
THE ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES IN EMPOWERING INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETY IN AFGHANISTAN

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ABSTRACT

Universities are not independent entities separate from society; political and social systems influence them and possess significant abilities to shape various sectors. As decision-making institutions, universities are crucial in creating conditions for nurturing transformative leaders. The institutional foundation of universities aims to address the developmental needs of society. A successful university seeks indigenous solutions to real problems. The primary objective of this research is to examine the role of universities as the highest educational and training institutions in empowering individuals and society. Initially, the study explored the literal and terminological meanings of empowerment. It then highlights the essential functions of universities concerning individual and societal empowerment. This research adopts a qualitative method with a descriptive-analytical approach, examining expert opinions, literature reviews, and previous studies. The thematic analysis revealed that universities in Afghanistan significantly contribute to individual empowerment through education, innovation, and cultural preservation while addressing broader socio-economic challenges and promoting political stability. These findings emphasize the crucial role of universities in Afghanistan's sustainable development.

Keywords : Afghanistan, development, empowerment, individual, society, university

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INTRODUCTION

One of the critical missions of universities is to train the specialized workforce needed by society. Any country's economic, social, and cultural development is made possible through the education of such professionals (Miotto et al., 2020; Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia et al., 2022). Universities are the most complex and dynamic systems and hold a unique and prominent position in the comprehensive development of society (Bagherian & Sattari, 2022). They are considered crucial drivers of political and social growth in any community, and universities are instrumental in raising awareness and organizing human resources for social advancement (Gorgiladze et al., 2020). In today's technologically advanced societies, having specialized professionals who can contribute to political and social development is a source of pride. In this context, universities play a vital role as institutions that train students to become teachers pivotal to society's political and social development (Talebian et al., 2014). These students, who become experts in their fields, find employment in educational centers without much job-related concern and can significantly contribute to the political and social development of the community (Alhammad, 2024).

Studies on the factors contributing to social progress indicate that all these communities possess effective, capable, and creative education systems (Cain et al., 2024; Peiró-Palomino et al., 2024). The essence of education is reflected in the training of committed, specialized, thoughtful, and skilled human resources. Each institution plays a specific role and duty in society. The government, religion, and family fulfill their respective roles. In this regard, the university is a unique institution with the primary mission of developing the intellectual, cultural, and social dimensions of human beings. The role of universities as educational and training institutions has been a focus of scholars since ancient times (Mosalagae & Bekker, 2021; Yar & Shaheedzooy, 2024b).

The body of human knowledge, which one generation adds and passes on to the next, has evolved over centuries of human history. Civilization preserves truth and knowledge by institutionalizing them, thereby transmitting the achievements of each generation to the next. Specifically, the university must safeguard the accumulated knowledge, culture, skills, art, and discipline of the past. Universities allow individuals to gain self-awareness and better evaluate social, cultural, economic, and ideological processes. In a progressive social system, universities contribute to personal growth and the flourishing of human potential. Indeed, universities are recognized as some of the most valuable resources available to society for national progress and development (Hancock, 2024; Yar & Shaheedzooy, 2024a).

In contemporary societies, the higher education system is crucial and influential in economic, social, and cultural transformation (Daim et al., 2024). Its fundamental duty is to provide comprehensive education and training, foster the development of all individuals' talents, train specialized human resources, and transmit cultural, scientific, and technical values (Wang, 2024). Consequently, society today expects universities, as the highest educational and training institutions, to play a fundamental role in development, culture promotion, and community empowerment (Henkhaus et al., 2018). As we aim to explore the functions of universities as the highest educational and training institutions for empowering individuals and society, a fundamental step is to elucidate the meaning of empowerment. Clarifying this concept is essential for discussing the university's role.

