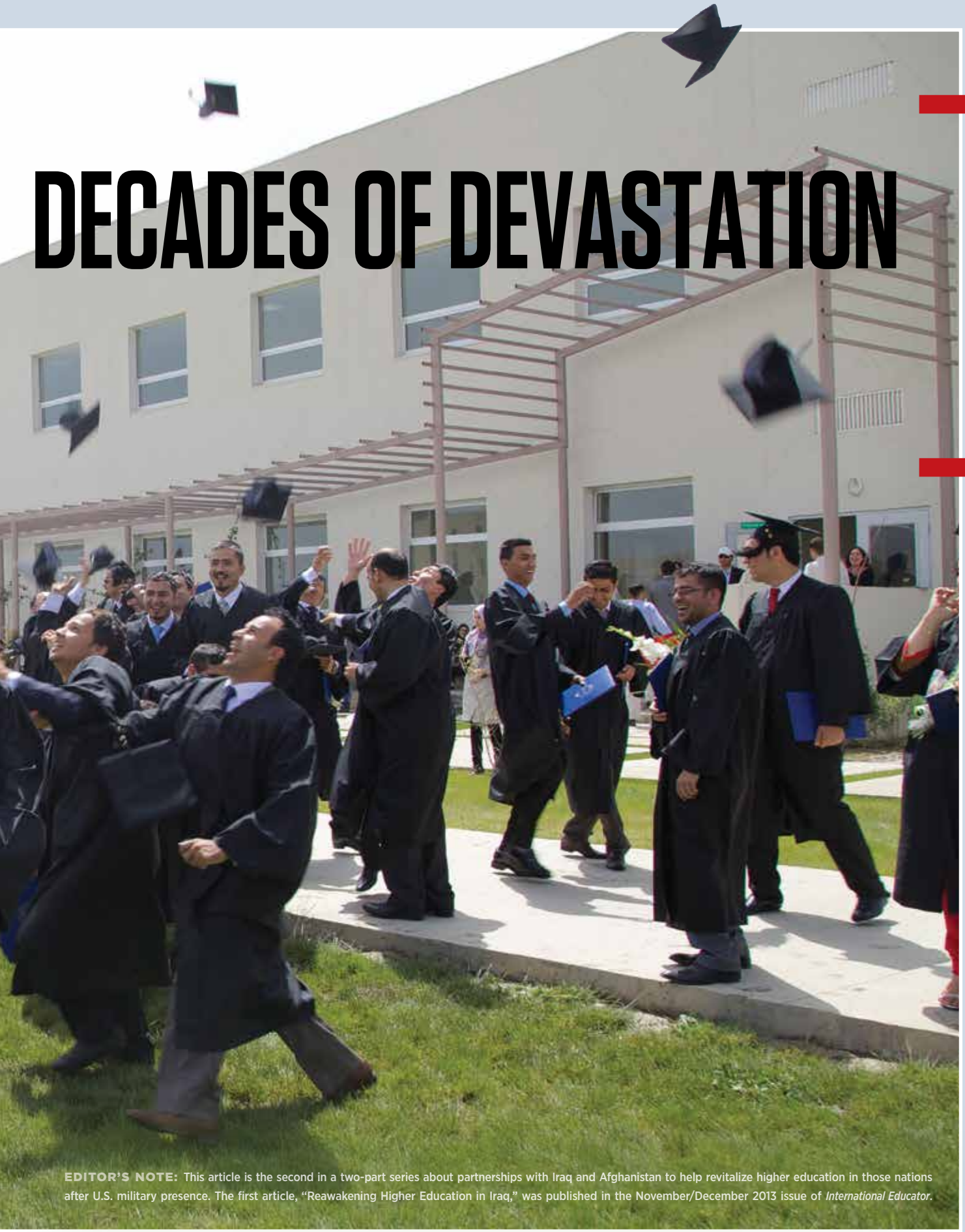
OVERCOMING

Revitalizing Education in Afghanistan

Higher education in Afghanistan suffered in the aftermath of many years of war and strife, but colleges and universities are developing partnerships to help rebuild opportunities for Afghan students.

AUAF COMMUNICATIONS OFFICE

DECADES OF DEVASTATION



EDITOR'S NOTE: This article is the second in a two-part series about partnerships with Iraq and Afghanistan to help revitalize higher education in those nations after U.S. military presence. The first article, "Reawakening Higher Education in Iraq," was published in the November/December 2013 issue of *International Educator*.

