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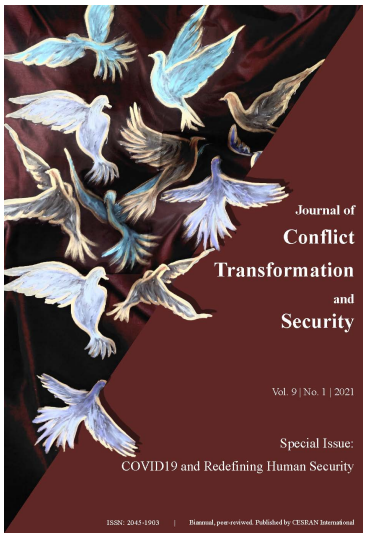
INDEXING & ABSTRACTING



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RESEARCH ARTICLE **JCTS** *Volume 10, Number 1, 2023*

Failing to Decolonise Knowledge Production in the Periphery: The Compromise of Afghan Research and Higher Education 2001-2021

Jeremy Simpson*

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ABSTRACT

The article outlines some structural features of the Afghan fields of research and higher education during the period 2001-2021, arguing that problems with the implementation of development programs in these interdependent sectors contributed to the collapse of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in 2021. Two key problem areas are identified: the subordination of Afghan research and researchers to the agendas and methodologies of intervening metropolitan institutions involved in research, and the failure to prevent endemic corruption in delivery of educational aid and development from undermining both local capacities for knowledge production and the perceived legitimacy of the Afghan state. In the research field the outcome was un-reflexive and often inadequate knowledge of Afghanistan and of intervention. In higher education, the outcome of inadequate metropolitan oversight was conversion of development aid into elite patronage, the article concluding that narratives of 'Afghan corruption' omit the key enabling role of metropolitan institutions.

Keywords: *Afghanistan, Research, Education, Knowledge, Corruption, Decolonial, Periphery*

Biographical Note: *Jeremy Simpson holds a PhD in Sociology and Honours in Social Science from the University of Sydney. His thesis concerned radical inequalities in experiences of risk in Afghanistan, critiquing the dominant 'risk society' position. He has lived and worked independently in Afghanistan at intervals from 2011, most recently for a year in 2018. Dr Simpson has worked as capacity-builder in Afghan higher education, as research consultant for Afghan research NGOs, as Advisor to the Ministry of Education, and been a Visiting Scholar at ACKU and AREU. Most recently he has been HRC Visiting Fellow at ANU and part of the UTS White Ribbon project supporting Afghan women.*

Introduction

In this article I will be briefly outlining some features of the Afghan fields of research and higher education, as these pertain to the relative lack of development of an autonomous Afghan capacity for knowledge production within contemporary Afghanistan. I will be focusing on the period of metropolitan intervention 2001-2021, in an attempt to show how failures in intervention practice in the specific fields of research and education contributed to the wider failure of the intervention project, culminating in 2021 in the collapse of the metropolitan-sponsored Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (IRoA) and the resurgence of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEoA). In particular, I will be indicating how the domination of Afghan research and researchers by metropolitan researchers and research institutions led to the production of unreliable or even invalid knowledge of Afghanistan and of the effects of intervention. In addition to contributing to compromise of the intervention project through the use of questionable analyses in support of given policies – such as support for an increasingly corrupt and unresponsive central government – lack of meaningful Afghan participation in externally-sponsored research led to failures in building local capacities for knowledge production. The extensive corruption that characterised metropolitan intervention in Afghan education led to a corresponding failure to provide an adequate basis for future Afghan research capacity, which it is argued must ultimately derive from local higher education. I conclude that responsibility for problems of corruption lay with metropolitan institutions administering the aid and development project, due to a combination of institutional risk-aversion and short-termism or careerism emphasising reportable outcomes oriented to internal institutional objectives, rather than meaningful development outcomes at Afghan community level.

In framing the analysis that follows, I am drawing on my own personal experience of the Afghan research and education fields, an experience going back to 2011 as a volunteer advisor with the Ministry of Education of the IRoA. Much of what follows draws on the year I spent in Afghanistan in 2018, working independently as a capacity building consultant and visiting scholar with various research institutions, both public and private, and with both public and private institutions of higher education. The basis of my analysis is hence direct experience of conditions outside the fortified metropolitan enclaves that intervening institutions in Afghanistan, whether INGOs or intervening-state agencies, operated in until 2021. Where I have cited sources in support of points, it is because I found their analysis of local conditions borne out in my own experience: where I make a descriptive or analytical statement without citation, I am basing this on my own experience, and to some extent on the anecdotal evidence of Afghans with whom I was working at that time and subsequently.

