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American University of Afghanistan: An Island of Liberal Arts Education in a War Zone

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Abstract

This research aims to explain the benefits and challenges of promoting an American-style liberal arts education at the American University of Afghanistan (AUAF) from 2005 to 2021 during the Western-backed Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. It draws on the author's earlier research on Afghanistan's higher education and professional experience of working as a foreign academic at AUAF to contextualise the exceptional characteristics of AUAF as an island of liberal arts education and to analyse its educational, institutional, financial and political challenges until the Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan in August 2021. It argues that AUAF's specific educational mission and institutional management, growing insecurity and over-reliance on external funding prevented AUAF from becoming a sustainable institution. These challenges were further exacerbated after the return of the Taliban and forced AUAF to close its Kabul-based campuses and relocate to the Education City in Qatar to offer a mixed of in-person and remote education.

Keywords: Afghanistan higher education, American University of Afghanistan, liberal arts education, higher education in conflict societies

Introduction

Liberal Arts Education (LAE) has undergone diverse interpretation and development in recent decades. It has been the subject of ongoing criticism from students, parents and policy makers in the United States (US) which is considered the birthplace of contemporary LAE. Outside the US, LAE has experienced a surge especially in the East and North Asian societies (Logan & Curry 2015). Some scholars have questioned the western origins of LAE and emphasised that traditional knowledge and learning in Chinese, Indian and Islamic civilisations share similar tenets with contemporary LAE in western countries. Godwin and Altbach (2016: 11) stated that '[In Al-Azhar University] and other post- secondary institutions in much of the Islamic world, the curriculum was based on Islamic concerns but often included other subjects in the sciences and arts, recognising that a comprehensive perspective on knowledge was necessary for an educated person, and often reflecting a unified philosophy of education'. Others have analysed the core values of LAE from a historical perspective, introduced selected best-practice examples specially from Asia and explained their respective policy and pedagogical guidelines (Jung, Nishimura & Sasao 2016). Nishimura and Sasao (2019) have recently conducted their own specific in-depth analysis of case studies of LAE and found that the interpretations and practices of LAE vary significantly around the world.

A shared theme in the existing scholarship is that the promotion of LAE is vital for a healthy society because it has the potential to educate students as a whole and prepare them to face the opportunities and challenges of an increasingly interconnected world. Despite this, there seems to be a significant gap in the literature about LAE aspirations, policies and practices in emerging regions such as conflict-ridden societies like Afghanistan. This research note aims to fill this scholarly void by analysing the prospects and challenges of promoting American-style LAE in the AUAF from 2005 until the return of the Taliban in 2021.

The remainder of this paper is divided into four sections. Section One explains liberal state-building and market-led efforts in Afghanistan from 2001-2021 to contextualise the expansion of State-Administered Higher Education (SAHE) and the emergence and growth of Privately-Administered Higher Education (PAHE) in the past two decades[1]. The second section explains the unique and exceptional characteristics of AUAF as an island of LAE in a war

[1] For the use of SAHE and PAHE instead of public or private higher education in the context of Afghanistan, refer to the author's earlier research: Yunespour, Ali Reza. (2023). *Admissions into Higher Education in Afghanistan: Past, Present and Ensuing Inequities?.* PhD diss., UNSW Canberra.

zone. The third section analyses AUAF's educational, institutional, financial and political challenges. The conclusion summarises the key findings and presents a suggestion for future research.

Evolution of higher education in Afghanistan

Afghanistan has had a dual education system since the establishment of European-style schools in the early 20th century: 'traditional' education taught in mosques and madrasas and 'modern' education taught in schools (Samady 2001; Yunespour 2022). Successive ruling political elites have used their ideology to support or restrict both or either of these education institutions (Baiza 2013; Davis 2002). The state had a monopoly of SAHE institutions that were developed from the formation of the first Kabul Medical Faculty in 1932 until the end of the first Taliban regime in 2001 (Samady 2001).

In 2001, the US-led international community toppled the Taliban regime from power following the 11 September 2001 Al-Qaeda attacks on the Twin Towers in the US. (Stewart 2004). Subsequently, the Afghan Republic and the international community embraced a pro-market, liberal ideology to strengthen state legitimacy and to promote socio-economic development (Suhrke 2007). The 2004 constitution recognised the 'market-economy' as the country's economic system, which represented an historical departure from a state-controlled economy (Yunespour 2023). Successive national development strategies prioritised and promoted the development of the private sector in Afghanistan (Ghiasy, Zhou & Hallgren 2015).