BY DAVID TOBENKIN

Devastation is rampant— Afghanistan has suffered from decades of isolation and war, capped by the U.S.-led invasions and control that began in 2001. Higher education has been among the major casualties in the country, with higher education personnel, infrastructure, and budgets depleted by the ongoing conflicts.

But partnerships between higher education institutions and organizations and their counterparts in Afghanistan formed in the last decade have proven a lifeline of support for their beleaguered academies.

The partnerships tend to be workshops or exchange programs between institutions in the United States or other Western nations and administrators, academics, and students from Afghanistan, many heavily subsidized by government organizations. Some aspects of the exchange programs are mostly one-way, with students and professors from Afghanistan tending to visit the United States far more than visits in the other direction, for example. U.S. academics have also been heavily involved in staffing and supporting some of the new higher education institutions that have been created in recent years in both countries. In addition, scholarships to educate graduate students abroad funded by Afghanistan's government organizations are ramping up some exchanges.

But there are many challenges and limitations. Ongoing violence places restrictions on the type of student exchanges that can occur and limits travel in Afghanistan. "You can't have student exchanges; even though we have sent faculty to Afghanistan, we haven't sent our students to institutions in this country," says Kenneth Holland, director of Ball State University's Center for International Development who has led Ball State partnerships with Afghan institutions. "That's a disappointment for me. I was walking down the hall in Kabul University, and I ran into an American student and I asked who are you and why are you here. He was a PhD student doing a dissertation on something regarding Afghanistan. But you rarely see that."

With the drawdown of U.S. forces expected by the end of 2016 in Afghanistan, and with political turmoil and violence continuing to roil the nation, the question remains as to whether seeds planted by exchanges will blossom into long-lasting partnerships and, significantly, whether U.S. government bodies will continue to fund them.

Where There Are Challenges, Opportunities Await

Afghanistan is an Asian country, primarily Muslim, has a population of roughly 30 million, and is fractured into sectarian groups with strong resentment of central government control. It has instituted a new constitution in the last decade, and views education as a key component of a national renaissance.

Resources in Afghanistan remain far lower than in the West. Internet access is spotty, books are often old, facilities are frequently dilapidated, and class sizes are often large. Afghanistan also suffers from relatively low penetration of English, curtailing their ability to fully benefit from partnerships with U.S. institutions, gain accreditation, and access free online materials.

While there was considerable higher education penetration into Afghanistan in the 1970s, the sheer devastation and anti-education ethos faced by Afghan higher education during the Taliban regime present a challenge for educational rehabilitation.

A Pressing Need for Revamping Higher Education

"I can't think of anywhere I have been where the need for higher education restoration is greater," says Paul Smith, director of the British Council USA, the United Kingdom's official organization for international education and culture. Smith formerly held a similar position in Afghanistan until 2012. "In the 1970s, the higher education situation there was not bad, compared to other Asian countries,"

SHUTTERSTOCK

COURTESY OF PAUL SMITH

Paul Smith, director of the British Council USA, the United Kingdom's official organization for international education and culture

Smith says. "Kabul and Herat were relatively liberal metropolitan cities. What happened is that under the Taliban, there was a complete collapse of the university system and a reduction in the belief of their values such that even now, 10 to 12 years after attempts at restoration began, less than five percent of the faculties of universities have PhDs."

During the late 1970s, before the turmoil commencing with the country's invasion by the Soviet Union, and continued by the rise of the Taliban and the current U.S. war against the Taliban, Al-Queda, and extremists, there was a period when the country was making considerable progress in developing higher education institutions.

In Afghanistan, under-capacity is a serious problem in higher education institutions. According to the 10-year strategic plan developed by the Ministry of Higher Education, existing institutions have the capacity to accommodate no more than 150,000 students, which could leave as many as 85 percent of applicants unable to attend.

There is a severe lack of qualified faculty as well. "In Afghanistan, 85 percent of the faculty have a bachelor's degree," Ball State's Holland says. "The level of academic quality is very, very low. In Afghanistan, most of the professors have two or three jobs. We've tried to get the universities to force professors to come to class and teach but were never successful. We were told that the salaries are so low that they must have a second job. That limits the quality of the instruction."

A host of new universities are stepping into the breach. "A major development is an explosion of new private higher education institutions," says Quadir Amiryar, who until recently headed the Central Asia Research and Development Center, and is a former faculty member at George Washington University. Amiryar previously served in various roles in the Afghan government, including as a senior legal and policy adviser to Afghan President Hamid Karzai, as well as senior adviser to the Ministry of Higher Education, where he assisted in writing Afghanistan's higher education strategic plan. "There are 17 public institutions of higher education and, as of this month, 74 private institutions, most of them not more than five years old. Their quality of education varies, but they are providing competition with the public universities."