The colonisation of the Afghan research field by metropolitan intervention

Distinctions of power in research fields instutionalise the global 'North' and 'South' division in the production of social-scientific or sociological knowledge foregrounded by Connell in *Southern Theory*[1]. In peripheralised spaces[2] such as Afghanistan, power relations are in practice a question of the conditions of employment for contracted local researchers and research institutions. Research is subordinated to maintaining ongoing funding relationships, in the case of institutions, or to gaining access to research-professional employment or metropolitan higher education, in the case of individual researchers. In Afghanistan, access to metropolitan higher education or employment can often operate as a potential migration pathway, a primary objective for many Afghans after decades of conflict and attendant social and economic instability. The Afghan research field can be seen as an "information economy"[3], where particular forms of knowledge were produced 'to order', and had a particular 'exchange value' in granting access to opportunities such as contracts, consultancies, scholarships and migration to metropolitan spaces and positions. The Afghan information economy or research field was hence extensively *colonised*

[1]Connell, *Southern Theory*
[2]Hallaq, *Restating Orientalism*
[3]van der Haar et al., "Construction of knowledge in conflict-affected settings" 523-524

by metropolitan institutions of knowledge production during the period 2001-2021, due to external incentives structuring the local field of knowledge production and determining the particular forms of knowledge produced[4].

Local research capacity building during the period to 2021 was limited by the extent of domination of Afghan research institutions and researchers by metropolitan INGOs and intervening-state agencies engaged in research, and by metropolitan researchers more generally[5]. The relations of domination in this specific case may be seen as an instance of the production of knowledge proceeding from a particular distribution of power and resources within a field, as theorised by Pierre Bourdieu[6]. Risks of field work were devolved to local researchers but the benefits of grants, publications and advancement of careers accrued to international researchers who oversee and write up studies[7], a postcolonial relation where "the metropole produces theory and the periphery is either erased entirely … or, at best, supplies metropolitan theory with data"[8]. The modes of knowledge production aligned with such metropolitan institutional interests arguably represent an instance of a colonial or neocolonial "surveillance modality" of "peripheral groups … perceived as a threat to social order"[9].

In parallel, the particular forms of knowledge recognised as useful, and therefore legitimate, by intervening state institutions operated as a dominant methodological position, what may be referred to as a "pentagon epistemology"[10]. From an intervening state or security institution perspective, only those forms of knowledge that ultimately facilitate intervention – serving force projection or force protection objectives, or the (re)construction of state and society in line with intervening state objectives – will be recognised as deserving of funding. Methodologically, the dominant 'pentagon epistemology' was overwhelming positivistic, emphasising statistical knowledge, and formal case-comparative methods used to address particular problems of intervention policy, as the only legitimate forms of knowledge. Attendant emphasis on technical rigour and on the generalisability of 'standard' research methods led to a corresponding de-emphasis of questions of validity, particularly the adequacy of knowledge produced as a representation of Afghan experience or understandings.

During the period 2001-2021, Afghan researchers operated largely as "local *enumerators*" in the service of "outside *researchers*"[11], reflecting again the metropolitan pre-occupation, outside relatively marginalised fields of ethnographic-anthropological knowledge production, with production of a positivistic and statistical 'knowledge' representing the postcolonial continuation of an imperial-colonial "enumerative modality"[12]. In practice, local research and local research capacity-building were constrained by a pre-occupation with surveys, a "survey modality" that was also a feature of colonial administrations[13]. Under this 'survey modality', Afghan researchers and research institutions as 'implementing partners' were largely confined to implementing surveys in the field, and otherwise operating as local 'fixers' for metropolitan research projects. The capacity of local researchers to meaningfully contribute to metropolitan research, due to their significant advantages in access to local informants and vastly greater contextual understanding, was generally subordinated to implementation of externally designed projects into which they were often given little meaningful input[14]. In many cases, Afghan researchers as 'enumerators' were limited to entering numbers or pre-determined analytical codes into spreadsheets, resulting in a local perception that 'research' was simply the provision of required numbers or responses to

[4]Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*
[5]Khattak, "Reflections on Pakistan and Afghanistan" 10-11
[6]Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*
[7]Khattak "Reflections" 33
[8]Reed "Theoretical Labours Necessary for a Global Sociology" 162
[9]Shamsul "From Colonial Knowledge to Multiculturalism" 112
[10]Gusterson "War on Terror" 292
[11]Khattak "Reflections" 39, emphases mine
[12]Shamsul "Colonial Knowledge" 112
[13]Shamsul "Colonial Knowledge" 112; see also Nader "Dialogues Between the Middle East and the West"
[14]Milton *Higher Education and Post-Conflict Recovery* 152-153

donor institutions. The result was the production of un-reflexive and hence potentially invalid analyses, by metropolitan researchers with no real understanding of local conditions and little interest in actual peripheral experience, beyond what was directly relevant to the categories of their own metropolitan research.

Effects in practice of metropolitan dominance on knowledge production

In attempting to employ metropolitan research instruments such as particular 'standard' surveys under Afghan conditions, the result was in many cases the production of 'findings' that were known to be false. A key example here were surveys indicating that a majority of the Afghan population had confidence in or otherwise supported the central government of the Islamic Republic, where this was known not to be the case[15], and where in parallel the capacity to adequately implement such surveys in Afghanistan was known to be lacking[16]. As "survey penetration is usually shallow and concentrated on what is measurable at the time"[17] a "rigidly structured questionnaire will elicit little useful data … some research techniques are completely useless in a war situation"[18]. The result was the use of invalid findings in support of particular policies, such as supporting a central government that surveys de-problematised, using responses categories or methods that were not valid outside the metropolitan contexts where they were originally developed, a basic "misrecognition" in Bourdieu's terminology[19].

