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THE EMERGENT TALEBAN-DEFINED UNIVERSITY: Enforcing a top-down reorientation and unquestioning obedience under 'a war of thoughts'



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Since the takeover around two years ago in August 2021, the Taleban have sought to overhaul and reinvent Afghanistan's higher education. They have put their affiliates in charge at the ministry and many public universities, created new bodies to promote religious institutions and incorporate them into the higher education system and reshaped curricula with a focus on religious studies. They have undertaken to monitor conduct and had imposed strict rules on appearance and behaviour on both male and female students, before banning women from higher education altogether in December 2022. This report, based on research by guest author Said Reza Kazemi* details this steady process of Talebanisation, theocratisation and instrumentalisation, fuelled by the Taleban concept of the *fekri jagra*, or 'war of thoughts', and explores its wide-ranging impact on students, lecturers and staff. It concludes that the Taleban-defined university, where reorientation is enforced from the top and unquestioning obedience is required, has already emerged, but questions about its (near) future are far from settled.

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KEY FINDINGS

- The Taliban see changing higher education as central to rolling back the *fekri jagra*, or war of thoughts, which they believe the foreign interveners and the previous government imposed on Afghanistan in the period 2001-2021, as part of a longer historical process. Higher education, they believe, must be realigned to 'religious and national values' and dominated by 'an Islamic and Afghan spirit.' In their view, this necessitates overhauling and reinventing higher education. So far, this has had two characteristics.
- First, the Taliban have filled the higher education ministry with their own affiliates and have summarily dismissed and changed leaders of many public universities. Less noticeably but importantly, they created the powerful interim position of 'extraordinary representative' at the provincial level with authority to intervene, manage and supervise all higher education in the respective provinces. This temporary takeover of the higher education system gave the Taliban time to place their affiliates or loyalists in university leadership positions. In some cases, the changes revealed a Taliban presence or penetration in higher education institutions that predated the fall of the Republic.
- Second, the Taliban have placed their understanding of Islamic sharia at the centre of higher education. They did so in three ways. First, a new General Directorate of Religious Universities and Specialisations in the ministry has established new religious studies disciplines and included two existing religious institutions into higher education, so far. Second, a new Directorate of Preaching and Guidance was established to promote and enforce religious surveillance in higher education. Third, the Taliban have allowed the pre-takeover process of revision of university curricula to continue, but have redirected its focus to religious studies, as indicated in the newly published curricula for three religious studies subjects. One of these is a university-wide subject, obligatory for all public and private higher education institutions, whose teaching time has now tripled.
- Private higher education institutions secured a relatively swift go-ahead to reopen by proposing and adhering to a self-developed gender segregation policy a little over three weeks after the August 2021 takeover. After this, it

took the Taliban authorities about half a year to reopen public institutions, which they did under close scrutiny.



Graduation ceremony at Kandahar's Benawa University Engineering and Computer Science faculty. This was one of the last cohorts of Afghan women to graduate before women were banned from higher education.

Photo: Javed Tanveer/AFP, 17 March 2022.

- The gender segregation rule, which was the main prerequisite for reopening, was enforced in different ways in different universities, including by timing, day of the week or campus; by installing partitions or shifting female classes to dormitories; or by setting a minimum threshold for female students for a class to start or resume. The Taliban authorities further announced and enforced rules on how those in higher education must dress (*surat*, appearance) and behave (*sirat*, conduct). For many students, the initial joy of being able to return to university gave way to profound uncertainty and frustration as the impact of the new rules and appointments became evident. All in all, women faced many more challenges than men.

- Interviewees reported a considerable exodus of both lecturers and students, albeit with provincial variations. Several said they and/or their colleagues no longer felt safe or free in the university. Others mentioned the drastic pay cut for lecturers in public higher education that led many to consider whether to leave the profession or the country altogether. There was a similar financial fallout for many students after meagre, but crucial government subsidies were stopped or interrupted for students enrolled in public institutions and after jobs funding private (and, to a lesser extent, public) students were lost en masse. This has, in particular, undermined the financial base of the private higher education sector, threatening it with bankruptcy and even disintegration.
- The depth and breadth of the changes made by the Taliban's higher education authorities – and their profound and wide-ranging repercussions – point to a rapid and radical process of Talibanisation, theocratisation and instrumentalisation of higher education in the service of rationalising and strengthening the second emirate. The little and fragile space for freedom and diversity that had developed in the period 2001-2021 has thus fast been disappearing in the emergent Taliban-defined university.
- Although the shape and direction of the changes are clear, questions remain about the (near) future of higher education in the country. These include what a fully-fledged and articulated Taliban concept and structure of higher education would look and feel like. Most foundational is the question of what will happen as the Taliban continue to seek to implement their top-down reorientation and expect unquestioning obedience in an existing university that still embraces, in some way, both Taliban and non-Taliban.

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METHODOLOGY

The research for this report is based on 41 semi-structured key informant interviews with 39 people (two were follow-up interviews with the same key informants). 31 interviews were conducted by two researchers and ten by the author.

The main interviews were completed between 23 December 2021 and 30 March 2022. Three follow-up interviews with key informants in late March and early April 2023 served to double-check previous findings and clarify remaining questions, for example, on the new religious universities.

The interviewees were nine women and 30 men, aged between 21 and 63 years old, who were all engaged in different roles in higher education: 11 students, 22 lecturers and six managers/staff. Nearly all of them were studying, teaching, working or otherwise had an ongoing direct stake in public and/or private higher education institutions at the time of our interviews; only three interviewees were outside or had left the country.

The interviewees represented the entire gamut of sciences in Afghanistan's university: agriculture, biology, computer science, economics, engineering, geology, health sciences, journalism, language and literature, law, mathematics, pedagogy, physics, political science, psychology, sharia and sociology (in no specific order). The interviewees further self-identified with diverse social, ethnic or religious backgrounds in the country: Arab (one interviewee), Baloch (one), Hazara (nine), Pashtun (12), Sadat (nine), Tajik (six) and Uzbek (one) (in alphabetic order).

The interviewees were linked to higher education institutions¹ in 23 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces, ranging between one and six key informant interviews per province: Badakhshan (two interviewees), Badghis (one), Baghlan (one), Balkh (two), Bamyan (two), Daikundi (six), Farah (one), Faryab (one), Ghazni (two), Helmand (two), Herat (four), Kandahar (two), Kapisa (one), Khost (one), Kunar

¹ Afghanistan's 39 public and more than 120 private higher education institutions are located in towns and cities throughout the country's 34 provinces. See the March 2020 list of public higher education institutions in the Republic's Ministry of Higher Education [catalogue](#) and the August 2021 list of private higher education institutions in the Ministry of Higher Education's [general list](#).

(one), Nangrahar (one), Paktia (one), Paktika (one), Panjshir (one), Sar-e Pul (one), Uruzgan (three), Wardak (one) and Zabul (one) (in alphabetic order).

It is important to note that this research was not intended to be representative socially or geographically. The primary focus has been to capture the detail, complexity and profundity of qualitative experiences and perceptions of those involved in higher education concerning the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan's universities.



A banner inside a private university in Kabul shows women's faces obscured by spray paint after they were banned from higher education.

Photo: Wakil Kohsar/AFP, 6 March 2023.

The interviewees were approached through the methods of 'convenience sampling' and 'snowball sampling'. Two research assistants based in Afghanistan and the author based outside the country contacted near and distant acquaintances in different higher education institutions across the country to set up phone interviews. This sample was expanded when contacts who agreed to be interviewed introduced other interviewees, some of whom made other

introductions and, in a few cases, even further introductions. This method was chosen to facilitate access, ensure trust and increase the likelihood of receiving accurate information. Some contacts, however, did not agree to be interviewed, as specifically experienced by the foreign-based author, or accepted only after several attempts. Some who agreed to be interviewed were still reluctant to speak in much detail, illustrating the felt sensitivity of the topic. When quoting sources, we identify them by: distinguishing between students and staff (both teaching and non-teaching), mentioning the interviewee's gender where relevant and stating their location by naming the province where relevant.

The interviews were semi-structured to allow a natural and uninterrupted flow of conversation and focused on broad qualitative questions. Topics included the situation of public and private higher education institutions and the circumstances of female and male lecturers and students after the Taliban takeover; the experiences of reopening under the Taliban authorities; new rules introduced and implemented by the ministry; changes made by the ministry in personnel such as university leaders, lecturers and any new officials; perceived changes in student and lecturer numbers; financial impacts; and ministerial monitoring or surveillance.

The findings from the interviews have been complemented and supported by a desk review of relevant documents and media reports and a close reading of the official Taliban Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) website's reporting. The author conducted the literature review and analysis and wrote the report. As such, any errors, whether factual or interpretational, are the author's sole responsibility.

CHAPTER 1.

OVERVIEW OF THE TRANSITIONAL PERIOD

The Taliban takeover took place during the 1400 (2021/2022) academic year. Higher education institutions had been allowed to reopen only weeks earlier after the final round of closures prompted by the Covid-19 pandemic ended. The pandemic had caused a year and a half of disruptions. At the same time, the war had also affected many of the cities and towns where Afghanistan's public and private higher education institutions are situated.

In his inaugural speech held in Kabul on 29 August 2021, two weeks after the takeover, then acting higher education minister, Mawlawi Abdul Baqi Haqqani, announced that higher education institutions would continue under the Taliban, but without coeducation (see this media [report](#)). "The people of Afghanistan will continue their higher education in the light of sharia law, in safety, without being in a mixed male and female environment," he said, without specifying when it would resume. The fact that no women had participated in or been invited to the inaugural event heightened the uncertainty about whether women would be allowed to participate in higher education at all.

Amid this anxiety over what higher education might look like under the new rule, local authorities started meeting higher education staff. A long-time university lecturer and administrator, with experience in both state and private higher education in western Afghanistan, described what he called "the depth of the catastrophe" when, early on, he attended two meetings Taliban officials held with university staff. Many of the themes that became more pronounced later were already present in his description:

[The Taliban officials] called for meetings with lecturers of state and private higher education institutions. I was deputy chancellor of administration of [name of institution withheld]. My colleagues and I didn't go to these meetings willingly.... First, the banners that were put up to explain the purposes of the meetings were in Pashto and Arabic. Arabic had replaced Dari, and English, my mother tongue, had been deleted. Second, Taliban officials spoke and responded to questions by referring only to sharia. When asked about the fate of the disciplines, they said they would review the disciplines and those that didn't contravene sharia would remain.

One official who looked more knowledgeable than the others spoke about the importance of higher education. He said when God said that the stomach was the source of all diseases, this was medicine. When God said that we must save resources, this was economics. When God said that water descended from the sky and would make this or that happen to the soil, this was engineering. This was their understanding of higher education. When there was a question about the livelihoods of university lecturers, they responded very casually by saying that we [lecturers] weren't better than the mujahedin [holy warriors, the term used by the Taliban to refer to members of their movement, especially those with a fighting role]. If the mujahedin slept hungry, we must also sleep hungry. If the mujahedin had bread to eat, they would share it with us.

Private higher education institutions were the first to reopen, a little over three weeks after the takeover, on 6 September 2021. The swift pace was made possible by the initiative of the Association of Private Universities and Institutes of Higher Education in Afghanistan (APUIHEA),² which had reached out to the new authorities soon after the fall of the Republic. Two interviewees, with close knowledge of the association's outreach to the new Taliban rulers, told AAN that the APUIHEA started negotiations because private higher education institutions could not afford a further shutdown. An interviewee from Mazar-e Sharif said:

Private higher education institutions have made huge investments and are a source of income for many people, including founders, managers, lecturers and staff members directly and many more people indirectly. They needed to restart and get things running again.

Interviewees told AAN that because private higher education institutions needed the go-ahead of the Taliban Ministry of Higher Education to resume their work, they were in a very weak position to negotiate. They urgently needed an agreement with – or, more precisely, an appeasement of – the new Taliban authorities.

When APUIHEA representatives approached the Taliban officials at the ministry, they found gender segregation to be the central issue that needed to be solved to obtain the Taliban's permission. "[Segregating men and women] was the

² The Association of Private Universities and Institutes of Higher Education in Afghanistan (APUIHEA), which brings together and represents the interests of Afghanistan's private higher education institutions, was established in 2012 (see details on its [website](#)).



Students attend a lecture at a university in Kandahar province in a classroom which is partitioned by a curtain to separate male and female students.

Photo: Stringer/AFP, 21 December 2022.

only focus. There was no attention to issues related to the curriculum, teaching improvement and higher education development in general,” said a third interviewee, a researcher and university lecturer who was then in Kabul and closely following the developments.

The Taliban’s approval letter emphasised that classes in private higher education institutions could resume “in a safe environment and under Islamic requirements and principles.” It detailed that the APUIHEA had submitted the policy proposal, the minister had approved it, and the heads of all private higher education institutions were obligated to implement the policy in their institutions. In addition, it said that the APUIHEA was obligated to monitor and report on its implementation to the MoHE – thus putting the burden of both the policy’s design and implementation on the APUIHEA and private institutions.

For its part, the APUIHEA policy proposal said that its member institutions would provide higher education to young people “in the light of the Islamic spirit.”

Referring to Covid-19-related disruptions over the last couple of years, it hoped that “[now], thanks to God, with the coming of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan ... all higher education institutions will restart their routine administrative and teaching activities.” Then, the policy tackled the main issue, the solution which secured the Taleban’s go-ahead:

All female students, lecturers and staff members have an obligation to comply with the sharia hijab (the colour of the hijab must be black. The image of the sample hijab has been attached to the proposal [see photo on page 48], which students, lecturers and staff members can obtain from the market or prepare it themselves). All universities have an obligation to separate the entrances for women.

The policy further entailed segregating male and female students, lecturers and staff from the time they arrived to when they left the campus. It ordered gender segregation, based on the availability of resources, by assigning separate buildings or, if that was not possible, separate teaching times or, if that was not possible, separate classrooms when there were over 15 female students. If assigning separate classrooms was not possible, and fewer than 15 female students were enrolled in a class, a curtain would partition the classroom. A joint commission of Taleban authorities and private higher education institutions would decide gender segregation modalities based on “the statistics and classroom attendance sheets of the universities.” The policy required new classes to be gender-segregated from the outset, revealing that the initial provisions represented a transition towards full gender segregation.

