



## The Role of Universities in Empowering Individuals and Society in Afghanistan

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### Abstract:

#### Purpose:

The primary objective of this research is to examine the role of universities as the highest educational and training institutions in empowering individuals and society. Initially, the study explored the literal and terminological meanings of empowerment. Then, we highlight the most essential functions of universities concerning individual and societal empowerment.

#### Methodology:

After clarifying universities' role as the highest educational and training institutions, we addressed how universities can effectively empower individuals and society. This research adopts an analytical approach that examines and analyzes expert opinions, literature reviews, and previous studies.

#### Findings:

As the highest educational and training institutions, universities play a crucial role in expanding the frontiers of knowledge, conducting research, providing public services, and empowering individuals and society in various scientific, cultural, social, and political dimensions. They should critically study and systematically, sequentially, and densely transmit Afghanistan's rich Islamic heritage to students, creating a constructive link between traditional and modern cultures.

#### Implication:

Universities are expected to define the significant issues humanity faces and identify the dynamic forces of the present time. Ultimately, by fostering creativity, innovation, and a spirit of research, reasoning, critical thinking, and initiative among students, universities can fulfill their grand role in empowering individuals and society.

## INTRODUCTION

One of the critical missions of universities is to train the specialized workforce needed by society. The economic, social, and cultural development of any country is made possible through the education of such professionals. Universities are among the most complex and dynamic systems and hold a unique and prominent position in the comprehensive development of society (Bagherian & Sattari, 2022). They are considered crucial drivers of political and social growth in any community, and universities are instrumental in raising awareness and organizing human resources for social advancement (Gorgiladze et al., 2020). In today's technologically advanced societies, having specialized professionals who can contribute to political and social development is a source of pride. In this context, universities play a vital role as institutions that train students to become teachers pivotal to society's political and social development. These students, who become experts in their fields, find employment in educational centers without much job-related concern and can significantly contribute to the political and social development of the community (Alhammedi, 2024). Studies on the factors contributing to social progress indicate that all these communities possess effective, capable, and creative education systems. The essence of education is reflected in the training of committed, specialized, thoughtful, and skilled human resources. Each institution plays a specific role and duty in society.

The government, religion, and family fulfill their respective roles. In this regard, the university is a unique institution with the primary mission of developing the intellectual, cultural, and social dimensions of human beings.



The role of universities as educational and training institutions has been a focus of scholars since ancient times (Mosalagae & Bekker, 2021; Yar & Shaheedzooy, 2024). The body of human knowledge, which each generation adds and passes on to the next, has evolved over centuries. Civilization preserves truth and knowledge by institutionalizing them, thereby transmitting the achievements of each generation to the next. Specifically, the university must safeguard the accumulated knowledge, culture, skills, art, and discipline of the past. Universities allow individuals to gain self-awareness and better evaluate social, cultural, economic, and ideological processes.

In a progressive social system, universities contribute to personal growth and the flourishing of human potential. Indeed, universities are recognized as some of the most valuable resources available to society for national progress and development (Hancock, 2024; Yar & Shaheedzooy, 2023). In contemporary societies, the higher education system is crucial and influential in economic, social, and cultural transformation. Its fundamental duty is to provide comprehensive education and training, foster the development of all individuals' talents, train specialized human resources, and transmit cultural, scientific, and technical values. Consequently, society today expects universities, as the highest educational and training institutions, to play a fundamental role in development, culture promotion, and community empowerment (Henkhaus et al., 2018). As we aim to explore the functions of universities as the highest educational and training institutions for empowering individuals and society, a fundamental step is to elucidate the meaning of empowerment. Clarifying this concept is essential for discussing the university's role.

#### **Research Goals.**

1. To examine the role of universities in empowering individuals and society in Afghanistan.
2. To identify the critical functions of universities in the socio-economic development of Afghanistan.
3. To propose strategies for enhancing the effectiveness of universities in contributing to Afghanistan's growth.

#### **Research Questions.**

1. How do universities in Afghanistan contribute to the empowerment of individuals and society?
2. What are the primary functions of universities that impact Afghanistan's social and individual development?
3. What strategies can be implemented to improve the role of universities in Afghanistan's socioeconomic development?