Examples in practice of misrecognition would involve posing questions that would never occur to research participants, in terms they would never use, for example asking Afghans in outlying areas if they 'support' the central government, where they may have no referents for what 'support' or even 'central government' might mean. Such methods often result in responses of indifference or politeness, or spontaneous analogising and generalising that does not necessarily meaningfully relate to the actual experience of the setting or field that the researcher is attempting to investigate[20]. In general, there was an unacknowledged problem of respondents telling researchers identified with donors what they thought they wanted to hear, particularly relative to (usually again misrecognised) possibilities for gaining access to metropolitan aid, funding, or opportunities such as scholarships. Further methodological problems resulted from attempting to implement surveys as quickly and cheaply as possible, and lack of transparency about the probability of producing invalid data or analysis as a result. For example, Asia Foundation surveys, usually considered among the more reliable, could involve as many as 6500 separate survey interviews across 34 provinces in a single month, with little time allowed to analyse the data produced, and little discussion of the methodology of the study and how it might affect the analysis in the presentation of the survey findings[21].

The methodological and analytical problems arising from disconnection from the setting were exacerbated by perceptions of extreme danger to metropolitan personnel of operating in Afghanistan during the period of international military operations, reinforcing a culture of individual and institutional risk aversion, and preoccupation with risk management, which I have discussed elsewhere[22]. Preoccupied with possible risks, metropolitan staff of donor institutions would "shy away from working with staff in the field, or getting directly involved in or observing the operation of projects"[23]. The result was limited-to-non-existent quality assurance of development and research projects, and very limited opportunities for local researchers to work directly with metropolitan researchers

[15]Guistozzi *The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan* 35-37
[16]Khattak "Reflections" 25
[17]Barakat et al., "Research Design" 995
[18]Barakat and Ellis "Collecting Data and Information in War Circumstances" 154
[19]Bourdieu "Reflexive Sociology" 128
[20]Bourdieu "Reflexive Sociology" 128
[21]Bazia *Education in Afghanistan* 191
[22]Simpson "The Enclavisation of Intervention in Afghanistan" "Risk Management Responses to Armed Non-State Actor Risk in Afghanistan" and *Catastrophe and precaution outside the risk society*; see also Duffield "Risk-Management and the Fortified Aid Compound" and "Danger, resilience and the aid industry"
[23]Hayward *Transforming Higher Education In Afghanistan* 125

and hence build capacity above the survey-implementation and data-entry-enumerator level. Under these conditions, local research institutions tended to be almost entirely dependent on metropolitan researchers not simply for funding but for the production of almost any higher-level research outcome[24], and were largely unable to move beyond this condition of dependency and incapacity.

The result was a largely irreconcilable tension, observable in the cases of the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) and the Afghanistan Centre at Kabul University (ACKU) for example, between the need to localise and end their dependence on metropolitan consultants, and the need to keep their institutions in being through the maintenance of ongoing funding relationships. Where local capacity for the production of higher-level research outcomes was mostly lacking, local research institutions were forced to choose between delivering lower quality outcomes or continued dependency on non-local consultants. The result was a vicious circle where local researchers were only employed in low-level implementation roles, if at all, as they generally lacked research capacities above this level[25], but where as a result they were denied the opportunity to develop capacity for higher-level research, particularly the key capacity of autonomous publication of research.

To date it is almost entirely through assimilation of Afghan researchers to metropolitan institutions and fields that Afghan capacity for knowledge production has developed. However, the lack of adequate preparation for higher-level knowledge production resulting from the limitations of the local education system, and Afghan higher education in particular, in addition to the difficulties attendant on migration, has potential to limit the capacity of Afghan diaspora scholars to produce a genuinely *decolonised* Afghan knowledge of Afghanistan. In particular, the dependency involved in patron-client relationships between peripheral-migrant or diaspora scholars and metropolitan sponsors controlling access to opportunity-granting networks and especially publication militates against possibilities for autonomy from metropolitan structures of knowledge production. Insofar as autonomous knowledge production requires autonomous institutions, peripheral-nation higher education institutions would seem to be an obvious choice for capacity-building support, both as producers of knowledge, and of capacities for knowledge production on which non-higher education institutions such as research organisations depend. Autonomous peripheral capacity in higher education would on this basis seem central to postcolonial projects of decolonisation of knowledge of peripheralised spaces.