The policy also said that only women lecturers or, when women lecturers were unavailable, older men of good reputation would teach female students. Moreover, private higher education institutions “must make efforts to prepare specific transportation” for female students, in which “[there] must be a purdah [curtain] between the [male] driver and [female] students in the vehicle.”

The fact that the policy, drawn up by the APUIHEA, mimicked the Taleban’s notion of complete gender separation while providing temporary compromises for institutions that lacked adequate resources illustrated the desperate negotiating position private higher education institutions found themselves in. If they had not managed to solve the central issue of gender segregation, they would have had to remain closed. Most likely, this would have led to quick and widespread bankruptcy and dissolution, particularly after the difficult pandemic years.

Given the short timeline between the development and endorsement of the policy proposal and the reopening of private higher education institutions, it was no surprise that there was widespread confusion about its details and scope, followed by furore on and offline (see for instance this Etilaat-e Roz report [here](#)). Many institutions had not yet designed or did not have the space to adhere to the new gender segregation rules. In particular, the requirement for a curtain was not clear, as one of our interviewees described:

In the beginning, some institutes installed a fabric curtain in the middle of classrooms. It didn't prevent female and male students from seeing or speaking to one another. Therefore, the authorities said this wasn't acceptable and that curtains [partitions] made of wood or iron must replace the fabric ones... [In some cases] two classes became one class, and some classes were completely cancelled because student numbers were low and [their fees] couldn't cover the institute's costs and lecturers' salaries.

As for public higher education institutions, it took the Taliban several more months to decide when and under what conditions to reopen them. One interviewee who had been in touch with Taliban higher education officials in southern Afghanistan said that, in addition to the problem of financing, one major reason for the delay in the reopening of public higher education institutions was serious Taliban concerns about the curriculum:

The Taliban have many considerations about the curriculum. They say that they haven't changed it yet, and if the same curriculum is taught, it'll be recognised [as valid]. That's why it's not clear when they'll restart public higher education: two weeks later, three weeks later or more. They have considerations on the entire higher education curriculum in all the faculties and departments. For example, they'll surely increase credits for Islamic religious education. They say that our students don't talk enough about sharia and Islam in the universities. They say the students must be brought under the influence of sharia and Islam. That's why they say Islamic subjects must increase and Western and foreign views must decrease – in all universities. Yes, there's the budget issue, but there's also the curriculum issue.

On 30 January 2022 (a week after the interview quoted above), then higher education minister Haqqani announced, in a short [video message](#), the phased reopening of public higher education institutions: first on 2 February 2022 in the six

warmer provinces (Laghman and Nangrahar in the east; Kandahar, Helmand and Nimruz in the south; and Farah in the southwest) and on 26 February 2022 in the remaining 28 provinces. According to our interviewees, in some provinces, such as Bamyan and Daikundi, the actual reopening was delayed by a week or so, because initially very few students and lecturers had shown up.

The experiences of higher education reopening varied. In many provinces, the initial joy of being able to return to university – which was considerable – gave way to feelings of uncertainty, confusion and frustration, in particular when confronted with new appointments and new rules. In some provinces, a relatively upbeat mood remained, particularly among men, as well as in places where the new rules had already been the local practice.

CHAPTER 2.

AN EMERGENT TALEBAN-DEFINED UNIVERSITY: PUTTING AFFILIATES IN CHARGE

From the interviews and a close following of the relevant literature, including MoHE announcements and policy documents, we can deduce how higher education is being changed and shaped under the Taliban. So far, two main characteristics have emerged.

First, higher education must be run by the Taliban. To anyone who has followed the higher education ministry and the institutions it supervises, it is easy to notice that, since the Taliban takeover, new faces are now in charge. As far as the ministry is concerned, all new appointments are Taliban affiliates with experience fighting the previous regime, often as part of a longer involvement in Afghanistan's decades-long armed conflicts, and/or experience studying and lecturing in religious education institutions.

A case in point is the current deputy minister for finance and administration, Mawlawi Hafez Muhammad Hamed Hasib, who, according to his short biography published on the MoHE website, participated in “the conquest of Herat” in the 1990s, alongside extensive religious education. During the “illegitimate invasion”

of Afghanistan by the US and NATO, he continued his “scientific jihad during the day and worked with his students and comrades on planning and carrying out jihadi operations against the invaders during the night.” His other previous positions include *qazi* (judge) and head of the military commission in Nahr-e Saraj district of Helmand province, inmate in Bagram prison and member of the Taliban education and higher education commissions.³

Another drastic, but far less noticeable, personnel change came at the provincial level with the introduction of temporary, but powerful ‘extraordinary representatives’ as well as many top-down and arbitrary changes in the leadership of public higher education institutions, as summarised below in Table 1.

³ There is little publicly available information about the backgrounds of the Taliban appointees to the MoHE. The information on the deputy minister for finance and administration, Mawlawi Hafez Muhammad Hamed Hasib, however, comes from a rare biographical [sketch](#) made available on the ministry’s website. It tells us that the 45-year-old Kandahari deputy minister was two years old when his family migrated to Pakistan following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. There, he received his primary religious education from his father who was an *alim*, a religious scholar. At age ten, he enrolled in a *dar ul-hefaz* (house of memorisation) in Quetta city, the centre of Pakistan’s southwestern Baluchistan province. After he completed the memorisation of the Quran and learned Arabic, he first switched to *amuzesh-e asri* (modern education) in a high school in the same city and then joined a *jamia* (religious university) in Karachi. He left his studies for a while in the 1990s when “he and his like-minded friends participated in the conquest of Herat after the Taliban launched their Islamic uprising against evil and corruption.” He later returned to Pakistan “under the insistence of his teachers” and continued his religious studies by mastering the fields of hadith (sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad), *efta* (issuing fatwas or religious verdicts) and *qaza* (jurisprudence). After his return to Afghanistan, he became an *ustad* (lecturer) in a madrasa in his home province of Kandahar. When the US and NATO launched the “illegitimate invasion” of Afghanistan, he was involved in “scientific jihad during the day” and “jihadi operations against the invaders during the night.” The short bio adds that “this period of his life was full of problems.” He became a *qazi* (judge) in Nahr-e Saraj district of Helmand province because of “his indefatigable jihad and high academic status” and served as the head of the military commission in the same district. In March 2011, he was “arrested by the American forces and their mercenary regime in a dangerous ambush and taken to the cruel prison of Bagram.” After his release in late 2013, he was active as a member of the Taliban education and higher education commissions. In 2019, he was appointed to a jurisprudential position for the southwest region for three years. “After the end of the American occupation and the fall of Kabul to the Islamic Emirate,” he served in a post to coordinate mosque affairs for six months and was then “appointed based on a decree of the Amir ul-Muminin [Commander of the Faithful, that is, the Taliban supreme leader] as the deputy minister of higher education for finance and administration.”

2.1 Extraordinary representatives

One of the first things Mawlawi Haqqani, the first acting minister of higher education, did after his 29 August 2021 induction was to introduce extraordinary representatives (*fawqulada astazi*) in many provinces. Hosted by the main state provincial university or higher education institute, they acted as powerful interim political envoys aimed at bringing higher education under tighter Taliban control and monitoring.



Mawlawi Hafez Muhammad Hamed Hasib, Deputy Minister for Administration and Finance, Ministry of Higher Education.

Photo: Ministry of Higher Education website, 1 January 2023.

The tasks and authorities for the new post were spelled out in an official letter, with an accompanying attachment, on 1 September 2021, a little more than two weeks after the takeover.⁴ The then minister Haqqani said the extraordinary

⁴ Letter number [illegible], dated 23/1/1443 (1 September 2021) issued by Abdul Baqi Haqqani, acting minister of higher education, Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and its attachment “terms of reference of the extraordinary representative of the Ministry of Higher Education” (available with the author).

representatives were needed for the “coordination, monitoring and evaluation of state and private universities in each province.” He instructed “the central university in each province ... to provide him [the extraordinary representative] with a suitable working office, transportation and other materials needed for his work.” The minister further said that “the chancellor and all academic and administrative employees of universities will remain in their positions,” but “all affairs will proceed with the understanding of, and in coordination with, the extraordinary representative.”

The ministry gave the extraordinary representatives high and broad powers to intervene, supervise and manage all higher education affairs. They had the right to “participate in leadership and administrative meetings of state higher education institutions and supervise the implementation of the decisions.” They were also responsible for “supervising and controlling the properties, assets and financial affairs of public universities.” Their powers, moreover, went beyond administration and entered the domain of the academic, where they were to “supervise the academic, analytical and other activities of the faculty of higher education institutions.” They also had human resources management and quality control functions in that they were charged with “monitoring and addressing the recruitment, promotion and dismissal of the faculty and administrative staff of universities based on the rules and standards” and “receiving, monitoring and addressing complaints of the faculty and students with regard to the teaching affairs of higher education institutions.” Their authority even extended to the private higher education sector in that they were also ordered to “supervise private higher education institutes and universities and assist in terms of coordination with the Ministry of Higher Education.”

In late 2021, minister Haqqani further increased the powers of the extraordinary representatives. He issued an order that all communications from higher education institutions to the ministry had to go through the extraordinary representatives:⁵

For accurate and careful performance, all those issues that require instructions from the Minister of Higher Education must be confirmed and signed by the extraordinary representative and then referred to the Ministry of Higher Education.

⁵ Letter no. 149 dated 3/3/1443 (10 October 2021) issued by Erfanullah Ebad, Head of the Office of the Minister of Higher Education (available with the author).

By the time the Taliban introduced their second acting higher education minister in October 2022, these dominant posts were being dismantled, since the Taliban had by then changed most university leaders, some of whom were chosen from among the extraordinary representatives, and felt they were more firmly in charge.



Ceremony to mark the reopening of Sheikh Zayed State University in Khost city.
Photo: Sardar Shafaq/Anadolu Agency via AFP, 26 February 2022.

A look at the backgrounds of at least some of the extraordinary representatives reveals a presence or penetration of Taliban cadre in higher education predating the takeover. Some were recent graduates of the higher education institutions they were suddenly tasked to oversee. In Kandahar University, for example, the Taliban appointed a graduate of a provincial private higher education institution as the extraordinary representative. A long-time lecturer, who had been in contact with Taliban authorities in the province before and after the takeover, described the extraordinary representative as a “graduate of law and political science who had secretly worked for the Taliban and had headed their higher education commission in Kandahar province.” After a couple of months, the extraordinary representative was appointed vice-chancellor for administration and finance at Kandahar University.

The appointment of recent graduates, with hidden Taliban membership during the Republic, to positions within higher educational institutions has been a recurring pattern. In Bamyan province, for instance, the extraordinary representative was a graduate of Bamyan University who was said to have previously been a covert member of the Taliban. He was later appointed vice-chancellor for finance and administration. In Paktika, a recent graduate of the state higher education institute was first appointed as extraordinary representative and then became vice-chancellor for finance and administration.

The recurring move, to appoint extraordinary representatives who then (also) became vice-chancellors for finance and administration, shows that it was a major Taliban concern to entrust university finance and management to members with proven loyalty to the new political dispensation (see Table 1 below).

In two cases we learned about, the extraordinary representatives had been officials of the previous government, further blurring the line of who was on which side before August 2021. In the Daikundi Institute of Higher Education, the extraordinary representative, who later became vice-chancellor for administration and finance, had worked as the head of a government directorate in neighbouring Uruzgan province during the Republic. He was a graduate of a technical and vocational education institute, had been a secret Taliban member and was reportedly a close relative of the Taliban's provincial intelligence chief. In Kunar, the extraordinary representative at Sayed Jamaluddin Afghan University, who later served as vice-chancellor for finance and administration, had been a district governor in the previous government.

In many cases, our interviewees considered the Taliban-appointed extraordinary representatives to be grossly ineligible for any university position, let alone a post with so many responsibilities and powers. An interviewee from Paktika was considering leaving the profession because he found it unbearable to work under a former student who “[didn’t] know a word about these things [university leadership and administration].” In Farah province, a lecturer said it was difficult to work under the new Taliban-appointed leader with much lower education and/or academic qualifications than him. Likewise, a lecturer in Uruzgan was shocked when a former student – a graduate from the agriculture faculty of the institute – was suddenly introduced as extraordinary representative. He was later also made vice-chancellor for finance and administration.

Table 1: Early university leadership changes made by the Taliban Ministry of Higher Education in the 23 provinces covered by our interviews

No	Province	HE institution	Leadership changes made by the MoHE
1	Badakhshan	Badakhshan Uni	Introduced an extraordinary representative; appointed a lecturer as chancellor
2	Badghis	Badghis IHE	Introduced an extraordinary representative
3	Baghlan	Baghlan Uni	Introduced an extraordinary representative; appointed a lecturer as chancellor; changed vice-chancellor finance and admin
4	Balkh	Balkh Uni	Introduced an extraordinary representative
5	Bamyan	Bamyan Uni	Introduced a graduate of the university as extraordinary representative; removed chancellor and vice-chancellor finance and admin; appointed an alumnus of the university as new chancellor; changed extraordinary representative to vice-chancellor finance and admin
6	Daikundi	Daikundi IHE	Introduced a director in the previous government as extraordinary representative; then changed the extraordinary representative to vice-chancellor finance and admin
7	Farah	Farah IHE	Introduced an extraordinary representative
8	Faryab	Faryab Uni	Introduced an extraordinary representative, then appointed him as vice-chancellor finance and admin; appointed a lecturer as vice-chancellor academic affairs
9	Ghazni	1. Ghazni Uni 2. Ghazni TTI	1. Introduced an extraordinary representative and appointed a lecturer as chancellor; 2. Appointed a lecturer as chancellor
10	Helmand	Helmand IHE	Introduced an extraordinary representative, then appointed someone else; changed the chancellor
11	Herat	Herat Uni	Introduced an extraordinary representative; changed the chancellor
12	Kandahar	Kandahar Uni	Introduced an extraordinary representative, then installed him as vice-chancellor finance and admin; changed the chancellor
13	Kapisa	al-Biruni Uni	Introduced an extraordinary representative; chancellor resigned in protest

14	Khost	Sheikh Zayed Uni	Introduced an extraordinary representative
15	Kunar	Sayed Jamaluddin Afghan Uni	Appointed a lecturer as chancellor; introduced a district governor of the previous government as extraordinary representative, then installed him as vice-chancellor finance and admin too; changed vice-chancellor student affairs
16	Nangrahar	Nangrahar Uni	Changed vice-chancellor academic affairs
17	Paktia	Paktia Uni	Introduced an extraordinary representative; appointed new chancellor, then replaced him with a lecturer of the same university
18	Paktika	Paktika IHE	Introduced a graduate of the same institute as extraordinary representative, then installed him as vice-chancellor finance and admin
19	Panjshir	Panjshir IHE	Introduced an extraordinary representative, then installed him as chancellor
20	Sar-e Pul	Sar-e Pul IHE	Introduced an extraordinary representative, then installed him vice-chancellor finance and admin too
21	Uruzgan	Uruzgan IHE	Introduced alumnus of same institute as extraordinary representative, then installed him as vice-chancellor finance and admin too
22	Wardak	Wardak IHE	Introduced an extraordinary representative, then installed him vice-chancellor finance and admin too
23	Zabul	Zabul IHE	Changed chancellor

Source: Interviews December 2021 to March 2022.