Afghanistan's higher education system is pivotal in empowering its society, yet its potential remains underexplored in academic literature. Afghanistan faces numerous socio-political and economic challenges, and understanding how universities can serve as agents of empowerment is crucial. Previous studies have touched on similar themes. For instance, a study by Akbari and Younas (2023) explored the role of higher education in post-conflict regions, demonstrating that universities can significantly contribute to nation-building by producing skilled professionals and fostering a culture of peace. Another study by Williams et al. (2024) emphasized the role of universities in economic empowerment through entrepreneurship education, particularly in developing countries like Afghanistan. Both studies highlight the vital functions of universities but do not fully address the intersection of education, cultural preservation, and socio-political stability in Afghanistan. This research seeks to fill this gap by comprehensively analyzing how universities in Afghanistan empower individuals and contribute to broader societal development, making the theme still highly relevant for discussion.

This research explores universities' role in empowering individuals and society in Afghanistan. It seeks to identify the critical functions of universities in the country's socio-economic development and propose strategies to enhance their effectiveness in contributing to Afghanistan's growth. The study focuses on how universities can serve as social and individual empowerment drivers, ultimately influencing the country's broader development goals.

This research is essential because it focuses on the crucial role of higher education in a country facing numerous challenges. By understanding how universities empower individuals and society, policymakers and educators can create targeted strategies to improve the effectiveness of these institutions. Such advancements could significantly improve Afghanistan's social, economic, and political landscape.

This study's originality stems from its focus on Afghanistan's higher education system, a relatively underexplored area in academic literature. Its significance is heightened by Afghanistan's current socio-political context and the pressing need for educational development to address its challenges. This research could provide critical insights into how universities can become powerful change agents in the nation's future.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative research method to explore the role of universities in empowering individuals and society in Afghanistan. The qualitative approach is used to gain in-depth insights into how universities contribute to socio-economic and cultural development. The research design is descriptive-analytical. This design was chosen to systematically describe and analyze the functions of universities in Afghanistan, particularly in terms of empowerment. The descriptive nature allows for a detailed examination of the subject, while the analytical aspect focuses on identifying key themes and patterns within the data.

The data collection method primarily involved reviewing secondary sources, such as scholarly articles, government reports, and institutional data from universities in Afghanistan. Expert opinions and previous studies were also included to understand the universities' roles in societal empowerment comprehensively. Thematic analysis was employed for data analysis. This method involves identifying recurring themes and patterns within the collected data, allowing a deeper understanding of how universities contribute to individual and societal empowerment in Afghanistan. Thematic analysis is suitable for qualitative research as it provides a structured approach to analyzing complex qualitative data.

The research subjects are universities in Afghanistan, with a focus on their roles in empowering individuals and contributing to societal development. The study examines how these institutions impact education, innovation, cultural preservation, and socio-economic growth. This research employs an analytical approach to examine the role of universities in empowering individuals and society, with a specific focus on Afghanistan. The methodology involves thoroughly exploring the literature, expert opinions, and previous studies to understand university functions in the context of empowerment. This analysis is designed to clarify the concept of empowerment and its relationship with the roles and contributions of universities in social and individual development. This research also considers universities' historical and cultural significance in preserving and transmitting knowledge and their role in fostering creativity, innovation, and critical thinking.

RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION

Research Finding

University and Its Functions

Educational and training institutions play specific roles in society, each performing designated tasks. These functions are generally either explicit or implicit. Explicit functions are clear and recognizable, forming the primary purpose for the existence of these institutions. However, implicit functions are unintended and may not be immediately identifiable. They can either support the institution's primary goals or be unrelated, potentially leading to harmful or contrary outcomes (Gury et al., 2024).

The primary and explicit function of universities in modern society is to provide individuals with knowledge, scientific and philosophical thinking, information, and skills. Through their curricula, universities help individuals achieve personal and social responsibilities, thus contributing to individual growth and social development (Soyyilmaz et al., 2017). The critical functions of universities in empowering individuals and society are the following:

