Higher education peacebuilding in conflict-affected societies: beyond the good/bad binary

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Abstract

Purpose – This comparative case study looks towards the diverse approaches of higher education to support peacebuilding, from policy and philosophy to pedagogical practices, in conflict-affected and post-conflict settings. The achievement of global development goals is dependent on addressing access to quality education in conflict-affected contexts, including higher education. However, in settings affected by conflict, higher education is often perceived to be a luxury, not a necessity. This study, then, explores whether and how higher education might support peace and development through the unique perspective of the "three faces" of higher education in conflict contexts.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper is designed as a qualitative comparative case study. The research examines the work of university educators in two institutions in Afghanistan and Somaliland, highlighting the challenges and opportunities they face working in conflict-affected societies and their pedagogical responses to conflict. Data for the research were collected through in-depth interviews, documents, and digital artifacts with 12 university educators across the two institutions. The faculty teach a wide variety of subjects in the social sciences and humanities, subjects including and in addition to those specific to peace and development studies. To strengthen the interpretation of data, multiple coders were involved and intercoder reliability was conducted.

Findings – Findings indicate a number of challenges and opportunities that university lecturers and their institutions face in teaching for peace in conflict-affected contexts, particularly as it relates to the "three faces" of higher education to support, impede, or reveal the complicated nuances of peacebuilding in conflict settings. Member-checking was employed with participants to enhance the reliability of the analysis.

Originality/value – In the end, the paper contributes new empirical insights into higher education in conflict-affected contexts, particularly from the standpoint of faculty. Critical perspectives and implications for curriculum, pedagogy and research are offered.

Keywords Higher education, Conflict-affected societies, Peacebuilding, Pedagogy

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Given the growing importance of higher education within the international community in its efforts to achieve the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), this study examines the challenges and opportunities for higher education to contribute to peacebuilding in conflict-affected and post-conflict settings [1]. For more than a decade, the international community has explicitly stated that the achievement of global development goals is dependent on addressing access to quality education in conflict-affected contexts (Rose, 2011; UNESCO, 2011; World Bank, 2011). In 2015, the SDGs extended this to higher education (UN, 2015). However, in settings affected by conflict, higher education is often perceived to be a luxury, not a necessity.

Yet recent research has indicated the positive role of higher education to contribute to post-conflict recovery (Milton, 2017) and to the promotion of democracy, preservation of culture, and professionalization of the social sector (McCowan and Unterhalter, 2015).

Indeed, existing literature suggests that almost 60 million children of primary school age are out of school with more than half of these children in conflict-affected areas (UNESCO, 2013; UNICEF, 2017). Extended to secondary school, the data indicate more than 250 million children are out of school (UNESCO, 2020). Furthermore, as the pipeline to tertiary education is dependent on completion of earlier years, this prevents further access to higher education. Yet, higher education is critical toward transforming life opportunities and the development of local communities (Dryden-Peterson, 2010; Johnson, 2013). Hence, conflict remains one of the greatest obstacles to achieving the 2030 SDGs; it is imperative then to understand the barriers hindering young people's access at all levels of education, and to examine educator's perspectives, capacities and the pedagogical tools that might support efforts to promote peace and quality education in conflict-affected societies. But, hitherto there is a lack of empirical research investigating educator's perspectives, pedagogical practices and the challenges they encounter teaching in conflict contexts.

Hence, this empirical study seeks to address this gap in knowledge by examining higher education peacebuilding in two conflict-affected societies, Afghanistan and Somaliland. The driving research questions include: 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? What are some implications for curriculum, teaching, and research? Data for the research were collected through in-depth interviews, documents, and digital artifacts with 12 university educators in Afghanistan and Somaliland. In the pages that follow, we will first review the literature on education in conflict-affected settings, with a focus on higher education specifically. This will be followed by a presentation of our conceptual framework of the "three faces" of education (Bush and Saltarelli, 2000; Metro, 2020). Then, we outline our methodology and findings before turning to the discussion. All in all, the paper offers new empirical insights into the challenges associated with curriculum, pedagogy, and research in higher education in general (and related to peacebuilding specifically) in conflict-affected and post-conflict contexts (McCowan and Unterhalter, 2015; Milton, 2017; Sahar and Kaunert, 2021). Four emergent themes and three implications will be discussed.

