Advancing Educational Opportunities in Afghanistan

The Asia Foundation re-established an office in Kabul in February 2002 to launch new program initiatives in key areas central to the development of post-Taliban Afghanistan. Essential among these initiatives is the creation of a strong educational system that is vital for long-term reconstruction of the country. The Asia Foundation addresses strategic educational needs in Afghanistan by supporting initiatives in higher education as well as increasing educational opportunities for women and girls.

The Afghan system of higher education, particularly Kabul University, had been developed into a relatively strong set of institutions by the late 1970s, in part through assistance from The Asia Foundation. Today, the Foundation continues to play an integral role in aiding the higher education institutions in Afghanistan by providing essential support to universities across Afghanistan, other educational institutions, and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

From 1989 to 1994, The Asia Foundation supported activities in basic literacy, numeracy, and vocational skills training for hundreds of poor Afghan women in refugee camps. Since the re-establishment of The Asia Foundation's office in Kabul, a major emphasis of the Foundation's re-emerging program in Afghanistan has been working to help women and girls rebuild their lives in the aftermath of the Taliban era. As part of its current programming, the Foundation has established strong links with the formal education system of Afghanistan – including the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Education - and is providing small grants to NGO partners in order to address strategic and emerging educational needs throughout the country. By initiating innovative and successful pilot projects, and working closely with Afghan partners, the Foundation has had a significant impact and advanced education in Afghanistan.

SUPPORT FOR THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF AFGHANISTAN

With the fall of the Taliban in 2001, higher education became a crucial part of reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan. The American University of Afghanistan (AUAF) was created in 2004 to provide young men and women with American-style higher education while celebrating the cultural heritage of Afghanistan.

Between 2005 and 2009, The Asia Foundation assisted the university through organizational and programmatic support. The primary objective of these efforts was to ensure that AUAF could operate as an independent, transparent, and accountable entity. To achieve this, the Foundation assumed fiduciary responsibilities for AUAF on behalf of USAID. Through the Foundation's support, AUAF accomplished several substantial achievements including: the establishment of
independent financial management and functional logistical facilities, the commencement of preparatory school and graduation classes, the finalization of a facilities master plan, and reaching adequate staffing levels. By March 2008, AUAf successfully passed a USAID-administered audit and was then able to apply for and subsequently obtain direct funding from USAID through assistance from the Foundation. By late 2009, AUAf had enrolled 259 undergraduate students and 129 students in the Foundation Studies program.

**NATIONAL COLLEGE ENTRANCE EXAMINATION PREPATORY COURSE**

One of the significant barriers facing students in Afghanistan is the lack of adequate and effective preparation for the national college entrance examination. Most Afghan students have little or no access to preparatory examination materials and are unfamiliar with registration procedures. This presents an enormous barrier in accessing higher education.

In an effort to address this issue, The Asia Foundation, in partnership with the Ministry of Education, implemented a nationwide college preparatory course program to ensure students are prepared for their national college entrance examination. Building on a successful pilot project in one province designed by the Foundation, in the ensuing two-year period between 2007 and 2009, 13,000 teachers were engaged across all 34 provinces of Afghanistan, who then reached approximately 200,000 students who were eligible for the national college entrance examination. Additionally, in 2009, 60,000 Dari and 40,000 Pashto examination guidebooks were distributed to students and 6,000 teachers’ guides were distributed to teachers. As of 2010, this program successfully and significantly increased the number of students, particularly female students, who sat for and subsequently passed the entrance exam for institutions of higher learning. In its initial year of 2006, less than 800 students participated in the preparatory course. By 2008, the number had increased to almost 89,000 students across all provinces. The Ministry of Education has now assumed complete responsibility for the preparatory courses.

**ADDRESSING EMERGING AND STRATEGIC EDUCATIONAL NEEDS**

The Asia Foundation has established a small grants mechanism to provide support for NGOs working to provide or strengthen basic and higher education in Afghanistan. For a variety of legitimate reasons, these organizations do not have direct access to funding from USAID. In August 2010, a small grant was issued to Geopolicy, Inc., a Dubai-based management consultancy group, to conduct an educational sector analysis and assessment of the Afghan National Education Strategic Plan for 2010-2014. Findings from this assessment will enable the Ministry of Education to apply for financing under the World Bank’s Fast Track Initiative (FTI) which allocates funds to assist developing nations achieve the Millennium Development Goal of universal primary education by 2015.

