



1. Project Data

Project ID P146184	Project Name Higher Education Project	
Country Afghanistan	Practice Area(Lead) Education	
L/C/TF Number(s) TF-A0730	Closing Date (Original) 31-Dec-2020	Total Project Cost (USD) 44,233,108.52
Bank Approval Date 07-Jul-2015	Closing Date (Actual) 21-Dec-2022	
	IBRD/IDA (USD)	Grants (USD)
Original Commitment	55,000,000.00	55,000,000.00
Revised Commitment	45,182,742.52	45,182,742.52
Actual	44,233,108.52	44,233,108.52

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2. Project Objectives and Components

a. Objectives

As stated in the September 15, 2015 Grant Agreement between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the International Development Association (IDA), acting as administrator of the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF), the proposed project development objective (PDO) was "...to increase access to, and improve the quality and relevance of, higher education in the Recipient's territory." The design document presented the same statement (Project Appraisal Document [PAD], pp. viii and 4).



The PDO did not change throughout the project's life. However, all three PDO-level targets were revised to more ambitious levels under the project's Additional Financing and restructuring, approved in September 2018. Additional minor adjustments to the Results Framework and disbursement-linked indicators (DLIs) were introduced under a second restructuring approved in December 2020 responding to constraints on project activities due to COVID-19 lockdown and travel restrictions. None of these changes warrant a split rating, since all original PDO targets and two of the three revised PDO targets were exceeded, and the third revised target was fully achieved by August 2021, 16 months before the revised closing date.

Nevertheless, **a split rating will be used to discriminate between the periods before and after the Taliban takeover in August 2021**, as agreed between IEG and the region, and in accordance with advice to the author from IEG management.

b. Were the project objectives/key associated outcome targets revised during implementation?

Yes

Did the Board approve the revised objectives/key associated outcome targets?

Yes

Date of Board Approval

17-Sep-2018

c. Will a split evaluation be undertaken?

Yes

d. Components

Original Components:

Component 1: Higher Education Development Program (original estimate of \$40.0 million + \$4.0 million in Additional Financing, amounting to a revised component estimate of \$44.0 million; actual cost: \$34.0 million). This component was to support the implementation of Afghanistan's Second National Higher Education Strategic Plan (NHESP-II) through a Results-Based Financing (RBF) modality, shifting the focus from inputs and activities to results. Financing was to be disbursed to selected line items in the Ministry of Higher Education's (MoHE's) annual budgets (Eligible Expenditures Programs/EEPs) up to capped amounts, conditioned on the achievement of an agreed set of DLIs. The EEPs included: (a) salaries and allowances of staff in MoHE and public universities and higher education institutions (HEIs); and (b) scholarships for academic staff. Six DLIs nurtured and supported the achievement of results in five Thematic Areas.

Thematic Area 1 (Increasing access to priority degree programs for economic development): The objective was to expand enrollment in priority degree programs, with special attention to female enrollment, through: (a) scholarships for female students from disadvantaged backgrounds; (b) strengthening orientation, counseling, and support services, such as childcare; (c) improving transportation services to and from universities; and (d) developing online higher education courses to expand access, especially for women unable to attend in-person for cultural reasons.



Thematic Area 2 (Modernizing the quality of teaching and learning): The objective was to assist universities to introduce outcome-based education (OBE) and student-centered learning (SCL). This theme also included the introduction of new approaches to curriculum design and delivery; innovative teaching methods and techniques; active and dynamic learning models; increased use of higher education publications, information and communication technology (ICT), and internet-based resources; and the modernization of assessment systems. These new approaches were to be applied to the priority programs first, then expanded to other degree programs. Universities' Staff Development Centers (SDCs) were to provide continuous professional development for academic, management, and technical staff to implement these new approaches. A key element was strengthening the Afghanistan Research and Education Network (AfgREN) to operate a national system connecting campus networks with each other and with other research and education networks globally.

Thematic Area 3 (Improving the qualifications and skills of university staff): The objective was to increase substantially the number of academic staff qualified to at least the Master's degree level through the provision of scholarships to around 300 full-time, regularly employed faculty at public universities. Special attention was to be given to staff working in priority degree programs and female academics. The selection of universities for study would take into account cost effectiveness and quality of Master's degree programs, along with cultural factors, which affect the preference of many female academics to pursue their postgraduate studies in-country. The combination of overseas and in-country study in partnership with foreign universities was to be explored. Scholarship awardees would be bonded by an obligation to work in Afghan universities after graduation. The recruitment of new staff was expected to mitigate the risk of an excessive shortage of teachers while some faculty and staff pursued fulltime study. This thematic area also aimed to support the upgrading of skills of technical staff (laboratory and ICT specialists and librarians) through short-term programs organized mainly through SDCs.

Thematic Area 4 (Strengthening governance, quality assurance and accreditation): The objectives were to (a) promote substantive and procedural autonomy of universities and (b) develop the quality assurance and accreditation system. To help them exercise autonomy and accountability, universities were to undertake the preparation and implementation of strategic institutional development plans (SIDPs) aimed at improving the quality and relevance of their degree programs, research outputs, and community services and incorporating feedback from external and internal quality assurance reviews. SIDPs were required to be consistent with the NHESP-II and to present a realistic and sustainable financial framework, and would be monitored through Annual Progress Reports (APRs) reporting progress against targets and any remedial measures. A Mentors Program, drawn from foreign and Afghan universities, was to support this effort.

Quality assurance and accreditation (QAA) was to be expanded and strengthened to reflect international standards at national and university levels. The project was to support the establishment of the Afghanistan Quality Assurance and Accreditation Directorate (QAAD) and its membership in an international accreditation network. The recruitment and training of QAAD staff would enable: the incorporation of modern QA protocols and guidelines; the conduct of a fresh cycle of external QA for public and private universities; and a clear, transparent, and objective process for licensing, QA, and accreditation of the rapidly increasing number of private HEIs in the country. The project also aimed to support a comprehensive Internal Quality Assurance System, including: (a) setting up of Internal Quality Assurance Units (IQAUs) in universities that lack such units; (b) further developing of IQAUs in universities that have embryonic units; (c) strengthening the planning and conduct of institutional self-assessments; (d) factoring QA findings into strategic plans; and (e) continuous quality improvement of teaching and learning. IQAUs



were expected to be key in assisting academics to assess and improve the quality of OBE and SCL, as well as internet-based teaching and learning methodologies.

Thematic Area 5 (Stimulating development-oriented research): The objective was to develop a research culture in universities, with a focus on applied, development-oriented, demand-driven research, mainly in the priority disciplines. Both group and individual research were to be supported, and collaboration with overseas researchers was to be encouraged. Research projects undertaken by Kabul-based universities were expected to focus on national development. Universities in provincial towns could participate national research but were also expected to act as research hubs for the development of their provinces. The research culture to be developed was expected to be results-focused, demand-driven, and competition-based.

Component 2: Program Operations and Technical Support (original estimate of \$10 million + \$1.0 million in Additional Financing, amounting to a revised component estimate of \$11.0 million; actual cost: \$9.74 million). Using the standard disbursement modality of regular Investment Project Financing (IPF), this component aimed to strengthen the capacity of MoHE and universities to implement the reforms of the NHESP-II. Planned support included technical assistance, coordination, capacity building, pilots and innovations, policy studies including beneficiary feedback surveys of staff and students of institutions and programs supported by the project, monitoring and evaluation (M&E), research, and communication. Additionally, this component was to finance incremental operating costs of an Operations and Monitoring Support Team (OMST) in MoHE.