Article 43 of the constitution recognised education as a fundamental right of all citizens and made it 'free' of charge in state institutions up to bachelor level. Article 46 granted a constitutional right to national and foreign individuals and entities to establish for-fee 'higher, general, and specialised education' with the state permission. To maintain these constitutional provisions, the Afghan Republic reconstructed the Ministry of Education (MoE) to govern general education, Islamic education and secondary vocational education and for the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) to manage universities and diploma level higher education institutions (Baiza 2013; Babury & Hayward 2014). Accordingly, school enrolments increased from around one million students in 2001 to more than nine million students (3.5 million girls) in 2020. Similarly, the number of SAHE institutions grew from seven in 2003 to 24 universities and 14 higher education institutions in 2020. During the same time, student enrolments in SAHE increased from around 8,000 students (10% female) to 205,000 (30% female) (Yunespour 2023). The Afghan Republic attempted to bridge the education gap between school and madrasa education by introducing more religious content in the school textbooks and by teaching mathematics, science, history and geography in state-administered madrasas (Baiza 2013; Tariq 2011; Choudhury 2017). In 2019,

around 360,000 (mostly male) students attended primary level Darul Huffaz (centres of Quran memorisation), and secondary madrasas and Darululum (diploma-granting religious institutions) (NSIA 2021, 74).

A significant difference in the past two decades in higher education in Afghanistan was the emergence and rapid expansion of PAHE institutions (Ibrahimi 2014). From zero institution in 2005, PAHE institutions grew to 29 universities and 99 non-university higher education institutions in 2020. Collectively, they provided diverse education programs for more than half of the 400,000 higher education students (NSIA 2021, 89). Most PAHE institutions delivered their curriculum in Dari or Persian language (with a minority in Pashto) and, therefore, relied significantly on the knowledge and expertise of Afghan refugees who had returned from Pakistan and Iran (Yunespour 2023). Regional states such as Pakistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia reportedly provided support to some PAHE institutions or directly to their founders, some of whom held influential positions in the Afghan Republic (Ibrahimi 2014). To support the Iranian government's cultural diplomacy and regional soft power (Majidyar & Alfoneh 2010; Wastnidge 2015), some Iranian universities like Al-Mustafa International University (AMIU) used their shared Persian language and cultural ties with Afghanistan to offer courses in Islamic sciences, humanities, Fiqh (jurisprudence) and law inside Afghanistan. Other privately-administered universities like Gawharshad, Ibn-e Sina, Kateb, Kardan and Dunya used their socio-cultural ties with the Afghan diaspora in Western countries to deliver some of their graduate and undergraduate programs in English to attract financial and technical support from individuals, institutions and governments in North America, Western Europe and Australia.

However, growing insecurity hindered access to and quality of education as militant groups such as the Taliban and the Islamic State of Khurasan (IS-K) targeted schools and universities to delegitimise the state and oppose the presence of US-led security forces (Giustozzi & Franco 2013; Osman 2016; Save the Children 2013). Male-dominated socio-cultural norms, poor infrastructure and inadequate teachers led to widespread regional and gender disparities at all levels of education (Babury & Hayward 2014; Naumann 2009). Madrasa education was provided mostly outside the control of the state in unknown and unregistered madrasas that surpassed the smaller number of state-administered madrasas (Choudhury 2017, 131). Some madrasas and their students, including those that were admitted in the Theology Faculty of KU, opposed the country's constitution and US-backed Afghan Republic (Osman 2015).

AUAF- An exceptional education island

AUAF stood out as an exceptional education island amongst Afghanistan's SAHE and PAHE since its establishment in 2005. The mission of AUAF was

to deliver American-style LAE and 'to replicate a curriculum similar to that of an American university' (SIGAR 2020: 1). Godwin and Altbach (2016) have identified three core principles- interdisciplinary approach, general education, and promotion of elemental skills to distinguish LAE from postsecondary studies with a narrow specialisation. At AUAF, the four undergraduate degrees emphasised the development of the student as a whole and offered general education such as humanities, natural sciences and mathematics to all students and specialised knowledge in law, political science and public administration, business, and computer science. It promoted socio-political values such as gender equity, leadership, individual empowerment, meritocracy, plural democracy and cultural diversity and emphasised 21st century skills such as critical thinking, problem solving and taking initiative. AUAF maintained relative academic freedom in an increasingly insecure environment which made it different to most higher education institutions in Afghanistan where academic freedom was hindered by lack of institutional autonomy (Babury and Hayward 2014) and historically, ideological influences on education and higher education (Baiza 2013).