Uni: university; IHE: institute of higher education; TTI: teacher training institute.

A few interviewees described how some students had also revealed themselves as Taliban when the universities reopened after the takeover. In Baghlan University, for instance, an interviewee said these students, although “few” in number, now “come in army uniforms.” In Panjshir, an interviewee said the Taliban had already been present in the province, even in the provincial public higher education institute, before the fall of the Republic. Lecturers like him, he said, had not known that “our students were working hand in glove with the Taliban. We weren’t able to recognise it. Only after the upheaval [Taliban takeover] did we come to know they were members of the Taliban.” A lecturer at Kabul Medical University who left the country after the Taliban takeover told the author he had been surprised to

see how many students in the university were already members of the Taliban or had become Taliban members after the fall of the Republic. The experience was similar in Paktia, as another interviewee recounted:

We have students who are members of the Taliban. On the first day the university reopened they attended classes in uniforms and carried guns. Then, the extraordinary representative visited all the classes and told them not to do that. I also told my students: wherever you work, I respect it, but an army uniform has never been allowed in the university because it's a place for education.

2.2 Other changes in the leadership of universities

While the Ministry of Higher Education relied on the extraordinary representatives as an interim measure to gain greater control over higher education institutions in general, it also changed the leadership of many public institutions. In many cases, these decisions were quite sudden. A lecturer at Ghazni University, for example, said the chancellor was not even told he had been replaced by a new man with “links to the Emirate” and was given no opportunity to react to the decision. A similar example comes from Bamyān University, where the Taliban summarily dismissed the chancellor and vice-chancellor for finance and administration and found replacements among the university’s graduates, who were relatively young men from the Taliban’s own ranks (for more examples, see Table 1).⁶

We encountered a variety of views on the suitability of the new administrative appointments. Some interviewees thought the new university leaders were generally unqualified for their positions. Others thought the ministry had at least sought to select replacements from among the local academics who had connections to the Taliban movement. Several interviewees said the Taliban regarded themselves as more eligible than the academics they had replaced; in the words of one interviewee, they saw themselves as “better, more informed and

⁶ In western Afghanistan’s key university in Herat, there has been a quick succession of leaders since the Taliban takeover. The last chancellor prior to August 2021, Pohanwal Dr Abdullah Fayez, left the country around the time of the Taliban capture of the city. The then vice-chancellor for student affairs, Dr Muhammad Daud Munir, became acting chancellor until he too left the country soon afterwards. At the same time, the Taliban introduced an extraordinary representative, Mawlawi Mennatullah Akhundzada, to oversee the university’s affairs. Later, the Taliban appointed Pohandoy Abdul Aziz Numani as the chancellor of Herat University.



Kabul University chancellor Osama Aziz, acting minister Mawlawi Nadim, and deputy minister for academic affairs Dr Lutfullah Khairkhwa (from right to left) in a Kabul University leadership council meeting. Photo: Ministry of Higher Education website, 10 January 2023.

more knowledgeable.” According to another, they “gave positions to their fellow members regardless of qualifications.”

Some of the changes in staffing provoked reactions among staff and students, including resignations and non-confrontational protests. In a few cases, this resulted in the ministry reconsidering its changes to the university leadership. In Kabul University, for instance, the Taliban introduced Muhammad Ashraf Ghairat as their extraordinary representative on 21 September 2021 and then named him to replace then chancellor, Muhammad Osman Baburi (see this media [report](#)). There were two reasons for the ensuing furore. First, Ghairat’s qualifications paled in comparison to Baburi’s, who had taught for decades and served as deputy minister, from 2007 to 2017, before becoming chancellor.⁷ Second, upon his

⁷ Ghairat is said to have graduated from the journalism faculty of Kabul University in 2008 and to have 15 years of working experience with the Taliban. Baburi, on the other hand, holds a doctorate in pharmacognosy (the study of medicinal drugs obtained from plants and other natural sources) from

appointment, Ghairat called for the “Islamisation” of the entire higher education system, including the curricula and women’s participation.

When the outrage did not die down, and dozens of Kabul University lecturers threatened to resign, the ministry [sent](#) a high-profile delegation to talk to the lecturers on 25 September 2021⁸ to explain “the aims and programmes of the Islamic Emirate” and ask for the cooperation of the university’s academic staff. Speaking as a representative of the university’s academic staff, professor Qodratullah Oriakhel “rejected demands raised by a limited number of lecturers about the new acting chancellor of Kabul University [Ghairat]” and stressed that “the professors of Kabul University have never made such a demand.” The meeting, with its implied pressure, succeeded in quelling the protests. The following month, however, the Taliban did replace Ghairat with a man with at least more academic qualifications.⁹

The ministry also replaced the new chancellor of Paktia University after some lecturers and students expressed unhappiness over the appointee’s qualifications. The Taliban instead promoted the dean of the law faculty, which went down better, as one of our interviewees described:

The university lecturers and students weren’t happy because [the first appointee] wasn’t educated. After some time, the dean of the law faculty was appointed as [another] new chancellor. The lecturers and students have no problem with this man and did not react to his appointment. The current chancellor was also a lecturer in the law faculty of Paktia University.

Some chancellors, according to our interviewees, stayed in their jobs, including – initially – the female chancellor of the Badghis Institute of Higher Education. Our interviewee thought her ethnicity – Pashtun like most of the Taliban – had helped the chancellor avoid “getting fired” at the time, despite being a woman.

Philips University in Marburg, Germany. He has held teaching posts at Kabul University for several decades and served as a deputy minister of higher education from 2007 to 2017 and chancellor of Kabul University since May 2020 (see this media [report](#)).

⁸ The MoHE delegation consisted of Mawlawi Asadullah Farid, then deputy minister for administration and finance, chancellor Ghairat himself, Dr Delawar Silab, then director of information, publications and public relations, and Sheikh ul-Hadith Mawlawi Shah Muhammad, a Taliban mullah.

⁹ The new chancellor of Kabul University, Osama Aziz, holds a bachelor’s degree in sharia and law, a master’s degree in Islamic business law and a PhD in jurisprudence from the International Islamic University Islamabad in Pakistan, according to this media [report](#).

While she stayed on as chancellor, the interviewee said it was the extraordinary representative who “monitors all the activities of the university and approves the final decisions.”¹⁰ Other university leaders who stayed in their positions, at least initially, at the time of our interviews, included those at Nangrahar University in the east and some public universities in Kabul (Kabul Polytechnic University and Kabul University of Education).

Some interviewees said they expected the Taliban authorities to start replacing faculty deans, department heads and lecturers. A Kandahar interviewee, for instance, thought it “impossible that the faculty deans and department heads remain in their positions; the Taliban have [within their movement] people for each office who have worked for them during the last 20 years.” In Mazar-e Sharif, a lecturer said: “If there is a vacancy in a faculty or department, it will certainly be filled with an affiliate [of the Taliban].”

CHAPTER 3.

AN EMERGENT TALEBAN-DEFINED UNIVERSITY: CENTRING SHARIA IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The second characteristic of the emergent Taliban-defined university is that it aims to strictly centre the Taliban’s understanding of sharia and its observance within higher education. From statements by Taliban officials, it emerges that they see changing the higher education system as one of the missions of the jihad, or armed struggle, against the previous regime and its Western supporters. In this view, the previous government and the Western interveners waged not only a military war since 2001 but also a *fekri jagra*, a ‘war of thoughts,’ including through higher education. The Taliban intend to roll it back.

As part of this war of thoughts, the Taliban have created new religious bodies within the ministry, with the authority to upgrade and incorporate religious institutions into higher education and ensure that higher education, and anyone

¹⁰ Another female chancellor, however, had stopped working as the chancellor of Kabul University of Education explaining to the author in December 2021 that “the women are at home [since the Taliban takeover] and so am I.”

involved in it, functions under the watchful eye of a religious authority. They have permitted the existing university curriculum revision to continue, but have given it a religious reorientation based on their understanding of sharia.

3.1 A war of thoughts



Women queue up to take the university entrance exam at Kabul University. However, the Emirate banned women from higher education before this group of hopefuls could begin their university studies.

Photo: Wakil Kohsar/AFP, 13 October 2022.

The first hint of the war of thoughts rhetoric came during the inaugural speech of Mawlawi Haqqani, the Taliban's first acting higher education minister, on 29 August 2021. Haqqani, who had been the head of the insurgency-era higher education commission of the Taliban, stressed that both religious and natural sciences are part of Islam, but that the previous government had "followed non-Muslims in its focus on separating religious and natural sciences" (see this [media report](#)). His comments reflect a common view among the Taliban authorities that religion is to be the overall framework that informs and guides higher education

and that this foundation was lost due to the pervasive foreign influence in the 2001-2021 period. As Taliban authorities have repeatedly stated, higher education must follow “religious and national values [*dini aw melli arzeshuna*]” and an “Islamic and Afghan spirit [*islami aw afghani ruhiya*]” must reign in higher education.

Another example of this thinking was expressed a month later, in late September 2021, by Muhammad Hamed Yaqubi, when he was appointed as extraordinary representative in the Kabul University of Education (he has since been appointed director of public university students in the ministry). He said in front of a gathering of students and staff:¹¹

It's easier to conquer a territory than to maintain it. This means that although we can save our country from the claws of any occupier or oppressor within several years or a relatively short time, it's much more difficult to maintain and manage the nezam [government system]. It's hard because the Americans not only invaded and intervened in our country with their military might, but they also used a much more powerful tool, a war of thoughts, to change the mind and thoughts of our people. They implemented most of their projects in universities, schools and other places.

The current acting higher education minister, Mawlawi Neda Muhammad Nadim, previously governor of Nangrahar province, has been similarly outspoken about the fekri jagra. “The physical war of the unbelievers has ended in the country, but their thought and propaganda war continues,” Nadim [said](#) during one of his several provincial trips in December 2022. He asked the lecturers to “keep the young generation of the homeland away from foreign thoughts and educate them with healthy Islamic beliefs.”

The Taliban authorities see this war of thoughts as vast and pervasive. In a meeting at the ministry to revise the language and literature faculty's curriculum on 1 January 2023, for example, Mawlawi Nadim [asked](#) the participants to “protect national languages from the domination of foreign languages.” In the same event, Dr Lutfullah Khairkhwa, deputy minister for academic affairs, said that language was not just a means of communication, but it also transmitted thought, after which he stressed that “the war of thoughts is waged by thought.” In another

¹¹ The author followed parts of the extraordinary representative's speech on social media. The link has since then stopped working.

event held to revise the curriculum of the journalism faculty a week later, Mawlawi Nadim [said](#) that the media was a powerful instrument and “for this reason, the unbelievers mostly use the media in their thought and propaganda war against Muslims.” Dr Khairkhwa said the media had strongly influenced “the public opinions of our society in the 20-year occupation period.”



Acting higher education minister, Mawlawi Nadim, speaking at an event to revise the curriculum of the language and literature faculty in higher education institutions.

Photo: Ministry of Higher Education website, 1 January 2023.

The Taliban authorities thus see it as their task to roll back the higher educational and intellectual legacy of the last 20 years that, in their view, the foreigners foisted on them after toppling the first emirate. They also take it as their duty to use higher education to help justify and entrench their second emirate. “The Islamic Emirate is a gift given to us by God Almighty. In this nezam, the sovereign is the Almighty and the amir [ruler] is the servant of the nezam,” [said](#) Mawlawi Nadim in a meeting with the religious scholars, the ulema, in Herat in December 2022. “It is imperative,” [said](#) Mawlawi Nadim in a meeting with students and staff during the same provincial trip, “to obey God, the Prophet and the amir of the Muslims.”

The leaders, staff and students of higher education institutions are expected to join in this endeavour. One of the interviewees said that the ministry had “asked the founders and chancellors of private higher education institutions to warn those people [faculty deans, department heads, lecturers, students] who are *sharir* [rebellious] and who don’t submit to the law and policy of the Islamic Emirate.” The ministry has regularly reported similar statements. In a “religious-scientific [seminar](#) for lecturers of Kabul-based higher education institutions” on 28 February 2023, Taliban officials in charge of the ministry called on the participants to display “the characteristics of the conscientious and trustworthy lecturer [*sefat-e ustad-e wazifashenas wa amanatdar*].”

Rather than dismantling the sector altogether, as they did, for instance, with the women’s affairs ministry (after which, symbolically, the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice – virtue and vice ministry, for short – moved into its buildings), it seems clear that the Taliban intend to instrumentalise higher education in their efforts to rationalise and consolidate their rule, which they believe is divinely ordained.

3.2 New religious bodies in the ministry

As part of their efforts to reshape the higher education system, the Taliban have established two new bodies in the ministry: one to elevate and incorporate certain religious institutions in higher education and another to promote and monitor that anyone involved in higher education is adhering to the specified gender, behaviour and appearance rules.