1. **Providing General Education and Specialized Skills:** Universities offering education in natural sciences, social sciences, humanities, history, geography, philosophy, mathematics, and arts. This education enables students to use scientific and analytical methods to solve various problems. **Development of Personal Qualities** Universities aims to develop qualities such as realism, truth-seeking, moral and religious insight, personal discipline, appreciation of natural beauty, awakened conscience, responsibility, logical engagement with new ideas, critical thinking, self-confidence, individual initiative, perseverance, communication skills, and support for human values (Jasemi et al., 2019). **Professional Training** Universities not only provide general education but also develop specialized skills for specific careers, significantly transforming the capabilities of the general population. They train educated and experienced managers and employers to lead a country's economic development and produce specialized human resources to meet society's needs (Gorgiladze et al., 2020).
2. **Transfer of Culture and Preservation of Cultural Identity:** **Cultural Transmission:** Universities play a dual role. They enhance individual capabilities and help individuals realize and develop their potential. Simultaneously, they serve the social system by transmitting values and norms. Traditional and cultural values are significant in all societies, and cultural and social heritage preservation is crucial. Universities help renew and continue cultural life by passing on cultural heritage to individuals, especially the younger generation (Edberg & Krieger, 2020). Some believe universities' primary role is to train and develop high-level specialists. Others argue that universities should broadly provide fundamental and theoretical education, with specialized training offered through short-term courses or in-service training based on job needs.

The university is a premier educational and training institution responsible for refining and selecting aspects of cultural heritage that merit preservation. According to Dewey, this involves simplifying complex cultural heritage elements through educational planning that aligns with the learners' growth and readiness levels. As a refining agent, the universities select elements that promote individual and societal growth while discarding those that do not (Jingyu et al., 2020).

As a higher institution, the university transmits cultural heritage and seeks to reconstruct it to meet contemporary needs. Without the university's role in evaluating cultural heritage, what we inherit from the past would be subject to study without adapting to present-day rational and essential needs (Jimenez-Ayora et al., 2024).

3. Evaluation and Development of Culture: University curricula should serve to evaluate, revise, and develop societal culture. Societies focusing solely on preserving and transmitting cultural heritage may experience stagnation as social conditions evolve. Thus, past knowledge and skills require continuous assessment and improvement to remain relevant to current social needs (Yar, 2024).
4. Individual and Social Growth: Cultural development hinges on individual growth, achievable through comprehensive educational planning. Universities should design curricula that address learners' developmental gaps and foster personal growth and social integration by transmitting social values and norms.
5. Innovation and Change: Universities play a crucial role in fostering innovation, which is essential in advanced societies. Educational institutions must introduce new ideas and techniques to promote social transformation without provoking traditionalist resistance. Effective education leadership can catalyze this process by facilitating the adaptation of new values within the framework of existing ones (Fabbro et al., 2024).
6. Empowering individuals and societies: Universities must continually evaluate and enhance their roles to address complex societal issues effectively. By contributing solutions to challenges such as nuclear technology, healthcare, agricultural innovation, and space equipment, universities demonstrate their capacity for significant social impact. Continuous assessment and refinement of their functions can help universities address various social problems more efficiently (Zhang & Lin, 2023).

Critical Considerations for Improving University Curricula

The first key consideration is Enhancing the quality of curriculum content, which has become a central focus in educational policies in many countries that receive significant annual funding. Continuous assessment and refinement of curriculum sections ensure they meet their goals, suit the target learners, and effectively incorporate the necessary knowledge structures. This ongoing evaluation, called formative assessment by Michael Screven, aims to provide feedback for the continuous improvement of curriculum and teaching (Sell & Phitayakorn, 2020).

Quality, cost, and productivity are key factors in university management, with quality often being the most critical factor. Improvements in quality can reduce costs and increase productivity. Recent attention has been paid to the quality of university curricula, especially following significant quantitative expansions in higher education to meet the country's socio-economic needs. However, this rapid expansion often leads to a decline in quality, which requires adequate human and financial resources for rectification (Mbizvo et al., 2020).

Another key is aligning curricula with external learning; selecting relevant curriculum content is crucial for effective educational planning. The content should be meaningful, foster learners' skills and attitudes, and cater to cognitive and affective domains. With the rapid evolution of information, content must be updated regularly to ensure accuracy and relevance. A learner-centered approach suggests meaningful content arises from learners' interests and experiences, facilitating continuous learning and future education. It is also essential that the curriculum content coordinates with external learning, providing a foundation for ongoing education and integrating the university into a broader society (Clark, 2023).

