



Science Diplomacy for Enhancing India-Afghanistan Co-operation in Higher Education



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Introduction

India and Afghanistan have a strong relationship based on historical and cultural links. The relationship is not limited to governments in New Delhi and Kabul; it has its foundation in the historical contacts and exchanges among the people of both the countries. Indo-Afghan relations have been strengthened further by the Strategic Partnership Agreement signed between the two in 2011. Hence, it is no wonder that India has rendered support by making a long-term commitment to higher education and economic development of Afghanistan.

India has also played an important role in Afghanistan higher education development since its independence; despite turbulent situation in Afghanistan, India has never stopped giving support and assistance in the field of higher education to Afghanistan. Since 2001, thousands of Afghan students have been coming to India for higher education. This has played a vital role in the development and reconstruction of Afghanistan. Many scholarships are being provided to Afghan students, and training modules are being implemented for professors from Afghanistan. Assistance is given to Afghanistan government of in the field of higher education.

Higher Education in Afghanistan

Although there has been much progress in this since 2001, the country still has a long way to go to reach to the levels prevalent in neighbouring countries. Low literacy rate, particularly, among women, lack of access in many areas for reasonably good education and quality of education are some of the maladies

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plaguing higher education sector. In fact, higher education is given importance by donors and by agencies like World Bank. But support from them in addition to government efforts is not adequate while considering the need. As the economic development is not possible without human resource development, and only adequate availability of human resource can facilitate reconstruction and transformation of Afghanistan, there is thus the obvious need for higher education. The number of students enrolled for higher education are 300,000 compared with 7,900 in 2001. The number of public and private universities have increased; and presently there are 36 public universities and more than 100 private universities¹. However, the critical issue is that of quality of faculty in higher education, as it has been observed that hardly 5 percent of the faculty have PhD degree, and a very few public universities offer PhD programmes. Even a random look at the data would indicate that these institutions are nowhere near the better institutions in the neighboring countries in terms of infrastructure, research and publications, diversity in programmes and quality of education offered to students.

But the situation is not so hopeless to be improved. Given the surge in rate of literacy and increase in enrollment in primary, secondary and higher secondary education, the demand for enrolment in higher education would go up. So we need a virtuous cycle on higher education. Although there are many agencies and countries involved in supporting growth of higher education in Afghanistan, India is playing a unique role, as has been explained in the subsequent paragraphs. This role has to be expanded and diversified.

India-Afghanistan initiatives for Higher Education in Science

a. Afghan Scholarships and Fellowships Programmes

In 2001, India initiated assistance to Afghanistan higher education, and provided scholarships to

Afghan students to study in India. Some of the scholarships for higher education in sciences are as follows.

ICCR Scholarships

The Scheme is sponsored by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), an autonomous body under the administrative control of Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi. The nodal agency for administering the scheme in Afghanistan is the Ministry of Higher Education. Under the scheme, every year a total of 1,000 scholarships are offered to Afghan nationals pursuing undergraduate, postgraduate and Ph.D. courses in Indian universities.

ITEC Fellowships

The Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) Training Programme is sponsored by the Technical Cooperation Division, Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi, and is administered by the Independent Administrative Reforms & Civil Service Commission (IARCSC), Afghanistan. The objective of this scheme is to train middle-level public officials of the Afghan Government Ministries/Department/Semi-Government organizations. A limited number of seats are open to private/business organizations. During Indian Prime Minister's visit to Afghanistan in August 2005, the number of fellowships increased from 200 to 500. Over 200 training courses are offered in different fields of Business Management, Journalism, IT, Legislative training, power distribution, English speaking and writing skills and business communication; Tools Design; Bio medical/ optical/ ophthalmic equipment, Audit (PSE/Disinvestment/IT/Environment/Energy), Flow measurement and control techniques, Urban planning and management, Mass Communication, Power plant management, HR planning, Manpower research, Engineering (Civil/mechanical/agriculture), Accounts, Agriculture and Rural development, Logistics and supply chain management; Textile management; Prevention of HIV/AIDs etc. The duration of the courses varies from 2 to 52 weeks.

ITEC Fellowships

Academic year	No. of ITEC trainees
2006-07	498
2007-08	428
2008-09	375
2009-10	449
2010-11	372
2011-12	455
2012-13	448
2013-14	411
2014-15	386
2015-16	318

Colombo Plan

This training scheme is offered by the Indian Ministry of Finance to many developing countries, including Afghanistan for short-term trainings; 20 slots are allotted every year for Afghanistan.

Its objective is to train middle-level officials of the Afghan Government Ministries/ Departments/Semi-Government organizations. Comprehensive and integrated training is provided to participants to enhance their administrative and technical capabilities.

Number of courses are being offered under this scheme for a duration of 1-3 years on different themes, including standardization and quality assurance, parliamentary internship, Sustainable crop production, livestock management, footwear design, stones mechanics, marine fisheries, plastic processing tools, poultry management, leather processing, intensive biotin, silkworm, PG Remote sensing, IT, general insurance, audit, oil and gas flow measurement, urban development, hydrology, molecular biology, etc.

