

Afghan university gets help from SDSU

By Sherry Saavedra

STAFF WRITER

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COLLEGE AREA – One of the toughest decisions Mohibullah Israr ever made was leaving behind a wife and six children in Afghanistan to get an education in America.

But in the end, the choice was clear.

“It's a golden opportunity to be here,” said Israr, 32. “We will learn here and then go back home and educate the people – the young generation. Then we will have a way to peace and stability.”

Israr is among seven faculty members from Nangarhar University in Jalalabad, Afghanistan, attending a three-week Summer Institute at San Diego State University on how to teach English. Two faculty members, including Israr, have been in America for about a year earning master's degrees at other universities.

The World Bank is giving SDSU \$4 million to aid Nangarhar University, which involves implementing an English language program and redesigning the outdated engineering program to accelerate rebuilding efforts and create a better-educated work force.

“The engineering curriculum hasn't been updated or changed in over 20 years, but the world has changed,” said Steve Spencer, SDSU's project director for the Nangarhar partnership. “And as Afghanistan works with other nations to restore their country, English language is a critical skill. Those that can speak it have more opportunities – more jobs, more earning potential.”

In addition, SDSU will help establish programs at Nangarhar University's International Learning Center, such as student and faculty exchanges, seminars and visiting lecturers from other institutions – programs that will help connect Nangarhar University with the rest of the world.

The impetus for this partnership came when two members of La Jolla Golden Triangle Rotary Club traveled to Jalalabad to assess the region's needs in 2002. The club has since built a coed school through private donations, established a sister-city relationship between San Diego and Jalalabad, and set up a computer lab and built the International Learning Center at Nangarhar, among other things. A club member encouraged SDSU to apply for World Bank funding to assist Nangarhar University.



JOHN R. McCUTCHEN / Union-Tribune

Karl Richter (right), an instructor at SDSU's Summer Institute, helped Gul Rasool (second from right), a faculty member at Nangarhar University in Jalalabad, Afghanistan, set up iTunes in a class called "Learning through Technology" on Monday.

Rafi Sayad, who is participating in the Summer Institute and who taught English at Nangarhar on the weekends for about a year, said the school essentially languished during the years of Soviet occupation, civil war and Taliban control.

“It was just a disaster,” said Sayad, 37. “No professional teachers, no books, no libraries. There were students, but not that many. The university was just like a desert.”

Sayad, who also worked for the United Nations as a media monitor, interpreter, political assistant and human rights officer, has had his share of personal difficulties. He was arrested twice by the Taliban for having a beard that was too short. Sayad said his beard merely looks short because it is curly.

Sayad is earning a master of education degree in language, literacy and culture at the University of San Diego through scholarships from the school and the Rotary Foundation.

The Summer Institute began July 28 , but Sayad and Israr have attended classes longer. Each day, seven students take courses on how to teach English through SDSU's Language Acquisition Resource Center, one of 15 U.S. Department of Education-funded centers in the nation. Eight engineering faculty members from Nangarhar University, who are delayed over visa difficulties, are expected to arrive at SDSU in the coming weeks.

The faculty members plan to attend another Summer Institute next year.

Spencer said partnerships such as this one are the key to achieving peace, stability and security in Afghanistan.

“This is one of the essential ways to fight the war in Afghanistan,” Spencer said of the partnership. “The bottom line is we can't win the war by military efforts alone.”

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