The Afghan higher education field 2001-2021

A fundamental demographic feature of contemporary Afghanistan is the disproportionate youthfulness of the population, 63 percent of the population in 2018 being under the age of 25[26], creating a proportionate demand for education, a demand increased by recognition by Afghans post-2001 of education, and particularly higher education, as a key pathway to social and global mobility[27]. In Afghanistan, very high rates of youth unemployment strongly incentivise seeking a higher education place, both to increase employability, and to defer having to seek employment for as long as possible. The result is demand for higher education places dramatically outstripping supply, especially the supply of subsidised places at the more prestigious public universities[28], notably the University of Kabul. Rapid expansion of higher education after 2001 resulted in significant quality issues in a sector already severely affected by previous periods of conflict, particularly the urban destruction of the civil war period in the early 1990s, issues made even more problematic by the high expense of maintaining a student even within the public system. The only other option, private higher education, which hence experienced dramatic expansion during the period, is even more expensive, despite being plagued by even more serious issues of quality, including instances of

[24]Milton *Higher Education* 153
[25]Hayward *Transforming Higher Education* 105-106
[26]National Statistics and Information Authority/CSO "Afghanistan Statistical Yearbook" 4
[27]Baiza *Education in Afghanistan* 192
[28]Milton *Higher Education* 58-60

deliberate fraud[29].

The only higher-quality private sector institution, the American University of Afghanistan (AUAF) has annual fees making it inaccessible to the overwhelming majority of Afghans, despite its crucial position as the key local higher education institution for gaining access to metropolitan higher education. However even AUAF had significant problems with the quality of teaching and research[30], owing in part to generally low levels of faculty qualification by international standards. AUAF can be considered primarily to represent an example of a higher-educational institution where, as theorised by Igarishi and Saito in their work on cosmopolitanism as cultural capital[31], non-Northwestern-metropolitan or peripheral subjects can be acculturated to a dominant cosmopolitan-globalist culture, hence increasing their chances of gaining access to a range of metropolitan fields, usually by migration. The assimilationist or global-multiculturalist approach to building peripheral knowledge-production capacity has attracted strong criticism from postcolonial theorists, as representing no more than elite "'minority particularisms' in search of inclusion in the dominant system"[32]. From the postcolonial perspective, elite 'inclusions' are not conducive to genuine decolonisation of knowledge production, but only to token assimilation of a small minority of elite peripheral subjects to metropolitan culture or knowledge[33].

What development did take place in Afghan higher education in the period of peak intervention 2002-2014 tended to focus on physical infrastructure, in line with the general preoccupation of the major metropolitan donor institutions with programs of infrastructure development[34], and with administration of the attendant private and state contracts and contracting relationships. Notable also was the emphasis on prestige facilities, with quality of education identified largely with the physical quality of facilities that could be visually presented in reports[35], for example the Afghanistan Centre at Kabul University (ACKU), or the prestige reception and event spaces within the large and extensively fortified AUAF complex. As such prestige facilities were largely inaccessible to general student populations, they had only a limited effect in building local capacities. A parallel development was donor contracting for construction of locally-prestigious ICT facilities at both public and private institutions, presented as a technical solution to Afghanistan's academic isolation and almost total lack of access to even minimal scholarly resources[36]. Again, access to these facilities was often restricted, or technical issues limited their usefulness, and basic issues of lack of access to subscription-only academic libraries or databases required for higher-level knowledge production remained un-addressed.

Part of the problem for building the capacity of higher education followed from the way, historically, higher education in Afghanistan has been for the "authorisation" or recognition of existing, usually familial, social statuses, through titles, credentials and occupancy of positions, rather than for the development of specific skills, or any more general capacity for knowledge production[37]. The historical capacity of a higher education place, and especially graduation with a title such as 'Doctor' or 'Engineer', to confer status on a family or associated network[38], led to places being sought as honours, as a position conferred through patronage, or in recognition of the status of the head of the family. New expectations of higher education after 2001 resulted in a culture of credentialism, whereby certificates were used to secure access to further opportunities, such as scholarships, or other internally or externally funded positions or opportunities that require given formal qualifications. Credentialism tended to lead to a social and political pre-occupation with *access* to the education system, but a corresponding

[29]Hayward *Transforming Higher Education* 120
[30]Khattak "Reflections" 13
[31]Igarishi and Saito "Exploring the Intersection of Globalization, Education and Stratification"
[32]Boatca and Costa "Postcolonial sociology: a research agenda" 15
[33]Bhambra "Towards a Postcolonial Global Sociology"
[34]Hayward *Transforming Higher Education* 119
[35]Tarheyar *Higher Education in Afghanistan* 44 and 53
[36]Milton *Higher Education* 42
[37]Daxner and Schrade "Higher Education in Afghanistan" 11
[38]Ali "Afghan students' difficult way into higher education" 3

disinterest in (or even active antipathy to) merit and the actual *quality* of education[39], especially where candidates were admitted to successively higher levels of education on grounds other than merit. From the relatively little that is known in specific cases, spurious credentialism seems to have been the rule rather than the exception: for example, at one technical institute of higher education, a teacher-training college, only ten percent of students attended but graduation certificates were issued to all enrolled students, and the absent students were included in official enrolment and graduation statistics[40].