Revisions to Components

Under Additional Financing and Restructuring, approved together in September 2018, the following successful activities were scaled up: (a) scholarships for full-time faculty to pursue Master's or higher-level degrees (Thematic Area 3); (b) training of faculty in OBE-SCL (Thematic Area 2); (c) support to public universities to prepare and implement SIDPs (Thematic Area 4); and (d) research grants (Thematic Area 5). The level two restructuring involved minor revisions to the results framework, DLI targets, and some indicator definitions and a two-year extension of the closing date.

A second Restructuring, approved in December 2020, expanded activities under OBE-SCL (Thematic Area 2) to increase focus on distance and blended learning and reduced targets for Master's degrees (Thematic Area 3) and research projects (Thematic Area 5) in response to the country's pandemic lockdown and international travel restrictions. Relevant changes included (a) a reallocation of project funds, increasing by \$5 million DLI funds allocated to the OBE-SCL, reducing by \$3 million DLI funds allocated to Master's degree scholarships, and reducing by \$2 million DLI funds allocated to research grants. This restructuring also included an updating of the results framework to reflect these changes.

e. Comments on Project Cost, Financing, Borrower Contribution, and Dates

Cost. At the time of project approval (July 2015), the original cost of the project was estimated at \$50 million. In September 2018 Additional Financing in the amount of \$5 million increased the total project cost to \$55 million. In late 2022, over a year after the August 2021 Taliban takeover, an amount of \$9.82 million was cancelled, culminating in a final revised cost estimate of \$45.18 million. The Bank's system indicates an actual cost (based on disbursements) of \$44.23 million, and an unused amount of \$0.95 million.



Financing and Borrower Contribution. The project was 100 percent financed by the ARTF, both the initial grant of \$50 million, and the Additional Financing of \$5 million. While there was no Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GoIRA) counterpart financing planned or provided, the project was conceived as support to the implementation of the NHESP-II. The originally estimated cost of the project amounted to about 8 percent of the total estimated budget for implementing the NHESP-II 2015-2020 of \$658 million, for which GoIRA and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) were slated to finance \$518 million and \$90 million respectively. Actual disbursements of the ARTF amounted to \$44.23 million, or 80 percent of the full ARTF amount of \$55 million available at the time of the Taliban takeover. More than a year after the Taliban takeover and close to the project closing date, \$9.82 million was cancelled.

Key Dates. The project was approved on July 7, 2015, became effective on September 15, 2015, and closed on December 21, 2022, approximately two years after the original closing date of December 31, 2020. After the May 3, 2018 mid-term review, Additional Financing of \$5 million and a restructuring of the project were approved together in September 2018 to scale up activities, involving changes to the results framework, a reallocation of project funding, and a two-year extension of the closing date. A second restructuring, approved in December 2020, introduced slight modifications to activities and the results framework and reallocated remaining resources, all in response to the challenges and constraints associated with the COVID-19 lockdown and travel restrictions.

3. Relevance of Objectives

Rationale

Up until the time of the August 15, 2021 Taliban takeover, the relevance of the PDO was high.

- **The PDO was highly relevant to country conditions at the project's outset and remains so today.** Afghanistan's higher education sector was underdeveloped, with its 6 percent gross enrollment rate one of the lowest in the world, of which only 20 percent were women. Its teachercentered pedagogy and passive student learning undermined quality and learning outcomes. There was a severe shortage of qualified academic staff in Afghan universities and HEIs, with the majority of academics (65 percent) holding only a Bachelor's degree. The highly centralized governance of higher education left little autonomy to universities, which lacked the capacity to assume increasing autonomy: technical, developmental, and fiscal. MoHE's quality assurance and accreditation system for public and private HEIs was at an early developmental stage and needed further strengthening. Moreover, the academic research output of Afghan universities was insignificant. While progress has been made on all of these fronts, these issues continue to challenge access to, and quality and relevance of, higher education.
- **The PDO was highly relevant to the developmental priorities of the country.** Afghanistan's National Development Strategy highlighted the importance of strengthening education outcomes and accelerating human capital accumulation, and GoIRA was fully aware of the strategic importance of human capital in the modern global knowledge economy and higher education's potential role in promoting democratic values and attitudes for developing a socially cohesive nation. The Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework (2017-21) makes specific mention of the need to improve the quality of HEIs, using an outcomes-based education model and



restructuring curriculum, assessment, and reporting practices, all supported under the project. The second National Higher Education Strategic Plan (2015-2020), which sought to orient the development of the higher education system to promote the economic and social development of the country, served as the impetus and framework for the project.

- **The PDO was also highly relevant to the World Bank’s assistance strategy in Afghanistan, as laid out in the Country Partnership Framework (CPF) for FY17-FY20 (Report No. 108727), and subsequently extended to FY22.** Grounded in a Systematic Country Diagnostic undertaken by the Bank, the CPF supported the tenets of Afghanistan’s National Peace and Development Framework: (1) improving governance and state effectiveness; (b) building social capital and nation building; (3) economic growth and job creation; and (4) poverty reduction and social inclusion. Of the three areas of engagement supported under the CPF (building strong and accountable institutions, inclusive growth, and social inclusion through human development outcomes), the PDO was highly relevant to the first and third areas. Under the third area, it included outcome indicators and targets for increased enrollment in higher education, with specific targets for women, supported under the project.
- **The World Bank had played an integral role in the reconstruction of the higher education system in Afghanistan, rendering it well equipped to undertake the project.** Its support of the Afghanistan Strengthening Higher Education Project 2005-2013 succeeded in progressively restoring basic operational performance to the sector through support to 12 core universities, including investments in human resource development, curriculum standardization, and the restoration of basic physical infrastructure. This provided a basis and experience upon which further support was designed.

Rating

High

4. Achievement of Objectives (Efficacy)

OBJECTIVE 1

Objective

Increase access to higher education in Afghanistan

Rationale

The theory of change envisaged the achievement of **Thematic Area 1** (increasing access to higher education, especially of females) through the support and nurturing of increased female enrollment in the first year of public universities, with a focus on priority disciplines for economic development (**DLI 1**). Activities envisaged to realize these outputs included the establishment of counseling and support services for female students; provision of transport services to and from universities for female students; improving female students’ access to adequate residential facilities on campus; provision of scholarships for female students to complete their university studies; and the strengthening of universities’ ICT capacities and facilities to provide



online higher education courses, for the benefit of all students, but especially convenient for female students given cultural norms and constraints.

The following activities were implemented, and intermediate outcome and PDO-level targets achieved, as of August 2021 (the month of the Taliban takeover), and 16 months prior to the extended closing date of December 21, 2022. References to revised targets refer to those revised under the September 2018 Additional Financing and Restructuring.