**Importance of the Research.** This research is vital because it addresses the critical role of higher education in a country facing numerous challenges. By understanding how universities empower individuals and society, policymakers and educators can develop targeted strategies to enhance the effectiveness of such institutions. This can significantly improve Afghanistan's social, economic, and political landscape.

#### **Originality and Significance.**

- Originality: This manuscript contributes significantly to understanding the role of universities in Afghanistan, which is a relatively underexplored area.
- Significance: This research is highly significant given Afghanistan's socio-political climate and educational development needs.

**Literature Review.** Universities' role in modern society extends far beyond traditional education and research. Universities are increasingly recognized for their significant contributions to regional development, economic growth, social cohesion, and innovation. This literature review explores universities' multifaceted roles in empowering individuals and society by drawing on various studies and analyses.

Universities have a profound influence on individual empowerment through education. They provide opportunities for personal development, critical thinking, and acquiring skills necessary for professional and personal success. Education at the university level equips individuals with the knowledge and competencies required to navigate and contribute to an increasingly complex world (Sedlacek, 2013). Additionally, universities foster sustainable development by integrating concepts of social responsibility and sustainability into their curricula, thus preparing students to address global challenges (Rieckmann, 2012).

Universities play a crucial role in economic development by acting as hubs for innovation and research. They contribute to economic growth through knowledge creation, technology transfer, and the development of skilled workforces (Mapuranga, 2016).

Entrepreneurial universities, in particular, drive economic progress by fostering a culture of innovation and entrepreneurship, generating new business ventures and employment opportunities (Ferreira et al., 2018).

Universities contribute to social and cultural development by acting as centers for social interaction, cultural exchange, and public engagement. They serve as cultural reference points within communities and are pivotal in promoting social cohesion and public discourse (Paleari et al., 2015). Moreover, universities engage with socially excluded communities to provide access to education and opportunities, thereby fostering inclusivity and social equity (Benneworth, 2013).

Research conducted in universities leads to scientific breakthroughs and technological advancements that have far-reaching impacts on society. Universities are instrumental in addressing global health, environmental sustainability, and technological innovation challenges. Their research outputs contribute to the overall knowledge economy and support the development of new products, services, and industries (Göransson et al., 2009).

Universities play a multifaceted role in empowering individuals and societies. They are vital institutions for education, economic development, social and cultural engagement, and innovation. By fostering personal development, driving economic progress, promoting social cohesion, and advancing knowledge, universities can significantly contribute to society's betterment.

## METHODS

This research employs an analytical approach to examine the role of universities in empowering individuals and society, with a specific focus on Afghanistan. The methodology involves thoroughly exploring the literature, expert opinions, and previous studies to understand university functions in the context of empowerment. This analysis is designed to clarify the concept of empowerment and its relationship with the roles and contributions of universities in social and individual development. This research also considers universities' historical and cultural significance in preserving and transmitting knowledge and their role in fostering creativity, innovation, and critical thinking.

**Empowerment.** The term "empowerment" has various meanings in Western culture. Ability, growth, progress, development, improvement, preparation, mastery, and dominance have gained significant attention since the Enlightenment and have been closely linked to modern industrialization. According to many thinkers and scholars of this era, empowering individuals and communities involves equipping them with education and knowledge and strengthening their intellect (Nicholas et al., 2019). This enables them to improve their lives through intelligent participation in social interactions and adaptation to changing societies. Empowered individuals with essential tools and technological advancements can ponder the world around them, leading to discoveries and inventions (Yar & Hajinejad, 2023).