Before turning to the literature, however, we should first position ourselves in this research, as our findings, too, demonstrate the need for scholars to critically practice reflexivity (see also Kester, 2021). This is especially important when working as insider/outsider researchers in conflict-affected contexts. Turning the lens back onto ourselves: the first author is a White Global North scholar working in East Asia who also has experience working in developing and conflict-affected contexts, including the contexts of this study. It is his experience collaborating with colleagues in Afghanistan and Somaliland that led to this research. As an insider-outsider researcher in the contexts of the study, he is keenly aware of racial, gender, and institutional privileges that facilitate his capacity to work in these settings. The second author is a black African scholar with experience working in higher education in post-apartheid South Africa. The third author is a Korean female researcher with experience working for an international organization that promotes peace education and global citizenship education (GCE) internationally. Through this organization, she has engaged with implementing GCE and peace education across the Asia–Pacific region. The fourth author is a Korean female scholar who grew up in South Korea during an era of heightened tensions with the North; this contributed to her growing interest in utilizing education to promote peace. These positions influence our thinking at the intersections of higher education, peace and conflict. We will continue to reflect on these in the following pages. We now turn to the literature.

Higher education, conflict and peacebuilding

In recent years, there has been a resurgence of interest in the study of direct war and its impact on education (Burde, 2014; Bush and Saltarelli, 2000; Cardozo and Novelli, 2018; Novelli and Smith, 2011). Most of the literature is focused on primary and secondary schooling or basic education; yet, in the past several years a set of literature has begun to emerge that explores the role of higher education in conflict-affected contexts and its contributions to peace or war (Kester, 2020; Kester *et al.*, 2021; Millican *et al.*, 2021; Milton and Barakat, 2016; Pherali and Lewis, 2017; Sahar and Kaunert, 2021). These papers identify different ways in which higher education can positively or negatively influence sustainable peacebuilding. We highlight three of these prominent themes here, as found in the literature: (1) the spread of messages of peace or conflict through education, (2) intergroup contact and peacebuilding, and (3) the educational reproduction of horizontal inequalities (Dryden-Peterson, 2010; Johnson, 2013; Kaunert and Sahar, 2021; Milton and Barakat, 2016).

Pertaining to the spread of messages of peace or conflict through education, higher education can play a pivotal role in cultivating social norms that underscore cultures of peace, coexistence, and nonviolence (Pherali, 2022). Here, group attitudes and beliefs can be fostered through education to support peacebuilding and positive social change (Johnson, 2013; Lebeau, 2008; Sahar and Kaunert, 2021). Millican *et al.* (2021), for example, argue that a cross-institutional approach "in which researchers, practitioners and students from all disciplines work together to address the triggers behind conflict, may be the most viable approach to managing and minimizing conflict in the longer term" (p. 572); and Omeje (2015) claims, "One of the most effective ways universities in war-affected countries can be functionally relevant to the everyday needs and challenges of their immediate environment is by promoting peacebuilding" (p. 33). Millican *et al.* (2021) further explain, "Within current higher education curricula [in the contexts from which they write: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Colombia, Rwanda, and the UK], spaces for discussing inequality, difference, conflict and cohesion can be found in courses on civic education, citizenship, ethics and democracy, as well as in specific courses on peacebuilding" (p. 572). They conclude that it is the "responsibility of higher education" in general (not specific peacebuilding courses) to nurture the skills and values of citizens to recognize and respond constructively to conflict.

Nonetheless, higher education does not only contribute to peace. It also has the potential of reproducing violence that can spread widely throughout society. For instance, higher education may inject a political, racial or religious ideology that may be exclusive and intolerant (Antia and Dyers, 2019; Ighodaro and Wiggan, 2011; Inoue, 2019). Moreover, such violence is not always direct; it may be more subtle and embedded deeply within curricula and pedagogy. Kester (2020), for example, has shown the potential role of higher education to reproduce cultural and structural forms of violence – even while promoting peacebuilding. As he explains, higher education may follow dominant state-centric and rational models of peacebuilding that exclude localized forms of knowledge and ways of life. This has the effect of closing off alternative ways of knowing and being, and dismisses non-state actors, thus reproducing dominant knowledge and power relations and excluding intrastate and ethnic conflicts, as well as interpersonal and intrapersonal relations, from the conflict analysis (Kester, 2020; see also Cremin *et al.*, 2018).

In regard to intergroup contact, the literature indicates that this approach to education and peacebuilding can also work for or against peace (Milton and Barakat, 2016). This idea is rooted in the contact hypothesis, where scholars argue that conflict can be mitigated by allowing students to be exposed to others who are from different backgrounds. The theory holds that such exposure – under the right conditions – can break down negative stereotypes based on, for example, differences in ethnicity, race, religion, gender, socioeconomic status, etc. (Allport *et al.*, 1979; Niens, 2009; Sagy, 2002; Tomovska, 2010). Yet, Kanas *et al.* (2017) find that intergroup contact may also amplify negative attitudes towards out-group members if

the quality and length of the contact is poor, i.e. the conditions are not adequate for proper interaction. Kanas *et al.* (2017) provide the example of an interreligious contact program. They state that making interreligious friends is a key factor in a successful contact program centered on religion; yet, to support these positive relationships a longer duration of contact is necessary, and sensitive facilitation is key. They argue that short-term programs tend not to achieve the desired results and instead reinforce negative stereotypes (see Ross, 2014; Salomon and Nevo, 2001).