General Directorate of Religious Universities and Specialisations

The first new body is the General Directorate of Religious Universities and Specialisations (*da dini jamiato aw takhassosato charo loy riyasat*). First reported by the ministry in late April 2022 (see its press releases [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#))¹²

¹² Between 26 and 30 April 2022, the ministry dispatched a delegation of senior officials to spread the word about the establishment of the general directorate of religious universities and specialisations. The delegation was composed of a high-ranking official of the new general directorate, Mawlawi Saifuddin Hammad, and two officials who had been transferred from other posts within the ministry, Mawlawi Asadullah Farid, then deputy minister for administration and finance, and Mawlawi Dawud Haqqani, then director of research, compilation and translation. The three officials met the extraordinary representatives and other Taliban-appointed university leaders in Kunduz, Kunar, Panjshir, Herat and Kandahar, as well as university leaders from nearby provinces who had travelled in for the meetings.

and [inaugurated](#) in a high-profile ceremony¹³ a few weeks later in Kabul on 18 May 2022, the directorate pursues two interlinked purposes.



Taliban officials inaugurate the building of the general directorate of religious universities and specialisations of the higher education ministry.

Photo: Ministry of Higher Education website, 18 May 2022.

First, the general directorate aims to promote specific religious studies disciplines in higher education. In so doing, it has established five specialisations that the ministry has recognised as five master's of arts degrees: (1) *tafsir*, exegesis of the Quran; (2) *hadith*, the sayings and conduct attributed to the Prophet Muhammad; (3) *dawat aw ershad*, preaching and guidance; (4) *fiqh* and *qaza*, jurisprudence and the judiciary; and (5) Islamic economics and banking (see also this [press release](#)). The ministry has already recruited at least the first batch of lecturers for these five fields of study (see its press releases [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)) and [allocated](#) 54 staff to the general directorate.

¹³ Among the attendees were the minister of mines and petroleum, Sheikh Shahabuddin Delawar, minister of virtue and vice, Sheikh Muhammad Khaled Hanafi, former minister of education, Sheikh Nurullah Munir, and president of the Taliban-run Academy of Sciences of Afghanistan, Sheikh Fariduddin Mahmud, in addition to the then higher education minister, Abdul Baqi Haqqani.

Second, the general directorate aims to accredit specific religious institutions as religious universities (see this [press release](#)). It has so far converted two religious institutions into universities: the Jamia Abdullah bin Massud in Kabul and the Jamia Ibrahim al-Nakha'i in Kandahar (see also p 47 of the first annual [report](#) of the Taleban ministry).¹⁴

Before the ministry designated the Jamia Ibrahim al-Nakha'i as a religious university, it was a religious school called Hammadiya Madrasa in Kandahar city, which was run by the Quran Banset (Quran Foundation) established by Mufti Abdul Hadi Hammad in Kandahar city in 1384 (2005/2006).¹⁵ Mufti Hammad, a graduate of the Dar ul-Ulum Haqqaniya in Pakistan, is a mufti with a specialisation in Hanafi jurisprudence and a sheikh with a specialisation in hadith, who has travelled extensively in the Islamic world (more on him in this Wikipedia [entry](#)). Among his many publications is a 2016/2017 book entitled *Fekri Jagra*,¹⁶ which shows great similarities with the Taleban war of thoughts argument, in particular as reflected in the recently revised curriculum for the university-wide subject of *saqafat-e eslami* (literally 'Islamic culture'), which we will discuss further below.

A well-informed interviewee wondered why the upgrade had not been made within the existing higher education system:

[Jamia Ibrahim al-Nakha'i] didn't exist under this name before. It used to be a madrasa. Madrasa-ye Hammadiya. They [the ministry] have now upgraded it to the level of an institution offering master's degrees in religious sciences. There was no study about whether it fulfilled any [higher education]

¹⁴ *Jamia* means university in Arabic. Abdullah bin Massud was a prominent early companion of the Prophet Muhammad who died in about 32-33 AH/652-654 AD and is considered one of Islam's greatest *mufasssirs*, or exegetes of the Quran; more about him in this [entry](#) of Brill's Encyclopaedia of Islam. Ibrahim al-Nakha'i (born about 50 AH/670 AD, died about 96 AH/717 AD) was an influential traditionist (*muhaddith*) and jurist (*faqih*) who belonged to the generation succeeding the companions of the Prophet Muhammad known as the *tabi'un*, or 'followers/successors' (more in this [entry](#) of Brill's Encyclopaedia of Islam).

¹⁵ According to this Pashto-language Wikipedia [entry](#), the Quran Banset also runs a *dar ul-efta* (fatwa-issuing office), a *dar ul-hefaz* (Quran memorisation office), a magazine called *Neda ul-Quran* (Voice of Quran), a compilation and translation office and the radio station Talim ul-Quran (Education of Quran) that broadcasts online and has branches in Helmand and Herat provinces too.

¹⁶ *Fekri Jagra*, research, arrangement and translation by Mawlawi Abdul Hadi Hammad, Kandahar, Hammadiya Madrasa of Islamic Sciences, 1394 solar hejri/1436 AH/2016-2017 AD (available with the author). The PDF version of the book is no longer accessible from this [page](#) of the Talim ul-Quran radio station website.

standards. For example, in principle, a person with a master's degree shouldn't teach master's-level students – the lecturer must have a PhD – but it is now happening [in Jamia Ibrahim al-Nakha'i]. We already had a sharia faculty at Kandahar University. They could have upgraded the faculty to offer master's and PhD degrees, like the sharia faculties in Kabul and Nangrahar Universities that offer such degrees. Why didn't they do this? ... The people in charge of running the ministry are all graduates of madrasas. I think they want to bring the same system under which they studied to the ministry and universities. They want to give these graduates some degree so they can find their place in the state.

The two newly established religious universities have already graduated the first batch of what they call *ulema-ye keram* (magnanimous scholars) or *fazelan* (the erudite) – instead of using the more common term *mohasselan* (university students, literally ‘those who acquire knowledge’) – in the specialisation *efta* (issuing fatwas or religious edicts) and *qaza* (judgement).

During the graduation ceremony held at Kabul University on 8 March 2023, Mawlawi Nadim [said](#) that there was “a serious need for such experts in the country's courts” where “the wrong decisions of the previous nezam remain in place.” During the graduation event in Kandahar on 12 March 2023, the minister [said](#) that “after two years of education paid for by the nation,” the graduates had “greater responsibilities for honest service.”¹⁷ The mentioned timing – two years of studies – suggests that either the graduates had started their studies one year before the new general directorate was activated or that the MoHE rushed their graduation.

The general directorate plans to turn more religious institutions into universities, as the ministry has referred to plans, decreed by the Taliban supreme leader, to create six more religious universities in Balkh, Helmand, Herat, Kunduz, Nangrahar and Paktia ([watch](#) the 7 May 2023 statement of the ministry spokesman, Hafez

¹⁷ The Kabul and Kandahar graduation ceremonies were attended by high-ranking Taliban officials from outside the higher education ministry, including the minister of refugees and repatriation, Hajji Khalil ul-Rahman Haqqani, and Kabul governor, Sheikh Muhammad Qasem Khaled, in the Kabul event and the Kandahar deputy-governor, Mawlawi Hayatullah Mubarak, in the Kandahar event. The speech by the acting higher education minister, Mawlawi Nadim, during the Kandahar graduation ceremony became controversial when he said that “anyone who damages the nezam, whether by language or by pen or by action, is a rebel and has to be killed” (see media reports [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)). His remarks were not included in the relevant ministry press release.

Ziaullah Hashemi; see also this ministry [press release](#) and watch this [report](#) by the state broadcaster, Radio and Television Afghanistan, which, among other things, refers specifically to the plan for a religious university in Kunduz).

Directorate of Preaching and Guidance

The second new body in the ministry of higher education is known as the Directorate of Preaching and Guidance (*dawat aw ershad riyasat*). The ministry has [referred](#) to a scheme (*tarha*) sketched out by the directorate which all higher education institutions would have to follow. We have not seen the text of the scheme, but the director, Sheikh Shakerullah Wahdat, has explained that their “*kari layeha* [job description]” has two areas of focus (watch him explain it [here](#)). First, he said the directorate “holds daily training and capacity-building sessions” for the ministry’s staff members, which concern:

[H]ow we [at the ministry] can prevent ourselves from [falling into] tribalism [qawmparastai], racism [nezhadparastai], regionalism [samtparastai] and moral and administrative corruption, and exercise compassion [tarahom] towards our fellow Afghans who come from Badakhshan, Nangrahar, Herat, Khost, Kunduz and elsewhere and help them fulfil their work today rather than put it off to tomorrow.

Sheikh Wahdat said their work had had “good results and our behaviour with our clients has become very cordial.” Second, he said officials from the directorate visited, monitored and assisted higher education institutions to “win support for the *markazi nezam* [central government system],” without giving further details.

According to the annual report of the ministry cited above (p 50), this new directorate trains staff in the ministry and in public and private higher education institutions in “observing hijab, eliminating male-female mixing [*ekhtelat*] and bigotry [*ta’asob*] and avoiding extremes [*efrat wa tafrit*].”

The relationship between the MoHE’s directorate of preaching and guidance and the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (virtue and vice ministry, for short) is unclear. Some interviewees believed the directorate was functioning under the virtue and vice ministry. Officials, apparently from both the new directorate and the virtue and vice ministry, have been gathering lecturers and students to explain the new policies and rules to them.

For instance, during a visit to a private higher education institution in Kabul in April 2022, a virtue and vice delegation reportedly held separate sessions for male and female lecturers, staff and students (the visit was reported by the Association of Private Universities and Institutes of Higher Education in Afghanistan (APUIHEA) in a Facebook post that is no longer available, but was seen by the author). The delegation informed them about “hijab, prayer, fasting, ethics and conduct in the revealed religion of Islam; brotherhood of various ethnicities of Afghanistan and the manners of the great personalities of the Islamic community on the basis of Quranic verses and Prophetic sayings.”

Our interviews show that the MoHE directorate of preaching and guidance has opened branches in each province’s main public university or higher education institute and has dispatched officers to preach and guide all higher education institutions in religious matters. An interviewee who is a chancellor of a private university in the north described his first encounter with them:

Preaching and guidance officers appear every now and then to remind us about [observing] certain points. The first time they came, they told me to take a pen and a piece of paper and to write down five or six points: surat [appearance] and sirat [behaviour] must be according to the sunnat [Islamic tradition], clothes must be loose and not tight, beards and moustaches must be long and according to the sunnat, prayer must be said in congregation, classes must be suspended for the prayer, female students must wear niqab [face covering] and their hair must not be bare, female lecturers must wear the niqab when teaching male students.

The directorate has required all higher education institutions to recruit preaching and guidance officers, preferably those with a background in religious studies (see also this ministry news [release](#)). An interviewee said about the officer in his institution: “[My institute] has introduced a preaching and guidance officer. He’s active, has many authorities and carries a specific ID card... He gives training to all on Islamic matters. He documents and takes photos of his work and reports to higher officials [the directorate’s branch in the main university] once every three months.” So far, the directorate has not forced the institutions to recruit externally or against their will, according to interviewees from western and northern Afghanistan.

The directorate announced on 22 August 2022 that it would also recruit one mullah imam (mosque leader) and one *moballeq* (preacher) for each state higher education

institution (see media reports [here](#) and [here](#)). Along with their religious duties, the purpose may be to increase the number of personnel within institutions that can conduct religious surveillance on students, lecturers and administrative staff.



Sheikh Shakerullah Wahdat, director of preaching and guidance, speaking to students during a monitoring visit to a private university in Kabul.

Photo: Ministry of Higher Education website, 14 March 2022.

The preaching and guidance directorate also pioneered a series of “religious-scientific seminars” for *ulema-ye keram* (religious scholars) and *ustadan/asatid* (university lecturers) in late February and early March 2023 (see ministry press releases [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)). High-ranking Taliban officials from outside the higher education ministry, including the provincial administration, participated in these events. One stated aim was “to open the door of negotiation, debate and understanding between religious scholars and lecturers of higher education institutions to use the knowledge of both parties to arrive at an overarching vision to serve the people and the country,” said the directorate in the seminar covering the Emirate’s state and private higher education institutions in Khost, Ghazni, Parwan, Kunar, Nuristan, Sar-e Pul and Baghlan provinces. The

ministry also used these occasions to explain the new orientation in higher education, including “the rights and duties of the amir of Muslims,” “the importance and truth of jihad,” “hijab in Islam,” and “the characteristics of a successful and trustworthy lecturer.”¹⁸

3.3 Revising university curricula

The revision of university curricula, aimed at producing a single curriculum for all higher education institutions, particularly state-run institutions, across the country, was ongoing when the Taleban took over. The Taleban authorities have let the revision process continue under their supervision, while clearly prioritising religious studies.¹⁹

A foundational document guiding the prioritisation appears to be the Arabic-language book titled ‘The Islamic Emirate and its System’, written by Taleban Chief Justice Sheikh Abdul Hakim Haqqani and endorsed by the Taleban Supreme Leader Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada, who wrote the foreword.²⁰ The document explains, among many other things, a position on (higher) education that revolves unequivocally around the centring of the sharia in all education.

According to the book, the state is the key actor in ensuring that sharia reigns in any education, which in turn strengthens the state. “In the Islamic state, *talim al-dini* [religious education] must be given preference over *talim al-asri* [modern education]. It does not mean that modern education should be left out entirely, but what is meant is that modern education should be within religious education,” writes Chief Justice Haqqani (p 242). He goes on to write that “the weakness in the Islamic state comes from the predominance of non-religious sciences ... and immersion into the new modern sciences is destructive to faith and practice”

¹⁸ In the seminars, the ministry saw the ideal professor in Abu Hanifa al-Numan ibn Thabit (80-150 AH/699-767 AD), who was a theologian and jurist and the eponym of the jurisprudential school of Hanafi (more on him in this [entry](#) of Brill’s Encyclopaedia of Islam). His adherents refer to him as *imam-e azam* (great spiritual leader).

