

Respected officials, Vice-Chancellor, honoured guests. It's a great privilege on behalf of the Afghanistan Institute of Strategic Studies the Sussex Asia Centre to welcome you to the University of Sussex.

Each year, the Afghanistan Institute of Strategic Studies organises its flagship event - the Herat Security Dialogue in Afghanistan - in the beautiful and historic Silk Road city of Herat. I've had the great honour of being able to attend two Herat Security Dialogue meetings. Held in Herat's 15th century Timurid citadel - itself built on the site of a fort dating to the era of Alexander the Great - the Herat Security Dialogue brings together representatives from across Afghanistan's diverse spectrum of opinion. The AISS sees to it that guests are treated in a manner that befits the grandeur of the conference location. Unfortunately, the brutalist 1960s buildings of the University of Sussex and the infamous British sandwich lunch are in no position to compete with the history and hospitality available in Herat.

We do however hope that today's jointly conceived, organised and executed conference provides a supportive environment to critically and creatively discuss the pressing issues confronting Afghanistan's development, as well as areas of mutual interest between Afghanistan and the UK.

It is our hope that the Sussex Afghanistan Forum will gather momentum and consolidate into a major, annual platform.

UK- and international researchers stand to benefit by building lasting relationships with colleagues in Afghanistan. The collaborations we envisage emerging out of today's event will be yet further enriched by the attendance of leading policy-makers from Afghanistan, many of whom continue to keep at least one foot in research and academia. We are especially grateful that they have taken the time to join us in Sussex today.

Collaborations is the key term here, and one we should take especial note of.

For too long Afghanistan was the object of international scholarly endeavour, yet one from which Afghans were too often either excluded or insufficiently integrated within.

This situation has had serious implications for Afghanistan. The foundations of modern frameworks for understanding Afghanistan are often to be found in colonial history. Too often, such frameworks have been deployed unthinkingly by the participants of recent international interventions in Afghanistan. Unsurprisingly, the results have often been disastrous.

In post-2001 Afghanistan study circles it has become a cliché to celebrate the increase in scholarship on Afghanistan by Afghans. An increase visible in PhD thesis produced about Afghanistan by Afghan students in particular.

The barriers to collaborative research on Afghanistan, however, cannot be resolved merely by having more Afghans writing PhDs about Afghanistan in Western universities, regardless of how important this is.

After all, Afghan intellectuals have been active and critically engaged in the study of their country for decades. Their contributions have been both impressive and diverse. Rarely, however, have such scholars been treated in Western institutions with the seriousness and respect they were due.

A range of factors can be identified to explain this.

One is to do with language: When Afghanistan's languages were taught in the West, such programmes were often animated by military rather than scholarly concerns.

Another issue is to do with style. Scholars in the West have been reluctant to embrace genres different from their own, even when this has been to the detriment of their own understandings.

A further issue arises from the impact of geopolitics on intellectual work. Afghan intellectuals and researchers have moved in and through global intellectual circuits. Yet they have often done so in the context of geographies inflected by geopolitical tensions that their colleagues in the West have been unwilling or unable to broach.

And finally, we mustn't discount the scant nature of support from Western governments for collaborations between Afghan and Western researchers. Further, when such support has been at hand it has often been with specific political projects in mind. This scenario has skewed outcomes, poisoned intellectual relationships, and disincentivised individual researchers from developing collaborative research agendas. The presence today of leading Afghan natural scientists signals the possibility of breaking down age-old barriers.

In the course of organising this conference, both the AISS and SAS have confronted comparable barriers, often in places where we least expected them. There are many people we wished to be here but have been unable to join us, largely as a result of difficulties in securing access to UK visas.

Nevertheless, we do hope however that today's event will play a role in creating institutional linkages between research centres in Afghanistan and those in the UK; facilitate better integration of policy-related and scholarly research on Afghanistan; provide a space for new relationships and conversations about Afghanistan to take place; and - above all - that it will lead the way for more inclusive research on a troubled yet beautiful and deeply fascinating country.

We thank you for taking the time to join us today. And we wish you a memorable and fruitful conference!