Self-Finance Schemes

This scheme is meant to facilitate Afghan national willing to pursue higher professional studies at their own expenses in the courses. The criterion for admission varies. It is not automatic, and often students have to take entrance examination or prove that they are eligible otherwise. For example, since academic year 2017-18, foreign candidates are to appear for a National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET), conducted by CBSE

for admission in MBBS/ BDS UG courses in the India. The scheme is suitable for Afghan citizens, who can afford the expenses for the courses. While higher education in India is definitely cheaper when compared to the USA or Europe, still it is beyond the reach of many aspiring students from Afghanistan. It is suggested that there should be a comprehensive review of this. Both governments can consider bringing some flexibility in this and in the provision for providing subsidies, loans and offering more number of scholarships to meet the demand.

b. Institutional Collaborations

National Agriculture Science and Technology University in Kandahar

In February 2014, Afghan President Hamid Karzai and Indian Foreign Minister Salman Khurshid inaugurated the National Agriculture Science and Technology University in southern Kandahar province of Afghanistan. The establishment of the University is one of the major capacity-building projects undertaken in Afghanistan with the financial collaboration from Indian government. The university would have include departments of pedagogy, plants protection, forests and agricultural economy. Moreover, animal husbandry department entails department of food studies, department of veterinary and other departments. The university has been established with the support of \$500 million pledged by India for the agriculture sector. And the university has been built with a budget of \$60-70 million from the grant. The university aims to provide right education and training to cadres and specialists in the field of agriculture. Lack of specialists has been a major constraint confronted by the Ministry of Agriculture. Afghanistan is an agricultural country, and farming forms the pillar of the country's economy.

India-Afghanistan Foundation

India-Afghanistan Foundation (IAF) is a trust fund set up by the Governments of India and Afghanistan to finance projects aimed at fostering India-Afghanistan relations through enhancement of economic, scientific, educational, technical as well as cultural cooperation. The IAF

was established in April 2007 with the signing of an MoU between India and Afghanistan for fostering Indo-Afghan relations through the enhancement of economic, scientific, educational, technical and cultural cooperation and promotion of greater understanding among the peoples of two countries. The management and direction of the Foundation is vested in a Board of Directors, consisting of 10 members. Ambassador of India to Afghanistan in Kabul and Ambassador of Afghanistan to India in New Delhi are Co-Chairpersons of the Board. The other eight members are nominated by the two Governments.

The thrust areas identified for promoting understanding and cooperation are education and culture, archeological studies, agricultural research, science and technology, health, technical training, developmental studies and women's studies. The programmes of IAF include the following:

- Facilitating visits and exchanges between India and Afghanistan of scholars, academics, professionals, artists and experts involved in the areas of activities covered by the Foundation.
- Assisting activities such as seminars, symposia, colloquia and workshops on the subjects of common interest.
- Extending financial support to those non-governmental organizations both in India and in Afghanistan whose work facilitates achievement of the objective of the Foundation.
- Contributing towards publication of standard works on India-Afghanistan relations in specified fields.
- Encouraging translations of standard works of Afghanistan literature into Indian languages and *vice-versa* and arranging for their publications

Challenges

Cooperation between Afghan and Indian Governments in the field of higher education has increased but it is not sufficient, particularly, in science and technology disciplines. Compared to the number of students who are interested in pursuing higher education in India, the number

of seats made available to them is much less, particularly, in central universities like JNU. Cooperation among private sector educational institutions in Afghanistan and accredited/recognized private universities in India is very weak. There is good potential but it is virtually unexplored. Most of the Afghan students coming for studies to India are selected by the ministry of higher education of Afghanistan on the basis of merit. But for many reasons their competence in English is far from adequate. Addressing this issue is important for both the countries.

Science Diplomacy and Higher Education

One of the objectives of Science Diplomacy is use of science to further objectives of foreign policy. If the foreign policy of India is to promote growth and development in India across sectors and to enable Afghanistan to catch-up with other countries in the region in higher education, then Science Diplomacy can be used to support creating capacity in higher education, particularly in science and technology. For this, India needs to review its current programmes of support in higher education and need to replace them with a comprehensive programme that would give more impetus to science and technology education. India has institutions that are globally renowned in science and technology, and its S&T capability is well known. The higher education in Afghanistan can benefit from these institutions, if S&T gets major support in the programmes. In this regard we suggest the following.

- India can encourage its top ranking institutions in S&T to establish institutions in Afghanistan and rapidly develop the capacity.
- Incentives for co-operation with Afghanistan can be granted to accredited and top-ranking private universities.
- Special emphasis should be given to setting-up through collaboration for institutions to impart training to trainers and for developing faculty .
- Instead of having many programmes that enable students from Afghanistan to apply and benefit, there should be a single and comprehensive programme with a scope for expansion over the years

Conclusion

As participants of an ITEC programme, it is suggested that India should consider using Science Diplomacy to help Afghanistan in developing its higher education system. Some suggestions have been chalked out. We hope that both governments can do more than what is achieved so far.

Endnote

- 1 <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2017/12/12/the-role-of-higher-education-in-economic-development-of-afghanistan/>