Continuous with the problem of credentialism is that even the most prestigious and relatively well-supported higher education institutions in Afghanistan have very low academic and professional standards for graduation. For instance, at the University of Kabul, the leading public university, undergraduates do not in general write papers or learn basic academic and professional skills: only a single piece of written work may be required during the course of a degree for graduation, and low academic capacity and standards mean that even this piece of work is often plagiarised[41]. As elsewhere within the Afghan education system, there were serious issues with the consistent and equitable implementation of standards and the principle of merit, with frequent concessions for members of the families of those who are "important" or "have suffered"[42], or who can otherwise claim 'extenuating circumstances' where academic performance is concerned. In parallel, the oversubscription of prestigious disciplines such as political science has created an over-supply of graduates with low-quality qualifications in these areas, increasing unemployment where the state, traditionally the expected employer of the more-educated, is unable to absorb more graduates[43].

If graduates of higher education are unable to find employment, or if general education graduates are unable to secure a place in higher education, they may be more vulnerable to radicalisation[44]. Such graduates would obviously be particularly prone to radicalisation if they felt dissatisfied with the quality of the education system, and hence by extension with the central government, or if they felt that access to public higher education was compromised by government misadministration or corruption.

Disenchantment due to the effects of corruption on prospects for employment or access to higher education may have a more radicalising effect than exposure to militant ideologies, or may significantly increase the effect of such exposure[45]. Expansion of the education system but not of employment opportunities, and attendant radicalisation of unemployed graduates, has historically resulted in conflict and violent regime change in Afghanistan, being one of the key pre-conditions of the 1978 communist coup and subsequent civil wars. Graduates in the 1960s and 1970s, some of whom would go on to become key figures in later communist and fundamentalist factions, found themselves unable to secure adequate employment, largely due to lack of government connections, leading to increasing alienation from the central government[46]. Disenchantment of un- or underemployed graduates of both general and higher education with the central government was on historical evidence alone likely to have been a contributing factor to events in 2021.

Student and graduate concerns regarding the quality of higher education and the need for reform emerged early after 2001, but concerns expressed in 2002-2003 remained un-addressed ten years later[47], with later attempts at reform often effectively blocked by the Ministry of Higher Education[48]. An emphasis on seniority or social connections rather than capacity or merit resulted in serious problems with largely unqualified or incompetent so-

[39]Hayward *Transforming Higher Education* 129
[40]Baiza *Education in Afghanistan* 231
[41]Khattak "Reflections" 28
[42]Hayward *Transforming Higher Education* 7
[43]Milton *Higher Education* 60 and Ali and Roehrs "University entry exams as bottleneck for higher education" 5
[44]Daxner and Schrade "Higher Education in Afghanistan" 13-14
[45]Khousary "Madrassas and general education in Afghanistan" 122
[46]Guistozzi "Politics of Education in Afghanistan" 10
[47]Hayward *Transforming Higher Education* 32
[48]Milton *Higher Education* 76

called 'professors'[49], and whole 'universities' without PhD-holding staff: in many cases so-called 'faculties' across the higher education sector were composed largely of junior teaching assistants[50]. Students were often graduated, and graduates appointed to faculty positions as 'professors', as an honour or status-conferring title as noted above, on bases of nepotism or favoritism, or through patron-client networks, or in response to political pressure on institutions and individual academic and administrative staff that at times included armed intimidation[51].

Rather than focusing on actual reform, programs of capacity-building were characterised more by a pre-occupation with donor conditionality for funding. Funding conditionality tended to focus on the production of strategic plans and reports, largely limited to Ministry or at best university administrative-executive level, as centralisation at high levels made implementing programs easier for donor institutions. Conflicts resulted over control of the process, on the side of the Ministries of Education and Higher Education mainly concerning control of funds and donor control of contracting and sub-contracting, and on the side of donor institutions concerning failures to meet conditions for release of funds. The result was funding delays, delaying implementation, followed by shortfalls in capacity to implement, further delays, and projects hence remaining uncompleted across successive project cycles[52]. Despite – or possibly because of – lack of outcomes relative to the extent of funding, the consultancies, infrastructure contracts and funding for capacity-building projects came to represent what has been described as a "huge reservoir of patronage"[53]. Opportunities for patronage accrued not only to local positions and institutions, but also to the metropolitan positions and institutions delivering the aid, vis-à-vis both local and international contractors and implementing partners. Given patron-client relations, lack of transparency, no independent oversight and multi-million-dollar programs, it was naïve to suppose that endemic corruption would not inevitably result[54].

The corruption of Afghan capacity-building by metropolitan intervention

Corruption, specifically perceptions of monopolisation of metropolitan resources by a minority composed of central government factional elites, was a significant popular issue and source of unrest and disaffection in Afghanistan almost from the outset of intervention. For example, a collapse of popular enthusiasm for state-sponsored education was noticeable from as early as 2002 due to the low quality of government services[55], and due to a perceived general failure of intervention from that point onwards to produce significant concrete outcomes at community level. The extent of the problem was under-reported throughout the 2001-2021 period, despite repeated assertions by many Afghans that corruption was as significant an issue as physical security and the ongoing insurgent conflict between the IRoA and Coalition and the IEoA[56]. In the failure to foreground corruption as a key problem, the operation of a key structural condition of knowledge production about Afghanistan can be seen, one determined by an alignment between local governance elites *and* intervening metropolitan institutions, both with vested interests in de-emphasising the extent of corruption.