U.S.-Afghan higher education institution partnerships are occurring at the highest levels, notes Fred Hayward, currently senior higher education adviser for the Higher Education Project and the Afghan Ministry of Higher Education and a former professor of political science at the University of Wisconsin, Madison.

Fred Hayward, senior education adviser for the Higher Education Project and the Afghan Ministry of Education (in the middle) with (from left to right) former Minister Muhammad Azam Dadfur (2009). Deputy Minister M. O. Babury and two other two deputy ministers (finance and transformation).

COURTESY OF FRED HAYWARD

"You need to develop a large cohort of Afghans who can solve their own problems by using tradition and history, but also analytic skills and legal reasoning."

"I work with the Deputy Minister [of Higher Education for Academic Affairs Osman Babury], directors, chancellors, deans, and other senior education leaders (as well as senior managers in the Ministries of Finance, Women's Affairs, Labor, and Education)," Hayward says. "I have helped in the development of the National Higher Education Strategic Plan and in establishing a system of accreditation—though everything I have worked on, and all our work in the Ministry, has been very much a collective effort with our Afghan colleagues led by Deputy Minister Babury, who has been the driving force behind all of this work."

The USAID-funded Afghanistan Higher Education Project (HEP) supports the Ministry of Higher Education to implement four activities that are considered critical to the success of the ministry's efforts to achieve quality higher education, including providing technical assistance to operationalize the National Higher Education Strategic Plan that is aimed at revitalizing higher education.

"Higher education was badly disrupted by more than 30 years of war, but in the last few years many of those links have been revived, especially with U.S. universities, but also with some regional neighbors, in particular India and Turkey," Hayward says. "On the administrative level, we have had a great deal of assistance from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, through the Higher Education Project funded by USAID. [U. Mass., Amherst] has helped us with the National Higher Education Strategic Plan: 2010–2014, the establishment of an accreditation system, major revision, and upgrading of the curriculum (50 faculties have completed reviews and upgrading of their curricula). We have had help in computer science from Germany and UC San Diego, in English from Indiana University, and in economics from Kansas State University. We also have links with Purdue University, the University of Arizona, and several others. These links have been especially important in helping us build capacity in several areas, especially teacher education with the help of the Higher Education Project (U. Mass., Amherst), public policy, and currently with the development of an undergraduate program in social work (Hunter College and Boston College). In the administrative area we have had assistance with the development of accreditation and quality assurance through the HEP program. Programs with University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and Indiana University under the HEP program have helped us significantly improve teacher education. The Master's in Teacher Education at Kabul Education University has produced 65 Master's in Education for faculty members over the last four years, half of them women. We have worked setting up the accreditation program since 2009. We look forward to additional partnerships, especially in helping us establish additional master's and PhD programs."

A class at the American University of Afghanistan, which is part of the Afghan Legal Project, a collaboration with Stanford University's Rule of Law Program

COURTESY OF ELI SUGARMAN

Students from the Afghan Legal Education Project in Afghanistan

COURTESY OF ELI SUGARMAN

A Successful Partnership for Law Students

The Afghan Legal Education Project (ALEP) collaboration between American University of Afghanistan (AUAF) in Kabul, a private university opened in 2006, and Stanford Law School's Rule of Law Program is one of the longest-standing collaborations in the region, dating from 2007. It started as a semester-long research project where a Stanford Law School team developed an introductory legal survey class for AUAF, which ultimately led to development and publication of at least five textbooks on legal issues. The books are initially published in English and later translated into Dari and Pashto, the two most commonly spoken languages in Afghanistan, says Eli Sugarman, a Stanford Law School graduate who was one of two co-founders of the project and now serves as an adviser to it.

Sugarman says that from 2007 to 2012, students at the AUAF were able to obtain a legal certificate, similar to a minor in law, but that they were not eligible to practice law upon graduation. That changed in 2012 when, with the help of a generous grant from the U.S. Department of State, ALEP and AUAF established a Department of Law offering a five-year bachelor of arts and law degree. The program has a full-time faculty of six, four of whom are Afghan, and offers up to11 classes per semester. Graduates of the degree program will be fully eligible to practice law in Afghanistan upon completion of their studies.