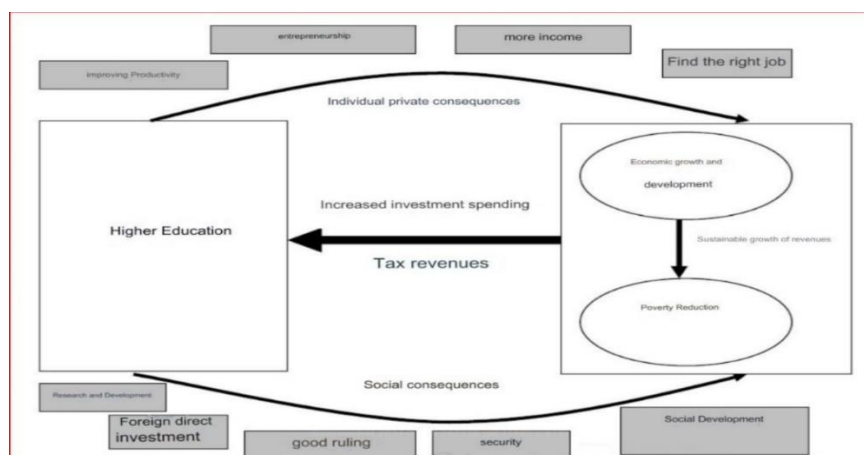
Froebel posits that development is equivalent to empowering individuals through education, which broadens their lives and encourages them to eagerly engage in all social activities, striving to excel in progress and evolution. Covanta views science as the most precise tool for human problem-solving. As a rational method, science produces organized and precise knowledge and purposefully enhances human capabilities. From Covanta's perspective, empowerment means addressing social issues such as poverty, unemployment, racism, sexism, displacement, drug addiction, and violence (Almino et al., 2022). Dewey argued that education is not merely about transmitting cultural heritage but about reinventing our ways of life. In today's dynamic world, fostering creative thinking to rebuild society is an essential role of education, making it crucial for empowering individuals as responsible citizens. Education should benefit society and spare no effort (Dai et al., 2019). Utilitarian philosophers like Jeremy Bentham and James Mill consider improving human conditions and enjoying life's benefits as individual



and community empowerment outcomes. From an economist's perspective, empowerment involves a continuous increase in the gross national product, relying on greater utilization of labor, capital, physical equipment, and superior machinery. Economic growth in society largely depends on changes in individual behavior because humans are the most critical factor in the production process. They possess the power to manage resources, allocate resources, and implement decisions through their labor (Gorin, 2021). Thus, individual and social empowerment is vital for achieving economic growth. Education removes cultural barriers and limitations, thus improving decision-making conditions and opportunities by expanding the concept of "possibility" for individuals. Education and knowledge increase people's desire, interest, and motivation to take action, revealing their weaknesses and prompting them to enhance their activities, thereby accelerating economic growth (Cipta et al., 2024). Philosophers of education and psychologists often discuss "growth" instead of "empowerment," referring to changes that accompany progress and follow specific plans and goals (Herawati et al., 2022). This plan and goal provide the context for human growth. Studying human development shows that individuals can gradually learn about the external environment through education, respond to events, form concepts in their minds, understand the relationships and outcomes of these concepts, use their experiences to tackle problems, participate in social life, acquire necessary social skills, and determine their position in society (Shoker et al., 2021). Psychologists typically identify four fundamental aspects of human growth:

1. Intellectual development includes perception, judgment, thinking, and forecasting.
2. Social development defines an individual's relationship with others.
3. Emotional development involves the emergence and control of emotions.
4. Physical development encompasses qualitative and quantitative bodily changes.

Considering the various interpretations of empowerment, we concluded that individual and community empowerment results from economic, social, political, scientific, and cultural transformations. It encompasses identity, solidarity, equality, participation, rationality, security, welfare, justice, and freedom (Kundu et al., 2019).



**Figure 1.** Influences of higher education on economic growth

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Educational and training institutions play specific roles in society, each performing designated tasks. These functions are generally either explicit or implicit. Explicit functions are clear and recognizable, forming the primary purpose for the existence of these institutions. However, implicit functions are unintended and may not be immediately identifiable. They can either support the institution's primary goals or be unrelated, potentially leading to harmful or contrary outcomes (Gury et al., 2024).

The primary and explicit function of universities in modern society is to provide individuals with knowledge, scientific and philosophical thinking, information, and skills. Through their curricula, universities help individuals achieve personal and social responsibilities, thus contributing to individual growth and social development (Soyylmaz et al., 2017). The critical functions of universities in empowering individuals and society are the following:

1. **Providing General Education and Specialized Skills:** Universities offering education in natural sciences, social sciences, humanities, history, geography, philosophy, mathematics, and arts. This education enables students to use scientific and analytical methods to solve various problems. Development of Personal Qualities Universities aims to develop qualities such as realism, truth-seeking, moral and religious insight, personal discipline, appreciation of natural beauty, awakened conscience, responsibility, logical engagement with new ideas, critical thinking, self-confidence, individual initiative, perseverance, communication skills, and support for human values (Jasemi et al., 2019). Professional Training Universities not only provide general education but also develop specialized skills for specific careers, significantly transforming the capabilities of the general population. They train educated and experienced managers and employers to lead a country's economic development and produce specialized human resources to meet society's needs (Gorgiladze et al., 2020).