Otherwise, Curriculum Approach Change: The approach to curriculum reflects how two perspectives—university and society—interact. By examining a curriculum planner's approach, we can understand their perspectives on learners, subjects, educational goals, methods, and the roles of universities and society in education. Ornstein and Hankins categorized curriculum approaches into two major groups:

1. **Scientific and Technological Approaches:** These approaches align with traditional educational theories and established learning and teaching models. They emphasized formal and conventional methods of instruction, viewing the curriculum as a structured plan for organizing the learning environment, resources, and educational tools. This perspective adheres to the logic of science and assumes fixed rules and procedures in curriculum planning, leading to a linear, step-by-step decision-making process. The curriculum is pre-determined and organized to guide learners through predefined goals and learning stages. Advocates of this approach emphasize essential subjects and content, requiring learners to study the curriculum as presented (Ibrahimi & Thoma, 2024).
2. **Non-Scientific and Non-Technological Approaches:** Reflecting unconventional philosophical views and new policies, these approaches critique scientific and formal educational methods. They focus on learner-centered perspectives and emphasize individual interests, thinking, and personality. This approach advocates for creativity and educational processes and stresses that teaching and learning should center on individuals. Content is important because it enables learners to conceptualize and find personal meaning. Subjects should provide opportunities for critical thinking and discussion to help learners develop their understanding. Meanwhile, despite advocating a non-scientific and non-technological view of education, Eisner acknowledges the shortcomings of education dominated by technological approaches. He argued for a balance between the two perspectives, rejecting absolute certainty in education.
3. **Emphasis on Educational Goals and Teaching Methods:** Selecting and articulating educational goals is crucial in curriculum planning, significantly impacting educational programs' quality and outcomes. Practical educational activities correlate directly with the quality of efforts in defining these goals. Despite the use of advanced methods and resources, programs may fail if the goals are not well-defined (Neubauer et al., 2022).

Involving teachers, learners, and parents in curriculum design and goal-setting is increasingly recognized in advanced societies. Experts consider this involvement a fundamental right. Olivia suggests that teachers, as primary participants in curriculum planning, play critical roles in planning, implementing, and evaluating curricula. They create plans, collect data, lead research, engage with stakeholders, and assess programs. Feedback from learners is also crucial and influences both the content and methods (Li et al., 2022).

4. **Content and Teaching Methods:** Effective teaching methods are closely linked to curriculum content, enhancing its impact and ensuring successful learning outcomes. A disconnect between content, method, and curriculum renders all three ineffective. Teaching at the university level requires mastery of content and specific skills and insights, yet traditional and experiential methods still dominate. This reliance on textbooks often leads to second-hand, mechanically organized experiences. Students succeed by memorizing rather than understanding content, and textbook

assignments and rote learning drive many courses. This approach diminishes creativity and leads to disengagement for teachers and students (Bogaerds-Hazenberg et al., 2022).

The Role of Universities in Empowering Individuals and Society in Afghanistan

Universities play a crucial role in developing and empowering individuals and society in Afghanistan. This role can be summarized in several critical areas as follows:

1. **Education and Knowledge Enhancement:** As primary higher education centers, universities significantly contribute to increasing students' knowledge and specialized skills. These skills help individuals excel in various fields, such as science, engineering, medicine, social sciences, and humanities, leading to personal and professional advancement.
2. **Research and Development:** By providing suitable platforms for scientific research and research projects, universities can contribute to Afghanistan's scientific and technological development. This research can help solve local and national problems by offering innovative solutions to existing challenges (Arita, 2020)
3. **Economic Empowerment:** Through educational programs and entrepreneurship initiatives, universities can play a vital role in the economic empowerment of youth and the community. Creating job opportunities and supporting startups and local innovations can help reduce unemployment and increase incomes (Stypińska et al., 2019).
4. **Strengthening Civil Society:** Universities can promote the values of democracy, human rights, and social justice, playing a significant role in strengthening civil society in Afghanistan. Educating younger generations about democratic principles and civic rights can contribute to political and social stability and sustainability (Kali, 2022).
5. **Cultural Development:** Universities can be crucial in preserving and promoting Afghanistan's rich culture and history. Through cultural programs, seminars, and historical research, they can help maintain national identity and foster a sense of patriotism.
6. **Networking and International Collaboration:** Universities can create new opportunities for students and faculty members by establishing international relationships and collaborations. These Collaborations can include student exchanges, joint research projects, and access to additional educational resources and facilities (Brisbois & Pereira, 2019). In conclusion, as critical institutions for empowering individuals and society, universities can act as driving forces for Afghanistan's development and progress, paving the way for a brighter and more sustainable future.