Arguments were made in regard to tolerating corruption as an element of a traditional culture of patronage, or relative to Afghanistan as a unique setting in which 'western' models of transparency in contracting or recruitment, quality assurance or other standards were inappropriate or even culturally insensitive[57]. Leaving aside the extent to which this is an obviously stereotypical and orientalising representation of a peripheral society and culture[58], a distinction can readily be made between more traditional-cultural or central-state institutional social-network models of patronage in Afghanistan before 2001, and conditions during the period of metropolitan intervention. Wholesale colonisation of virtually every Afghan institutional field and

[49]Baiza *Education in Afghanistan* 218
[50]Hayward *Transforming Higher Education* 137
[51]Khattak "Reflections"
[52]Baiza *Education in Afghanistan* 238-241
[53]Guistozzi "Politics of Education" 2
[54]Cordesman "How America Corrupted Afghanistan"
[55]Guistozzi "Politics of Education" 19
[56]Hayward *Transforming Higher Education* 26
[57]Hayward *Transforming Higher Education* 138
[58]Said *Orientalism*

governance sector after 2001 by metropolitan fields and institutions offered opportunities for appropriation through contracting, project implementation, consultancies and access to global mobility and migration pathways on a scale vastly greater than at any other period in modern Afghan history[59]. Contributing to the problem was a strong sense of entitlement to what might be termed the 'spoils of war' on the part of an older mujahideen generation who had survived the conflicts of the 1980s and 1990s[60].

A pervasive culture of metropolitan-funded institutional corruption at all levels resulted in a general popular perception that merit was largely irrelevant to access to opportunities. The effect was wholesale erosion of credibility for any educational qualification, and particularly higher education graduate qualifications, leading to endemic problems of faking of certificates and of records[61]: for example, over 1000 forged documents were discovered at the Ministry of Education in a single case in 2006, following the establishment of a central register[62]. Forging of documentation extended to any documentation that might grant access to metropolitan-funded opportunities, leading to wholesale copying of any documents to which individuals or organisations might have access, for example planning documents or reports, creating a 'copy-paste' culture of plagiarism among networks of "briefcase NGOs"[63], later 'laptop NGOs', that sprang up in response to the demand for local implementing partners. A culture of opportunistic plagiarism militated against development of genuine capacities for research and knowledge production, especially where 'capacity-building' came to mean granting individuals and institutions access to opportunities regardless of capacity, rather than increasing capacity to demonstrate merit relative to opportunity, or capacity to deliver outcomes above a minimal funding-conditionality level. Officials were paid to accept forged, plagiarised or otherwise spurious documentation, conferring positions or contracts on individuals or organisations with limited capacity to deliver outcomes[64], degrading the project of aid and development assistance, and the project of producing valid data and analysis as knowledge of the setting.

Across the Afghan governance field, resources made available by metropolitan donors during the period 2002-2021 became the object of patronage networks converting control of the distribution of these resources into social and political power and influence[65]. An endemic problem of 'ghost' employees – salaries drawn on non-existent positions – was continuous with that of absenteeism, particularly on the part of those occupying longer-established positions[66]. Again, this was a consequence of a historical culture of positions being seen as sinecures, assigned through networks of patronage[67], but was dramatically exacerbated after 2001 by endemic nepotism and favouritism[68]. Estimates of the extent of the problem in the general education field alone refer to 16 000 to 20 000 ghost positions, at a cost of up to US$12 million a month: potentially over a *billion* US dollars in misappropriated funds across the decade of peak intervention, in just one area of a single Afghan governance sector. It cannot be over-emphasised that the implication of what is known in specific instances such as this is that, far from being a marginal issue or special case, wastage and misappropriation of funds may have been the *general* case, with the *majority* of funding potentially lost to corruption.

A further key form of patronage was control of scholarships, especially those conferring a place at a metropolitan institution, and hence allowing residence outside of Afghanistan for extended periods. Opportunities for global mobility were obviously highly desirable given conditions in Afghanistan, and especially for the children of the governing elite, given the potential of scholarships to operate as a

[59]Cordesman "How America Corrupted Afghanistan"
[60]Hayward *Transforming Higher Education* 140
[61]Welch and Wahidyar "The Interrupted Development of Higher Education in Afghanistan" 174 and Guistozzi "Politics of Education" 20
[62]Guistozzi "Politics of Education" 20
[63]Khattak "Reflections"
[64]Guistozzi "Politics of Education" 20
[65]Pherali and Sahar "A political economy analysis of education in Afghanistan" 248 and Guistozzi "Politics of Education" 23
[66]Tarheyar *Higher Education in Afghanistan* 70
[67]Daxner and Schrade "Higher Education in Afghanistan"
[68]Baiza *Education in Afghanistan* 231

migration pathway, not just for the recipient but for their immediate family also. As a means of building local capacity, the external scholarships model attracted considerable criticism at the time, as almost inevitably in practice it tended only to facilitate the key capacity-building problem in Afghanistan of 'brain drain', where the best qualified in every Afghan field leave as soon as they are able[69]. Development of 'capacity' was hence used to gain entry to metropolitan fields with the aim of permanent migration, resulting in "masses of academic exchange activists"[70] with a strong vested interest in the external scholarships model, keen to leverage any metropolitan connections to that end. Scholarships were largely awarded to the same members of elite families or patronage networks who were also given preferential access to higher education and certification of graduation, as "selection [was] unmeritocratic, based on political allegiance and sectarian identity"[71].