The teaching of Islamic subjects (known as Shari'at) and Afghanistan history are compulsory in most undergraduate degrees in Afghanistan each semester (Yunespour 2023). Whilst the MoHE has historically taught a state-centric and Pashtun-dominated history of Afghanistan and Sunni Islamic theology in SAHE institutions (Baiza 2013), AUAF allowed its foreign and national academics in general education, political science and law degrees to take a more academic approach to the delivery of Islamic and Afghan history, arts and law. However, the quality of some of these subjects were largely dependent on the qualifications of the individual academic teaching those subjects. AUAF also provided separate prayer rooms for male and female students, observed Afghanistan's public holidays such as Nawruz (New Year) and the two Muslim Eids and dedicated calendar days to celebrate the country's cultural diversity.

AUAF offered the most expensive LAE in English. In 2016, the cost of four undergraduate subjects in other PAHE institutions in Afghanistan varied from $US100-400 per-semester, whereas the subsidised tuition fee for a single three-credit subject at AUAF was around $US650 (Yunespour 2023). Overall, the various US government departments contributed $US167.3 million to AUAF from February 2005 to May 2019 (SIGAR 2020, 1). From this fund, AUAF provided financial scholarships to male and female students from most provinces of the country, which covered their tuition fees and on-campus accommodation for the growing number of female students. By 2018, women accounted for 42 percent of AUAF's enrolments of around 1,700 students (SIGAR 2020, 14-15). The US funds also helped AUAF build two campuses in Kabul; maintain a Foundation Studies Program; establish two affiliated centres- a women's centre to promote education, research and advocacy for Afghan

women's economic empowerment and a business incubator and accelerator centre to support local businesses. It delivered short-term professional training programs for Afghanistan's growing civil servants and employed foreign (70%) and local (30%) academics who were mostly educated in English-speaking Western countries.

Another distinguishing feature of LAE at AUAF was the relatively small undergraduate class sizes of less than 25 students. Like the LAE delivery in other countries (Namai 2019, 3-4), the small class sizes in AUAF provided a learning environment that helped most students engage with the learning materials and allowed sufficient time for academic staff to support diverse students' needs, especially those who experienced traumatic events such as suicide attacks and economic hardship. These practices had a beneficial impact on the education quality at AUAF. In 2018, AUAF became the first university in the country to obtain accreditation from the MoHE (SIGAR 2020, 15) and 'approximately 11% of [AUAF] graduates have been awarded Fulbright Scholarships – the highest number of Fulbright awardees, as a percentage of graduates, of any academic institution in the world' (Bickford 2025, 1). The combination of AUAF with the US government, English language instruction and a higher quality education helped most AUAF students to be favoured for employment in local and foreign government and non-government organisations.

AUAF challenges

AUAF faced several challenges in delivering American-style LAE in Afghanistan. First, the American name and publicly-stated mission of American-style LAE made it institutionally more vulnerable and a likely target for anti-government opposition groups such as the Taliban and IS-K (Osman 2016). To ensure security, AUAF mostly contracted foreign private security companies such as the Canadian GardaWorld. AUAF was perceived as an 'island of security' in a 'sea of terror' in its first 10 years (Redden 2016). Although former President Hamid Karzai issued a decree in August 2010 which called for the removal of all national and foreign security companies, replacing them with government-run Afghan Public Protection Force (APPF) (Asad 2012; BBC 2018), AUAF like other US-backed institutions in Afghanistan was given an exception to continue to use private foreign security companies, which reportedly cost more than the national security companies or APPF. The argument of the US government at the time of the president's decree was that 'there was still a need for private security companies in the country' (Asad 2012: 4).

Despite these security arrangements, AUAF remained vulnerable to security incidents especially after the planned withdrawal of international security forces from the country in 2014 (Dobbins et al., 2019). The Taliban

abducted two AUAF professors, one US and one Australian citizen on 8 August 2016. They were imprisoned for over three years and released by the Taliban in 2019 in a prisoner exchange with the Afghan Government (Saif 2019). On 24 August 2016, suicide bombers attacked AUAF campus and killed at least 13 students, staff and security guards and injured around 50 individuals (AAN 2016). Unlike the kidnapping of the two professors, no group claimed responsibility for the suicide attack on AUAF. However, the Taliban reportedly considered AUAF as a US intelligence centre and 'Kabul's Christian University' which in their view promoted anti-Islamic education and moral corruption through co-ed classes in a Muslim society. After the suicide attack, some Taliban members and sympathisers used social media to publicly applaud the campus attack (Osman 2016). To counter these ongoing security threats, AUAF was given around $US19 million by the US government in 2016 to upgrade and enhance the security of its campuses (SIGAR 2020).