2. **Transfer of Culture and Preservation of Cultural Identity:** Cultural Transmission: Universities play a dual role. They enhance individual capabilities and help individuals realize and develop their potential. Simultaneously, they serve the social system by transmitting values and norms. Traditional and cultural values are significant in all societies, and cultural and social heritage preservation is crucial. Universities help renew and continue cultural life by passing on cultural heritage to individuals, especially the younger generation (Edberg & Krieger, 2020). Universities' primary role is to train and develop high-level specialists. Others argue that universities should broadly provide fundamental and theoretical education, with specialized training offered through short-term courses or in-service training based on job needs.

The university is a premier educational and training institution responsible for refining and selecting aspects of cultural heritage that merit preservation. According to Dewey, this involves simplifying complex cultural heritage elements through educational planning that aligns with the learners' growth and readiness levels. As a refining agent, the universities select elements that promote individual and societal growth while discarding those that do not (Jingyu et al., 2020).

As a higher institution, the university transmits cultural heritage and seeks to reconstruct it to meet contemporary needs. Without the university's role in evaluating cultural heritage, what we inherit from the past would be subject to study without adapting to present-day rational and essential needs (Jiménez Martín et al., 2022).

3. **Evaluation and Development of Culture:** University curricula should serve to evaluate, revise, and develop societal culture. Societies focusing solely on preserving and transmitting cultural heritage may experience stagnation as social conditions evolve. Thus, past knowledge and skills require continuous assessment and improvement to remain relevant to current social needs (Yar, 2024).
4. **Individual and Social Growth:** Cultural development hinges on individual growth, achievable through comprehensive educational planning. Universities should design curricula that address learners' developmental gaps and foster personal growth and social integration by transmitting social values and norms.
5. **Innovation and Change:** Universities play a crucial role in fostering innovation, which is essential in advanced societies. Educational institutions must introduce new ideas and techniques to promote social transformation without provoking traditionalist resistance. Effective education leadership can catalyze this process by facilitating the adaptation of new values within the framework of existing ones (Fabbro et al., 2024).
6. **Empowering individuals and societies:** Universities must continually evaluate and enhance their roles to address complex societal issues effectively. By contributing solutions to challenges such as nuclear technology, healthcare, agricultural innovation, and space equipment, universities demonstrate their capacity for significant

social impact. Continuous assessment and refinement of their functions can help universities address various social problems more efficiently (Zhang & Lin, 2023).