¹⁹ The revision of the curricula has so far included the faculties of mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, medicine, pharmacy, veterinary science, computer science, engineering, agriculture, language and literature, journalism and geology and mining.

²⁰ Abdul Hakim Haqqani, *Emara al-Eslamiya wa Nezamaha* [*The Islamic Emirate and its System of Governance*], [place of publication not mentioned], Maktab Dar al-Ulum al-Sharia, 1443 AH/2022 AD (available with the author).

(ibid). He then distinguishes the objectives of religious and non-religious education into two mutually exclusive categories: “The purpose of *elm al-ketab wa al-sunnah* [science of the Quran and the Prophet’s Tradition] is to know God ... while the purpose of *elm al-asri* [modern science] is to obtain perishable material benefits” (p 245). Chief Justice Haqqani prescribes that “if a student spends one hour on arithmetic, agriculture and chemistry, they must spend at least two hours on religious science, not the other way around” (p 246).

Furthermore, the Taliban supreme leader has ordered the Taliban government to provide that “those ulema who are committed to Islam, pious and deserving the profession become professors in the sharia faculty” and that “a committee composed of deserving ulema is appointed to monitor teaching in the university.”²¹

At least some of this thinking is reflected in what the Taliban higher education ministry has done so far regarding university curricula. Among the three curricula that have so far been revised and published in the Pashto language, the first and most important is the subject of religious studies known as *saqafat-e eslami* (Islamic culture). This is a university-wide subject, obligatory for all students in all faculties of all higher education institutions, whether public or private.²² The two other revised and published curricula are for the subjects *talimat-e eslami* (Islamic studies) and *fiqh aw qanun* (jurisprudence and law), which are used to teach first- to fourth-semester students in the sharia faculty only.²³

In the revised Pashto-language curriculum for *saqafat-e eslami*, the ministry has increased the time allotted to this subject. Students, regardless of their field of study, now need to receive 48 teaching hours of Islamic studies each semester, instead of the previous 16 hours per semester, to get not one, but three credits – a threefold increase. It is beyond the scope of this report to go through the entire revised curriculum, but examples from the sections *fekri pohana* (intellectual

²¹ Ministry of Justice of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, [The Decrees, Edicts and Instructions of His Excellency Amir al-Mu’minin the Supreme Leader](#), 2 Dhu al-Qadah 1444 AH/1 Jawza 1402 solar hejri/22 May 2023 AD, Official Gazette, issue no 1432, p 96.

²² In the introduction, ex-Minister Haqqani wrote that it was the first curriculum released by the ministry after the end of the “occupation [*eshqa*] and 43 years of forced war [*tahmili jagra*]” (page i). Ministry of Higher Education of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, [Curriculum of Islamic Culture](#), Kabul, MoHE, 1443 AH/2022 AD.

²³ Access the *talimat-e eslami* curriculum for the first and second semesters [here](#) and for the third and fourth semesters [here](#) and the *fiqh aw qanun* curriculum for the first and second semesters [here](#) and for the third and fourth semesters [here](#).

education, pp 31-35) and *siyasi nezam* (political system, pp 40-45) reveal the thinking behind the restructuring of Afghanistan's higher education post-Taliban takeover.²⁴

The section on intellectual education, which the curriculum calls "one of the most important and comprehensive" sections, discusses *fekri jagra*, the war of thoughts, identifying four historical stages: *salibi jagro* (Crusader wars), *este'mar* (colonialism), *esteshraq* (orientalism) and *tansir/tabshir* (Christian proselytism/preaching), mirroring the 2016/2017 book by Mufti Abdul Hadi Hammad referred to above (pp 19-53). The curriculum further establishes "[preventing] the introduction of bad and wrong ideas into Islamic society" as one of the teaching objectives and enumerates the ends and means of the war of thoughts that it seeks to roll back, contending that:

The ends of fekri jagra:

1. Preventing the Islamic call [*eslami dawat*] from reaching Western nations /
2. Defaming Islam in Western nations / 3. Defaming the past history of the Islamic umma [*global community*] / 4. Defaming Islam and Muslim nations around the world under various pretexts / 5. Involving Muslims in physical and mental wars among themselves / 6. Keeping Muslims sceptical about their future / 7. Damaging the international identity of Muslims as an Islamic umma / 8. Laying hold on the throne of power in Islamic countries / 9. Defaming international Islamic movements.

The means of fekri jagra:

1. Promoting Western culture / 2. Promoting secularism [*'almaniyat*] /
3. Creating false and artificial leaderships / 4. Removing material from curricula that reveal enemy plots / 5. Controlling the media.

The section on the political system in the revised curriculum discusses what it calls the theory of divine principle (*da elahi asl nazariya*), where the amir (ruler)

²⁴ The full curriculum of *seqafat-e islami* covers the belief system (*eteqadi nezam*), *talawat aw tajwid* (recitation and reading of the Quran), the worship system (*ebadati nezam*), the *sirat* (the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad), the ethical system (*akhlaqi nezam*), the social system (*tolaniz nezam*), intellectual education (*fekri pohana*), religions and religious sects (*adyan aw mazaheb*), the political system (*siyasi nezam*), the administrative system [*edari nezam*], the economic system (*eqtesadi nezam*), the Quran and contemporary subjects (*moaseru ulumu*) and Islamic civilisation (*tamadon-e eslami*) (page iii). The curriculum gives a list of mostly Arabic-language references for each of these sections.

or imam (leader), who takes his power from divine sovereignty (*elahi hakemiyat*), is appointed through allegiance (*bay'at*) by a council (*shura*) or succession (*estekhlaf*). The government then emanates from this amir/imam.

The ministry has already started implementing the revised curriculum and the threefold increase in teaching time of the university-wide subject *saqafat-e eslami* (Islamic culture). An interviewee described what the on-the-ground implementation had looked like in Herat province:

They [MoHE] added two more credits for the subject saqafat-e eslami. They said they had consulted the universities and then made the addition.... Previously, there was no single curriculum for saqafat-e eslami. There were various curricula even in the city of Herat. Now the curriculum has completely changed in terms of its content, language and sources. The language is Pashto and the sources are mostly in Arabic. It's one curriculum for all. It was difficult for many to read it [because of language reasons]. Because the ministry didn't provide the curriculum in Dari too, the sharia faculty of Herat University translated it into Persian and published it in the form of a book in the market.

We did not come across instances of lecturers of *saqafat-e eslami* who had objected to or commented on the new curriculum. A chancellor of a private university told us that “[there’s] no space for objection or opposition.”

It is not clear when the Taliban ministry of higher education will publish the curricula for the various other subjects it has been revising. It is also not clear what the revised curricula for these subjects will look like, apart from an expected further increase in the study of Islamic matters in all classes across higher education institutions. One interviewee thought that although “[the ministry] managed to completely change the content of the *saqafat-e eslami* subject, it is hard to imagine big and fundamental changes in subjects like engineering and the sciences.”

CHAPTER 4.

AN EMERGENT TALEBAN-DEFINED UNIVERSITY: RULES ON GENDER, APPEARANCE AND BEHAVIOUR

The centring of sharia, in line with the Taleban's understanding, in higher education has also prominently manifested itself in a series of strict gender, dress and behaviour rules. When universities reopened, the Taleban ministry of higher education asked chancellors, vice-chancellors, deans, heads of departments and other university officials to organise the “teaching and learning environment [*mohit-e darsi*] ... in such a way that it is both Islamic and national” and to obligate “students ... to dress according to the Islamic sharia ... and adjust their appearance [*surat*] and manners [*sirat*] according to the Islamic sharia.” It asked lecturers and academic staff to “pay all attention [*nahayat-e tawajju*] to the moral upbringing [*tarbiyat-e akhlaqi*] of the dear students and encourage them to adjust their appearance and manners according to the Prophetic tradition [*sunnat-e nabawi*].” It asked the faculty to “have such appearance and manners that they serve as a good practical example for their students.”²⁵ And it stressed the need for complete, or as complete as possible, gender segregation.

4.1 Gender segregation

The book written by Taleban Chief Justice Abdul Hakim Haqqani and endorsed by Taleban Supreme Leader Akhundzada, cited above, is clear-cut about the full ban of *al-talim al-mokhtalat* (mixed education). “As for mixed education between women and men, as we see in offices, schools and universities, there is no doubt about its prohibition. It is strange that there is mixing of the genders in universities, schools and offices in a Muslim nation, even though the religion of Islam ... forbids it completely,” writes Haqqani (p 263). Moreover, he explains in the section on women's learning and teaching that “the lawgiver [God] forbade women to leave their homes except for legal necessity” and gives such examples of “legal necessity” as leaving the home for “prayer, *hajj* or *umra* [Hajj is the annual pilgrimage to Mecca. Umrah is a pilgrimage that can be completed at any time of the year]” (p 250).

²⁵ Announcement by the Ministry of Higher Education of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, “To lecturers and academic staff of higher education institutions,” undated (available with the author).

The gender segregation rule was the precondition for resuming higher education following the Taliban takeover before it progressed to the complete ban on women in late December 2022. The rule was enforced in different ways in different universities, including by timing, day of the week and campus; or by adding partitions, shifting female classes to the dormitories or setting a minimum threshold for female students for a class to start or resume. In some universities and faculties, where gender segregation was already in place, the new rules were the prevailing local practice. In two provinces – Paktika and Maidan Wardak – there was, for whatever reasons, already no women’s presence, at least not in public higher education.

Table 2: New rules introduced by the Ministry of Higher Education in the 23 provinces covered in this research

No	Province	HE institution	New rules enforced by the MoHE
1	Badakhshan	Badakhshan Uni	Gender segregation; shifting some female classes to the female dormitory; specific hijab rule for women
2	Badghis	Badghis IHE	Gender segregation by timing; dress rules for females and males
3	Baghlan	Baghlan Uni	Gender segregation by timing; excluding women lecturers from academic council; surat and sirat rules
4	Balkh	Private IHEs	Gender segregation by partitioning classes using a curtain; some resistance to Taliban-defined hijab type by non-compliance
5	Bamyan	Bamyan Uni	Gender segregation by timing; surat and sirat rules; virtue and vice monitoring
6	Daikundi	Daikundi IHE	Gender segregation by timing; surat and sirat rules; rules related to expression; virtue and vice monitoring
7	Farah	Farah IHE	Gender segregation by timing; virtue and vice monitoring
8	Faryab	Faryab Uni	Gender segregation by timing; surat and sirat rules, especially for females
9	Ghazni	Ghazni Uni Ghazni TTI	Gender segregation by timing; surat and sirat rules, especially for females; rule enforcement by Taliban guards at entrance

10	Helmand	Helmand IHE	Gender segregation by timing; ten-person limit for starting a female class; surat and sirat rules especially for females; virtue and vice monitoring
11	Herat	Private IHEs	University closed at interview time; gender segregation
12	Kandahar	Private IHEs	University closed at interview time; gender segregation
13	Kapisa	al-Biruni Uni	Gender segregation by weekday; surat and sirat rules especially for females; mahram (chaperoning by a close male relative) rule for female students
14	Khost	Sheikh Zayed Uni	Gender segregation by partitioning classes using a curtain; shifting classes with many female students to the female dormitory; surat and sirat 'advice'
15	Kunar	Sayed Jamaluddin Afghan Uni	Gender segregation by turning female dormitory into a teaching space for female students; surat and sirat rules
16	Nangarhar	Nangarhar Uni	Gender segregation by timing; no other information
17	Paktia	Paktia Uni	Gender segregation by campus; other rules already local practice
18	Paktika	Paktika IHE	No need for gender segregation because no women
19	Panjshir	Panjshir IHE	Gender segregation by timing which was already local practice; surat and sirat rules; virtue and vice monitoring
20	Sar-e Pul	Sar-e Pul IHE	Gender segregation; limit for starting a female class; surat and sirat rules; virtue and vice monitoring
21	Uruzgan	Uruzgan IHE	Gender segregation but difficult to enforce due to too few female students; strictest surat and sirat rules, especially for females
22	Maidan Wardak	Maidan Wardak IHE	No need for gender segregation because no women students
23	Zabul	Zabul IHE	Gender segregation by partitioning classes using a curtain

Source: interviews December 2021-March 2022.

Uni: university; IHE: institute of higher education; TTI: teacher training institute.

In many places, the initial joy of being able to return to university gave way to uncertainty and frustration as the impact of the new rules became apparent. Women faced many more challenges than men, as a female student from Uruzgan described to us:

When we went to university, on the first day, the faculty didn't permit us to go to our classes, even though our lectures were going on. They said they must first fix a curtain in the classroom. We couldn't go to university for the first four days after reopening. Now a curtain separates the male and female students, but it has no benefit because the men can still see us. It only created problems because the board isn't fully visible to us.

The gender segregation made the work of the female lecturers more difficult, particularly after they lost the right to participate in academic meetings and their offices were separated from their male colleagues, as discussed in interviews from western and northern regions:

They separated the offices for male and female lecturers and allocated a new room for the female lecturers, but it's very small and has no facilities and is for several female lecturers. They couldn't even bring their documents and cupboards because the room was so small. They shared the issue with the officials many times, but nobody did anything.

Staff member, western region

The head of the literature department is a woman, but now no woman has the right to participate in the scientific council meetings of the university or any other meetings.... Female lecturers don't have the right to teach male students. Male lecturers have permission to teach female students, on a need basis, but according to an official letter, if there are enough female lecturers at the university, male lecturers have no permission to teach female students.

Staff member, northern region

In the gender-segregated university space, not only were no men allowed on the campus and premises in the time allocated to women – apart from relevant and necessary male lecturers and staff – but women were told not to roam around on campus even during their specific time. Many women were dropped off and picked up from the university.

In order to enforce these rules, there were checks at university entrance gates as well as monitoring missions by the preaching and guidance directorate of the ministry of higher education and/or the virtue and vice ministry.

A male lecturer described his frustration over the new rules:

The separation of male and female classes is an inhuman act. If higher education can't narrow the rift between males and females, promote the idea that women and men can work together in a friendly and respectful manner and improve understanding between people, what's the benefit of getting higher education in the first place? The goal behind higher education and scientific knowledge is to boost relations, enhance understanding, amend people's thinking towards each other. This is only possible through coeducation in universities.... Overall, the Taleban have completely ousted Afghanistan's education system from the standardised and international education systems and norms.