"The goal is to improve legal education nationwide," says Sugarman. "You need to develop a large cohort of Afghans who can solve their own problems by using tradition and history, but also analytic skills and legal reasoning. Afghan legal experts have been involved in every step of the development of the ALEP materials and Afghan teachers teach it. Students are taught the laws of Afghanistan under the current constitutional order and its laws and regulations. Everyone acknowledges what is written and how system functions actually differ, and we examine why they don't function as well as they should."

The ALEP program is a rare exception to the one-way nature of student exchanges between U.S. and Afghan

institutions. Through the program, at least two dozen Stanford students have visited Afghanistan to participate in the project, says Megan Karsh, a Stanford Law School Rule of Law fellow who helps administer the program.

This speaks to Stanford's emphasis on sustainable collaboration and creating enduring work products. "Whereas some schools engage in a form of developmental tourism, where students travel to developing countries, meet with high-ranking officials, and leave little behind, ALEP students work with their counterparts at AUAF to create high quality textbooks that respond to a real demand from Afghan students and professors," Karsh says.

The project has enjoyed two large grants, $1.3 million in 2009 and $7.2 million in 2012, through the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs. Sugarman says that the rather large second grant resulted after the ALEP program received positive evaluations by the State Department. "They measured the impact," Sugarman says. "How many textbooks and products we were putting out, how many people were exposed to them, how many government ministries made use of them. There are qualitative metrics. In the Rule of Law space, it is more complicated; there are qualitative metrics that involve interviews of participants to see how the instruction impacted their skills and how they used those skills."

The concern for sending faculty and students abroad is that they are often reluctant to return to Afghanistan. To address that, and to reduce costs, more students are being sent to regional and developing countries for training, such as Malaysia, India, Singapore, Turkey, and other countries.

Amiryar says the impact of such partnerships is particularly great in a country that has faced Afghanistan's degree of professional isolation.

"The partnerships are helpful," says Amiryar. "They help introduce modern teaching methodologies and guidance to new resources, help develop libraries and know-how to design programs, how to teach, and how to write proposals seeking grants, participating in scholarships and fellowships. Capacity was not there, as a result of 30 years of war and being away from modern science and technology. Now, they have access to the Internet and know how to benefit. In academic environment, their impact is multifaceted."

COURTESY OF QUADIR AMIRYAR

Quadir Amiryar, previously served in various roles in the Afghan government, including senior adviser to the Ministry of Higher Education, where he assisted in writing Afghanistan's National Higher Education Strategic Plan.

Amiryar says that the Ministry of Higher Education's strategic plan proposes development and promotion of academic affiliation with various regional and international institutions of higher education to enhance quality and capacity of a professional cadre. The impact of such affiliation is particularly great in a country that has faced academic challenges based on under-capacity.

Amiryar says that recent Afghan-government-sponsored programs have targeted sending faculty for shorter periods of time to the United States and other Western Countries. However, the concern for sending faculty and students abroad is that they are often reluctant to return to Afghanistan. To address that, and to reduce costs, more students are being sent to regional and developing countries for training, such as Malaysia, India, Singapore, Turkey, and other countries, provided that the medium of instruction is in English in these countries, Amiryar says.

Partnership Helps Create a Journalism Program in Afghanistan

Journalism has been one target of U.S. funding for higher education partnerships. Funded by a $1.2 million State Department grant, San Jose State University's (SJSU) School of Journalism and Mass Communications in 2011 helped establish an academic journalism program for Herat University in the west of Afghanistan. In 2012, SJSU received another grant of $1 million from the U.S. State Department to help modernize the journalism program at another university in the north of the country, Balkh University.

"On my first visit to Afghanistan in February 2011, I helped Herat faculty members create a new curriculum," says SJSU Associate Professor of Journalism and Mass

Communications Diane Guerrazzi, who heads up the partnership for SJSU. "The new plan is a sharp contrast from the outdated one they had been using. It takes into account multimedia, allowing for practical training, while focusing on ethics, and also introduces public relations as a discipline. The curriculum was swiftly approved by the Ministry of Higher Education and instituted at Herat University within a month in March 2011. When we received the Balkh grant a year later, Balkh also began using the curriculum. In August 2013 I went to Kabul, Afghanistan, for the National Journalism Conference conference, at which all major Afghanistan journalism departments adopted the curriculum."

Violence altered Guerrazzi's approach toward the partnership. "I intended to spend a month in Herat teaching a hands-on television news class," Gerrazzi says. "However, after two weeks, coordinated suicide attacks forced an evacuation to the Herat Consulate, and a later decision to return stateside to continue the class remotely, which I did. I embedded video lectures in my PowerPoint, and the professors completed their stories through e-mail and YouTube."