### **Critical Considerations for Improving University Curricula.**

1. **Curriculum Improvement:** Enhancing the quality of curriculum content has become a central focus in educational policies in many countries that receive significant annual funding. Continuous assessment and refinement of curriculum sections ensure they meet their goals, suit the target learners, and effectively incorporate the necessary knowledge structures. This ongoing evaluation, called formative assessment by Michael Screven, aims to provide feedback for the continuous improvement of curriculum and teaching (Sell & Phitayakorn, 2020).
2. **Ensuring Quality Education:** Quality, cost, and productivity are key factors in university management, with quality often being the most essential factor. Improvements in quality can reduce costs and increase productivity. Recent attention has been paid to the quality of university curricula, especially following significant quantitative expansions in higher education to meet the country's socio-economic needs. However, this rapid expansion often leads to a decline in quality, which requires adequate human and financial resources for rectification (Mbizvo et al., 2019).
3. **Aligning Curricula with External Learning:** Selecting relevant curriculum content is crucial for effective educational planning. The content should be meaningful, foster learners' skills and attitudes, and cater to cognitive and affective domains. With the rapid evolution of information, content must be updated regularly to ensure accuracy and relevance. A learner-centered approach suggests meaningful content arises from learners' interests and experiences, facilitating continuous learning and future education. It is also essential that the curriculum content coordinates with external learning, providing a foundation for ongoing education and integrating the university into a broader society (Clark, 2023).
4. **Curriculum Approach Change:** The approach to curriculum reflects how two perspectives—university and society—interact. By examining a curriculum planner's approach, we can understand their perspectives on learners, subjects, educational goals, methods, and the roles of universities and society in education. Ornstein and Hankins (1993) categorized curriculum approaches into two major groups:
  - 1) **Scientific and Technological Approaches:** These approaches align with traditional educational theories and established learning and teaching models. They emphasized formal and conventional methods of instruction, viewing the curriculum as a structured plan for organizing the learning environment, resources, and educational tools. This perspective adheres to the logic of science and assumes fixed rules and procedures in curriculum planning, leading to a linear, step-by-step decision-making process. The curriculum is pre-determined and organized to guide learners through predefined goals and learning stages. Advocates of this approach emphasize essential subjects and content, requiring learners to study the curriculum as presented (Ibrahim et al., 2022).
  - 2) **Non-Scientific and Non-Technological Approaches:** Reflecting unconventional philosophical views and new policies, these approaches critique scientific and formal educational methods. They focus on learner-centered perspectives and emphasize individual interests, thinking, and personality. This approach advocates for creativity and educational processes and stresses that teaching and learning should center on individuals. Content is essential because it enables learners to conceptualize and find personal meaning. Subjects should provide opportunities for critical thinking and discussion to help learners develop their understanding.

Despite advocating a non-scientific and non-technological view of education, Eisner acknowledges the shortcomings of education dominated by technological approaches. He argued for a balance between the two perspectives, rejecting absolute certainty in education.
- 3) **Emphasis on Educational Goals and Teaching Methods:** Selecting and articulating educational goals is crucial in curriculum planning, significantly impacting educational programs' quality and outcomes.



Practical educational activities are directly correlated with the quality of defining these goals. Despite the use of advanced methods and resources, programs may only succeed if the goals are well-defined (Neubauer et al., 2022).

Involving teachers, learners, and parents in curriculum design and goal-setting is increasingly recognized in advanced societies. Experts consider this involvement a fundamental right. Olivia suggests that teachers, as primary participants in curriculum planning, play critical roles in planning, implementing, and evaluating curricula. They create plans, collect data, lead research, engage with stakeholders, and assess programs. Feedback from learners is also crucial and influences both the content and methods (Li et al., 2020).

- 4) Content and Teaching Methods: Effective teaching methods are closely linked to curriculum content, enhancing its impact and ensuring successful learning outcomes. A disconnect between content, method, and curriculum renders all three ineffective. Teaching at the university level requires mastery of content and specific skills and insights, yet traditional and experiential methods still dominate. This reliance on textbooks often leads to second-hand, mechanically organized experiences. Students succeed by memorizing rather than understanding content, and textbook assignments and rote learning drive many courses. This approach diminishes creativity and leads to disengagement for teachers and students (Bogaerds-Hazenberg et al., 2022).

**The Role of Universities in Empowering Individuals and Society in Afghanistan.** Universities play a crucial role in developing and empowering individuals and society in Afghanistan. This role can be summarized in several critical areas as follows:

1. Education and Knowledge Enhancement: As primary higher education centers, universities significantly contribute to increasing students' knowledge and specialized skills. These skills help individuals excel in various fields, such as science, engineering, medicine, social sciences, and humanities, leading to personal and professional advancement.
2. Research and Development: By providing suitable platforms for scientific research and research projects, universities can contribute to the scientific and technological development of Afghanistan. This research can help solve local and national problems by offering innovative solutions to existing challenges (Arita, 2020).
3. Economic Empowerment: Through educational programs and entrepreneurship initiatives, universities can play a vital role in the economic empowerment of youth and the community. Creating job opportunities and supporting startups and local innovations can help reduce unemployment and increase incomes (Stypińska et al., 2019).
4. Strengthening Civil Society: Universities can promote the values of democracy, human rights, and social justice, playing a significant role in strengthening civil society in Afghanistan. Educating younger generations about democratic principles and civic rights can contribute to political and social stability and sustainability (Kali, 2022).
5. Cultural Development: Universities can be crucial in preserving and promoting Afghanistan's rich culture and history. Through cultural programs, seminars, and historical research, they can help maintain national identity and foster a sense of patriotism.
6. Networking and International Collaboration: Universities can create new opportunities for students and faculty members by establishing international relationships and collaborations. These Collaborations can include student exchanges, joint research projects, and access to additional educational resources and facilities (Brisbois & Pereira, 2019). In conclusion, as critical institutions for empowering individuals and society, universities can act as driving forces for Afghanistan's development and progress, paving the way for a brighter and more sustainable future.

