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## **AFGHANISTAN'S RAPID PROGRESS IN EDUCATION IS TRANSLATING INTO PROGRESS FOR THE PRIVATE SECTOR**

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**AACC Executive Committee and Board Member**

On the first day of the unilaterally agreed upon Taliban cease fire in Afghanistan, our optimism fades quickly as we learn that at least 27 people have been killed. The recent attacks throughout the country are prominently featured each day in the worldwide press. For those of us who have been involved with Afghanistan for many years, it is vital that we remind those less involved of the progress that has been made over the last decade plus.

The positive progress in areas such as healthcare, education, entrepreneurship, agriculture, and female empowerment is rarely reported in the press. It is an honor for me to relate a few facts and an anecdote regarding education in Afghanistan in 2018 that will perhaps present a different image of a country that has struggled through decades of war. Perhaps, these are not sensational enough for the front pages of the newspapers, or the lead stories in the nightly news, but worthy of note.

### **GENERAL EDUCATION TRENDS 2017-2018:**

The Human Rights Watch Report from late 2017 reported that 9.3 million children are now in school, 39% of them girls compared to no girls during the Taliban. That is positive progress. USAID reports that over 300,000 students are attending the 157 public and private universities in Afghanistan and over 100,000 are women. In 2001, 1% of the college age population attended universities, today it is nearly 10%. *This is positive progress.*

### **A HIGHER EDUCATION SUCCESS STORY:**

The American University of Afghanistan (AUAF), was chartered under the new Afghan Constitution and Civil Code as a private, not for profit, co-educational, independent, non-sectarian institution of higher education in 2006. AUAF implements an American model of a liberal arts education, with a focus on critical thinking, respect, civility, morality, integrity, and intellectual rigor, freedom of expression and gender and ethnic equality.

The first class in 2006 was comprised of 52 men and 1 woman. In 2018, nearly 2,000 students (45% women) from all 34 Afghan provinces participate in the undergraduate degree programs of business administration, political science and public administration, an undergraduate law program sponsored by Stanford University, an MBA program with concentrations in finance, accounting, and management and a master's in education program, and professional development non-degree courses in English, business and finance. Faculty members, from over 15 countries, with masters and doctoral degrees from the world's finest universities foster the world-class education. Eleven percent (11%) of the AUAF graduates are Fulbright scholars, the highest percentage of any university in the world. *This is positive progress.*

**Afghan Student Anecdote:**

In August 2016, American University of Afghanistan was the target of a complex Terrorist attack that killed seven students, a beloved Afghan professor with a Stanford education and was preparing to attend Oxford University, three unarmed AUAF guards, one guard from the neighboring school for the blind, and three Afghan policemen. The school closed from August through March 2017 to rebuild and install security enhancements. A law student, Breshna Musazai, was in the mosque on that day in August, when gunfire started. Paralyzed in one leg by childhood polio, she struggled to get into the classroom building for safety. But instead she found the windows shattered and the floor full of glass and the walls were riddled with bullets. She was unable to move through the destroyed building. Unable to move and lying very still hoping that she could stay safe, a terrorist approached and looked her in the eye and shot her twice in the good leg. Hours later, he approached her again and shot her in the foot of the already devastated leg.

She lay helpless and in pain for hours in the hallway, bleeding and praying that the terrorists would assume that she was dead. She nearly was. Fast forward, she was rescued, and treated in a Kabul hospital. In need of extensive surgery, a member of the AUAF board, Dr. John Alexander, an Afghan-American with a specialized hospital in Dallas, generously agreed to treat her. She spent nearly seven months in Dallas, where they cured the massive infection and performed several surgeries on her leg. She returned to the university during the summer of 2017 to return to her studies.

In May 2018, she led the procession of graduates, and as she approached the stage, she abandoned her wheelchair and walked across the stage with the assistance of a walker, to receive her Stanford sponsored undergraduate law degree. Her desire is to go into the private sector. She is typical of the new generation of women and men in Afghanistan, courageous, tough, determined, and dedicated to contributing to their country's peace and prosperity. *This is positive progress.*

**AFGHAN BUSINESSES DEPEND ON EDUCATED EMPLOYEES:**

For many years, students in Afghanistan sought an education to allow them to go into the public sector. With the influx of new direct and foreign investment, the growth of private enterprise and the fostering of entrepreneurship, there has been a shift in mentality. Students now are pursuing the private sector. Afghan Wireless, CEO, Dr. Ehsan Bayat has stated publicly that his company pursues AUAF business school graduates and business majors because of their background in finance, management, marketing, fluency in English, etc. He has recently donated the Bayat Institute of Technology building on the AUAF campus to focus on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math), an area of study and career development still underdeveloped in Afghanistan. Locally owned banks, media and communication firms, agriculture enterprises, as well as accounting firms and NGOs are benefitting from an increasing labor pool of young men and women with a solid background of business education. *This is positive progress.*

In closing, while the news media might not feature it, positive change is happening and is on the horizon in Afghanistan. Gradual transformation is bringing increased direct and international investment, growth of the private sector with a new focus on entrepreneurial ventures, rising numbers of men and women in higher education with an emphasis on business education and law. These are transformative trends. To quote Nelson Mandela, "education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world." And in Afghanistan--Education will prevail. *This is positive progress.*

**[CLICK HERE to view AUAF Film](#)**