

Effectiveness of Cross-border Partnership to Increase the Quality and Relevance of Higher Education in Afghanistan

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Background

In Afghanistan, education opportunities have rapidly expanded, including for females and minority ethnic groups that had limited chances to study during the rule of the Taliban. Since the initial decline in the Taliban regime and increase in the international donor community's funding of primary and secondary education, there have been huge increases in the number of secondary school graduates—more than 200,000 per year—ready for tertiary education. There has also been a boon in the number of established higher education institutions and that enrollment is also increasing. In 1990, there were 24,333 higher education students and approximately 30% were female (Samady, 2001). Now, more than 340,000 students are enrolled in the 36 public universities and 128 private universities. Approximately 25% of these students are female. University enrollment is projected to nearly double by 2025. However, 30 years of war, unstable government and high levels of corruption have left behind a weakened higher education system. Persistent fear from attacks, loss of trust in national leaders and uncertainty about the future weighs heavy on youth and puts the future of higher education and workforce development at risk (The Asia Foundation, 2016). Nevertheless, donor-funded projects, including USAID University Support and Workforce Development Program (USWDP) are standing in support of the Afghanistan Ministry of Higher Education and national universities. Cross-border partnerships funded by USWDP are bringing together university administrators, faculty, and students from Afghanistan and the United States who are willing to risk their own safety to expand youth access to higher quality and education relevant to the Afghan environment to promote economic growth and national stability.

Purpose

Cross-border partnership is a flexible strategy that has been used to strengthen universities around the world for decades (Samoff & Carrol, 2004). There is the belief that higher education is a way to promote economic stability that in turn reduces the level of conflict in fragile countries. It can reduce inequities by providing universities with educational resources and exposure to pedagogical practices that support marginalized students. This study investigates three university partnerships between Afghan and U.S. universities funded through the USAID University Support and Workforce Development Program (USWDP) to increase employability of male and female graduates in Afghanistan. The USWDP and these cross-border university partnerships are viewed as a way to strengthen Afghan higher education and the future workforce to promote the national stability. The Afghan context in which these partnerships are operating presents unique challenges including deep gender inequity and physical threats to university staff and students (Babakarkhail & Peterson, 2016). This paper presents preliminary results from the first of three iterations of data collection for this study. It aims to share information that will help

program stakeholders and provide evidence for donors in search of ways to foster more viable higher education opportunities for youth living in crisis and conflict settings.

Conceptual Framework

Although there is scant research on what makes cross-border partnerships effective, evidence points toward the importance of (1) understanding stakeholder motivations, (2) regular communication between partners, and (3) attention to issues of sustainability. **Motivations** of partner universities vary widely. According to literature, motivations could include raised status, increased revenue, more innovative research, internationalization, and improved cultural understanding (Altbach et al., 2009; Chapman & Sakamoto, 2011; Connolly et al., 2007). Individual administrators and faculty members may value potential personal, institutional, and community gains differently. This nuance has been observed in international education partnerships where one university partner has much to gain from a well-resourced university partner (Wilson, 2012). Motivations have a connection to what partners expect of each other. A threat to the success of partnership is a lack of communication between partners about their motivations and anticipated costs they will incur. **Communication** is a not just an action but a skill to navigate administrative processes including procurement of materials, institutional review of research studies, and financial reporting to donors. Such interactions are an opportunity to build trust and demonstrate commitment to partnership success. Conversely, poor communication contributes significantly to program erosion and potential termination of relationships (Amey, 2010; Eddy, 2010; Heffernan & Poole, 2005). Sustainability of relationships post-funding is another critical area identified in literature (Samoff & Carrol, 2004). **Sustainability**, or the ability to persist, is often cited as a measure of success in development projects. When partnership activities have not yielded expected benefits or when there is overdependence on individual leaders to carry partnership responsibilities indefinitely, sustainability of partnership is jeopardized (Wilson, 2012). Other international development literature posits that the partnership strategy may not yield the sustainability stakeholders desire. There is a tendency for partnerships to survive only with extended or alternative funding (Court, 2004; Holm & Malete, 2010; Jones & Blunt, 1999).