Outputs and intermediate results

- The project established counseling centers at six universities (Kabul Education University, Balkh, Kabul University, Herat, Jawzjan, and Bamyan). These centers provided consultative support and sessions for the beneficiaries, although there were delays in recruiting psychologists for the centers.
- The project provided 25 buses to transport female students and academics at 25 universities.
- The project awarded 400 scholarships to economically disadvantaged female students, including 2,500 Afs per month for the entire academic year. The Bank's team, in its May 5, 2023 email to IEG, clarified that these scholarships were paid directly to disadvantaged female students to use at their discretion. Since public university students do not pay tuition, these scholarships could be used for other education costs (e.g., books, stationery, and living costs). These scholarships aimed to improve retention of female students, mostly from disadvantaged backgrounds. An estimated \$300,000 was paid to about 300 female students at the Bachelor's level over the three-year period of 2018-2020.
- The project supported the establishment of child care centers at six universities (Takhar, Albironi, Bamyan, Parwan, Faryab, and Kabul medical universities), and the renovation of child care centers at two additional universities (Herat and Badakshan), reported to be ongoing as of August 21, 2021 (ICR, p. 13).
- The project supported the construction and completion of 14 water and lavatory complexes, while four others were in progress by August 2021.
- Under the project four female dormitories at provincial universities (Kunar, Takhar, Bamyan, and Helmand) were constructed, with a fifth dormitory (at Badghis HEI) under construction. Of the four completed dormitories, only one (Kunar) was functional, with the remaining three facing issues including lack of boundary walls, lack of female students (Helmand), and a retaining wall issue (Bamyan). The project prepared an action plan to expedite the resolution of these impediments to functionality, but it was not implemented due to the August 2021 events.
- (IRI 2) These impediments notwithstanding, the number of female students with access to adequate residential facilities for women on university campuses increased from a 2014/15 baseline of 2,500 to 5,800, **exceeding the original and revised targets** of 5,000 and 5,500, respectively.
- **DLI 3:** The project achieved an increase in the number of public universities with functional ICT centers for ICT-based higher education. Reported in detail under Objective 2 (improved quality), this intermediate outcome also contributed to (this) Objective 1 (increased access), especially postCOVID.

Outcomes as of August 2021

- The total student enrollment in universities in priority degree programs* reached 88,624, of whom 21,159 were female and 67,465 male, **exceeding the original targets** for total and female enrollments (81,000 total; 18,000 female) **and the revised targets** (86,500 total; 18,500 female).
- (IRI 1) Female enrollment in priority degree programs* in the first year of public universities (**DLI 1**) more than doubled, reaching 6,700 in August 2021 from a 2015 baseline of 3,000, **exceeding the**



original, unchanged target of 5,500. The remarkable increase in female enrollment in priority programs was due in significant part to the allocation of reserved seats for girls in the *kankor* (university intake exam) and an increase in the reserved seats in 2018 and afterward. In 2019, 6,000 seats were reserved for female students at 13 universities, which increased to 6,926 seats at 20 universities in 2020.

- Over and above its contribution to education quality (Objective 2), the development and further strengthening of ICT capacities of universities, detailed below under Objective 2, also helped MoHE strengthen its ability to offer distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic and a Higher Education Learning Management System (HELMS) platform for digital education.
- * *The focus on priority degree programs is detailed and assessed under Objective 3: Increased relevance of higher education in Afghanistan.*

Rating
High

OBJECTIVE 1 REVISION 1

Revised Objective

Increase access to higher education in Afghanistan

The objective was not revised, but official operations ceased after the Taliban takeover on August 15, 2021.

Revised Rationale

Since the Taliban takeover on August 15, 2021, there has been no official relationship between the World Bank and the government. There is no information about any project activities after that date.

Revised Rating
Negligible

OBJECTIVE 2

Objective

Improve the quality of higher education in Afghanistan

Rationale

The theory of change laid out a set of Thematic Areas, underpinned by strategically selected DLIs, to support and nurture improvements in the quality and governance of higher education. **Thematic Area 2** (modernizing and enhancing the quality of teaching and learning) supported increases in the number of fulltime academic staff trained in -- and practicing -- outcome-based education and student-centered learning (DLI 2). It also supported an increase in the number of universities with functional ICT centers for ICT-based higher education (DLI 3) (supporting both access and quality objectives). Activities included training in OBE and SCL; improvements in professional networking systems connecting universities to each other and to global networks; and strengthening of SDCs for continuous professional development. **Thematic Area 3** (improving



the qualification and skills of academic and technical staff) supported scholarships to university faculty so they could complete Master's (or higher-level) degrees in priority disciplines (DLI 4) and increases in the number of technical and maintenance staff completing short-term courses to raise their skills. The award of scholarships to faculty and the design and delivery of technical and maintenance courses were the main activities.

Thematic Area 4 (strengthening governance, quality assurance, and accreditation) supported improvements in quality assurance systems, processes and capacities, including the establishment and strengthening of IQAUs in universities (DLI 5); the completion by universities of quality assurance cycles; and strengthened governance capacity of universities through training in leadership and management and the development, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of university-level SIDPs, to enhance greater autonomy and accountabilities of universities. Supporting activities included development of the Afghanistan Quality Assurance and Accreditation Directorate in MoHE; setting up and strengthening IQAUs in universities; and technical support to universities in the preparation and implementation of SIDPs, the development and execution of APRs, the use of QA reviews for plan adjustments, and a continuous process of teaching and learning quality improvement.

Outputs and intermediate results as of August 2021

Modernizing and Enhancing the Quality of Teaching and Learning (Thematic Area 2)

- One of the project's outstanding achievements was the institutionalization of OBE and SCL in the universities. A total of 2,050 academics were trained in, and practicing, OBE and SCL, **far exceeding the original and revised targets** of 1,000 (original target), 1,250 (revised in 2018) and 1,500 (revised in 2020), respectively (**DLI 2**). The actual practice of OBE-SCL was confirmed by third-party verification (TPV) reports, which checked syllabi of a random sample of instructors to ensure they included outcomes, lesson plans, and course schedules. Two-thirds of the 116 syllabi checked in the 2020 TVP exercise had all the necessary parts. Student surveys corroborated teachers' self reports about using SCL methods and about the use of OBE practices in classrooms. TVPs found that instructors' use of SCL in the classrooms was most characterized by group work and discussions, and whiteboards, computers, projectors, and videos were reported to be the most used teaching aids.
- The development of OBE-SCL training materials was based on guidelines and workbooks used in countries such as Malaysia and Sri Lanka. International experts from the University of Technology, Malaysia, provided initial training in Malaysia to 68 academic staff from Afghanistan universities and certified them as OBE-SCL Master Trainers, who, in turn, trained the rest of the 2,050 faculty members in Afghanistan.
- The project also helped establish professional development centers at 12 universities and trained their directors, who facilitated the OBE-SCL training workshops and adoption of this approach in the classrooms.
- The project supported the establishment of ICT centers at 12 universities and the training of more than 66 technicians in topics such as e-learning, technical skills, and basic and advanced network administration. It also installed solar systems in six universities and provided IT equipment packages, some including computers, to 40 universities and HEIs.
- Of the 12 universities benefiting from newly established ICT centers under the project, ICT centers in 10 of those universities were assessed to be fully functional, **almost achieving the original, unchanged target** of 12 universities (**DLI 3**). The ICT center at Baghlan University had not yet been inaugurated in view of the university's relocation due to security threats. Assessment of ICT functionality was based on four indicators captured in annual scorecard reviews: (1) students and personal computers (PCs) ratio; (b) technician and PCs ratio; (c) utilization of ICTs by students; and



(d) utilization of ICTs by academic staff. In a May 5, 2023 email to IEG, the Bank's team added that the ICT center in Bamyan University was also found not to be functioning by the TPV in 2020. Completion of ICT centers was a work in progress at some of the universities. Those that were found not to be fully functional in a particular year were reassessed in the following round of third-party verification.