Finally, in reference to horizontal inequalities, these disparities may also be reproduced or mitigated through higher education (King, 2015; Stewart, 2002). For example, entering higher education is often a competitive process, particularly in the Global South and conflict-affected societies, due to limited seats, its perceived role in providing social mobility, opening opportunities for employment, and uplifting one's social status (Dryden-Peterson, 2010; Milton and Barakat, 2016). Thus, the stakes are high and within a conflict context if one identity group (e.g. based on race/ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, or some other distinction) is perceived to have disproportionate access to higher education, this may impede peacebuilding by perpetuating (real or perceived) group inequalities (Melander, 2005; Milton and Barakat, 2016). Yet, the literature indicates as well the possibility to the contrary: that when higher education does play a role in social mobility in a conflict-affected country it can mitigate issues surrounding discrimination and economic injustice (Sahar and Kaunert, 2021). Thus, there are competing theses on the role of higher education in conflict zones to contribute to the reproduction, interruption, or transformation of social, political and economic inequalities.

In sum, the literature shows that higher education has the potential to support or hinder peacebuilding through the spreading of messages of peace or war, positive/negative intergroup contact, and exacerbating or alleviating horizontal inequalities. In short, higher education has negative and positive (or good/bad) faces (Bush and Saltarelli, 2000; Milton, 2017). However, we also find through our examination of the data in this study that higher education in conflict-affected contexts is often more complex than this dualistic perspective suggests. Thus, to make sense of the intersections between higher education, conflict, and peace beyond the duality of good/bad, we employ the concept of a "third face" of education.

The "third face" of higher education

The "third face" of higher education builds on Bush and Saltarelli's (2000) foundational concept of the "two faces" of education, which has significantly influenced research into education in conflict-affected and post-conflict contexts. Bush and Saltarelli (2000) write, "education is often used as a panacea for a broad spectrum of social ills, from racism to misogyny." Yet, "if it is true that education can have a socially constructive impact on intergroup relations, then it is equally evident that it can have a socially destructive impact" (p. 9). This perspective of education as having "positive" and "negative" faces has been widely employed throughout the literature (Burde, 2014; Higgins and Novelli, 2020; Mundy and Dryden-Peterson, 2011; Paulson, 2008).

Most of this writing, however, is focused on education generally, so we expand it to higher education specifically. Yet, we expect from our review of the literature, and the first author's personal experiences teaching in the Global South and conflict-affected contexts, that teaching for peace and coexistence in/through higher education is often much more complex and contingent than a duality of positive or negative allows. Thus, we turn to a "third face" of education – which Metro (2020) describes as "moving beyond the good/bad binary" – to make sense of the data. 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); that is, education may not necessarily be promoting sustainable peace but it is de-emphasizing war. This is neither good nor bad; it is not the negative face of education that Bush and Saltarelli (2000) discuss, nor is it the positive face of emancipation. It is in-between: "a decent starting place to work towards reconciliation and peace without embracing cynicism or giving up demands for something better" (Metro, 2020, p. 296). Shah and Lopes Cardozo (2015), too, discuss the ambiguity of education's role in peacebuilding. They write:

> Education as a whole is rarely the panacea for conflict transformation that it is envisaged to be, and paradoxically, particular dimensions of the system or its location within the post-conflict political economy in which it finds itself may render it to do more harm than good. (p. 190)

Thus, in our examination of the data, we find — like Metro, Shah and Cardozo indicate — that the linkages between higher education and peacebuilding are not straightforward, neither entirely positive nor wholly negative but somewhere in-between: contingent and ever evolving. The concept of the "third face" of education, then, offers us a novel lens through which to investigate higher education in conflict-affected settings beyond the good/bad binary. We will next describe the methods of our study before turning to analyze the data through this "third face" of education.

Methods
Research design
To explore higher education and peacebuilding further, the first author conducted a qualitative comparative case study to examine the challenges and opportunities that faculty face working in conflict-affected societies and their pedagogical responses to conflict (Yin, 2003). He has published other related papers from this project elsewhere (see Kester, 2021, 2022; Kester and Chang, 2022). The data collection methods involved semi-structured interviews, digital artifacts, and document analysis. For the interview portion of the study, the first author interviewed 12 faculty in Afghanistan and Somaliland in 2021 [2]. The interviews were conducted online through Zoom (due to difficulties in accessing the contexts during the Covid-19 pandemic) for approximately 60–75 min each, audio-recorded, and were facilitated in English. The interviews were semi-structured to allow discussions to go into depth on specific topics as needed (see Appendix for details of questions asked during interviews).