In this study of three ongoing cross-border partnerships between Afghan and U.S. universities the following questions are posed: (1) What were partners' motivations to pursue this partnership? To what extent are the benefits they anticipated being realized? (2) What are the modes of communication used by partners? How well are partners communicating with one another? (3) Is sustainability post-funding being considered? and (4) How is context, specifically gender issues and the changing security environment in Afghanistan affecting the partnership?

Modes of Inquiry

Three USWDP partnerships that had been established for at least six months were chosen for the first iteration of this study. Chart 1 identifies the partner universities and the program on which each partnership is focused.

Chart 1: *USWDP Partner Universities and Degree Programs*

	Afghan University	U.S. University	Degree Program
1	Kabul Medical University/ Kabul Polytechnic University	Spokane Community College	Associate in Biomedical Equipment Technology
2	Kandahar University	Johns Hopkins University	Master of Public Health
3	Herat University	Purdue University	Food Technology Bridge Program

Administrators and faculty members from each partnership were selected in collaboration with USWDP staff members based on level of involvement and amount of information that each individual would have about the partnership at their university. In total, 28 individuals were interviewed including 15 from Afghan universities and 13 individuals from U.S. partner universities. On the Afghan side, there were no female administrators or faculty members who had been highly involved in the partnerships at time of interviewee selection. On the U.S. side, there were also few female individuals involved in the partnerships—only four who met the criteria of being involved and knowledgeable about their university’s partnership. Chart 2 summarizes interviewee characteristics.

Chart 2: *Afghan and U.S. Interviewee Characteristics*

Administrators				Faculty Members				Total	
Afghan		US		Afghan		US			
M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
6	0	3	1	9	0	6	3	24	4
10				18				28	

Interviews were conducted between November 2016 and February 2017. Elisabeth Wilson interviewed the U.S. individuals by phone and Skype in English and an Afghan consultant hired by USWDP interviewed the Afghan university partners in face-to-face interviews on their university campus in Afghanistan in Dari and Pashtu. The same interview protocol and guide questions were used across interviews. Interviews were recorded (with permission) and transcribed and translated into English. The interview transcripts were analyzed deductively (into the four categories: motivation, communication, sustainability, context) using Nvivo software.

Results

Preliminary analysis of the data indicates that in general, both Afghan and U.S. partners feel that they are benefiting from their partnerships in the areas that motivated them to enter in partnership with one another. The primary motivation of Afghan partners was to gain some type of capacity and resource and U.S. partners were driven to meet needs in Afghanistan that they felt capable of addressing. In terms of communication, the logistics for partners to be in touch with each other, both virtual or face-to-face have been challenging due to the geographic distance and difference in time and work week. Expectations are continually clarified on both sides to maintain the progress of the partnerships. Sustainability post-funding is addressed to a

certain degree. There is a clear realization that lack of funding, faculty interest, and security will jeopardize the activities. However, personal relationships are expected to last. At the end of the day, the context of the partnership appears to be the most central aspect that will determine the effectiveness of these partnerships. There is a void of female faculty members and students on both the Afghan and U.S. side. Females who are involved face greater challenges and risks and are affected by cultural expectations. This was acknowledged by interviewees on both sides. Also, discussed by most interviewees, especially those from U.S. universities was the lack of security and its impact on the viability, speed, and quality of their partnerships.

Motivation: *What were partners' motivations to pursue this partnership? To what extent are the benefits they anticipated being realized?*

In general, both Afghan and U.S. partners agree that they are benefiting from partnerships in the areas that motivated them to enter in partnership initially. Afghan partners anticipated that they would gain technical skills and resources for their universities such as lab facilities for new degree programs that address critical needs in Afghanistan. Administrators, such as this one at Herat University, focused on the strategic value of the partnership.