This small grants effort builds upon a prior small grant mechanism created by the Foundation in 2006 that supported various education initiatives including establishing 280 community libraries, a public campaign to further girl’s education on three national TV stations, provision of laboratory equipment and training for science teachers, and psychosocial training for teachers and girls.

**IMPROVING GIRLS’ SCHOOLS**

The Asia Foundation has helped to renovate two important girls’ schools in Kabul, the historic and prestigious Rabia-e-Balkhi Girls’ School and the Lama-e-Shaheed Girls’ School. Serving nearly 3,000 girls in grades K-12, the Rabia-e-Balkhi Girls’ School was almost destroyed during the years of conflict. From 2003, when the Foundation began its work with Rabia-e-Balkhi, classes
were being held in tents on rubble strewn grounds with no electricity, sanitation, or water supply, no desks or chairs, and almost no teaching materials. In partnership with the National Geographic Society Afghan Girls’ Fund and other private donors, the Foundation helped rebuild 14 classrooms, establish five science labs, provide classroom furnishings and educational materials, and create a new resource center with a library, multi-purpose conference and training hall, and computer-training lab. The Lama-e-Shaheed Girls’ School, supported with a grant from the Ketcham Family Foundation and other private donors, now has refurbished classrooms, a repaired roof and sanitation system, and more teaching materials and school supplies for the 4,500 female students and 155 teachers at the school.

**REMEDIAL AND ACCELERATED EDUCATION FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS**

Afghanistan’s educational system was devastated during the decades of war, and between the five years of Taliban rule, from 1996–2001, girls were forbidden to attend school. Today, women and girls are eager to resume their education. Since 2007, The Asia Foundation has partnered with Aid Afghanistan for Education (AAE) to provide remedial and accelerated education programs to at least 3,100 female students each year in eight provinces across the country. Students move up one grade level every eight months in order to complete their education. After completing the program, some students integrate into the regular school system while others continue their education with AAE. Overall, this program provides fundamental educational building blocks to help build a pool of educated girls and women and increase their opportunities to access to higher education, secure jobs, and promote gender equality.

**KABUL UNIVERSITY’S WOMEN’S DORMITORY**

In April 2010, in partnership with the Ministry of Higher Education, The Asia Foundation completed development of the environmentally friendly National Women’s Dormitory at Kabul University. Kabul University plays a particularly important role in providing technical education and training needed for Afghan reconstruction. Beginning in 2004, the university inaugurated a modern dormitory that now houses over 1,100 female students from 28 provinces outside of Kabul. Since 2008, with support from USAID, the Foundation has provided vital upgrades to the dormitory and worked to improve its operations and management while also expanding the scope of services made available to its female students. The Foundation has also provided support for the development of enrichment programs which aim to increase the quality of life for students living in the dormitory while also building their civic values and leadership skills. Through this support, the dormitory is becoming a place where both female students and staff can build a healthy, caring community and is fostering an academically supportive environment where young women can reach their full potential to be well-educated citizens and future leaders.

**THE AFGHANISTAN CENTER AT KABUL UNIVERSITY**

The Afghanistan Center at Kabul University (ACKU) is the only depository providing a comprehensive collection of research materials in the country. ACKU’s goal is to share this unique and important national resource with students and the academic community for the benefit of the people of Afghanistan. The Asia Foundation provides fiduciary oversight to ACKU as well as technical and on-the-job mentoring in order to enable ACKU to absorb and manage its substantial growth and also provide educational materials to disadvantaged and remote communities throughout the country through its box library extension program (ABLE). This will ultimately result in a dynamic research and information institution able to manage and advance research on Afghanistan.
BOOKS FOR ASIA

The Asia Foundation established its office in Afghanistan in 1954 and supported educational institutions with donations of English books and educational materials until the late 1970s. In 2002, the Foundation re-opened its office and re-established its Books for Asia program. The Foundation was one of the first organizations to help re-establish libraries by providing English-language materials to many institutions in Afghanistan after the expulsion of the Taliban.


Books for Asia donates approximately 40,000 new books and other educational materials annually to approximately 280 institutions across Afghanistan, including schools, public libraries, universities, and teacher training centers in support of youth and adult literacy; and nongovernmental organizations and government ministries. Donated by prominent publishers, these books are highly valued by Afghan institutions.

The Asia Foundation is a private, non-profit, non-governmental organization. Through its programs, the Foundation builds leadership, improves policies, and strengthens institutions to foster greater openness and shared prosperity in the Asia-Pacific region. It is funded by contributions from corporations, foundations, individuals, and governmental organizations in the U.S., Europe, Canada, Australia, and Asia, and an annual appropriation from the U.S. Congress.