The role of universities in empowering individuals and society is a multifaceted and complex endeavor, particularly in the Afghan context. Universities are not merely institutions of higher learning but are pivotal in

driving economic, social, cultural, and political transformation (Eksandy, 2023). The following discussion delves into the various dimensions of this role, drawing from the research findings and the broader literature.

First, universities are instrumental in providing a comprehensive education encompassing general knowledge and specialized skills. They offer a broad curriculum that includes natural sciences, social sciences, humanities, and the arts, which equips students with the necessary tools to analyze and solve problems. Moreover, universities foster the development of personal qualities such as moral insight, responsibility, and critical thinking, which are essential for personal growth and social contribution (Mi et al., 2022).

Another significant function of universities is transferring culture and preserving cultural identity. They act as custodians of cultural heritage by simplifying and refining complex elements of culture through educational planning that aligns with learners' growth and readiness (Sergey et al., 2023). This process ensures the continuity of cultural life and the transmission of values to future generations, which is particularly important in a country like Afghanistan with a rich Islamic heritage.

Innovation and change are also central to universities' mission. They are expected to introduce new ideas and techniques that promote social transformation while balancing the needs of modernity with traditional values. Effective educational leadership is crucial in this regard, facilitating the adaptation of new values within the framework of existing values (Mattingly II et al., 2019).

The discussion also highlights the importance of aligning curriculum content with external learning and updating it regularly to maintain accuracy and relevance. A learner-centered approach is advocated where content arises from learners' interests and experiences, fostering continuous learning and future education.

Furthermore, the research underscores the need for involving stakeholders in curriculum design and goal-setting. Teachers, learners, and parents should have a say in the educational process because their involvement is a fundamental right and can significantly influence content and methods (Durl et al., 2022).

In conclusion, the discussion section emphasizes the critical role of universities in Afghanistan's development and progress. They are expected to systematically transmit the country's rich Islamic heritage while promoting innovation and critical thinking. By fulfilling their grand role in empowering individuals and society, universities can pave the way for a brighter and more sustainable future for Afghanistan.

## CONCLUSION

As the highest educational and training institutions, universities play a crucial role in expanding the frontiers of knowledge, conducting research, providing public services, and empowering individuals and society in various scientific, cultural, social, and political dimensions. They should critically study and systematically, sequentially, and densely transmit Afghanistan's rich Islamic heritage to students, creating a constructive link between traditional and modern cultures.

Universities are expected to define the significant issues humanity faces and identify the dynamic forces of the present time. They should educate students in a way that allows them to preserve their identity while reassessing traditions, beliefs, and values that hinder innovation.

The functions of universities are directly related to civilization, involving the application of science and mechanics in various sectors of the human economy. They can significantly influence lifestyle methods and techniques by promoting powerful cultural forces like technology, which is essentially an art. Ultimately, by fostering creativity, innovation, and a spirit of research, reasoning, critical thinking, and initiative among students, universities can fulfill their grand role in empowering individuals and society.

**Suggestions.** This research suggests several strategies to enhance the effectiveness of universities in Afghanistan's socio-economic development. First, university curricula need continuous assessment and improvement to meet intended goals and suit the target learners. Second, the involvement of teachers, learners, and parents in curriculum design and goal-setting is recommended to ensure a learner-centered approach and



respect the rights of stakeholders. Additionally, this research calls for aligning curriculum content with external learning and updating it regularly to maintain accuracy and relevance. Finally, fostering international relationships and collaborations encourages new opportunities for students and faculty, expanding the university's role in empowering individuals and society.

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