

E-BASED EDUCATION: BREAKING LIMITATIONS

A *Caritas in Veritate* Foundation Report by

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During the past years, more and more international troops have been leaving Afghanistan. While officially the Taliban regime has been defeated, the fundamentalists are still controlling several regions in the country. Afghanistan remains both unstable and one of the poorest countries in the world. The situation is compounded by internal ethnic conflicts. The Hazara people in particular, Shiite descendants from Mongolian tribes living in the poor and under-developed highlands of central Afghanistan, have faced violence and terror for many years. This particular region received attention when the Taliban destroyed the famous Buddha statues of Bamyán in 2001. Since then there hasn't been much development for this neglected population.

In 2009 the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) started the first educational initiatives in the Bamyán region. Jesuit education addresses people from all gender, ethnic and religious groups in order to make a change within societies, transform communities and eventually foster peace. However, the JRS program has mostly focused on primary and secondary education. This is indeed very important, but it does not offer opportunities for adults who have already accomplished their secondary education. In 2017, Jesuit Worldwide Learning – Higher Education at the Margins (JWL) launched an education program in a learning centre in the same foothills where the Buddha statues were destroyed. Here, JWL offers different courses of higher education. Participants in the JWL program can earn a Diploma in Liberal Studies created in collaboration with several universities and fully accredited by Regis University in Denver, Colorado (USA). While most colleges focus on specialised studies, the Diploma in Liberal Studies builds a broad general knowledge based on the long Jesuit tradition of education which is summarized in the motto 'men and women for others'. The emphasis is on transforming learners into critical thinkers who are able to deal with different challenges, ideas, traditions and circumstances. The major goal of this educational program is to help transform the local mentality through an open-minded way of thinking and through the social commitment of graduates. The Jesuit perspective gives witness to their faith and core belief that all people are children of God and deserve the same rights, recognition and attention – no matter their race or creed.

1. Blended learning at the margins – the JWL model

Since 2010, JWL has offered high-quality blended higher education which combines the advantages of e-learning with those of onsite support. A good education through online learning is impossible to attain if it consists only of downloading documents from an application, which students must learn by heart. Successful education is only possible when combined with self-learning efforts, peer interaction, and regular discussion. Students should question theories and challenge each other's ideas. While today's workforce demands specialised experts and many "educated" individuals close off from the world around them as a result of such specialised training, JWL creates communities of broadly-educated people able to use their skills in many fields and in multiple ways.

While primary and secondary education is needed all over the world, in order to tap the full potential of the people it is important to provide quality higher learning opportunities. JWL is implementing this goal through the Diploma in Liberal Studies. It includes 45 credits of coursework over three years and has been developed within the framework of Ignatian pedagogy which seeks to develop the whole person. Students choose one of three concentrations, gaining specialized skills in either business, education, or social work. Within each course and across the curriculum, student learning is structured around the concepts of experience, reflection, and action – all marks of Jesuit education. Many of the students in Afghanistan who opted for the business concentration have successfully started their own shops in their villages. This is especially remarkable as many are women. Numerous

graduates of the education concentration now work as teachers – developing new learning centres in remote areas of the country.

2. Offering online education without internet

In the age of digitalization, a successful education program is not only about the variety of courses and the academic content. In remote areas – and Afghanistan has a vast number of these – effective logistics and functioning learning material are critical. While it is not difficult to get books and computers to cities like Herat in Western Afghanistan or Bamyan in Central Afghanistan, there are many mountainous regions where even basic goods are scarce. For many students, a large part of their daily life is taken up in doing chores or working in local agriculture. Areas outside the big cities are often without television or a telephone signal. The people in these villages know WiFi only from hearsay.

To receive an education, students must travel to schools in the bigger villages, but the distances are long and travel on footpaths is difficult. Spending this time to go to school is a huge investment for students who would otherwise be working in the fields. Most children and adolescents walk two to three hours to reach school. A small minority of them can afford a motorbike, but almost no one owns a car. However, all see an education as more important than the exertions they have to undertake to attain it. Nonetheless, distance and lack of communication infrastructure were great challenges for both students and the success of the program.

JWL explored ways in which students could access education more easily and this is where the digital age offered a key. E-learning allows students access to learning material without heavy books. Most digital education programs require a stable internet connection and this was a huge problem for the villages mentioned above. To address this challenge, JWL invented a unique learning environment. With the help of technology specialists, JWL built an online learning Management System (LMS) with the ability for students to study on and offline, and for courses to be accessed on different types of Android and Windows devices. This allows students to study at home most of the time, while taking care of their daily chores and duties on the field. As part of a blended learning community, they still meet two to three times a week with fellow students at the JWL learning Centre. In this learning model, students join an international network which becomes an important aspect of the experience. Being connected through the LMS allows students from Afghanistan to discuss with fellow students in Africa, the Middle East, South- and East Asia. They are also connected with a digital faculty room, where they interact with instructors and tutors whenever they want. Many students in Afghanistan say that this international dimension is a huge sign of hope for them, as they often feel forgotten by and disconnected from the rest of the world. Suddenly, they are exposed to other traditions and religious views and they gain a better understanding and appreciation of other cultures and beliefs.

3. Education transforms communities

One of the most important questions the future impact on a post-war Afghanistan. Is education really the key to a better and more peaceful society? The answer is simple: Yes! While most governments spend their budgets on national defense and cut funds for education, we are now witnessing terrific results in regions where JWL offers the Diploma Programme. In places where girls and women once could not go to school, they are now the majority in most classes. In places where women were not allowed to run their own businesses, they have started establishing their own shops. In places where, for many decades, authorities did not support educational programs, our graduates are educating children and adolescents with approval and benevolence of the local authorities. One of the local governors said, “War and the Taliban regime have led to regression. This is why these remote areas are underdeveloped. If we really want to improve our local agriculture and social structures, we are in big need of higher education – for both boys and girls. The time of gender-based discrimination must come to an end. Therefore, we will support the education projects of the Jesuits.”

The will for change and progress is in the mind of our graduates. While some want to develop the local economy, others are focused on social goals. For instance, Zainab, a young woman from Daikundi in Central Afghanistan, sees it as her mission to empower young women in her region and eventually in the rest of Afghanistan: “In the past, the authorities wanted girls and women not to study or get a better education. But we want to change this idea that is still in the head of many people in my country. There mustn’t be any discrimination between girls and boys. Especially girls need good examples that they can do more than what we find in our traditions. I see it as my task to empower and inspire them through my own example.”

4. Conclusion

The Jesuit education model is contributing to transforming people from isolated communities into a community of open-minded and critical thinkers who want to make a change – thus incarnating the motto ‘men and women for others’. In many countries, the lack of higher education, and hence the ignorance towards other cultures, religious beliefs and traditions, is the source of conflicts and war. A solid formation beyond basic education is therefore the key to transforming the hearts of marginalized people in order to foster peace in regions where conflicts between ethnic groups or discrimination between men and women are part of everyday life. If we want peace in this world, we have to go further, cross the borders of the impossible, and by doing so, give testimony to the Gospel: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.” (John 14:27)