- Although ICT centers facilitated online and blended education, the 2021 ICT assessment documented challenges at some locations: low internet bandwidth, lack of stable electricity, internet outages, some vacant ICT technician positions, and low levels of technical knowledge of students and faculty for effective e-teaching and learning. Sixty percent of surveyed students reported receiving distance education services from different platforms (WhatsApp and HELMS).
- In response to COVID-19, the project scaled up ICT support to cover more public universities and higher-level institutes to help implement e-learning through HELMS and other platforms. Eighteen projects supporting ICT equipment, networking, and solar system facilities for 16 public universities and HEIs were in either the procurement or implementation process in November 2020.
- Progress was also made on other initiatives, including the expansion of the AfgREN and the integration of e-learning into the country's higher education curriculum on a pilot basis. In addition, five AfghanX courses (web-based platform for courses taught at Afghanistan's universities) were uploaded on the EdX platform to familiarize a global audience with Afghanistan's culture and heritage.

Improving the Qualifications and Skills of Academic and Technical Staff (Thematic Area 3)

- The project awarded 494 scholarships, of which 436 were in Master's programs and 58 in Ph.D. programs. One-third (33 percent) of scholarships were awarded to female academics. Of the 494 scholarships awarded, 265 faculty members completed their programs, **falling short of the original and revised end-of-project targets** of 300 (original), 350 (revised in September 2018), and 300 (revised in September 2020) respectively, due to international travel restrictions and university closures resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.
- A total of 400 technical staff completed short-term technical and maintenance courses (in disciplines such as ICT, lab equipment, and maintenance, among others), **achieving two-thirds of the original target** of 600 and **fully achieving the revised target** of 400 (DLI 4).

Strengthening Governance, Quality Assurance and Accreditation (Thematic Area 3)

- As of August 2021, IQAUs were established at 18 public universities. Nine of them were functioning at international standards, **achieving slightly more than half (56 percent) of the original, unchanged target** of fully functioning IQAUs in 16 universities (DLI 5). The units were instrumental in facilitating self-assessment and external QA assessment, training faculty in OBE-SCL, and improving universities' overall relevance and quality.
- A total of 48 public and private universities completed a new regionally benchmarked quality assurance cycle, fully achieving the original target of 24 public and 24 private universities. Completion was based on universities carrying out self-assessments and competing an external QA review, which would then be disseminated by MoHE. TPV reports indicate high enthusiasm and commitment of the QA teams and their role in promoting and adopting the QA process by faculty members, students, and university personnel. In its May 5, 2023 email to IEG, the Bank's team confirmed that the target of 48 public and private universities was met by the project's closing (December 2022), as reported in the ICR's Annex 1 (p. 30), even though the ICR's main text only reported on the public universities'



lessthan-full achievement (20 of 24 public universities) by August 2021, but noted to be still on track to meet the target by the project's end.

- At the national level, the project contracted the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to conduct an assessment of QAAD's institutional capacity in 2019-20 and develop an institutional reform plan, which provided recommendations on how to move towards a quality assurance directorate, independent of the MoHE. Moreover, QAAD made notable progress in promoting good practices, including by working with development partners (Asia Pacific Quality Assurance Network [APQN], Malaysian Qualifications Agency, UNESCO, USAID, World Bank) to advance QA in Afghanistan. QAAD also continued to maintain its membership in the APQN, and four public universities obtained membership during the APQN annual conference in April 2018.
- By the project's end, a total of 450 university senior managerial and administrative staff completed short-term leadership and management courses in the context of greater authority and accountability accorded to universities, **substantially achieving the original, unchanged target** of 500 (**90 percent achievement**).
- In contrast with the 450 staff, reported in the above bullet, and documented in the ICR's Annex 1 (p. 30), the main text of the ICR (p. 16) reports that only 352 university leadership staff were trained in leadership and management. In its May 5, 2023 email to IEG, the Bank's team confirmed that indeed 450 staff completed this training, and that those trained in 2021 were not captured in the main text's reporting. While the numbers do not add up to the total of 450, the following details in the main text on the nature of that training are worth noting. The project supported the design and delivery, by the Asian Institute for Technology (Thailand), of an Advanced University Leadership program in 2016 and 2017, which trained an initial 245 university leadership staff by the end of 2019. To ensure sustainability, the project organized and supported a National Resource Persons (NRPs) Masterclass Training at the National Institute of Technical Teachers Training and Research in India, which trained 25 Afghan NRPs. During the last quarter of 2020, an additional 107 university leadership staff were trained by those NRPs.
- The project also supported the delivery of short-term courses for over 500 technical staff, including 166 library technicians, 160 lab technicians, 66 ICT technicians, and 130 gender focal points. A short-term training impact assessment revealed that two-thirds (67.5 percent) of academic respondents noted improvements in lab technicians' knowledge and skills, helping them to operate lab equipment more effectively.
- The project also facilitated the revision of the Accreditation Framework, the main instrument for external quality assurance and accreditation.

Outcomes as of August 2021

- Reform of teaching and learning was successfully implemented with the establishment and adoption of OBE and SCE in the classroom, which facilitated greater focus on learning outcomes and on students' needs and challenges.
- (PDO 3) The qualifications and knowledge base of faculty were enhanced in priority programs. With project support, the number of full-time academic staff with at least a Master's degree in priority degree programs increased from the baseline of 700 in 2015 to 1,800, **exceeding both the original and revised targets** of 1,000 and 1,600, respectively. Over and above the 265 completed degree programs supported under the project, this increase was due to other factors, including the recruitment of new faculty and the return of faculty benefiting from other scholarships and Master's degree programs that were established at six universities for 10 disciplines. The Bank's team, in its May 5, 2023 email to IEG, clarified that these other sources of scholarships for university lecturers



included Fullbright, Chevening, and DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service), among others. IEG notes that scholarships supported under the previous Strengthening Higher Education project/SHEP were yet another source. The establishment of continuous professional development centers for faculty and their improved access to professional networks also contributed to the enhanced skills and qualifications of faculty.

- The upgrading of skills and the adoption of tools and processes improved higher-level education governance and quality assurance.
1. (PDO 2) Twenty-four universities: (a) prepared and issued strategic five-year rolling institutional development plans (SIDPs), consistent with NHESP-II, and (b) undertook APRs, both prepared in accordance with a standardized template, **exceeding the original target** of 18 universities **and fully achieving the revised target** of 24 universities. This achievement is an important indicator of improvements in quality and governance.
 2. The strengthening of quality assurance at national and university levels institutionalized the quality assurance process and raised it to international standards.

Rating

High

OBJECTIVE 2 REVISION 1

Revised Objective

Improve the quality of higher education in Afghanistan

The objective was not revised, but official operations ceased after the Taliban takeover on August 15, 2021.

Revised Rationale

Since the Taliban takeover on August 15, 2021, there has been no official relationship between the World Bank and the government. There is no information about any project activities after that date.