The social power conferred by capacity to distribute overseas scholarships led to aggressive competition between Ministries, in particular between the Ministries of Higher Education and of Foreign Affairs[72]. The perverse outcome was that rather than being only conferred on those with merit, who would make best use of an opportunity they would otherwise be unable to afford, scholarships were often awarded to those with little or no merit, who would for that reason be unable to make use of the opportunity, one they were in any event readily able to afford, due to their privileged position. Despite occasional exceptions, in general external scholarships can be considered to be a "worst practice" [73]model, one that has "long been criticised as a regressive form of aid that fails to sustainably build capacity in recipient countries"[74]. Perhaps 50% of higher education aid in Afghanistan took the form of external scholarships, resulting in a small number of graduates at the "enormous cost" of higher degrees at metropolitan universities[75]. Scholarships were hence a key example of delivery of aid and development funding by metropolitan institutions that consisted in practice of awarding resources back to metropolitan institutions, while ostensibly engaged in local capacity building.

However, sinecures and scholarships are only two areas of corruption: the Monitoring and Evaluation Committee, in the first comprehensive report on implementation at a specific Ministry by an independent Afghan body, and now post 2021 likely to stand as a key study of metropolitan-sponsored governance 2001-2021, identified *36* distinct areas of corruption that developed as a result of insufficient monitoring of externally-funded programs[76]. Problems previously identified by the office of the Special Inspector-General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR)[77] with lack of transparency or independent monitoring and oversight were largely ignored in practice, despite the obvious potential for the vast influx of funds – US$855 million for education from USAID alone 2002-2016[78] – to be misappropriated. In particular, the relatively few independent inspections that were carried out indicated problems with generally reported data on the education system and implementation of policy[79]. The MEC report indicates that even basic programs such as adult literacy were seriously mis-represented, in practice often non-existent, with "collusion to hide the absence of any implementation, inappropriate and fraudulent participants, and numerous 'ghost' program sites"[80].

Due to the reliance of the whole apparatus of governance in Afghanistan on external funding, a system developed in which "ministers, parliamentarians and senior bureaucrats … primary focus is to obtain funds for further

[69]Milton *Higher Education* 36
[70]Draxner and Schrade "Higher Education in Afghanistan" 23
[71]Milton *Higher Education* 70
[72]Welch and Wahidyar "Interrupted Development" 169
[73]Milton *Higher Education* 15
[74]Barakat and Bengtsson 2017 in Milton *Higher Education* 21
[75]Milton *Higher Education* 66 and 69
[76]Bjelica "An assessment of Afghanistan's Ministry of Education" 1 and MEC "Corruption Assessment of the Ministry of Education"
[77]SIGAR "Corruption In Conflict"
[78]Adili "Afghanistan's inconsistent education statistics" 9
[79]For example, Adili "Education statistics" 8 and Ali "Plundered education in Ghor" 1
[80]MEC in Bjelica "An assessment" 5-6

disbursement"[81], which led by extension to a focus on meeting conditions for external funding, notably in the production of plans and reports, and on capacity-building to this end at Ministry level[82]. Production of policy as required to meet donor conditions, emphasising detailed action plans for implementation, become the focus of Ministerial operations and capacity-building. However, as Ministry capacity for planning had always been limited, Ministries remained largely dependent on the technical support of external consultants for policy development[83] and to meet donor requirements, with the actual role of the Afghan government described as "negligible"[84]: again, resources for Afghan capacity-building were effectively awarded back to metropolitan positions and institutions.

Lack of local ownership of policy development combined with the remoteness of external consultants and agencies from conditions on the ground resulted in disconnection of implementation from policy development: "despite the fact that many planning documents ('strategic plans') seem to be perfectly rational, they don't show much attachment to reality"[85]. The need to satisfy donor requirements led to wholesale copying of policies and systems from elsewhere, but these were often simply not possible to implement in the Afghan context, either due to differences in local conditions, lack of capacity, or simple political inexpediency[86], especially where wholesale changes to the existing system would have disrupted political structures of alliance and patronage. In the context of the disconnection between donor-developed policy, and systems as they existed and operated in practice, a wider system developed where, to quote an Afghan educator, "they say everything is OK on paper, but I have found through interviews that they do not implement. They say they do, but they do not"[87]. Where there was any response to problems of implementation, this tended to be "short-term fixes that satisfy donors"[88] but which had little or no concrete effect at community level, further exacerbating popular Afghan perceptions of the incapacity and illegitimacy of the IRoA and its metropolitan sponsors, contributing to the collapse of 2021.