In July 2012 Guerrazzi and professors from Ball State, the University of Arizona, and University of Nebraska, Omaha, conducted a two-week Journalism Skills Academy for professors from five different universities in Afghanistan—Kabul, Shaikh Zayed, Nangarhar, Balkh, and Herat—in Dubai.

Guerrazzi says that even in the Kabul University, the largest of Afghanistan's public universities, there were no computers, cameras, or projectors to work with during her initial visit. Most Herat and Balkh university professors have no more than a bachelor's degree, she says. Professors from Herat and Balkh Universities visited San Jose State University for 11 weeks each in fall 2012 and spring 2013, she says.

COURTESY OF ELI SUGARMAN

The American University of Afghanistan campus in Kabul, Afghanistan

Afghan professors visit Google headquarters in Mountain View, California, while studying at San Jose State University in 2013.

COURTESY OF DIANE GUERRAZZI

The two SJSU partnerships are a subset of a U.S. State Department-sponsored journalism partnership that also partners two other U.S. and three other Afghan institutions, including University of Arizona with Nangarhar University, Ball State University with Shaikh Zayed University, and the University of Nebraska, Omaha, with Kabul University, says Robin Smith, Cultural Affairs Officer at U.S. Embassy Kabul in charge of the U.S. State Department's educational exchange programs.

Smith says the last of the journalism partnership program will end by 2015. Meanwhile, the focus on State Department-sponsored partnership programs will shift to agriculture and science, "in line with helping government with long-term developmental needs," Smith says. "The goal is to equip students to help contribute to the country's economic development and strengthen mutual understanding between the people of the United States and Afghanistan. We should announce partnerships soon."

The UK Is Partnering With Afghanistan, Too

On the other side of the pond, the United Kingdom has also been creating partnerships with higher education institutions in Afghanistan. INSPIRE is a British Council funded project that aims to significantly strengthen academic and research partnerships between UK and Afghan higher education institutions. The partnerships aim to build capacity in higher education institutions through the further development of staff's professional skills and international research competence, to help build sustainable partnerships based on research and teaching agendas, and to serve as trails for possible models of future cooperation.

Some projects through the INSPIRE program included a project to bring together researchers and educationalists in geosciences in Kabul University and the University of Leicester (2010–2013); a research project to study folklore of Northern Afghanistan between the Afghanistan Academy of Science and Cambridge Central Asia Forum, University of Cambridge (2011–2014); and a delivery of a training course in counseling skills for practitioners who work with students and young people in the Afghanistan province of Herat.

Furthermore, the International Leadership Development Programme, funded by the British Council, seeks to support the development quality assurance processes and capabilities in higher education in Afghanistan. The project (known formally as the Partners in Academic Learning Project and, informally, as the PAL Project) involves eight Afghan academics who are heads or members of Quality Assurance Committees in six Afghan universities, and the Ministry of Higher Education itself was launched on April 2013. The goals of the partnership are to support six leading universities in Afghanistan develop quality assurance processes and further help the universities move toward a higher level of excellence of quality assurance.

"It has been a great and enjoyable privilege to work with our colleagues in Afghanistan," says Victoria Lindsay, former deputy director of partnerships at Open University at the time of the project (she was recently appointed as director of quality development at the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) in the UK). "The progress made by the Afghan institutions is a remarkable achievement in nine months. This should not be underestimated given the challenging external environment and the continuous need to engage colleagues in a new concept the benefits of which are not immediately apparent."

Lindsay provided the quality assurance expertise for the project. "This great progress is also testimony to the commitment and support of the Ministry of Higher Education who has been an enthusiastic supporter and enabler of the program providing invaluable support and advice at key points during the program."

The Afghan participants of the program were equally enthusiastic about its success.

"When we started this program, no one knew what quality assurance was but now more than 60 percent of staff and students know what quality assurance is and what we are doing," says Ahmad Reshad Jamalyar from Balkh University.

Because of this program, Sayed Sher Shah Sadat from Kabul University says, "Now we have teaching improving plans, which we lacked in the past. And it is a very good tool to improve quality."

Another participant, Ali Ahmad Kaveh from Herat University says that since the program, "We now have the system of having students' feedback and processing them to improve teaching."