Revised Rating

Negligible

OBJECTIVE 3

Objective

Improve the relevance of higher education in Afghanistan

Rationale

The theory of change for this objective held that, in its quest to improve access, quality, and relevance of higher education, the project's activities would support a strong focus on priority degree programs deemed most relevant for serving the needs of and enhancing the prospects for the country's economic development. Identified as national priorities in the NHESP-II, these degree programs included: Physical and Life Sciences (biology, chemistry and physics, geology, and earth sciences), Computing (computer science and computer



programming), Engineering, Manufacturing, and Construction (engineering, construction, electro-mechanics, chemical technology, and mining), Health (pharmacy, general medicine, medical treatment, stomatology, and nursing), Environmental Protection (environment and environmental engineering), Agriculture (agriculture, veterinary forestry, crop and livestock production, agronomy, irrigation, animal husbandry, and horticulture), Communication and Information Technologies, Management and Policy Administration, and English Language and Literature. Journalism, Education, Law, and Social Sciences were added later in year 3 to the list of priority disciplines to ensure that enough female faculty were available for the purposes of awarding scholarships for Master's or higher-level degrees.

Outputs and intermediate results as of August 2021

- Support to boosting **access** and relevant indicators (scholarships for female students, male and female student enrollment, and the expansion of online courses) all focused on the priority degree programs. (Details reported under Objective 1)
- Support to improvements in **quality and governance** and relevant indicators (scholarships for faculty for earning Master's and higher-level degrees; strengthening of capacities for strategic planning, plan implementation, and monitoring, linked to NHESP-II; and quality assurance processes and use for enhancing effectiveness) also focused on the priority degree programs. (Details reported under Objective 2)
- Likewise, as detailed below, the project's support to research focused on applied, development-oriented, demand-driven research, mainly in these same priority disciplines.
 - With project support, MoHE developed a competitive process for awarding research grants, established research technical committees and task forces, and provided grants for faculty to conduct individual and group research on Afghan developmental challenges.
 - As of August 2021, MoHE awarded grants to 161 research projects (110 individual and 51 group projects), of which 117 research projects (78 individual and 39 group) were completed, **substantially achieving the original target** of 120 research projects (80 individual and 40 group projects), **achieving 84 percent of the revised target of 140** (established during the 2018 Additional Financing/Restructuring), **and exceeding the target** of at least 70 individual research projects and at least 30 group research projects (for a total of at least 100) revised during the 2020 restructuring.
 - The project also prepared a concept note on "students-as-researchers pedagogy" in June 2021 to initiate a process to support the incorporation of research into undergraduate learning and teaching in Afghan HEIs.

Outcomes as of August 2021

The project was successful in improving the relevance of higher education in Afghanistan.

- It whole-heartedly embraced and focused on strengthening the degree programs designated as most relevant by GoIRA in its NHESP-II.
- Improvements in teaching and learning, achieved through enhanced qualifications of teachers and enhanced methods of teaching and learning (OBE-SCL), were overtly focused on these priority programs.
- Support to improvements in quality assurance and governance ensured that strategic planning, management, quality assurance, monitoring, and evaluation would all be grounded in NHESP's priority programs and used to enhance those programs' effectiveness.



- Efforts to expand access and boost enrollment all successfully culminated in substantially increased enrollments of males and females in these priority programs.
- The project not only supported research projects falling within these priority programs; it also supported and nurtured, within these priority areas, research that was relevant to national and provincial needs and priorities, with criteria ensuring that they were development-oriented and demand-driven.

Rating

High

OBJECTIVE 3 REVISION 1

Revised Objective

Improve the relevance of higher education in Afghanistan

The objective was not revised, but official operations ceased after the Taliban takeover on August 15, 2021.

Revised Rationale

Since the Taliban takeover on August 15, 2021, there has been no official relationship between the World Bank and the government. There is no information about any project activities after that date.

Revised Rating

Negligible

OVERALL EFFICACY

Rationale

The project achieved strong results in its initial years of implementation prior to the Taliban takeover, exceeding all of its original outcome targets and two of the three revised (more ambitious) outcome targets, the remaining revised target being fully achieved. The overall efficacy rating for the three objectives is high.

The Bank's team, in its May 5, 2023 email to IEG, stated that the majority of the achievements reported here are attributable to the project, although still recognizing that other higher education projects (for example, the US\$90 million USAID Higher Education project) may have contributed, especially to Objective 2 (quality).

Overall Efficacy Rating

High



OVERALL EFFICACY REVISION 1

Overall Efficacy Revision 1 Rationale

After the Taliban takeover in August 2021, efficacy was negligible for all three objectives.

Overall Efficacy Revision 1 Rating

Negligible

Primary Reason

External shock

5. Efficiency

A cost-benefit analysis undertaken at the time of appraisal estimated the Net Present Value (NPV) of the project at \$165 million and the internal rate of return (IRR) at 16 percent, assuming an 80 percent employment rate among university graduates and a 5 percent increase in their earnings. Due to the project’s suspension at the time of the Taliban takeover, the project was unable to collect the necessary data to update the NPV and IRR. In the absence of this data, the ICR (p. 16) notes that, since the project exceeded its initial targets and most of its revised, more ambitious targets with only 80.4 percent of its total budget, and 16 months before the closing date, “...it is fair to conclude that it has exceeded the estimated economic benefits.”

The ICR reports that implementation was also very efficient, thanks to the strong and efficient OMST based in MoHE and the close collaboration and coordination between the Bank, OMST, and the MoHE leadership team. The OMST team was competent and able to resolve project issues without referring them to the Bank’s team, and it had good working relationships with MoHE leadership and HEIs, each staffed with one university operating coordinator responsible for coordinating project activities. The RBF modality, instrumental in shifting the focus from inputs to results, was successfully implemented with concerted support from the Bank, MoHE, and the Ministry of Finance, and it contributed to the project’s strong outcomes. RBF reduced procurement challenges, since procurement under Component 1 was managed by MoHE and GoIRA following the national Procurement Law.

The 2018 Additional Financing and Restructuring reinforced and expanded successful elements of implementation and raised the level of ambition of the project targets. The 2020 Restructuring helped the project to overcome some of the constraints, disruptions, and inefficiencies in project implementation, and in higher education service delivery more generally, caused by lockdowns and travel restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

An analysis of planned versus actual costs by component reveals an ongoing effort to reinforce and expand project activities, judiciously, to address evolving challenges and opportunities.

There were very few minor shortcomings, including delays in procurement and delays in responding to audit recommendations.

Efficiency Rating

High



a. If available, enter the Economic Rate of Return (ERR) and/or Financial Rate of Return (FRR) at appraisal and the re-estimated value at evaluation:

	Rate Available?	Point value (%)	*Coverage/Scope (%)
Appraisal		0	0 <input type="checkbox"/> Not Applicable
ICR Estimate		0	0 <input type="checkbox"/> Not Applicable

* Refers to percent of total project cost for which ERR/FRR was calculated.

6. Outcome

The project's outcome prior to the Taliban takeover is rated **Highly Satisfactory**, given its high ratings for relevance, efficacy and efficiency. The relevance of the PDO at time of the Taliban takeover is rated **high**, since the PDO effectively addressed the most salient issues faced by the higher education subsector and was well aligned with GoIRA's national development priorities and with the second national strategic plan for higher education. Efficacy is rated **high** overall, with Objective 1 (increase access to higher education in Afghanistan) **highly** achieved, Objective 2 (improve the quality of higher education in Afghanistan) **highly** achieved, and Objective 3 (improve the relevance of higher education in Afghanistan) **highly** achieved. The absence of data for an end-of-project cost-benefit analysis notwithstanding, efficiency is rated high, given that almost all original and (more ambitious) revised outcome targets were exceeded, and the remaining revised target fully achieved, even with only 80 percent of project resources used up until that time, an indication that the project exceeded the economic benefits estimated at appraisal. Moreover, these outcomes were achieved 16 months prior to the project's closing date.