Secondly, most AUAF students struggled in their transition from an education system which was taught in Dari or Pashto language and emphasised rote memorisation (Yunespour 2023)- to a LAE system in English that encouraged independent research and critical learning. During admissions, AUAF tested students' English language proficiency by using the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and subsequently provided one-year of foundation studies to help students improve their written and spoken English language and learn analytical skills. AUAF allocated course advisors to help students understand the overall structure and requirements of their respective degree. Despite these efforts, most students faced English language barriers especially in written assessments whilst some found it hard to study general education subjects like natural sciences or mathematics because of poor quality education in their primary and secondary schooling. Some AUAF students were concurrently studying in another higher education institution and/or working in local or foreign government or non-government organisations. These students were finding it difficult to balance their work, study, and family/social commitments. During the security enhancement in 2016/17, AUAF provided online classes for the first time in the history of Afghanistan's higher education. AUAF's efforts to get approval from the MoHE for its online programs faced administrative barriers as some in the Ministry had concerns about the feasibility of online classes particularly because of the unreliability of electricity and poor internet access in Kabul. Most participants of the online classes struggled in their learning because of technical issues such as poor internet as well as emotional distress as a result of the suicide attack on AUAF and similar attacks elsewhere in the country.

Thirdly, it was difficult for AUAF to attract and retain qualified academic staff. It provided relatively generous employee benefits, including a higher base salary and compensation for its foreign staff compared to the national academics. This created an environment where AUAF's national academics,

who mostly received a higher salary than staff in the country's other public and private universities, were suspicious of the reliance of AUAF on foreign academics. Some of them did not appreciate receiving a lower salary compared to foreign lecturers. At the same time, some of its Afghan academics had other duties outside AUAF that prevented them from spending sufficient time supporting their students. Moreover, after the security incidents in 2016, foreign academics were forced to accept non-family friendly teaching appointments which caused some academics to resign from AUAF and accept offers from places more suitable for families. One of the consequences of this was that AUAF remained a largely teaching institution with limited research activities.

Finally, AUAF was heavily reliant on foreign funds particularly from the US government. From 2012, the US government had regularly expressed concern about the sustainability of AUAF, the deteriorating insecurity in the country and ongoing administrative, financial and leadership problems at AUAF that hindered their goal of achieving self-sufficiency. During a US government investigation in 2020, some in the AUAF leadership argued that 'sustainability is probably not a term that should be applied to a university in war zone' (SIGAR 2020, 16). These AUAF challenges were reflective of the wider insecurity, corruption and dependency on external financial and political support that resulted in the gradual decline and eventual fall of the Afghan Republic and the return of the Taliban regime to power in August 2021 (Jamal and Maley 2023; SIGAR 2022).

After the Taliban's return to power, AUAF was forced to close its campuses and transition into a 'university in exile' (Bickford 2025, 2). Since then, it has brokered partnerships with the American University in Central Asia, the American University in Iraq and Brad College in New York. With the support of USAID and Qatar Foundation, AUAF has provided coeducation classes to around 200 students in the Education City in Qatar and virtual classes for more than 1,000 young women and men inside Afghanistan (Bickford 2025, 2; Sharma, 2024). As a result, it still offers a glimpse of hope for its students amidst Taliban's gender segregation, which has been rightly described by some as 'gender apartheid' (Bennoune, 2022), including their bans on secondary and higher education for girls and women (International Crisis Group 2023; SIGAR 2023). AUAF remains heavily reliant on foreign assistance which poses significant challenges for its sustainability (Bickford 2025).

Conclusion

This research demonstrated that AUAF made a significant contribution to the education of male and female students in Afghanistan in the past two decades. However, several challenges including insecurity, dependency on foreign funds, failure to retain foreign academic staff, and English language barriers for its students made it hard to achieve self-sufficiency. The Taliban's return to power

forced AUAF to relocate to Doha and the lack of a legitimate political system and the Taliban's gender segregation edicts have further exacerbated AUAF challenges in the foreseeable future. This unique case study has attempted to contribute to the growing global knowledge on LAE in developing countries. Future research would benefit from similar in-depth case studies and comparative studies of post-secondary-level LAE in conflict societies.

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