Herat University has a strategic vision, which is based on the following three pillars: training or capacity building of our staff at the university level, connecting university to other government agencies, and through those agencies connecting to the private sector. When we found our goals similar to USAID and USWDP, that made us get involved in this partnership with USWDP and Purdue University.

U.S. partners said they were driven to build their counterparts' capacity. Most of the U.S. faculty members interviewed have years of international experience, high interest and expressed altruistic motivations for becoming involved in these partnerships. One faculty member said Afghanistan seemed "so different from many places that [he had] ever been, and lived." He said exposure to Afghan students and their enthusiasm to learn motivates him to keep coming back. All three U.S. universities have at least one champion at the faculty level who is driving the partnership. U.S. administrators described how these partnerships align directly with their universities' missions and mandates and were positive toward the progress made so far.

Communication: *What are the modes of communication used by partners? How well are partners communicating with one another?*

Interviewees said the primary modes of communication they use are Skype and email. Virtual meetings are usually scheduled by the U.S. partner. Logistics are challenging: Internet is weak and nonexistent on two of the Afghan campuses. Partners' time zone differences range from 8.5 to 11.5 hours and work days are different, too. Monday and Tuesday are the only workdays partners have in common (since the work week in Afghanistan is Saturday to Wednesday). Because of the security environment in Afghanistan and the U.S. government ban on issuing visas to Afghan academics partners have had few or no opportunities to visit either university.

In addition to the logistic challenges, especially the U.S. interviewees mentioned the need for frequent clarification of expectations. For example, there have been miscommunications about what resources that would be provided to each university. As one interviewee explained: "[I]t's

not a matter of we didn't communicate, like I didn't talk to you. It's a matter that we didn't clarify exactly what is meant."

Both U.S. and Afghan interviewees mentioned there have been equipment, classrooms, or laboratories that they had expected to be provided through USWDP funding. There is also caution in making requests and negotiating. One Afghan interviewee recalled:

We argued a lot to change some of the components, we wanted to add or subtract things based on our needs. However, lots of them did not happen. We had to give up on some of the things because we knew if we do not – they may go and work with Kandahar or Nangarhar universities. It is better to get 50 percent than nothing.

Another noteworthy point from the U.S. interviews was how these partnerships have reinforced connections between faculty members at their own universities. Administrators who had had previous experience with their faculty members implementing cross-border partnerships expressed a high degree of trust and respect for their faculty members who travel to Afghanistan.

Sustainability: *Is sustainability post-USWDP being considered?*

Sustainability post-funding is addressed to a certain degree. There is a clear realization that lack of funding and faculty interest will jeopardize the sustainability of activities. With so much initial energy being channeled to the partnerships, there is limited preparation at this point for when the period of funding ends.

Despite the time constraints, interviewees on both sides were optimistic that the new degrees will be developed to some extent. As one interviewee said, "We're behind on time, I suppose, but if you put it in the context of what we're trying to achieve, I think it's pretty impressive." Another administrator said though they would like to see the partnership with their Afghan partners expand, at the end of two years, they will have done as much as they can. There was admission that continuation of funding would be critical, however. Afghan universities are still developing systems to receive and manage tuition from students studying for associate and master's degrees. If this system is not in place soon, interviewees on both sides mentioned that partnership activities would be dependent on funding from the Ministry of Higher Education, other donors or an extension of USWDP funding.

The reliance on faculty champions was mentioned as a potential disadvantage for the sustainability of partnership. Unless there is shared ownership and interest of a broader range of faculty members, the relationships between universities could dissolve when faculty members retire, for instance. Many of the U.S. administrators and faculty members interviewed have worked as a team on past partnerships and describe strong relationships and high levels of trust and respect for one another. These USWDP partnerships have reinforced their ability to work together and solidified friendships.

