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A Program for Support of Medical Faculties in Afghanistan

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Description of aims and requirements

During my visits to different medical faculties (Jalalabad, Herat and Mazar-e-Sharif) in 2009 and 2010 and also during my work as an Expert at the Ministry of Higher Education in Kabul, I had the feeling that time there had been standing still for 30 years.

Deans and lecturers from the medical faculties in Khost and Kandahar confirmed this to me.

In spite of the good progress being made at the Kabul universities and several other higher education colleges, the position of medical faculties throughout Afghanistan is desperate. Until now these have not received any support from World Bank projects such as SHEP and ARTF.

Representatives from these faculties have also asked me to drive forward academic restructuring of medical faculties.

There is a lack of infrastructure, learning materials, laboratories and qualified lecturers. In most cases learning is by means of a chalk-and-talk and theoretical approach using old and mostly handwritten and copied texts. On-going, methodical and practical training does not take place.

Students hardly have the opportunity to learn about diagnosis and treatment at the hospital patient's bedside.

Yet the number of medical students is set to double over the next four years, hence all faculties face new challenges. However, these faculties are not in the position to teach and support even today's number of students satisfactorily.

That is why it is really necessary to become engaged in training future medical staff and to initiate and carry out short term as well as long term programmes to improve teaching.

Without well trained doctors it will not be possible to give the Afghan population access to a high quality overall health service.

Previous programmes carried out in different parts of the country have consisted of individual measures and sporadic projects which are short term and implemented on a one-off basis. No on-going support was available with no guarantee of sustainability. These projects were mostly geared to the ability and job-related experiences of project leaders in Germany. This should change to the extent that when new projects are developed and implemented they will be based on on-site circumstances and the existing problems and the requirements of the faculties. In addition more time is required and continuous monitoring of both the on-going and the newly developed projects by arrangement with local partners. Initially the new projects are to be developed and implemented at a medical faculty, for example in Mazar-e-Sharif. The intention is that this will serve as a model which can be transferred to other faculties.

1. Medical textbooks for students and young doctors

The Afghan doctors who visited Germany under the auspices of DAAD/DAMF Further Training (Capacity Building), stressed that besides the lack of further training there was also a serious lack of medical instruments, adequate equipment, laboratories and laboratory materials as well as an absence of up-to-date specialist medical literature.

In Kabul as well as in the provinces there are very few new specialist publications in English. Even the university libraries have very few and those are out-of-date. In addition, not every student and doctor has a good command of English. Therefore, lecturers dictate the contents of their lectures and students have to take notes. Often these notes are the only literature which is available. Hence specialist literature in the languages of the country is of immense importance for courses of study and further training.

Furthermore, an inventory of all textbooks which are currently used and written by university lecturers and which are fundamental for teaching and examining students is essential to improve the learning resources available to date.

Thereafter the intention is, together with lecturers and students from individual faculties, to compare learning resources in current use with international standard publications. Based on this a selection of international standard publications will be chosen, translated and published in the languages of the country for teaching purposes. This first important step serves to bring teaching into line with international standards.

In the “*National Higher Education Strategic Plan: 2010-2014*” the following is stated about it:

“Fund will be made available to encourage the writing and publication of text books in Dari and Pashtu, especially in priority areas, to improve the quality of teaching and learning and give students access to state-of- the-art information.

In the meantime, translation of English language textbooks and journals into Dari and Pashto is a major challenge for curriculum reform. Without this facility it would not be possible for university students and faculty to access modern and a development as knowledge in all disciplines accumulates at a rapid and exponential pace.”

In 2010 twenty medical text books, written by the lecturers of four Afghan universities (Nangarhar, Khost, Kandahar and Balkh) in the Afghan languages Pashto and Dari were printed with the financial support by Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). The total circulation measures 29.000 copies as well as the same number of CDs. These books have been distributed to the students freely and some copies were sent to the other universities in Afghanistan. Soft copies will be made available online at the websites of the referring Afghan Universities.

The textbooks written by lecturers are to be collected and printed after prior consultation, then made available again to students at the faculties. Some of these textbooks will be sent to other faculties nationwide to aid coordination, cooperation and scientific exchange.

2. Interactive and multimedia teaching instead of purely theoretical classroom teaching

In the medical faculty of Balkh and Nangarhar University there was only one single projector available at any one time. All lecturers taught purely theoretically facing the class.

Six projectors have been made available for the Nangarhar Medical Faculty through a *DAAD* grant and were installed in each classroom (six rooms in total).

