

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Learning While Female in Kabul

How educators around the world keep hope alive in a hopeless place.





THE REVIEW | ESSAY

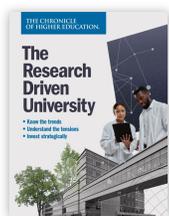
By *Lucy Ferriss*

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My student Asma had been missing for four class sessions when I tried to reach her. Her response came back after a few days. “Please professor,” she wrote. “Do not alone me.”

Asma is one of 120 students whom I and a dozen other college professors, spread across four continents and five academic divisions, have been teaching remotely since June. We began the way children are sometimes taught to swim: We threw ourselves into the water of the emergency that was the plight of Afghan women barred from education. The suicide rate among these women, we knew, had been skyrocketing. Depression was rampant. We were colleges professors, and thousands of these women were — had been — college students. We felt a particular call to help.

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The challenges Asma and our other students face, we quickly learned, are both academic and nonacademic. Academically, they have lost not just the months since December 2022, when the Taliban abruptly threw them out of all institutions of higher learning, but also the years prior. The country’s response to Covid was not a

quick pivot to Zoom but the cessation of most classes at the secondary level and many at the university level. Even among third- and fourth-year college students, basic skills are rusty. Their English fluency, never prioritized in Afghan schools, comprises the full range; of our initial cohort, recruited via local contacts throughout Afghanistan, only about 20 percent were advanced in English. Most have tried and failed to connect to self-paced online courses. They live isolated in their homes, and what they most need academically are professors and fellow students in the room, even if that room must be virtual.

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Beyond academics lies poverty. With the Afghan economy in freefall, most now live in families that are barely scraping by. Illnesses, brought on by trauma, unsafe nutrition, and poor medical care, are on the rise among our students. Their parents feel threatened by the Taliban and want their daughters either to stop their studies for fear of being caught, or to use their connection to this American initiative to somehow spirit them all out of the country. Minimal to begin with, their internet connection — their lifeline to the world — falls short because their families cannot afford wireless fees. When we saw attendance at about 40 percent over the summer, we made the decision to supply all our students with data packages for their mobile phones, so they can at least access class by looking through their small screens, as if through a tiny rectangular portal, toward the future they still imagine.

Early on, it became clear that offering free classes in academic English and university subjects, while a blessing for our students, would not be enough. They want education, yes, but they also want degrees, professional qualifications,

careers. They want to be ready to help their country when the moment arrives for the Taliban to lose power. To shape for them at least the outline of a possible future, we connected with a dozen institutions and initiatives in Asia, Europe, and North America that sponsor programs and scholarships for students under duress. Every step of their journey, we quickly learned, will be arduous. It takes up to two years to obtain a passport out of Afghanistan. To leave the country, they must be escorted by a *mahram*, a male member of their family willing and able to accompany them all the way.

English-language testing centers have shut down in Afghanistan, so to take the necessary tests for scholarships and admission, students must rely on a fickle internet and the keypads of their mobile phones. News of a scholarship they've applied for often arrives a few weeks before the deadline for admission, leaving them no time to make complicated arrangements. If they are lucky enough to obtain a student visa, they may be stopped at the airport, so they do better to find safe haven in Pakistan — except that Pakistan is now deporting Afghan refugees.

If our students did not obtain their transcript before the Taliban ejected them last December, they may not be able to get a copy of it now and might have to start a four-year college career from scratch. One student sent me a photo she took on the last day she was allowed to pass through the university gates. She had been in love, she reported, with an Afghan journalist and poet who had family in Germany, and she determined to study German so she could translate his poems into that language. Two years ago, he was killed by the Taliban. As she passed through the familiar halls of her university, she stopped to take a photo of her German classroom. The desks and tables had been cleared out, and the room was filled with trash.

Forbidden to work or attend university, our students must scramble to make themselves useful, lest they suffer another fate. Asma had been living with her

mother in a flat in Kabul. I knew this because she and her classmates had learned prepositions by describing their homes and the placement of rugs, chairs, pictures, and so on. Asma had been in her first year of a pre-med program, hoping to be a doctor, when the Taliban took over. Her English needed work, and over the summer she attended class faithfully, always a little shy but diligent about improving. This fall, she disappeared from the two classes she'd enrolled in. Her brother, she reported when I wrote with concern, was forcing her to marry. She tried to kill herself, but thoughts of her mother's fate stopped her. She wanted to be a doctor, she wrote. Now she felt all alone. Returning to class was the one thing she looked forward to.

"A soldier's biggest support is his weapon," another student wrote me this fall. "Education is our weapon. We will hang onto it. We will fight with it."

When I reach Asma, she has stepped back from the brink of suicide. A month ago, she reports, the Taliban came through her neighborhood, looking for single girls. They told her brother that she needed to marry a Talib. But the Taliban had killed her beloved father only seven years ago. She would kill herself before she would marry one of them. Now, a solution has been found. Rather than a Talib, she will marry a stranger, an Afghan man living in Germany. A short, bald man, going by his photo, a decade her senior. She will travel with her brother to Iran for the wedding, then she will return to Afghanistan, to live with her new husband's mother, until arrangements can be made to bring her to Germany.

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Her mother-in-law, she has heard, disapproves of her taking classes. She will have to be attentive, to clean the house and cook the food and care for her husband's

mother, and then maybe — maybe — she can return to the portal of her phone and learn again. Maybe she will get to Germany. Maybe she will not be made to bear children too soon. Maybe she will be allowed to study, and become a doctor, and come back one day to help her country.

In Germany, I tell her — though I am not certain of this — she will have rights.

Crises are shaking our world. We have turned from Afghanistan to Ukraine to, now, the horror of Hamas and the devastation in Gaza. But millions of women live under gender apartheid in the reign of the Taliban. We cannot rescue them, but we will not alone them. We'll be there as, brilliant and determined, they wield the weapon of their education and eventually rescue themselves — but at what cost, and after how much time lost, we cannot know.

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[Lucy Ferriss](#)

Lucy Ferriss is writer-in-residence emerita at Trinity College, in Connecticut.

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