

Elite Universities to Open

Author: [Habiburahman Ibrahimi](#)

Despite Afghanistan's poverty, international colleges say there is a market for fee-paying education.

Fee-paying universities might seem an unlikely commercial venture in Afghanistan, but there are now plans for at least two international colleges offering high-quality teaching in Kabul.

Demand is high for education in a country where teaching is valued but years of conflict have wrought havoc with the state system. And apparently there are enough people with money to make paid schooling a viable business prospect.

There is talk of setting up an American University of Afghanistan, along the lines of the long-established institutions in Cairo and Beirut.

And the private Ariana Gulf Medical College financed by a group from the United Arab Emirates has just announced that will open its doors next year to 100 students able to stump up the 10,000 US dollars annual fee.

The government's under-secretary for higher education, Ghulam Muhaiuddin Dariz, told IWPR that institutes in India, Japan and Germany had also expressed interest in setting up in Afghanistan. He said any suitable organisation would be welcome.

"The private universities will be equipped with modern technology and equipment, which will help the development of our country," he said. Even though few people would be able to attend such institutions, he said, the knowledge that was passed on would benefit everyone.

The state-run higher education system is hard pressed to cope with the country's 35,000 students. Textbooks from the Eighties - the communist era - are still in use. And lecturers often attend erratically because they have second jobs to supplement their meagre salaries.

There is already a burgeoning private college sector, mainly offering courses in English and computing.

Afghanistan has a long tradition of public schooling. The 1964 constitution - which will remain in use until a new basic law is approved in a few months - stipulates that every Afghan has the right to an education, and that the state should provide it free of charge.

The provision that the "state alone has the right and duty to establish and administer the institutions of public and higher learning" appears to rule out foreign-backed private institutions.

Qudratullah Azimi, head of student affairs at the higher education ministry, told IWPR that this apparent contradiction is being discussed with the commission now working on the new constitution. That document should be finalised in December, before either the American university or the medical college open.

Azimi dismissed the widespread rumours that allowing private universities could foreshadow a move to

charge fees at state institutions.

The Ariana college will run six-year courses to turn out doctors, using English as the teaching medium. Mohammad Nazer, an administrative officer for the Emirates-based Thumbay Group which is behind the college, told IWPR that his company will also provide expertise to two local hospitals, and equip them with some of the latest technology.

He said that the college may offer lower fees to talented but poor students, and that the 10,000 dollar charge itself represented a reduction. "The fee for one student in Dubai is 25,000 dollars, but here we have offered a big discount to Afghans," he said. "Donor countries and non-government organisations may also pay the fees of some students."

Planning for the American university is at an earlier stage of development, with a feasibility study under way. A report by the United States Trade and Development Agency, which is backing the study, envisages that first-year courses will start as soon as 2004 or 2005. With further courses added year by year, the university will eventually offer a four-year undergraduate programme of American-style education, taught in English.

The report suggests that capital expenditure on the university will be up to 20 million dollars.

Scott Parris, the local representative of the Coordinating Council for International Universities which is driving the project, said that in the longer term they may also look at offering post-graduate courses, something not currently available in Afghanistan.

It is hard to see who could afford to pay for a private education in one of the world's poorest countries. But Parris said a countrywide marketing survey, floating an annual price tag of between 2,000 and 5,000 dollars, was giving rise to "keen interest". He said many of the prospective students would probably be supported by relatives abroad.

These students might once have gone abroad to study, but with visas increasingly hard to come by for Afghans, Parris said "we are bringing foreign education to them."

Afghan academics and students voiced mixed feelings about the development.

The dean of the Kabul Medical Institute, Cheragh Ali Cheragh, told IWPR that it was a positive step which would develop Afghanistan's teaching facilities.

Amir Jan Wahid Ahmadzai, who used to teach journalism at Kabul University before joining a private institute in Wardak province, complained that public-sector education is lagging years behind. "The books which are used for teaching at Kabul University were printed in Moscow in communist times. They are very old, and neither the teachers nor the students show interest." He said that he would only teach privately now.

Opponents of the private universities fear that the state sector will be even further impoverished if richer students opt out and go for an elite education instead.

Fayaz Shindandi, who teaches literature at Kabul University, is among those deeply opposed to the move.

"Our countrymen don't have shelter, nor do they have anything to drink or eat," he said. "Establishing a private university at this time is senseless... the state universities will be finished with the establishment of private ones, because they won't have as many facilities."

Zakria Sadat, a third year student at the Kabul Medical Institute, says that for most students, fees are unthinkable because just buying a notebook is a stretch. She said, "With such fees at the private universities, only the children of [military] commanders and wealthy businessmen will be able to study. The others won't be able to afford it."

Habiburahman Ibrahimy is a freelance journalist undergoing IWPR training. Hafizullah Gardesh is a staff reporter for IWPR.

Location: [Afghanistan](#)

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/elite-universities-open>