provide primary and secondary teachers of special education.

Discussion

A great deal of work is still needed to improve higher education in Afghanistan. At the same time, the country has made progress since the fall of the Taliban. Without consistent and significant external support, however, the rebuilding will continue to be slow. In addition, as previously mentioned, the heavy Western influence in the improvement of the Afghanistan higher educational system alone is not going to successfully solve Afghanistan's educational problems. The major concern as the CS team looks at the current situation is, How willing are non-Western countries to

become actively involved in the rebuilding of Afghanistan?"³ Without the willing help and support of other Muslim nations, Third World nations, or developing countries, influence on Afghanistan's educational system will be primarily Western and this will limit the rebuilding process. In addition, the handful of presidents who do indeed possess Ph.D's were educated primarily in the West, with the greatest number being from the United States. This already has instilled in Afghanistan's educational leadership a prejudice or an inclination toward educational systems of the West.

Historically, Afghanistan has a long and rich heritage of academic excellence in poetry, philosophy, and science. The Afghan people have a wealth of learning and scholarly achievement rooted in their culture and society. Strong, vibrant educational systems and scholarly abilities are a part of their nation's past. Hopefully, it will be part of their future once again.

In spite of this heritage, the last 25 years of Afghan history have left these educators with little more than a deep commitment to education and a persistent determination to rebuild their broken nation. But for the nation to develop, the universities' leaders will have to participate, because without a functioning system of higher education, "it will be impossible to generate the expertise and knowledge needed to rebuild a country with a vast history and troubled past" (Tierney, 2005, para. 11).

At times during the four-day conference, emotions ran high as university presidents and deans expressed their hopelessness and disappointment at the inordinate time it was taking to rebuild the higher education system's infrastructure. One president from Kandahar stated, "Some days I am without hope until I see the students and their desire to get an education. This is what keeps me there." It was clear that there was strong support for higher education and a concern for the quality of education. However, these educational leaders are frustrated. More important, such frustrations often create a sense of bleakness that can paralyze university leadership officials with the feeling that they can do little in developing initiatives for the good of their universities. These frustrations need to be removed and hope needs to be provided to move forward in rebuilding Afghan higher education. This will only take place when adequate funding, established security, peace, and stability are the norm in Afghanistan.

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³ Cooperative Studies, Inc., is an international organization comprised of scholars and professors from around the world. It is the desire and objective of the CS mission statement to provide, whenever possible, professors and on-site consultants from countries other than the United States and Western Europe. However, in nations such as Afghanistan, where there are still ongoing conflicts and harsh living conditions, we have been unsuccessful in recruiting from our pool of scholars emerging from Third World or developing countries.

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Appendix A

The 39 registered participants for the four-day conference were distributed as follows.

One university president from each of the following universities attended:

Al-Beroni University
Badakhshan University
Baghlan University
Balkh University
Bameyan University
Faryab University
Hirat University
Jouzjan University
Kabul Education University
Kabul Medical University
Kabul Polytechnic University
Kabul University
Kandahar University
Khost University
Konduz University
Nangarhar University
Paktia University
Parwan University
Takhar University

One dean from each of the following departments or schools attended:

Kabul Education University	Literature Department Physical Education Department School of Professional Development Science Department Social Sciences Department Special Education Department
Kabul Medical University	School of Dentistry School of Medicine School of Pediatrics
Kabul Polytechnic University	Construction Department Electronics Department Geology and Mines Department
Kabul University	Economics Department Geo Science Department Literature Department School of Education School of Fine Arts School of Journalism School of Theology Social Sciences Department

Appendix B

Questionnaire for Afghan university presidents

1. What is your greatest problem in leading your university?
2. What is the greatest need of your university students?
3. What is the most important issue your professors are facing now?
4. What is the primary goal you hope your university can achieve in the future?
5. What topics/issues would you like to see addressed at the University Presidents Conference March 19–20, 2006?

Appendix C

Questionnaire for Afghan university deans

1. What is the greatest problem you face as a dean or administrator?
2. What is the greatest need of your university students?
3. What is the most important issue your professors are facing now?
4. What is the primary goal you hope your university can achieve in the future?
5. What topics/issues would you like to see addressed at the University Deans and Academic Officials Conference March 21–22, 2006?