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Introduction

It is well documented that a quarter century of conflict and oppression in Afghanistan decimated what was once one of the regions most respected and well-recognized higher education systems (Babury & Hayward, 2013; Berger, 2010; Berger & Thoma, 2015; Boardman, Sylvester, Khalid & Shaheed, 2012; Tierney, 2005). A series of conflicts, beginning with the Soviet invasion of 1979, including civil war resulted in an estimated one million casualties while displacing approximately six million people. During this period, professional development lagged; buildings that had not been destroyed had otherwise fallen into disrepair. Within the higher education system numerous faculty and staff accepted university positions abroad, and after many years found it difficult to return. What remained of higher education in Afghanistan included outdated curricula, under-qualified faculty, lack of proper classrooms and laboratories, and under-resourced libraries. This paper describes one effort to contribute to the rebuilding of higher education in Afghanistan.

From 2006-2013, the Afghanistan Higher Education Project (HEP), funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) focused rebuilding efforts on improving the capacity to deliver high-quality higher education through enhanced curriculum, instruction, and organizational functioning. Major areas of programmatic activity included individual faculty development, the establishment of professional development centers, leadership development, strategic planning at the institutional and national levels, and the development of a quality assurance framework.

All work was aligned with the National Higher Education Strategic Plan: 2010-2014 (NHESP) created by the Ministry of Higher Education of Afghanistan. The NHESP was developed with assistance from HEP (along with The World Bank and UNESCO) and, in turn, became a guide for subsequent HEP activities. In order to accomplish intended objectives, the HEP team worked across numerous issues at multiple levels within the system. This necessitated taking an ecological approach (Mendoza, Malcolm & Parish, 2015) to change in higher education, which emphasizes using mutually reinforcing strategies at three levels within the overall higher education system: (1) macro-policy system, which is represented by the Ministry of Higher Education in conjunction with other government ministries and agencies; (2) institutional, which covers the universities and their constituent faculties; and (3) individual, which is comprised of individual faculty members and academic leaders. At the macro-policy system level, higher education improvements address interrelated elements that include policy, financing, administration, scope of the system, quality assurance and accreditation, faculty hiring and promotions, and student admissions, among others. Most of these issues flow down to the

institutional level, including implementation of higher education policies, use of allocated funds, administration of facilities and resources, program offerings, academic quality, faculty development, and student services. Ultimately, the success of higher education improvements can be realized only if these issues are addressed in light of the human capital and skills needed at the individual level to ensure effective higher education administration, instruction, and learning. This approach entails addressing critical issues at the individual level through the development of leadership, managers and administrators, faculty members and researchers, and students.

Depending on the issue and associated activities, HEP began within a specific level and then engaged in strategies that facilitated progress and reinforced support across all levels. While a comprehensive examination of this approach in all project activities is beyond the scope of this paper, we have selected three exemplar activities to illustrate such cross-level strategic work: the development of the quality assurance framework at the national macro-policy system level; institutional development and strategic planning at the institutional level; and pedagogical training for faculty members at the individual level.

At the macro-policy level, work on the quality assurance framework was conducted by the MoHE and HEP, and focused on developing *Bye-laws for Quality Assurance and Accreditation* as well as providing workshops throughout the Ministry and higher education system. At the institutional level, HEP successfully collaborated with 18 institutions in establishing Institutional Development Teams (IDTs) comprised of leaders and members of both faculty and staff. HEP additionally facilitated the development of the first Institutional Development Plans, each reflecting the prioritized needs of the institution. This was followed by HEP assisting MoHE and these Afghan universities with developing their strategic plans in line with the NHESP priorities. Lastly, at the individual level, HEP focused on developing and conducting seven pedagogy courses for approximately 867 faculty.

Methods

This methodology includes qualitative and quantitative data gathering and analysis. In order to assess the impact of the work on quality assurance at the macro-policy level, a questionnaire was distributed to and collected from 48 rectors, deputy rectors, strategic plan development committee members, quality assurance committee members, and other key administrative staff in eleven of the participating universities and institutes. To assess the institutional level, an IDT questionnaire was also distributed to 54 previous and new IDT members, deans and key administrative staff of eleven selected universities and institutes. Simultaneously, at the individual level, 42 classroom observations were conducted by HEP staff using an observation checklist, at the end of each classroom observation faculty questionnaire was distributed to the observed professors and a student questionnaire was distributed to all students present for those classroom observations. The results of the classroom observation, faculty questionnaire, and student questionnaire were triangulated in addition to individual analysis of each data set.

Preliminary Findings and Conclusions

The results of the assessment indicated that the quality of teaching improved significantly and that these individual gains were supported by improved organizational leadership and infrastructure as a result of the institutional development process. Furthermore, the work on quality assurance at the policy level resulted in those faculty members and their faculties being identified as exemplar models for the rest of the system. The quality assurance framework also benefitted because the new standards were able to be implemented more rapidly in the 18 faculties that had improved individual pedagogy and engaged in the institutional development activities. It was also clear that there were mixed results at the institutional level as some of the institutional development efforts were more comprehensive than others and the scope of change varied from institution to institution.

References

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