"The Hope of the Afghan Diaspora": IUB Hosts Conference on Higher Education Reconstruction in Afghanistan

Indiana University sponsored an important initiative to support the reconstruction of the higher education system in post-war Afghanistan by hosting a conference, Strategic Planning of Higher Education for Afghanistan, held from October 6 to 7, 2002, at IUB.

The conference provided an opportunity for higher education professionals from Afghanistan to engage in a concerted effort to plan for future higher education needs at this critical moment in the history of their nation. By the end of the second day of the conference, the Afghan scholars had drawn up recommendations on a strategic plan to rebuild higher education in post-Taliban Afghanistan that they shared with IU faculty, administrators, and other interested parties from various charitable foundations. Conference participants also linked up with officials from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) in Washington, D.C. via an interactive video session.

In preparation for this important event, IU sent M. Nazif Shahrani, an Afghan-American anthropologist, who is chair of IUB’s Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures and director of the Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies Program, to Afghanistan in July 2002 for consultation and information-gathering on the current status and needs of Afghan higher education. During his three weeks there, he met with officials, faculty, and students of Kabul University, Badakhshan Medical College (Faizabad, Badakhshan Province), Abdullah Ibn Mas’ud University (Taliquan, Takhar Province), and the University of Balkh (Mazar-i-Sharif, Balkh Province). His firsthand observations of these institutions contributed significantly to the conference’s perspective on the urgent needs and priorities of the struggling nation.

Indeed, discussions at the conference, which took place at IUB’s new Neal-Marshall Black Culture Center, were passionate and ambitious, due in no small part to the participants’ intimate knowledge of Afghanistan and the system of higher education under which they grew up and worked in. A large number of the 30 invited participants were Afghan and Afghan-American professionals and educators currently working in various U.S. institutions of higher education. Many of these had received degrees and training from IU during the 1960s and 1970s when IU, under Herman B Wells’ vision and influence in internationalizing the university, had been deeply involved in assisting Kabul University and Nangrarahar University improve their institutional infrastructures through exchange programs to train Afghan faculty and administrators. In 1967, Wells traveled to Afghanistan to consult with these academics.

The featured guest of the conference was Afghanistan’s minister of higher education, Sharif Fayez. Other notables included a former minister of planning, Abdul Wahed Sarabi; two former rectors of Kabul University, Touryalay Etemadi and Amir Shah Hassanyar; the deputy minister of higher education, Maliha Zulfacar; the executive
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Kabul University is by no means alone in this sad state of affairs; all of the country’s institutions of higher education find themselves in a similar state. The conference participants identified a number of immediate short- and long-term needs to address these problems. Building and maintaining infrastructure at all of the universities is a critical need. Making a concentrated effort to develop the country’s “human capital” of university educators, particularly through the recruitment of female teachers, was also identified as a priority.

A proposal was made to have Afghan-American professors, including those attending the conference, consider volunteering their summers to go teach in Afghanistan’s universities during this transition stage. Indeed, the participants’ recognition of the need for personal involvement was palpable throughout the conference proceedings. Alam Payind, director of the Middle Eastern Studies Center at Ohio State University, characterized this as “the hope of the Afghan diaspora”—the hope for Afghans to unite and try to tackle the national problems of their country, utilizing their own considerable collective experiences and
perspectives. This attitude was crystallized by a major decision resulting from the IU conference, to form the "International Association for the Advancement of Higher Education in Afghanistan" (proposed name), along with a joint foundation that would give concrete support to Afghanistan in the form of both scholarship in institutional and curriculum development and fundraising.

In the long term, the proposed association and foundation would hope to focus on assisting the restructuring of Afghanistan's university system, including the establishment of a strong regional and community college system to support the universities currently operating in the country; developing curriculum, with an emphasis on providing students with a strong liberal arts background; and strengthening distance-learning partnerships between Afghan universities and U.S. and European institutions.

Fayez expressed his particular desire for a close liaison between such an association and the Ministry of Higher Education throughout Afghanistan's reconstruction process.

At this point in the political rebirth of Afghanistan as a nation, considering the challenges of rebuilding that war-torn country, the role of an appropriate, effective, and relevant higher education system cannot be underestimated. To construct and reconstruct a system of higher education that could meet the urgent needs of rebuilding Afghan society and economy, the country and the donor nations and non-governmental organizations need a road map, a strategic plan of higher education for the nation.

IU’s sponsorship of this conference, as well as any efforts it may pursue in the future, are important steps towards the renewal of mutual commitments to collaborate in this crucial endeavor in Afghanistan. With its rich historical experiences in assisting numerous countries worldwide to build higher educational institutions, and still reflected in various ongoing programs to build university infrastructures in southeastern Europe, post-Soviet Central Asian nations, and southern Africa, IU is in an ideal position to offer a helping hand in that reconstruction.

Co-sponsors of the event were the MacArthur Foundation, the U.S. Embassy in Kabul, Afghanistan, and the following IU units: Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies Program, Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures, Office of International Programs, Russian and East European Institute, Inner Asian and Uralic National Resource Center, Center for the Study of Global Change, and Office of Academic Affairs and Dean of the Faculties.

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For complete transcription of the conference, see:
www.indiana.edu/~nelcmesp/transcrp.pdf