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TRANSCULTURAL STUDIES

INSTITUTE OF
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Public Lectures

Structure, Body, And Mind:

How Taleban are controlling – and co-opting – higher education in Afghanistan



The entrance to Herat University, western Afghanistan, early 2021.
Photo by Said Reza Kazemi.

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17:00 ct. – 19:00 ct.

South Asia Institute,
Lecture Hall (room 010.01.05),
1st Floor

Based on qualitative interviews with 38 university students, lecturers and administrators in 23 out of Afghanistan's 34 provinces as well as a review of Taleban-run Ministry of Higher Education documents and of research literature, I argue that the Taleban have been establishing a mechanism of controlling higher education since their takeover almost 11 months ago. Three elements characterise this control mechanism. First, the Taleban have controlled the structure by putting their members or supporters in charge of the higher education ministry and public higher education institutions that oversee private higher education institutions, too. The appointees mostly have a religious education background or an experience of fighting the previous government (late 2001-15 August 2021) or both. Second, the Taleban have been controlling the body of anyone involved in higher education by segregating gender and enforcing strict dress and behaviour rules, especially for women. Third, the Taleban are creating an environment conducive to controlling the mind of students and lecturers by centring learning and teaching on their interpretation of Islam and tradition in Afghanistan and thereby confining knowledge. Thus, the Taleban have not dismantled higher education, but are reconfiguring and co-opting it to strengthen their 'divinely ordained' rule. This is the latest instance in the almost-one-century-long history of organised higher education in Afghanistan where various rulers have appropriated higher education as part of their political or ideological agendas, often within a context of external occupation or intervention. The agendas encompass developing a top-down and king-led response to colonialism, coping with 'cultural cold war,' producing ideological indoctrination for or against Soviet occupation and the civil war, aligning with or opposing US-led statebuilding project and Talebanising higher education. The debate cannot be more fundamental: what is higher education?