Context: *How do gender issues and the changing security environment affecting the partnership?*

Whether the security improves was mentioned by both the Afghan and U.S. interviewees as also critical to sustainability. In fact, context appears to be the most vulnerable aspect in the USWDP partnerships. Gender issues and the volatile environment in Afghanistan are a challenge to the

quality, speed, and long-term viability of the partnerships and the degree programs that are being established.

Access to new programs and facilities built through these partnerships is not equitable at this point. Few female faculty members and students participate in partnership activities. Some causes for the gender disparity is the deficiency of qualified female students to participate in advanced degree programs. Potential female candidates (who hold bachelor degrees and have adequate English language proficiency) who have young children often cannot leave home, let alone the country to pursue graduate degrees. Additionally, there are few female faculty members or administrators at Afghan universities to serve as models to counter the prevalent, conservative views of women's role in public, including academia. Deteriorating security traveling to and from campus exacerbates the situation. One workaround being discussed by those developing the MPH program in Kandahar is having online classes. This could encourage more female students to matriculate in the degree programs since they would not need to leave the security of their homes.

Insecurity is a contextual issue that affects all. As one Afghan interviewee explained:

Security is a crucial element for development. When you have security, development will also happen. And bad security conditions in Afghanistan did not only affect the academic area but all aspects of our society. Academia is one of the areas where bad security conditions have affected it a lot... [Before USWDP], we had faculty exchange. Lecturers were coming from around the world. But now, due to security problems, we do not have such advantages.

Due to security concerns in Afghanistan, U.S. partners have been unable to spend extended time in-country. Consequently, many discussions and decisions are slowed down by the amount of time it takes to communicate across time zones. U.S. partners also mentioned the challenge of choosing resources relevant to Afghanistan without having experience in the context. They also mentioned the difficulty in developing relationships with their partners with such limited facetime. U.S. faculty members who do travel to Afghanistan encourage their Afghan partners. Their visits reinforce the belief that the security situation in Afghanistan is becoming more stable. However, most U.S. interviewees expressed growing concern about their personal safety and sanity. The stress of traveling to and from campus and confinement indoors for safety during non-working times were specific challenges mentioned. One U.S. administrator said he has observed the steep learning curve his faculty members have navigated. He said they were unprepared for the large amount of time and the personal impact participating in the partnership would entail. In the future, he said their university would "...think carefully before entering into a similar agreement..." Another U.S. administrator said:

[This partnership] is a total commitment from all aspects. There is support from all the way higher up. I think nobody underestimates the risk and challenges in Afghanistan. But at the same time, since we have a team who knows it, or has the willingness to understand what's going, that leads to this. That's what gives us the strength to get involved.

Conclusion

At this point, there is great potential for these USWDP Afghan-U.S. university partnerships to be effective in strengthening the quality and relevance of higher education through the establishment of new degree programs, preparation of faculty members. Both Afghan and U.S. faculty members and administrators are pleased with the progress of the partnerships. However, they acknowledge that time will determine whether all they expected from the partnerships is realized. Despite many logistical challenges that partners have in communicating with each other, they are finding ways to relay messages to one another, whether through e-mail or calls on a regular basis. Communication of expectations and talking through decisions is a continuous process that partners are consciously navigating. Donor funding is enabling partners to work together and move toward their goals. The personal relationships, between partners seem to be mutually beneficial and both Afghan and U.S. partners express the desire to continue to work together beyond USWDP funding. However, it is unclear what, if any funding will be available long-term to support continued collaboration between universities. Currently, contextual factors including the lack of gender equality in participation in the partnership activities and the tenuous security environment in Afghanistan appear to be the greatest threat to the success of partnerships. The full development of degree programs and preparation of faculty members to sustain them within the remaining two years of USWDP funding depends on the ongoing flexibility of all stakeholders in response to contextual variables often out of their control such as Afghan society's perception of women's role in the labor market and academia in addition to the volatile security situation within Afghanistan.

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