Discussion

The role of universities in empowering individuals and society is a multifaceted and complex endeavor, particularly in the Afghan context. Universities are not merely institutions of higher learning but are pivotal in driving economic, social, cultural, and political transformation. The following discussion delves into the various dimensions of this role, drawing from the research findings and the broader literature.

First, universities are instrumental in providing a comprehensive education encompassing general knowledge and specialized skills. They offer a broad curriculum that includes natural sciences, social sciences, humanities, and the arts, which equips students with the necessary tools to analyze and solve problems. Moreover, universities foster the development of personal qualities such as moral insight,

responsibility, and critical thinking, which are essential for personal growth and social contribution (Mi et al., 2022).

Transferring culture and preserving cultural identity is another significant function of universities. They act as custodians of cultural heritage by simplifying and refining complex elements of culture through educational planning that aligns with learners' growth and readiness. This process ensures the continuity of cultural life and the transmission of values to future generations, which is significant in Afghanistan, which has a rich Islamic heritage. Innovation and change are also central to universities' mission. They are expected to introduce new ideas and techniques that promote social transformation while balancing the needs of modernity with traditional values. Effective educational leadership is crucial in this regard, facilitating the adaptation of new values within the framework of existing values (Mattingly II et al., 2019).

The discussion also highlights the importance of aligning curriculum content with external learning and updating it regularly to maintain accuracy and relevance. A learner-centered approach is advocated where content arises from learners' interests and experiences, fostering continuous learning and future education. Furthermore, the research underscores the need for involving stakeholders in curriculum design and goal-setting. Teachers, learners, and parents should have a say in the educational process because their involvement is a fundamental right and can significantly influence content and methods (Durl et al., 2022).

In conclusion, the discussion section emphasizes the critical role of universities in Afghanistan's development and progress. They are expected to systematically transmit the country's rich Islamic heritage while promoting innovation and critical thinking. By fulfilling their grand role in empowering individuals and society, universities can pave the way for a brighter and more sustainable future for Afghanistan.

CONCLUSION

As the highest educational and training institutions, universities play a vital role in expanding knowledge, conducting research, offering public services, and empowering individuals and society across various scientific, cultural, social, and political dimensions. They are tasked with critically studying and transmitting Afghanistan's rich Islamic heritage to students, fostering a constructive link between traditional and modern cultures. In doing so, universities must address significant global issues and the dynamic forces of the present while educating students in ways that allow them to preserve their identity, reassess traditions, and challenge beliefs that may hinder progress. By applying science and technology across various sectors, universities influence societal development, impacting lifestyles and techniques. Often viewed as an art, technology is a powerful cultural force universities can leverage to promote innovation. Universities can empower individuals and society by fostering creativity, critical thinking, reasoning, and a spirit of research. To further enhance their role in Afghanistan's socio-economic development, continuous assessment and improvement of curricula are essential to ensure relevance and alignment with educational goals. Involving teachers, students, and parents in curriculum design fosters a learner-centered approach and upholds stakeholder rights.

Additionally, regular updates to curriculum content ensure it remains accurate and reflective of external learning demands. Finally, encouraging international collaboration can expand opportunities for students and faculty, further enhancing the university's contribution to individual and societal

empowerment. Universities can play a critical role in Afghanistan's development and progress through these strategies.

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