

Afghanistan: Education

Afghanistan has one of the lowest literacy rates in the world, although literacy has improved from about 28 percent of the population in 2000 to about 38 percent in 2015. The literacy rate was 52 percent for men, but only 24 percent for women. The government, with the help of the international community, has made progress in rebuilding the nation's infrastructure. In 2018 more than 9 million students were enrolled in schools, a nine-fold increase since 2000, and 39 percent of the students were girls. However, an estimated 28 percent of school-aged children still did not attend or have access to schools. The Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education are responsible for rebuilding the nation's education infrastructure, which continues to be hampered by poor security.

The education system consists of primary education, secondary education, higher education, vocational education, and religious education. Nine years of education are compulsory, and the constitution guarantees a right to free education through a lower-level university degree. Despite international donations, facilities remain substandard, and worse, unsafe. Students, mostly female, have been attacked and even killed by terrorists for pursuing an education. Lack of qualified teachers continues to be a major obstacle. In many areas girls are forbidden to go to school because no separate facilities exist for them. In rural areas children often forego school to assist their families with subsistence tasks. Recently, there have been some attempts to reform Afghanistan's traditional religious schools, called madrasa, by amending the curriculum with non-religious subjects such as history, math, and science. Most madrasa are private and not registered with the government. Madrasa have traditionally played an important role in Afghan society, and they continue to be popular in Afghanistan.

Kabul is home to the country's best functioning school district. Several Western-financed high schools were established in the early 20th century, and Kabul University was founded in 1932. By the 1980s, 40 percent of the nation's doctors were females who had graduated from the university. Sixty percent of the university's teachers were female. Under the Taliban most professors and teachers left the country, and the university ceased to function. After the Taliban was toppled in 2001, efforts to rebuild and reestablish programs of study were aided by donations of funds and equipment from countries around the world. In 2006 the American University of Afghanistan opened, and other institutions soon followed, including Kandahar University, Nangarhar University, and Herat University. A majority of the student body at all these colleges are male. The number of students who graduate from high school each year is steadily increasing; they are competing for a limited number of openings in colleges as well as vocational and teacher training programs.

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