In some places, gender separation had already been the practice. For instance, in the main university in western Afghanistan, Herat University, students of the sharia faculty had already been attending completely gender-separated classes before the Taleban takeover. Female students of the sharia faculty had dressed much more modestly than female students of other faculties, including in burqa or niqab, and most, if not all, male students of the sharia faculty wore the traditional shalwar kameez and grew moustaches and beards.²⁶

Similarly, in the sharia faculty of Badakhshan University, the new rules made little practical difference and were welcomed by some, including by one of our interviewees:

Despite the upheaval [Taleban takeover], the situation of higher education in Badakhshan is good, better than we expected. Our lecturers are present and we try to regain the previous motivation [to study]... There are new restrictions by the Islamic Emirate on wearing hijab, but hijab is in Islam. We're accepting it and we're satisfied with this rule. Personally, as a Muslim woman and student, I'm delighted about it. In my [sharia] faculty, studies are going really well. Compared to the past, all women are better disciplined now. There was no mixed education in my faculty under the previous government, so the only difference is that now all other faculties have also separated male and female classes.

²⁶ This was according to a student who had studied in the same building for seven years and who said the sharia faculty authorities had separated the entire three stories of the building by gender (the fourth story was the dentistry faculty where the author's source studied).

Some of the changes already seemed aimed at gradually pushing women out of higher education altogether. In Badakhshan, for instance, the ministry had shifted some female classes to the female dormitories, which had knock-on effects on available space for the students living there. In Khost, classes with many female students (“up to almost 50”) had also been moved to a dormitory, while classes with fewer female students (“could be as little as two”) were partitioned by a curtain.



A banner inside a private university in Kabul expounds on the benefits of the Hijab for women, their families and society.

Photo: Wakil Kohsar/AFP, 6 March 2023.

In Helmand and Sar-e Pul, the higher education authorities decided that in classes with fewer than ten female students, the women had to postpone their studies until more female students enrolled, although an exception was made for female students in their final semester. In some cases, however, classes were still cancelled, even though they had technically met the threshold, as one of our interviewees told us:

I was so delighted when I heard about the reopening. I was thinking: it's okay that the Republic has fallen, as long as the Emirate permits us to study further.

Then I learned about their unnecessary rules and was so disappointed.... The classes with many female students have been separated, but classes with only a few female students are off. If the university can manage the classes, they'll call these female students back; otherwise, they're left behind.... We were [more than ten] female students in my class, but they didn't restart. Now my fellow classmates are busy with housework. Some of them have changed their [field of] study, but [topic withheld] was my favourite field. That's why I'm waiting to see if my class starts again by the end of the year.

At the time of these interviews, women were still allowed to go to university, but this interviewee was already not optimistic about the future of women studying under the Taliban:

I don't think the Taliban will allow female students to continue their education. The Taliban say that after [receiving international] recognition, they won't permit a single woman to leave her house. They're waiting to be recognised and then they will implement this plan. I'm saying this because many Taliban now live in the government houses in my neighbourhood. Their female family members say this. They say: our men say they will forbid women from studying all fields, including health sciences. The Taliban believe that women have only two places: the house or the grave.

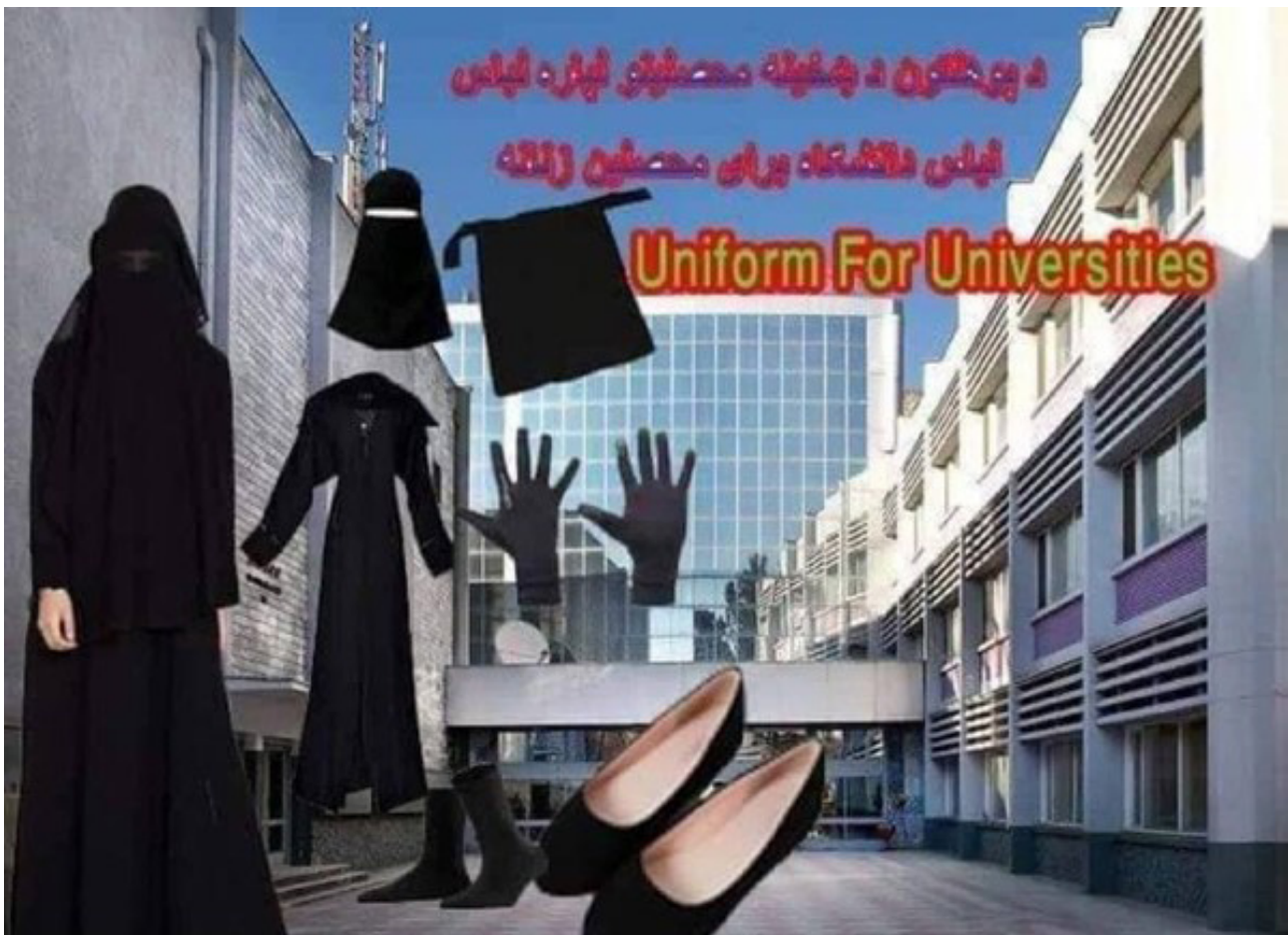
In December 2022, the gender segregation rule was indeed superseded by the complete banning of women from any role from all higher education. Referring to the cabinet approval of 20 December 2022, acting minister Mawlawi Nadim ordered, in a very brief official letter, all state and private higher education institutions to “immediately implement the complete suspending of the higher education of women until further notice” (find the original letter in this [media report](#)).

This was a highly controversial decision, including within the Taliban, which was illustrated in one of our follow-up interviews in the spring of 2023. An interviewee told us how even Taliban-appointed or aligned university leaders in his province had tried to oppose the ban, but had been unable to reverse it:

On 21 December 2022 [a day after the blanket ban was announced], the regional branch of the association [Association of Private Universities and Institutes of Higher Education in Afghanistan, APUIHEA] and the public university had a meeting with the provincial governor. The [Taliban-

appointed] chancellor of Herat University said that if women were totally banned from the university, his university would stop working and he would resign himself. The head of the regional branch of the association said that he would tear up his university's [government-issued] accreditation licence. In the end, neither did or could do anything.

4.2 Surat and sirat



University dress code for female students.

Photo: APUIHEA policy proposal endorsed by the Ministry of Higher Education (see annex).

The authorities also announced new rules for attire and conduct (*surat* and *sirat*). These rules can only be interpreted as an attempt to restore observable manifestations of an Islamically pious society, especially in cities and towns where all of Afghanistan's higher education institutions are based, which the Taliban believe became corrupt or at least deviant under pervasive foreign intervention and influence in the 2001-2021 period.

Prior to the complete ban announced in late December 2022, women involved in higher education were instructed to observe a specific type of hijab that covered the entire body and was black in colour and to avoid makeup (for this kind of hijab, see photo on page 48 in this report, also watch this Radio and Television Afghanistan [report](#)).²⁷ Men involved in higher education were ‘advised’ to wear a shalwar kameez and a head covering (for example, turban or cap) and not to shave their beard and moustache. Additionally, men and women, students in particular, were told not to speak to the media and not to bring smartphones to the university. Anyone involved in higher education was told to offer prayer in congregation.

The enforcement of these rules varied across provinces and universities. In private universities, which had opened earlier, enforcement was initially patchy. In late December 2021 – before the reopening of public universities – a staff member of a private higher education institution in Balkh described how, at the time, many students were still ignoring the rules:

I think the situation has only slowly changed, and only slightly. One reason is that female students themselves showed resistance [by not wearing the kind of hijab mentioned in the agreement on reopening private higher education]. The ministry of higher education and the private institutions had included a picture of the hijab, with all its specifications, in the proposal and had explicitly mentioned that female students must dress that way. We later saw that no institute complied [completely]. Students returned wearing the same clothing as they had before and they still do, so far. This is a kind of resistance by female students and the authorities haven’t reacted in any serious way yet. It’s a positive point, in my view, but there’s still this internal fear because we deal with a system that has its own ideas, thoughts, wants and demands that are different [from us]. One can’t speak, write or participate in gatherings like one wants. There’s certainly this internal dread.

The enforcement of the rules was more strict in public higher education, which is directly and completely under Taleban control, although when public higher

²⁷ The kind of women’s hijab propagated by the Taleban is black in colour and has three main components: (1) *abaya*, a loose overdress that covers the whole body except the head, feet and hands; (2) headscarf and *niqab*, a head and face veil that covers all but the eyes; and (3) long gloves to cover the hands. In addition, the hijab must also cover the feet, especially the ankles. Since this hijab is especially worn by some women in the Arabian Peninsula some of our interviewees called it “Arab hijab.”

education institutions reopened in February 2022, again, many students did not follow the rules very strictly. At the same time, interviews in March 2022 clearly illustrated the tension felt between, on the one hand, wanting to ignore or loosen the rules and, on the other hand, hoping to safeguard their access to education.

On the first day of university, the female students wore the clothes they used to wear before the takeover. The Emirate's soldiers who guard the entrance gate of the university met the chancellor and told him that if female students came to the university without hijab again, they wouldn't let them enter.

Staff member, Ghazni

When we were [in the university], some people from the virtue and vice office came and gathered the female students in the university mosque. They told us to observe the Islamic hijab. One of my classmates asked what kind of hijab Islamic hijab is. They told us to research it. They also told us Islamic hijab means that apart from your eyes, no other parts of your body should be visible. We understood that they meant Arab hijab, but no one has so far observed the kind of hijab they have in mind. We have only started wearing a long black chador [body-length scarf], not the Arab hijab. It isn't clear how strict the Islamic Emirate will get. All the changes came so abruptly, so suddenly. But I think none of these confinements should apply to the environment of a university. We feel like strangers and foreigners due to all these constraints. We feel there's something extra on our shoulders. We feel bad. It isn't normal at all.... But there's no other way than to adapt oneself to the existing situation.

Student, Bamyan

They [Taliban provincial higher education authorities] make students fearful of going to university. For instance, they're saying we should wear a black abaya or chadari [burqa], a black niqab [face covering], black gloves and black glasses. I wear a full hijab with a niqab, chadari, black glasses and black gloves. When female students enter the classes, they can take off the chadari, but they must wear black glasses. Most of the time, I don't wear the glasses because it's uncomfortable and it disturbs me when looking at the board. The students also have no permission to carry smartphones in the university. In the past, students used to take photos of the teacher's notes on the board because those at the back of the class couldn't see the board well.

Student, Uruzgan

Some rules are given as advice on how to make your surat and sirat according to sunnat [the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad]. For instance, male and female staff must have separate offices, women must wear Islamic hijab and all must offer namaaz with jamaat [prayer in congregation]... If the Taleban would enforce a rule only in [this province], then we might not accept it, but if the Taleban enforces the implementation of the new rules all over Afghanistan, we have no other way but to accept them. If lecturers and students don't accept or adapt to the new conditions, they will be forced to leave the university. So there's no other way. That's why people will accept the new rules.
Staff member, Uruzgan

CHAPTER 5. OTHER REPERCUSSIONS OF THE TALEBAN'S TAKEOVER OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The Taleban takeover of higher education has had other ramifications. First of all, the Ministry of Higher Education implemented a drastic pay cut for lecturers. There have also been delays, sometimes lasting for a couple of months, in the payment of monthly salaries. The cuts and delays in pay have come amid a severe economic collapse following the Taleban takeover, which led to a drastic increase in the cost of living.

There was consensus among our interviewees that it had become very difficult for lecturers to make a living from their profession alone. Several interviewees who were lecturers said they had been thinking about switching to other jobs or leaving the country altogether:

There's been a 40 per cent reduction in lecturer salaries. The reasons they [the ministry] gave are the lack of budget and lack of recognition of the [Taleban] government... This change was unexpected because, in the previous government, they gave us a higher salary, but now it's gone down. It has affected us a lot. Food and all other prices are much higher nowadays. That's why it's difficult for us lecturers to make ends meet.
Staff member, Badakhshan

Salary reduction had a huge effect on me. They [the ministry] also don't pay on time. Every time I only receive my salary after two or three months. I was even thinking about what to do if my salary wasn't paid at all. I was about to leave university teaching due to economic issues and mental pressures.

