Challenges and opportunities for peace (or conflict) in higher education:
Insights from Afghanistan and Somaliland

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KOTESOL Presents
The 29th Korea TESOL
International Conference
April 30-May 1, 2022

SEOUL NATIONAL UNIVERSITY
VERI LUX TAS MEA

NRF National Research Foundation of Korea

Outline

Introduction

- Higher education has received growing importance in efforts to achieve the 2030 SDGs

- In conflict-affected contexts, higher education is often perceived a luxury, not a necessity

- Yet, Milton (2017) and McCowan (2020) indicate the positive role of higher education to contribute to critical thinking, democracy, professionalization, and post-conflict recovery

- This study focuses on higher education and peacebuilding in Afghanistan and Somaliland

RQs

- The driving research questions are:
  - What are the challenges and opportunities that faculty face teaching in conflict-affected contexts?
  - How do university educators pay careful attention to local contexts in unique and particular ways?
  - How does this affect their choice of pedagogy?
  - Are the pedagogies across Afghanistan and Somaliland the same, or relatively similar?
  - What are the implications for curriculum, teaching, and research more broadly?

Research design

- Methodology: Comparative case study

- Context: Two universities in Afghanistan (Case University A) and Somaliland (Case University B)

- Data collection methods: semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and digital artifacts

- Participants: 12 faculty members at the universities

The "third face" of higher education

- Expand Bush and Salterelli (2000) to higher education, and introduce a 'third face'

- Metro (2020) explains education's "third face" is:
  - … neither the bad sort that perpetuates war nor the good sort that delivers social transformation, but the sort that may be more common in conflict and post-conflict situations: well-intentioned if theoretically muddled; passably executed; somewhat problematic; and having mixed effects on society. (p. 294)

- From peace studies literature, this "third face" suggests that it may be more common for education to promote "negative peace" rather than "positive peace" (Galtung, 1969; Novelli and Smith, 2011)

Findings

- Four emergent themes:
  - 1) strict pedagogical standards
  - 2) the university as a sanctuary
  - 3) "liberal White saviors" navigating tradition and modernity
  - 4) teaching in English in conflict-affected contexts

University as sanctuary

- Despite the debate on strict standards, several faculty indicated they believe the students perceive Case University A as a '*sanctuary*'.

- P2 and P4 observed that many female students at the university remove their traditional clothing such as scarves and hijabs and change into "*Westernized*" clothing such as jeans and shirts.

- Yet, P6 cautioned that such liberal perspectives should be approached carefully.

  - *…institutionally, we've got to tread such a fine line… I mean, we've got a huge mosque built on the ground. If at any point, I think if we were perceived to be sewing the doubt or to be encouraging people to be less Muslim or even, you know, even discussing things like atheism or things like that, I think we would be out of business real quick.* (P6)

"Liberal White saviors" navigating tradition and modernity

- P1 suggested that many international faculty at the university — whom she termed "*liberal White saviors*" — spread a distorted vision of quality education as being that knowledge which is from the West.

  - *I'm struggling every day with the majority of our international faculty feeling that they're coming to Afghanistan to really spread their vision of quality knowledge number one, but at the same time behave with national faculty as if they were superior… I mean, they would never say that, but I can see that in the interactions of the faculty. And then with students, something that's a recurring fight in departmental, in faculty-wide meetings is the expectations with regards to language and quality. And so they feel that they should not hold the same standards in terms of English language proficiency, the same standards that they would be applying in the UK or in the US….* (P1)

Discussion & Conclusion

- As the data indicate, tensions with pedagogy, liberal White saviorism, tradition and modernity, and English medium instruction complicate efforts toward peacebuilding

- These findings hold implications for curriculum, teaching, and research.
  - Curriculum: integrate indigenous knowledge into the learning
  - Teaching: promote reflexivity
  - Theory: move theory/practice beyond the good/bad binary

- In conclusion, further engage the in-between: maximize the positive of higher education peacebuilding, minimize the negative, and embrace the more common middle ground.

Contact

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Thank you!