The project's outcome after the Taliban takeover is rated unsatisfactory, in light of its high ratings for relevance and efficiency, and negligible ratings for efficacy.

A split rating of performance before and after the Taliban takeover, weighted by disbursements made during each period, culminates in a fully Satisfactory outcome.

	By August 15, 2021	After August 15, 2021
Relevance		High
Efficacy		
• Objective 1 (access)	High	Negligible
• Objective 2 (quality)	High	Negligible
• Objective 3 (relevance)	High	Negligible
Efficiency	High	High
Phase Outcome Rating	Highly Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory
Phase Outcome Rating Score	6	2
Use of Funds	Disbursed: \$44.23 million (ICR, p. 1)	Additional Disbursed: 0 Remaining, unused funds:



		\$10.77 million
Phase Weight	$44.23/55.0 = 80.42\% \times 6$	$10.77/55.0 = 19.58\% \times 2$
Weighted Rating	4.825	0.392
Overall Rating Score	5.217 (rounded to 5)	
Overall Outcome Rating	Satisfactory	

This split rating methodology was adapted specifically for the Afghanistan portfolio, given the abrupt fall of the government and takeover by the Taliban. This table was reviewed and noted as fully consistent with the special IEG guidance.

a. Outcome Rating
Satisfactory

7. Risk to Development Outcome

The project’s formidable outcomes are at high risk in the wake of the Taliban takeover of August 15, 2021. As envisaged under the project’s design, the sustainability of its outcomes had been enhanced, up until the August 15, 2021 events, by a number of factors, most notably: (a) strong GoIRA ownership and commitment to the reforms, thanks to the project’s support to the implementation of Afghanistan’s own higher education reform program; (b) the technical viability of the project design, based on international best practice, knowledge, and expertise, and analytic work undertaken by the Bank in 2013, as well as the experience and lessons learned from the previous Bank-supported higher education operation (SHEP); (c) project design and implementation arrangements, which supported and nurtured the strengthening of management and technical capacities in MoHE and in universities; and (d) the fiscal sustainability of project investments, which the ICR assesses as not posing an undue fiscal burden on the overall higher education budget (ICR, p. 22).

Since the August 21, 2021 events, the Taliban’s policies towards girls’ education and gender segregation, coupled with restrictions on women’s participation in society and academia, put the project’s remarkable achievements of increased female enrollment and female faculty development at high risk. Moreover, most of the former senior staff of MoHE, who held leadership positions, are no longer in the country. Faculty scholars studying abroad are not willing to return to Afghanistan. There are no reliable data on how many faculty who benefited from project scholarships remain in the country.

Prospects for the sustainability of other outcomes, especially the continued use and refinement of the OBESCL approach, infrastructure improvements, and quality assurance and governance reforms, are contingent on some continuity in related policies and in commitment to reforms, which are uncertain under current circumstances. This points to the importance of the Bank’s re-engagement with Afghanistan’s higher education subsector, when feasible, to sustain these outcomes.



8. Assessment of Bank Performance

a. Quality-at-Entry

In a very difficult country context of security challenges and political instability, the Bank supported the design of a highly relevant and evidence-based project. The project was designed to support the implementation of higher education reform, as laid out in Afghanistan's NHESP-II. Preparation drew heavily on local evidence, knowledge, and experience and on in-depth analytic work. The success and lessons of the Afghanistan Strengthening Higher Education Project (SHEP), implemented between 2005 and 2013, highlighted the importance of: evidence-based approaches; GoIRA ownership; strengthened systems for sustainability; flexible implementation, especially in a fragile environment; and a robust M&E framework. Design work also drew on the Bank's analytic report *Higher Education in Afghanistan: An Emerging Mountainscape*, finalized in 2013, which provided a solid understanding of the country context as well as the status and challenges of the higher education sector, and it highlighted best practices from the Bank's experience in higher education globally. Preparation was highly consultative, drawing on longstanding dialogue with MoHE and with some of the major public universities.

The PDO, theory of change, and indicators were clearly defined and coherent, and were appropriately gender-sensitive. M&E arrangements were strong (Section 9). These features, together with the RBF design, facilitated both smooth implementation and a strong focus on results. The PAD was clear in articulating the development challenges and the rationale for investing in Afghanistan's higher education system. The risk assessment was thorough and realistic, raising salient potential issues that could undermine implementation and results. Mitigation measures were appropriate – and proved to be effective – for reducing risks, including a selective focus on development initiatives, a sizeable technical assistance component, flexibility during implementation, management and leadership strengthening of MoHE and universities, a strong OMST, and reliance on fiduciary arrangements that worked for other ARTF and IDA projects. The Bank did its due diligence in assessing capacities and in addressing shortcomings in procurement, financial management, and environmental and social safeguards (Section 10). In retrospect, the ICR does note in its lessons section that better coordination with United Nations agencies and non-governmental organizations may have enhanced sustainability, given Afghanistan's fragility and instability.

Quality-at-Entry Rating

Highly Satisfactory

b. Quality of supervision

The Bank carried out implementation support missions twice a year throughout the project's life, even during the pandemic, when such missions were carried out virtually. This is a noteworthy accomplishment, given the ongoing security challenges, over and above the pandemic. Implementation Status and Results Reports (ISRs) and Aide-Memoires were detailed, clearly and candidly assessing the project's achievements and challenges, and documented recommendations and agreed-upon actions to address the issues and challenges identified. The Bank's team provided support and guidance to MoHE and the Ministry of Finance in implementing the new RBF modality, facilitating relatively smooth project implementation. The Mid-Term Review was seized as an opportunity to expand successful activities with Additional Financing. Throughout its implementation support, and facilitated by the RBF design, the Bank's



supervision missions were strongly focused on results. Indeed, the strong support of the Bank equipped MoHE and the Ministry of Finance to implement this modality very well, underpinning a shift in the project's focus from inputs and activities to delivering results/DLIs. Supervision of procurement and financial management was supportive and regular. MoHE's strong leadership and commitment to project objectives (which were fully supportive of national reform), an effective Steering Committee, and a competent OMST – all supported and nurtured under the project – proved to be strong factors in the project's success. Compliance with the Bank's environmental safeguards policies was an area that would have benefited from more attention, given that the Bank's Third-Party Monitoring Agent identified a few safeguard issues with the project's civil works in Bamyán and Badghis (see Section 10.a).

Quality of Supervision Rating

Highly Satisfactory

Overall Bank Performance Rating

Highly Satisfactory

9. M&E Design, Implementation, & Utilization

a. M&E Design

The project's clearly stated objectives and its well-articulated theory of change provided a solid basis for sound design of M&E. As stated in the PAD (p. 75), the objectives of M&E were to: (a) track the project's implementation experience and strengthen it, where needed; (b) assess the results achieved under project components and subcomponents; and (c) evaluate the outcomes. The results framework developed at project design laid out expected outputs, intermediate outcomes, and outcomes, with annual targets to provide a continuous picture of project performance. The use of DLIs underpinned a focus on critical milestones within the various higher education reform themes supported under the project, incentivizing progress on all of these fronts. The indicators were specific, measurable, sufficiently ambitious, achievable, relevant, and timebound. Baselines were duly established.