Staff member, Panjshir

There was an almost 50 per cent cut in lecturer pay. In the past, my salary was 56,000 afghanis, but now it's 31,000 afghanis. It has affected all of us. For instance, my children were studying at private schools, but now they go to public schools. All of this has affected me a lot. I'm 35 years old, but I already think I'm old.

Staff member, Uruzgan

The Ministry of Higher Education said it had cut salaries because of its lack of budget and the cut-off of international aid. It also said lecturers should undergo economic austerity until the situation improves. This is one reason why lecturers are leaving the profession, going abroad or looking for other jobs inside the country. With the existing inflation, the pay isn't enough for a university lecturer and their family to live on.

Staff member, Bamyan

This [salary] reduction forces lecturers to resign and look for a job in an NGO. Most lecturers at our university are from other provinces: Kabul, Wardak, Ghazni, Nangrahar. They can't support their families [at home] and at the same time pay for rooms and expenses here. All lecturers have economic burdens these days.

Staff member, Paktika

Many of our lecturers say it would be better for them to have a private business than to be a lecturer. They say this salary isn't enough for them and they can't support their families. One of the lecturers has stopped teaching and has opened a shop.

Student, Khost

Since we conducted our interviews, the MoHE [reported](#) on 10 April 2023 it would increase the salaries of lecturers at public universities from the beginning of the new fiscal year of 1402 (that is, 21 March 2023). It said it was able to do so “as a result of the persistent efforts of the leadership of the Ministry of Higher Education and the endorsement of the Commission for Regulating Structures and Salaries

of the Office of the Prime Minister of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.”²⁸ The announced pay increase would make up for over half the salary losses, but the resulting income would still fall short of earnings during the Republic. For instance, a professor who used to be paid 75,000 afghanis under the Republic told us that under the new salary scale, they would see their post-takeover salary raised from 39,000 afghanis to 60,000 afghanis. The new salary scale is expected to come into force from Jawza 1402 (May/June 2023), with retrospective effect from the start of the year.

The institutions, particularly the private ones, have also been hard hit financially. Many students – or their parents, spouses, siblings or other relatives who support them financially – lost their jobs in the previous government or the numerous agencies linked to its foreign backers. They now struggle or cannot afford the fees and costs of their higher studies and, as a result, there has been a dramatic reduction in the number of students and student applicants. This has, in turn, undermined the economic base of private higher education, hitting those employed in the sector and threatening the sector’s overall viability and sustainability.²⁹

²⁸ According to the MoHE [announcement](#), the monthly salary will now be: pohand 60,000 afghanis, pohanwal 45,000 afghanis, pohandoy 38,000 afghanis, pohanmal 30,000 afghanis, pohanyar 25,000 afghanis and namzad pohanyar 20,000 afghanis. These titles refer to the academic ranks in Afghanistan. Pohanyar (Teaching Assistant) and Pohanmal (Senior Teaching Assistant) are at the level of a *Mo’awen-e Ustad* (Assistant to a Professor); Pohandoy (Assistant Professor), Pohanwal (Associate Professor) and Pohand (Professor) are at the level of *Ustad* (Professor). See article 34 (1) of the Law on Civilian Higher Education, special issue of the Official Gazette, dated 9 Aqrab 1394 (31 October 2015), series no 1195. As for the academic rank namzad pohanyar, it is, as its name suggests, a lecturer candidate (namzad) for a pohanyar/teaching assistant position.

²⁹ One of the first private institutions that collapsed in Kabul around the time of the Taliban takeover was the American University of Afghanistan (AUAF, see these media reports [here](#) and [here](#)). The Taliban have since taken over its premises and repurposed it into the Pohantun-e Bain al-Melali-ye Afghan (Afghan International University) that, the ministry [said](#), will offer master’s and PhD degrees in four fields of study that it sees as “a necessity for the country,” namely sharia, engineering, agriculture and medicine. The ministry said that “about 800 applicants” had taken the admission test in sharia and from those “some 300 will be admitted.” 30 staff from the ministry have been [allocated](#) to run the repurposed university. Having already developed the sharia curriculum in the continued revision of university curricula, the ministry said on 6 August 2022 that it had also [completed](#) the preliminary work to develop curricula for the three remaining fields of engineering, agriculture and medicine. On 28 February 2023, the ministry [said](#) this university would soon start its practical work. Meanwhile, the AUAF has shifted its operations to the Education City in Doha, Qatar, offering both online and in-person courses. “Until the day we return to our campuses in Kabul,” it writes on its [website](#), “AUAF lives in the minds of its students and the accomplishments of its alumni – who prove what we have always believed, that education will prevail.”

With the return of the Taliban [to power], the fathers, husbands, brothers of many of our students, or the students themselves, have lost their jobs. They've been unable to afford the costs of their studies and had to leave. For example, in the economics faculty of the [name withheld] private higher education institute, many first-, second- and third-semester students simply didn't show up. The number of fourth-, fifth- and sixth-semester students has also fallen by 60 per cent. Classes have decreased and the institute has had to dismiss contracted lecturers. The institute hasn't been able to pay the salaries and arrears of lecturers either.

Staff member, Daikundi

Most of my classmates have lost their jobs and can't afford to pay the university fee. The university said it would announce a 20 per cent discount on fees. But even with that discount, many students still won't be able to pay.

Student, Helmand

There's a danger of bankruptcy. Of the seven or eight private higher education institutions that continue to operate in Balkh province, I think only two or three will be able to continue to operate. The rest will become bankrupt and will have to shut down unless we see a resurgence in student numbers. In our own institute, we've had some students who had gone abroad and returned. They re-enrolled with us to complete their studies, but their numbers are low. If I speak optimistically, we hope that our students will return, the economy will improve, and people will have access to work and income. But if things continue like this, several private higher education institutes will most likely become bankrupt and collapse.

Staff member, Balkh

Follow-up interviews conducted in late March and early April 2023 pointed to a continued decline in private higher education institutions, including the closure of an increasing number of institutions, especially following the complete ban on women staff and students in higher education in late December 2022. Even though, for now, the Taliban have exempted private universities from taxes,³⁰ all

³⁰ In a meeting of the Joint Commission for Solving the Problems of Private Higher Education Institutions on 16 May 2023, Dr Ahmad Tareq Kamal thanked the ministry leadership “for exempting private higher education institutions from taxes” (see [report](#) here). The report also referred to “institutions that ... have now been closed.” On 17 May, RTA [quoted](#) an official of a Kabul-based private university saying: “the government of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan ... exempted us from taxes for one year.”

indications are that only those institutions whose founders have income streams from outside the higher education sector will be able to cushion financial shocks in the long run:

The main issue is that women have been banned from higher education. This hasn't affected the state [higher education] institutions much. But it has affected the private ones greatly. Their incomes have been cut in half. I keep hearing that 40 to 50 private institutions will shut down. So far, no private university has been dismantled in Kandahar. It's because these universities belong to rich businesspeople. The owners [of the Kandahar-based private universities] have other businesses from which they can cover their universities' expenses. But they've, of course, reduced their staff and the salaries of the [remaining] staff.

Staff member, Kandahar

Private higher education institutions held admission tests without women six days ago [in March 2023]. There has been a severe reduction of student applicants in all of Afghanistan. If we admitted 500 students in the past, now it's plunged to 50, or even less. Our contact person in the ministry [in Kabul] said that some [private] institutions admitted only 15-20 students and some didn't hold any admission tests at all. [Name withheld] university was sold for 80,000 US dollars in Kabul. [Another] university has completely closed and put all the books in its library on sale. There are 140 registered private higher education institutions, and of these, nearly 40 will likely shut down. Most [private] universities have budgetary deficits. Those offering degrees in medicine and those having the backing of businesspeople or commercial companies can cover their costs to some extent.... In the end, maybe some 20 [institutions] will remain. Some [private] universities changed their compounds because they couldn't pay their rents. In Herat, except for the public university, almost all institutions have no land or buildings of their own. The rent is backbreaking.

Staff member, Herat

New student admissions have continued to plunge. There aren't any female student applicants any longer. And any man who comes for enrolment these days asks: how much fee do you take? Is there a discount? In our institution, staff haven't received their salaries for four, five months. The [name withheld] university, which was a prestigious university and offered master's degrees,

was closed [in Kabul]. Some 100 to 110 institutions may be left now and the situation is very bad for 30 to 40 of them. Most [private] institutions depend on student fees and when there's no fee, there's no income and when there's no income, expenses can't be paid and the affected institution collapses.

Staff member, Balkh

Additionally, many students saw their expenses increase due to interruptions to crucial services in government institutions as a result of the new rules, including for female students, when they were still allowed to study:

Students were so delighted about the university reopening, especially the women. The female students said it was beyond their expectation that they had permission to come to university again, but many aren't sure they can continue their education because of the weak economy. For instance, one of my students said she pays 30 afghanis for transport every day. Her family is poor, and she might not be able to afford it. She might leave university.

Staff member, Kunar

The women's dormitory is available, but there is no food due to a lack of budget. It's the same in the men's dormitory and all government universities. The majority of the students who come from villages and far areas stay in the dormitory. In the past, the dormitories prepared food free of charge. The [Taliban] government has said they'll solve this issue, so let's see. The dormitories also used to have a budget for buying fuel for generators, but now they don't, so it remains dark [at night]. In the past, we had access to the internet, but that has stopped. Lack of water is another problem because when there's no power, they can't turn on the water pump.... Also, due to a lack of budget, both during [the last years of] the previous government and now under the new government, students who live in rented accommodations outside the university dormitory haven't received their living allowance. And it had already decreased by half during corona.

Staff member, Badakhshan

It's been one semester that we haven't received our living allowance [ie since the university's reopening]. The rooms that students can afford to rent are very small. So students just go to class and come back to their rooms.... I've had economic problems in the past and I still have them now. But before, at

least, I received my living allowance. We haven't received any money since the upheaval [Taliban takeover].

Student, Zabul

A male student from Zabul lamented the fact that a needed upgrade to the university had been halted under the Taliban:

Our university [Zabul Institute of Higher Education] has a library, but it doesn't have enough books. It's just like a small room. We have no laboratory. We don't have a dormitory. There's no power in the daytime, sometimes they turn on the generator. The construction of new buildings for the university and dormitory started two years ago, but after the Taliban takeover, it stopped.

Interviewees reported a considerable academic exodus of both lecturers and students as a result of these pressures and the Taliban takeover overall. This was also reflected elsewhere. This widely circulated BBC Persian [report](#), for instance, said that 229 lecturers had left the country from three universities in Kabul alone. By May 2023, over 400 of Kabul University's about 780 lecturers had left the country by 22 May 2023, according to a [report](#) by BBC Pashto.³¹ Reasons our interviewees mentioned for departure included the loss of personal and academic freedoms, financial difficulties and the exclusive nature of Taliban governance, including in higher education.³²

The state institute in my province lost 20 per cent of its lecturers, and the private institute lost 80 per cent, either because of a lack of students or because the lecturers left the country. Some state institute lecturers left their jobs and migrated to Iran to look for work there.

Staff member, Daikundi

There has been a drastic reduction in student and lecturer numbers in Balkh. I witnessed the shrinking of student and lecturer numbers in every [higher education] institution I visited, was in contact with their managers, or

³¹ From our research, the academic exodus seems to have been most pronounced in major urban centres such as Balkh, Herat and Kabul and in places predominantly populated by ethnic and religious minorities, such as Bamyan and Daikundi – but it may have also happened equally or even at a greater scale elsewhere since our sample was not sufficiently representative to make generalisations.

³² Few interviewees also mentioned the option to be evacuated as a reason for why their colleagues or lecturers had left. It was rare to come across an academic who had an opportunity to leave the country, but did not take it.

participated in meetings for dialogue and discussion. I can't generalise this view to the southern and eastern regions, but I know it applies to the northern, western and central regions. Large numbers of students and lecturers of [state-run] Balkh University left the country. An example is the faculty of journalism, where ten of the twelve lecturers have left the country.

Staff member, Balkh

The number of lecturers has decreased after the upheaval [Taliban takeover]. Almost 50 per cent of them aren't coming to work. I'm in contact with five lecturers in my department who stopped teaching. Two of them left Afghanistan. One was injured during the fighting. Two others left [their job] because they started private work. I think the main reason lecturers left is the late salary payment and security concerns. Two of my lecturers are in hiding for fear of the Taliban, because they were also working with the previous government. Here in Helmand, the Taliban are searching for targeted people and arresting them.

Student, Helmand

Others lamented the loss of international opportunities:³³

The change in scholarships for lecturers is another problem. Every year around this time, India, Pakistan and Iran gave scholarship opportunities to lecturers, but we haven't received any formal letter about scholarships since last year. Recently I heard that women no longer have the right to travel abroad without a mahram [close male relative]. It means women won't have the opportunity to study in foreign countries and won't be able to get scholarships.

Staff member, Badghis

³³ The international contacts of Afghanistan's higher education ministry and institutions have contracted since the Taliban takeover. In the first year after the takeover, ministry officials only met representatives from Turkey, Japan, Qatar, Germany, ICRC and the UN and travelled to Pakistan and Uzbekistan (see pp 62-71 of the first annual [report](#) of the Taliban MoHE). The Taliban higher education authorities have also had contacts with Afghanistan-based Chinese diplomats and paid visits to Russia, during which they asked, for example, for scholarships (see, for example, these Radio and Television Afghanistan reports [here](#) and [here](#)). However, relations have been particularly tense with Western countries, especially after the EU [sanctioned](#) the current acting higher education minister, Mawlawi Nadim, in March 2023, considering him "responsible for serious human rights violations in Afghanistan, in particular the widespread violation of women's right to education and the right to equal treatment between men and women in the field of education."



Taliban officials escorted by security personnel leave the Faculty of Sharia in Kabul.

Photo: Wakil Kohsar/AFP, 13 October 2023.

Particularly in the early months after the universities reopened, the academic exodus affected the quality of higher education severely, threatening to become a self-perpetuating problem:

In my own department at the University of Herat, four of the six lecturers left the country [including the interviewee]. One of the two remaining [lecturers] will also leave. There's a similar situation in the journalism faculty, where almost 70 per cent of the lecturers have left the country. This is a severe blow to higher education and its quality.