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Afghan Students in the United States

For some students who have made the journey to pursue U.S. educations, the change is enormous. Until 2009, Khalid Fazly was studying economics at Karwan Institute in Kabul, a private institution with 6,000 to 7,000 students. He was also working for news organizations and others as a translator and "fixer" helping Western reporters and other visitors function in the country and, importantly, gauge risks. Among those who employed him was Ball State's Holland, who persuaded him to apply for a scholarship to Ball State, where Khalid is now finishing up his undergraduate degree in public relations and business.

The gulf between Karwan University and Ball State is enormous, Fazly says.

"There are so many difficulties people in Afghanistan face," says Fazly. "They don't really have new materials like textbooks and computers and use text books written 30

Khalid Fazly worked for news organizations and others as a translator and "fixer" helping Western reporters and other visitors function in the country and, importantly, gauge risks.

years ago. Also, culture-wise, Afghanistan is a very formal and collectivist culture. I remember my first class at Ball State, when I entered the class and I thought it was a theater, not a class. Some people were dancing, some rehearsing, some talking. Even when instructor entered class, no one cared. Some were stretching their legs, some listening to music. I was, like, 'wow, this is very casual.' Back in Afghanistan, whenever the instructor would enter the classroom the students would stand up out of respect for instructor, laptops had to be turned off, and you were not allowed to talk unless the subject related to the class. In public universities, it is a very teacher-oriented culture, with more focus on the teacher, not students. Students are not encouraged to contribute that often."

The situation for women in the country remains precarious in many locations, with fewer women faculty and many families reluctant to send their daughters to universities due to lack of security and cultural challenges.

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Given the lack of resources, the British Council's Smith says that based on the experience of a British higher education partnership program, the Partners in Academic Learning Project (PAL), partnerships that are smaller are sometimes better. "The Afghan Ministry of Higher Education loved the PAL program since it didn't involve lots of money, and therefore didn't tempt corruption," Smith says. "Also, smaller concepts may work better than if your project needs the actions of 50 key-placed people at a university. With a smaller concept, you will be able to design and move resources more quickly."

Mohammad Qayoumi, president of San Jose State University and a former official in the Afghan government, says that switching to instruction in English in certain subjects, such as STEM areas, and ensuring faculty and students are fluent in English would expedite advances in higher education. "This will allow them access to the latest information," Qayoumi says. "I think that is the only way you can really transform education and support an emerging economy. With that fluency, faculty should be looking online for materials that they can use and adapt to their own needs. This will be tremendously important, though I'm not aware of any institutions that are doing that."

The Future of U.S.-Afghan Higher Education Partnerships Unknown

Holland says that the question of what will happen to educational efforts once U.S. military forces largely or completely withdraw troops in 2016 is a major concern for U.S. higher education institutions with partnerships there. "No one knows the answer," Holland says. "The two universities we have worked with the most are located in Kandahar and Khost, which are among the most insecure areas. If the U.S. withdraws completely, it is possible that

COURTESY OF KHALID FAZLY

the Taliban could take it over entirely. If that happened, all the university professors working with us would need to leave their homes immediately because they would be targeted for retaliation."

Holland says that even if partnerships cannot fully change the difficult conditions that students and faculty in Afghanistan face, they can offer hope. "We did a workshop for Kandahar University on career services and entrepreneurship with 17 faculty from five colleges and brainstormed on enterprises students could start," Holland says. "And we are starting the first department of entrepreneurship at the University of Kandahar. Private jobs are still a challenge, so one reason to start an entrepreneurship program is if graduates can't get a job in the private sector, and I say they can start their own businesses—that gives them hope. We tell them about all the resources available to them including microfinance loans."

And some insist that beyond just hope, real progress is being made. "After the establishment of the Kandahar University Career Center [supported by a partnership with Ball State University], from October 2011 through October 2013, 193 students found jobs, eight students were introduced for postgraduate studies, and we offered eight career workshops for students, with 296 students participating in the workshops," says Kamal Kamaluddin, director of Kandahar University Career Center and a lecturer in the School of Engineering. After the partnership formally ended (it was funded by U.S. Department of State grant), Ball State University decided to continue to fund the partnership itself. The Center for International Development at Ball State supports the partnership with money from its Sustainability Budget, including support for the Department of Entrepreneurship, English for Specific Purposes curriculum in the Faculties of Agriculture, Economics, Engineering and Medicine, and the Career Center, including its website.

Partnerships like these have truly made a difference in the lives of Afghan students.

"There were no such opportunities before for students at Kandahar University," says Kamaluddin. **IE**

DAVID TOBENKIN is a freelance reporter based in Chevy Chase, Maryland. His last article for *IE* was "Reawakening Higher Education in Iraq," which was published in the November/December 2013 issue.