Institutional arrangements were given due attention. Component 2 aimed to strengthen MoHE's capacity for M&E, assessed as moderate at the project's outset. It financed an M&E specialist in MoHE/OMST to collect national and university-level data, compile and analyze it to report on project results and outcome indicators, and provide MoHE with technical assistance and capacity building. The verification of DLIs consisted of two sets of activities: (a) the provision by MoHE/OMST of an annual monitoring report on the status of achievement of DLIs; and (b) the undertaking of TPV studies by a consultant firm financed under the project. TPV studies were to cover all universities relevant for the DLIs each year, include surveys of a scientific sample of academic and managerial staff and students, stratified by gender, and include site visits to IQAUs, ICT centers, relevant research sites, and sites practicing SCL and OBE.

b. M&E Implementation

The implementation of M&E by MoHE and OMST allowed the Bank to track the project's progress against outcome and intermediate outcome targets on a regular basis during its implementation support



missions. There were some delays and inconsistencies in MoHE data because the Higher Education Management Information System was not yet fully operational, and some data and statistics were collected manually from the universities. The project recruited local research organizations to verify MoHE's M&E reports and DLI achievements as independent third parties. The project also involved the Bank's Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund/ARTF Third-Party Monitoring Agent to assess its civil works activities.

OMST provided the Bank bi-monthly and annual monitoring reports on a regular basis. Moreover, the project funded several studies assessing the capacity of the QAAD, ICT capacity, and female enrollment. Discrepancies between enrollment data in TPV, MoHE, and ISR reports were identified and were attributed to the lack of an integrated higher information system at MoHE and to confusion about the list of priority disciplines and sub-disciplines. The project's M&E system helped resolve many of these discrepancies and continued to monitor gender-disaggregated enrollment data.

c. M&E Utilization

Data generated by project M&E were used to verify DLI achievements; inform the 2018 restructuring and Additional Financing, as well as the 2020 restructuring for the COVID-19 response; and manage the project's day-to-day activities. The RBF mechanism tied funding to actual results, based on independent verification of M&E data. M&E was used to identify successful activities during the Mid-Term Review, which led to Additional Financing in 2018. The use of M&E data to track scholarship recipients at different stages of their studies, until their return, led to some policy changes, including the addition of new degree programs to the list of priority degrees, and a renewed focus on the need to recruit more female faculty at public universities, particularly in priority disciplines and science/technology/engineering/mathematics subjects.

M&E Quality Rating

High

10. Other Issues

a. Safeguards

The project was classified as Environment Category B (having potentially adverse environmental impacts on human or environmentally important areas) in accordance with OP 4.01 (PAD, p. 16). (The ICR did not document the Environment Category, but the Bank's team, in its May 5, 2023 email to IEG, confirmed its Category B status.) The PAD also mentioned that the Grant would not finance any civil works, but that GoIRA may finance civil works under NHESP-II, including classrooms and facilities, libraries, ICT centers, and dormitories for female students. However, the ICR reports construction of female dormitories and other infrastructure achievements under the project. IEG assumes that project attribution lies in the fact that DLIs rewarding female enrollment are likely to have incited the support of needed infrastructure to this end. IEG sought but did not receive confirmation of this interpretation from the task team.

As a part of project preparation, MoHE conducted an environmental assessment and prepared a sectoral environmental and social management framework (ESMF) to address potentially negative environmental



and social impacts caused by construction activities undertaken by GoIRA, financed from its own resources as part of its sectoral program. The ESMF consisted of environmental and social mitigation measures, environmental and social monitoring requirements, and documentation protocols. It also specified capacity building needs for effective implementation of the ESMF. OMST was designated to assist MoHE to put in place the necessary implementation arrangements. The ESMF (including a Resettlement Policy Framework) was prepared in Pashto, Dari, and English and disclosed locally on May 6, 2015 and to the Bank's InfoShop on May 12, 2015.

The project made substantive progress implementing the environmental safeguards provision on the civil works sites. Monthly monitoring and supervision reported ESMF compliance for each sub-project. The Bank's third-party monitoring raised safeguard issues with Bamyan and Badghis dormitory construction projects. To address these issues, the Minister of Urban Development and Lands assessed Bamyan municipality's request for processing land titles for Project-Affected Persons. By the time of the mid-August 2021 events, the final decision was waiting for the opinion of the President's Administrative Office, and the Bamyan dormitory was not yet functional. The project successfully resolved a social safeguard issue in the Badghis dormitory construction project by collecting land documents from the private donor. The project also established a Grievance Redress Mechanism (GRM) to address any safeguard, gender violence, IT, and degree-related issues. By November 2020, the GRM had received 54 grievances, of which 51 had been successfully resolved, and the remaining three were pending. The Bank's team, in its May 5, 2023 email to IEG, confirmed that independent review of the safeguards application was conducted once, by the Bank's third-party monitor.

b. Fiduciary Compliance

Financial Management. An integrated fiduciary system assessment was undertaken for financial management, procurement, and governance at appraisal. Based on this assessment and subject to the implementation of a Project Action Plan to mitigate the identified risks, the project's overall fiduciary framework and systems provided reasonable assurance that project funds would be used for their intended purposes. The overall fiduciary risk was rated as substantial. Component 2 was to provide financial management expertise to strengthen MoHE's and universities' capacities in internal auditing and internal controls. Bank funds for Component 1 were to be disbursed upon achievement of (a) DLI targets met; and (b) submission of Interim Unaudited Financial Reports with information on EEPs. Standard funds flow mechanisms for Afghanistan were to be followed for Component 2, with project funds deposited into a designated account in US dollars, whose replenishment would be based on statements of expenditure.

Financial management generally progressed well. Eligible Expenditures for Component 1 were always in excess of the project's contribution and reported in time for DLI verification. Under Component 2 (managed by MoHE/OMST), a few delays in responding to audit recommendations caused the project's financial management rating to be assessed as moderately satisfactory. IEG asked the task team to confirm whether any of the external auditors' opinions were qualified, and if so, what were the nature of qualifications and measures taken to address them, and whether all audit recommendations addressed by time of evaluation. IEG has not yet received a response. The Bank's team did confirm, in its May 5, 2023 email to IEG, that the project complied with the financial management manual.

Procurement



The PAD (p. 14) noted that since EEPs are “non-procurable” expenditures involving salaries and scholarships, a procurement plan for Component 1 was not required. Procurement under Component 2 was to be carried out in accordance with the Bank’s guidelines.