Conclusions: consequences of governance failures

Improvements in education, usually in access to primary and general education but also in higher education, continue to be cited post-2021 as one of the key achievements of the primary period of international intervention in Afghanistan 2002-2015[89]. In particular, dramatic increases in enrolment statistics have been repeatedly cited as evidence for the effectiveness of programs of aid and development, and of the Ministries of Education and Higher Education as recipients of metropolitan aid. By extension, improved access to education legitimated the central government, international donors supporting education, and metropolitan intervention itself: a narrative of 'achievement' that continues to be presented by metropolitan institutions post-2021[90]. However, representation of metropolitan intervention in terms of 'achievements' requires serious qualification, especially where what was ultimately 'achieved' was return to power of the IEoA, arguably due to failure to build IRoA capacity for effective governance.

In practice, the intervention project was fatally compromised in the eyes of the Afghan populace by practices such as highly questionable tendering for major infrastructure projects, awarding of sinecure positions such as consultancies through un-transparent recruitment or contracting processes, and nepotism and favouritism in the awarding of scholarships and other key opportunities. Donor agencies established a patron-client relationship with the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan[91] which emphasised delivery of outcomes at the level of government

[81]Khattak "Reflections" 16
[82]Baiza *Education in Afghanistan* 228 and 238
[83]Baiza *Education in Afghanistan* 237
[84]Khattak "Reflections" 32 and 30
[85]Daxner and Schrade "Higher Education in Afghanistan" 24
[86]Milton *Higher Education* 74
[87]Afghan woman academic in Roof "Day By Day: Higher Education in Afghanistan" 72
[88]Milton *Higher Education* 74
[89]Adili "Education statistics" 1
[90]ASPI "Beyond the Sandpit: Counterterrorism and resilience in an age of strategic competition"
[91]MEC "Corruption Assessment" 20-21 and Khattak "Reflections"

and donor policies, plans or reports, rather than delivery of concrete in-practice educational or research capacity outcomes on the ground, at Afghan community level. Lack of transparency and quality assurance enabled the development and institutionalisation of a new system of patronage networks, due largely to a failure on the part of donor institutions to engage in adequate monitoring and quality-assurance of the implementation of their own programs[92]. The quality-assurance needed was precluded by a lack of institutional capacity to tolerate the risks of effective monitoring under the security conditions of Afghanistan, and an attendant culture of avoidance of risk and liability[93]. A key enabling condition for these problems of mis-reporting of educational and other program outcomes was the emphasis placed by donors and hence by the Afghan government on 'reports' as outcomes, particularly the use of statistics as performance indicators relative to the amount of funding delivered, where local capacities for reliable production of statistical knowledge were generally very limited in practice[94]. As a result of the donor emphasis on reportable statistics, Afghan institutions tended to focus on outcomes most easily quantified, such as student enrolments and numbers of teachers and schools[95], with the high unreliability of the statistics[96] either de-emphasised or not referred to.

In parallel, metropolitan disinterest in the production of knowledge not directly relevant to immediate metropolitan interests led to a failure to build the capacity of local researchers for autonomous, that is, potentially *critical* knowledge production. The result was production of reports and surveys as 'knowledge' effectively de-problematising intervention, and obscuring the key problem for the legitimacy of the IRoA and metropolitan intervention represented by corruption. The corruption resulting from ineffective governance of programs was attributed to Afghan institutions and the IRoA, rather than to the metropolitan intuitions ultimately responsible for the implementation of programs of intervention. The wider analytical conclusion is that failures to deliver adequate outcomes at community level may over time fatally compromise the legitimacy of governance institutions and their implementing agencies in the eyes of external, that is, citizen and community, stakeholders, a conclusion with applications beyond extreme cases such as Afghanistan, including in metropolitan societies.

The concrete policy challenge for building capacities for autonomous knowledge production in Afghanistan is to make a break with the previous period of institutional maladministration, misappropriation of resources and loss of opportunities for building capacity, a break at once facilitated and made more challenging by the change of regime in 2021. More specifically, building genuinely autonomous capacity would appear to require making a break with previous practices of sponsored inclusion of a limited number of Afghans in metropolitan institutions where they remain largely subordinate to metropolitan knowledge production, and cannot be realistically expected to return to Afghanistan under current or future conditions. Building local capacity for the production of knowledge genuinely critical of prior metropolitan knowledges would hence appear to require building Afghan higher education institutions that do not operate primarily as migration pathways: a complex problem. A key specific challenge in attempting to make changes in intervention practice will be in addressing the 'spoils of war' expectations of factions within the successor regime, and to avoid perpetuating past practice in continued attempts at misappropriation of resources, with attendant bad-faith proffering of spurious evidence of meeting criteria for ongoing funding of programs of aid and development. The problem can arguably only be addressed by significantly more effective and rigorous oversight and quality assurance than in the past, which would require addressing the problems of the risk-aversion and institutional self-interest of metropolitan institutions overseeing programs.

[92]MEC "Corruption Assessment" 21-22
[93]Simpson "Enclavisation" "Risk-management" and *Catastrophe and precaution*
[94]Khattak "Reflections" 28
[95]Guistozzi "Politics of Education" 22
[96]Karlsson and Mansory "Islamic Education in Afghanistan" 696, Hayward *Transforming Higher Education* 39-40, Adili "Education statistics" 2-3 and Bjelica "An assessment" 5

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