In Nangarhar all six projectors were connected to PCs and the internet in the context of a USAID project. Consequently each classroom is connected to the World Wide Web which can only revolutionise teaching.

Within the framework of this project lecturers received training in PowerPoint and on how to use these appliances. Lecturers will continue to receive training based on this in order to be able to design and present didactic and multimedia resources clearly to their students.

This project also serves as a model for the whole country. Beamers were installed in all teaching rooms at the Medical faculties of several universities, like Khost, Kandahar, Herat and Balkh.

Likewise a projector is to be installed and connected to the internet in every classroom at all other medical faculties.

3. “Master of Science in International Health” in Heidelberg

I have looked at the curriculum of different Afghan faculties in the field of “*Preventive and Social Medicine*” which is supposed to comply with international Public Health. I was surprised to find, that the contents were last updated over 30 years ago. Public Health is of utmost importance for the training of Afghan doctors as medical care in Afghanistan has yet to be organised. Fundamental to this is the theoretical communication of an up-to-date level of knowledge and research.

I have spoken to Dr Rainer Külker, head of Master of Science in International Health from the Public Health Institute in Heidelberg and the institute is prepared to train three to four lecturers a year from the departments for Public Health at medical faculties in Afghanistan. I have had connections with Heidelberg University since 1993 as part of my training also took place there. Heidelberg is the centre of excellence in Germany in the field of Public Health.

Appropriate grants from Germany should be set aside for this.

4. Situational Analysis and Needs Assessment

Previously, various organisations in different parts of the country have carried out individual measures and projects. These projects mostly focus on the ability and professional experience of project leaders in Germany. Yet, in order to obtain a better understanding of the current problems and future challenges in Afghanistan and to be able to offer scientific solutions, it is essential to draw up an analysis of the current situation. Thus performance strengths and weaknesses can be more easily identified.

To this end a German or an international specialist in the field for training medical staff in developing countries is to go to Afghanistan for a brief stay to visit and assess medical faculties. Thereafter, following consultation with the MoHE (Ministry of Higher Education), DAAD, GTZ, the umbrella organisation of Afghan specialist medical staff in German speaking areas (DAMF e.V.) and any other interested institutions, further project suggestions will be developed and implemented.

5. Faculty Libraries

I have previously found a library at every medical faculty, which is very positive in comparison with other faculties. However, most books were very old and the libraries did not have catalogues.

The departmental libraries of medical faculties will be run as departments of the university library and assigned to their respective faculties.

In the longer term libraries will become efficient learning centres. After training, staff will also be able to help students access modern research and information strategies.

In the short term, following consultation with faculty management and in accordance with international standards, five to ten books at a time from all areas of medical specialism will be acquired and put at the library's disposal.

In this way, lecturers as well as students can inform themselves about the latest subject developments and put them into immediate practice in the classroom. In the medium term these books can also be translated into Afghan languages and printed following clarification on translation and copyright.

6. Practical training in laboratories

My observation was, that there were only a few and not well equipped laboratories at the Medical faculties. In this situation, appropriate teaching was not possible. In order that students could combine practical and theoretical teachings, they need to capacitate those laboratories that are available and some new laboratories should be established.

7. Teaching Hospital (University Hospital)

I was very surprised to find that not all medical faculties have a teaching hospital or are not linked to a university hospital. The result of this is that medical students hardly have any opportunity to undergo practical training at the patient's bedside.

Where there are university hospitals, these are to develop into genuine hospitals with clinical departments (predominantly internal medicine, surgical, obstetrics and gynaecology and paediatrics).

Where there are no university hospitals cooperation between the medical faculty and a Public Health Hospital should be established by means of a contractual agreement in order to secure the training of future doctors.

I will strive to obtain better (financial) support for university hospitals for the relevant specialist clinics (internal medicine, surgical, obstetrics and gynaecology and paediatrics) within the framework of structural reforms.

7. Strategic Planning

According to the Ministry of Higher Education the number of medical students is set to double in the coming four years. However, medical faculties are not well prepared and can hardly look after the current number of students adequately.

The Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) in Kabul is being asked to let every university and faculty develop its own strategic plan. This should be in line with the *“National Higher Education Strategic Plan: 2010 – 2014”*.

Strategic planning will be of immense significance to the future development of universities and faculties, to secure back-up-funds as well as to coordinate measures. The strategic plans are to be developed in cooperation with medical faculties and then presented to the Ministry of Higher Education as well as to the donor community.

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