Staff member, Herat

My faculty had nine lecturers. Six of them have fled the country. Those that remain are mostly not professional.... They come one day, don't come another day, and they don't prepare properly [for classes].

Student, Bamyan

Other interviewees had not witnessed the same level of exodus in their provinces. For instance, these:

After the upheaval [Taliban takeover], the male lecturers of Ghazni University didn't leave their jobs. [But] the lecturers who are on scholarships abroad might not return because of the new rules. Six to eight lecturers from Ghazni University are currently studying in Turkey and Iran.

Staff member, Ghazni

My opinion is that we're from this country and we can't solve the problems by leaving. If the lecturers and students leave the country, who will remain to serve the people? My colleagues and I are tolerating this situation so that we can make a positive difference. We have no option but to stay and serve.... The number of lecturers hasn't decreased at our university. So far, only two of the university's staff have changed: one resigned to get a job [elsewhere] and the other moved to Kabul. I don't know exactly about students. In some classes, there were students from northern Afghanistan and many of them are absent now. We used to have 400 students in the past. I think a small portion has left. I think this decrease is because of disappointment and the weak economy.

Staff member, Uruzgan

Apart from declining student numbers due to financial difficulties and other reasons, several interviewees commented on a severe loss of motivation among students. Many of our interviewees themselves seemed torn between the determination to continue and the feeling that their studies were no longer worth pursuing:

The reopening was good in Badghis, but students have lost their motivation to study. Many of them have gone to Iran and those who don't return will drop out. The female students attend their classes and are happy about the university's reopening. The impressive presence of female students is because they had no hope the universities would reopen for them too. In general, 80 per cent of students were present [when the universities reopened], the rest who were in Iran and Turkey were absent.

Staff member, Badghis

The reopening of Faryab University was good, everyone was so delighted. The students were waiting for the reopening impatiently. That's why they came on the first day. They hope it stays open in the future.... [But in general] the situation of higher education isn't good because students think the future isn't bright for them. Both corona and the upheaval [Taliban takeover] have

affected the motivation of students and lecturers. Motivation has gone down. We hope the situation gets better at the beginning of the new semester.

Staff member, Faryab

In general, students don't have the same motivation to study and work as hard as they had before, because of the upheaval [Taliban takeover], the chaos and because most people in Afghanistan are now in a bad economic situation. A student needs to be mentally prepared and have specific plans and goals for the future, but sadly students and lecturers are now busy finding ways to earn money to buy food. Many have dropped out because they have gone abroad or because the women's families don't allow them to return to class because there is no responsible government that can provide security and help them if they face an issue. For example, we were 25 students in our class, now we're only nine.

Student, Balkh

The ministry of higher education monitors private higher education institutions. They focus more on the students, especially female students' hijab, than the main things like curriculum and teaching methods.... Conservative families, whose daughters got permission to come to university with difficulty, now have an excuse to stop women from continuing their higher education.... I myself lost the motivation to study and was absent for ten weeks from my class. I didn't want to continue because I thought it was useless.

Student, Balkh

In government institutions, work isn't given to professionals. In the offices, directors and chiefs should be engineers and doctors, but the Taliban have appointed mosque mullahs as the director and chief. It's so disappointing.

Student, Helmand

In Panjshir, the interviewees were, unsurprisingly, most downcast of all. Students and lecturers said they saw “no value” for higher education in a society like Taliban’s, felt that “everything was wasted,” and even that “everyone’s heart [was] broken.” The Panjshir Institute of Higher Education suffered extensive damages during the fighting that led to the Taliban takeover of the province. “The biggest blow the Taliban dealt higher education,” a lecturer said, “was demotivating the young generation to pursue higher education.”

CONCLUSION

Since the takeover in August 2021, the new Taliban authorities have steadily laid the foundation for a complete redesign and repurposing of higher education. A close reading of relevant sources and statements indicates that the Taliban believe they are engaged in a *fekri jagra*, a war of thoughts, which, in their view, has been imposed on Afghanistan, as part of a long historical process. This has sparked a series of swift and radical changes that amount to overhauling and reinventing post-2001 higher education and that are characterised by enforcing a top-down reorientation and unquestioning obedience.

The Taliban have not dismantled higher education, but are seeking to make it an extension of their movement by theocratising and instrumentalising its structure and curricula and surveilling the people involved. They thus seek to make higher education part of the justification and consolidation of the rule of their second emirate, which they believe is divinely determined. In doing so, the current authorities appear to underestimate, if not disparage, the value of non-religious specialisations. This does not bode well for the future of higher education and for tolerance, understanding and peace in Afghanistan's diverse society. It deprives emerging professionals in Afghanistan of the chance and the time to specialise beyond a single, dominant and hardened focus on religious education that benefits the *de facto* rulers. Even more urgently, the full ban on women in higher education – and on girls' education beyond the sixth grade – is rupturing the continuity, sustainability and meaning of all remaining education at any level.

The higher education sector had its own problems under the Republic, including, as some would argue, that it too sought to use higher education to justify and consolidate the prevailing system. It had already become over-centralised, with the state often using funding and its oversight powers to control appointments and the day-to-day administration of public institutions in particular. There was, however, some room to object to policies and decisions coming from the top – and some public space to voice opposition and think or express oneself differently. There was a burgeoning diversity of curricula, some nascent academic freedom and increased international academic relations at the government and university levels. Proponents of academic freedom and diversity could easily point to problems in the sector as well as to places where it was improving and developing.

This space to explore has been fast disappearing in the wake of the Taliban takeover. Anyone involved in the already emergent Taliban-defined university is expected, under unquestioning obedience, to follow orders coming from the top, including from outside the higher education ministry itself. The Taliban authorities will likely continue to entrench this university in the foreseeable future.



Women students stand outside Kabul University shortly after it was reopened. A little over a year after this photo was taken, the Emirate would ban women from higher education.

Photo: Ahmad Sahel Arman/AFP, 26 February 2022.

However, there are still open questions and areas to watch going forward. Although it is clear that the Taliban authorities have been working towards a new concept and structure of higher education, it is unclear what this new concept and structure will ultimately look and feel like when fully fledged or articulated. Will there be any space for the inclusion of diversity, outside the ruling Taliban leadership's understanding of higher education, especially for those with different, if not opposing, understandings and methods? What will the relations be between the newly accredited religious universities and the sharia faculties of existing universities, and what specific future perspectives or needs will those attending

and completing courses in the new religious universities graduate for? How will the new directorate of preaching and guidance develop into the future, and how severely will it police higher education and anyone involved in it? Moreover, what will the 'Islamisation' of university curricula mean, beyond religious studies, especially for the humanities and social sciences?



Members of the Taliban attend a class in the economic faculty of a private university in Kabul.

Photo: Ahmad Sahel Arman/AFP, 7 June 2022.

Administratively, how will the Taliban manage to fund the public higher education system and to keep it running, as they have done so far with cuts and delays in pay, if the Taliban government and the higher education ministry remain unrecognised, unsupported and struggling to establish and broaden academic relations at both the government (ministry) and university levels? As for private higher education, is there a future for the sector under the current debilitating and disintegrating conditions and, if so, what will it look like, especially for those who might be able to cushion and survive financial difficulties and other troubles in the long run? More broadly, how long will the Taliban rulers be able to enforce a top-down reorientation and expect unquestioning obedience in higher education, not

only in terms of not facing any organised or publicly expressed protests but also in terms of an increased academic exodus of students, lecturers, staff and others no longer seeing a future for themselves? Will this end in a Taleban-only higher education and, if so, can the authorities maintain strict uniformity even among their own ranks in the long term?

The answers to these questions are far from being known, let alone settled. For now, what this research points to is that, with the loss of whatever little and fragile space of freedom and diversity that had somehow managed to develop in higher education in the period 2001-2021, the university as we know it, even compared to Islamic countries in the neighbourhood of Afghanistan, has been fast ceasing to exist under Taleban's second emirate.

Edited by Martine van Bijlert
Design and layout by Žolt Kovač

The research assistants and the author express their deep gratitude to all the 39 students, lecturers or staff who, in very challenging conditions, gave us their time and spoke to us about their experiences and perceptions of Afghanistan's higher education around and after the Taleban takeover. Without their engagement, it would have been impossible to do this research.

The author conducted the literature review and analysis and wrote the report. As such, any errors, whether factual or interpretational, are the author's sole responsibility.

Cover photo:

Minister of Higher Education, Neda Mohammad Nadeem, speaking on Radio Television Afghanistan on the day he announced that women were being barred from higher education.

Photo: Wakil Kohsar/AFP, 20 December 2022.

ANNEX

MoHE letter promulgating the resumption of private higher education with APUIHEA's approved policy proposal attached

[letterhead]

Ministry of Higher Education
Office of Deputy Minister for Student Affairs
Directorate of Private University Student Affairs

Serial number: 146

Date: 11 Sunbula 1400 [2 September 2021]

To all private higher education institutions in the country

With offering best wishes!

Subject: promulgating the approved proposal and starting classes under Islamic requirements and principles

As you know better, in-person classes of all of the country's private higher education institutions for males and females are set to start in a **safe environment and under Islamic requirements and principles** [bold in original] on 15 Sunbula 1400 [6 September 2021]. In this regard, the Association of Private Universities and Institutes of Higher Education in Afghanistan [APUIHEA] had developed a specific proposal in coordination with the country's higher education institutions and submitted it in nine articles as a recommendation on 10 Sunbula 1400 [1 September 2021] to the Minister of Higher Education for approval.

The Minister of Higher Education has approved the mentioned proposal by issuing the decree dated 23 Muharram 1443, corresponding to 10 Sunbula 1400 [1 September 2021]. A copy of the said proposal is attached to this letter and herewith promulgated to you. The leadership of all private higher education institutions are instructed to implement the proposal in their respective institutions from the date 23 Muharram 1443, corresponding to 10 Sunbula 1400 [1 September 2021]. In addition, the APUIHEA has an obligation to implement the provisions of

the proposal in higher education institutions and regularly monitor and report implementation to the Directorate of Monitoring and Evaluation of the Ministry of Higher Education.

Sincerely,

Puhandoy Dr Khaibar Saifi
Director of Private University Student Affairs
[signature]

Copy:

Deputy Minister for Student Affairs
Directorate of Monitoring and Evaluation
Chair of APUIHEA

[attachment]³⁴[letterhead]

Association of Private Universities and Institutes of Higher Education in Afghanistan

The Proposal of the Association of Private Universities and Institutes of Higher Education in Afghanistan (APUIHEA) on Restarting Higher Education Institutions and Separating the Mixed Education System

In the Name of Allah, the Most Beneficent, the Most Merciful

(114: هـ ط) اَمَلْعْ يَنْدِزْ بَرِّلْ قُوْ

... and pray, "Lord, advance me in knowledge." [Surah Ta-Ha:114, Abdullah Yusuf Ali translation]

In Afghanistan, there are 131 private universities and institutes of higher education that provide higher education for thousands of male and female students.

In the light of the Islamic spirit, the mentioned institutions work to offer higher education services to the country's youth and have provided the ground for the development of professional and standardised higher education.

³⁴ Association of Private Universities and Institutes of Higher Education in Afghanistan and Office of Deputy Minister for Student Affairs of the Ministry of Higher Education of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, "Communicating the Approved Scheme on Restarting Higher Education Institutes and Ending the Coeducational System," 10 Sunbula 1400/1 September 2021 (original in Dari and Pashto, English translation by author).

On the other hand, during the last two years, all education and higher education institutions [in particular] have gone through difficult quarantines because of the spread of the coronavirus, and this has seriously affected the teaching and administrative affairs of universities.

Now, thanks to God, with the coming of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, we hope that all education and higher education institutions will restart their routine administrative and teaching activities.

How should in-person classes begin now [and] how should male and female students be separated and how should they attend classes again? And what are the principles and regulations of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in these respects? For these reasons, we deem it necessary to present the following proposal to the leadership of the Ministry of Higher Education of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan:

1. All female students, lecturers and staff members have an obligation to comply with the sharia hijab (the colour of the hijab must be black, the image of the sample hijab has been attached to the proposal and students, lecturers and staff members can obtain it from the market or prepare it on their own).
2. All universities have an obligation to separate the entrances for girls and take the following items into account:
 - a. Those universities and higher education institutes with adequate resources and have separate classes for girls must separate the buildings and, if they do not have adequate resources, they must separate teaching times for boys and girls.
 - b. Those classes that are mixed and in which there are more than 15 female [students] must be separated.
 - c. Those classes with fewer than 15 female [students] must be partitioned by a sharia purdah.
 - d. The deans and department heads have an obligation to monitor the following regarding the movement of female students:
 - i. Before the class starts, all female students must go to the waiting room.
 - ii. Five minutes before the classes start, girls must, in a disciplined manner, go to their classrooms and take seats in the place that has been al-

lotted to them. Likewise, all girls must leave five minutes before boys, go to their transportation or enter the waiting room.

3. All universities have an obligation to allocate separate places for females to recite their prayers or take a break between classes.
4. In any new class created in private universities, boys and girls must be separated.
5. In each province, the Ministry of Higher Education and the APUIHEA shall establish a joint commission to monitor the implementation of the above-mentioned provisions.
6. The joint commission shall act to separate males and females based on statistics and classroom attendance sheets of universities pursuant to article 2 (d).
7. All private universities must make efforts to prepare specific transportation for those students who do not have private transportation. There must be a purdah between the driver and the students in the car. Likewise, there must be a purdah on car windows.
8. Given their resources, the universities must assign female lecturers to teach female students in the future. Likewise, efforts must be made to assign older lecturers of good reputation to teach girls.
9. Private universities and higher education institutions have an obligation to implement the aforesaid provisions and the following disciplinary measures shall be taken in case of non-compliance:
 - a. Reminder
 - b. Written warning
 - c. Punishment

The mentioned proposal has been prepared in four pages and nine articles and shall enter into effect from 10 Sunbula 1400, corresponding to 23 Muharram 1443 [1 September 2021].

Dr Ahmad Tareq Kamal
Acting Chair
APUIHEA

[stamp]