Procurement was initially centralized at the National Procurement Authority, which caused delays, especially for civil works projects. The subsequent delegation of most of the preparatory work to MoHE expedited the procurement process. Procurement under Component 1 was managed entirely by GoIRA, following national procurement law. Procurement activities under Component 2 were carried out by MoHE OMST, following Bank procurement guidelines. To strengthen MoHE’s procurement capacity, OMST assigned procurement specialists to work closely with MoHE’s procurement directorate. There were a few delays in implementing procurement activities under Component 2. In its May 5, 2023 email to IEG, the Bank’s team explained that the delays were due to the unfamiliarity of the procurement specialists in OMST with the Bank system and guidelines, which was addressed with support by the Bank’s staff. The impact of delays was not significant, since major procurement was under Component 1, which applied the government’s procurement law. The Bank’s May 5, 2023 email to IEG confirmed that Bank procurement guidelines were followed, where they were applicable.

c. Unintended impacts (Positive or Negative)

Gender. Over and above the project’s support to MoHE to increase female enrollment reported under Objective 1 in Section 4 (reserving seats in annual university intakes, providing scholarships for economically disadvantaged female students, constructing dormitories for female students, and transportation and other support services, such as counseling and childcare), the project implemented gender-based violence interventions and helped establish systems for mitigating gender-based violence at the HEIs. MoHE established a task force to revise gender strategy and anti-harassment policy. By August 2021, 28 of 29 public universities had a gender officer (all female), and 11 positions were under recruitment. There remained a critical need to strengthen the capacities of these gender officers, who did not have the required training or qualifications to address and manage gender issues.

Institutional Strengthening. The project’s RBF approach contributed to MoHE and HEI institutional strengthening by giving more ownership over the project.

d. Other

None.

11. Ratings

Ratings	ICR	IEG	Reason for Disagreements/Comment
Outcome	Satisfactory	Satisfactory	
Bank Performance	Highly Satisfactory	Highly Satisfactory	



Quality of M&E	High	High
Quality of ICR	---	Substantial

12. Lessons

The following five insightful and relevant lessons are drawn from the ICR.

- **Results-based financing can be an effective mechanism for delivering development outcomes and fostering innovation and efficiency.** Although it was the first project in Afghanistan to include an RBF approach, this project’s smooth implementation by MoHE and the Ministry of Finance was due in significant part to the Bank’s strong support and coaching. RBF propelled a shift from inputs and activities to results and provided MoHE flexibility in the use of the project’s budget to fund essential and innovative activities, among which were a number of activities to increase female enrollment. RBF limited the Bank’s involvement in procurement and other administrative activities, improving project efficiency.
- **Affirmative action policies to increase the representation of women in higher education can be highly effective.** Reserving seats for female students in Afghanistan’s national university entrance exam in priority degree programs, together with coordinated support services, contributed substantially to increases in female enrollment in a context of deep-rooted inequalities in Afghan society. These actions demonstrated MoHE’s strong commitment to gender equity.
- **Especially in an FCV context, a competent Operations and Monitoring Support Team (OMST), with staff working full-time on the project, can be pivotal to project success.** The Bank’s presence in the field was limited due to prevailing security situations in Afghanistan. The strong and competent OMST at MoHE was highly effective in compensating for this shortcoming. OMST ensured coordination between MoHE’s leadership and the Bank, solving many implementation problems that arose, and providing regular monitoring reports to the Bank.
- **Proactive risk management is crucial for safeguarding and securing implementation and results in a fragile context.** The project encountered formidable issues during implementation, including work disruptions caused by periodic bombing and explosions in Kabul and the COVID-19 pandemic. OMST, with Bank support, continued project activities working through digital means when necessary, including during the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, the 2020 project restructuring provided support to the higher education system to strengthen its response to the pandemic.
- **In retrospect, a closer engagement with United Nations partner agencies and nongovernmental organizations, especially in a context of conflict and political instability, may have enhanced sustainability of reform implementation and results.** While not fully anticipated during project design or implementation, the abrupt and sweeping changes following the August 15, 2021 Taliban takeover, and their severe threats to sustainability, point to the importance of closely engaging with relevant UN and NGO partners who would be equipped to serve as facilitators or third-party implementing agencies in order to carry forward selected activities initiated and supported under the project. This



approach is a key consideration for the design and implementation of future operations in Afghanistan and other FCV countries.

13. Assessment Recommended?

No

14. Comments on Quality of ICR

Quality of Evidence.

Thanks to a high quality M&E system (Section 9), including strengthened M&E capacity at MoHE and university levels and third-party verification of DLIs, the availability, quality, and credibility of evidence was strong. Overall, the ICR's presentation of this evidence was clear and comprehensive, both as tallied in Annex 1 and as outlined in the efficacy section of the main text. There were a few minor inconsistencies in the presentation of some (baseline, target, and outcome) data within and across the various documents (restructuring Project Papers and ICR), which were largely sorted out by IEG's close review of the various key design and restructuring documents.

Quality of Analysis. The use of this evidence was effective. The ICR's analysis supported a thorough review of the project's results chain, linking outputs and activities to intermediate outcomes and results. The ICR cited the sources and triangulated project data on indicators and DLIs with third-party verification reports and other sources, including beneficiary surveys. It was clear and systematic in using this data and qualitative information (on leadership, capacity strengthening, government commitment) to explain convincingly the success of this project in an extremely challenging environment. The systematic presentation of data and findings provided a rich narrative of implementation challenges, the contribution of the RBF to an enhanced focus on results, and the partnerships and collaboration across a range of actors that culminated in the achievement of objectives. IEG suggests that the ICR's assessment of two objectives (improved access, and improved quality and relevance) could have facilitated a deeper look at quality and relevance had Objective 2 been subdivided into two separate objectives (as is done in this ICRR).

Quality of Lessons. The quality of lessons was high. The lessons were well grounded in the ICR's narrative and in its documentation of experience gained under this project. The lessons are also highly relevant to other countries facing the challenges of higher education reform, gender inequities, a Fragility, Conflict & Violence context, and/or inexperience with the RBF approach.

Results Orientation. The ICR's results orientation was strong, both in its thorough presentation and analysis of data across the entire results chain (including DLIs), and in its insightful discussion of the RBF approach and its nurturing and support of a stronger results orientation for the higher education sector in Afghanistan.

Internal Consistency/Adherence to Guidelines. Overall, the ICR was well written, internally consistent, and adherent to the Bank's guidelines. There were a few shortcomings.

- The various project costs, broken down by component, were not systematically presented in the ICR (Annex 3, p. 37) to reflect the formally approved revisions of ARTF financing (which financed 100



percent of the project) during implementation, or the actuals at project closing. These various iterations included the original cost of \$50 million; the revised cost of \$55 million, with the approval of \$5 million in Additional Financing in September 2018; the revised cost of \$45.18 million after the cancellation of \$9.82 million in December 2022; and the actual cost at closing totaling \$44.23 million. Rather than reporting on these evolving costs (and component breakdowns), the ICR's cost table: (1) reports incorrect totals of \$55 million for original amount at approval and for actual at project closing; (2) reports incorrect costs for Component 2; (3) calculates inaccurate disbursement rates against the original approved financing; and (4) contains mistakes in the totals of each column. This ICRR's reporting of costs and financing is based on its close review of the original design and restructuring documents.

- The “Restructuring and/or Additional Financing” Section of the ICR (page 2) listed only the second restructuring, approved on December 10, 2020. It did not list the first restructuring, undertaken together with an Additional Financing in the amount of \$5 million, approved in September 2018. The main text of the ICR does report on either of these (ICR, p. 11).
- There were a few inconsistencies between data/information presented in the main text (Efficacy section) and Annex 1.
- The ICR's safeguards discussion does not confirm that the project was Category B.

a. Quality of ICR Rating
Substantial