In addition to interviews, the first author also collected documents provided by the participants (e.g. student surveys, syllabi, and planning memos) and artifacts published on the university websites (e.g. reports, brochures, and faculty websites). Specifically, the analysis in this paper draws on a review of the university websites, two student surveys provided by faculty in Afghanistan, several syllabi across the contexts, and two planning documents provided by lead faculty in Somaliland – in addition to the interview data. References to these documents are noted where relevant throughout the findings. All documents were used in the analysis to provide a richer picture of higher education at the institutions. Observations were planned but had to be canceled due to Covid-19 disruptions.

Participants
Participants at each university were purposively chosen through key informants first and subsequently by snowball sampling. Participants qualified for the study if they were faculty

working in their respective university for more than one year prior to the study to support thorough reflection on higher education teaching and learning in conflict-affected settings. The faculty teach a range of subjects across the social sciences and humanities. Such an approach was chosen to garner interdisciplinary perspectives on higher education teaching and learning in conflict contexts. The participants' ages were between 25 and 70. For further details, see Table 1.

Data analysis
Audio-recordings were transcribed after the interviews and reviewed multiple times using inductive analysis and the constant comparative method to reveal themes (Merriam, 2009). These themes were also compared with data from the documents and digital artifacts to identify broader categories and concepts related to higher education and conflict. Throughout the study, we additionally reviewed literature to confirm or challenge the themes from the interviews and documents. We had multiple coders, meaning that all the authors were involved in the data analysis, to establish intercoder reliability and to systematically code (O'Connor and Joffe, 2020). Moreover, reports of the findings were presented back to participants prior to publication so that participants could offer further commentary on the findings. In this process, several participants confirmed their agreement with the findings; no participants contested the results. This lengthy process brought to light four common themes on the challenges and opportunities of teaching for peace in conflict-affected and post-conflict contexts. We will introduce these themes shortly.

Ethics
Finally, we followed the ethical guidelines of UKRI and UNICEF (2021) pertaining to conducting research in conflict-affected contexts [3] and received ethics approval from our home university prior to the study [4]. Before interviews, informed consent was given by participants and issues of privacy, confidentiality, anonymity, and beneficence/"doing no harm" (The Belmont Report, United States, 1978) were followed throughout the research process. We will now turn to introduce the research contexts.

Contexts
In this section, we describe the university contexts in Afghanistan and Somaliland where the study was conducted. The universities were purposively selected because they explicitly teach for peace and development within conflict-affected societies (although individual participants may not identify in this way). The first author had previously engaged in different capacities with each institution prior to this research.

Afghanistan
Afghanistan is a culturally rich and dynamic context, yet its social, political, and geographical richness creates diversity that has made it difficult for various governments to govern the country (Burde, 2014). Indeed, Barfield (2010) indicates that historically rulers in Afghanistan created governing bodies "with dual organizations". On the one hand, "Administration was placed in the hands of "men of the pen" – literate Persian speakers familiar with government, while military commands were assigned to "men of the sword", i.e. tribal Pashtuns" (Barfield, 2010, p. 88). Here, Barfield (2010) suggests that this strategy "produced a synthesis that was the political foundation" of Afghanistan today (p. 88).

This political foundation has led to competing groups taking up arms and engaging in acts of insurrection to gain control over regions and cities. In the most recent case of insurrection, the Taliban ousted the Western-backed democratic government of President

Interviewee	Gender	Age	Ethnicity/Region	Level of Education	Discipline	Domestic or International	Roles within the University	Specifically teaches peace studies or identifies as a peace educator
Participant 1 (Afghanistan)	Female	40–49	White European	PhD	Political Science and International Relations (IR)	International	Teaching, Research, and Administration	Y
Participant 2 (Afghanistan)	Female	30–39	White North American	MA	English Language and Literature	International	Teaching and Administration	N
Participant 3 (Afghanistan)	Female	60–69	White North American	MA	Business Studies	International	Teaching, Research, and Administration	N
Participant 4 (Afghanistan)	Female	60–69	White European	PhD candidate	Geography and General Education	International	Teaching, Research and Administration	N
Participant 5 (Afghanistan)	Female	50–59	Black North American	MA	Counseling and General Education	International	Teaching and Administration	N
Participant 6 (Afghanistan)	Male	50–59	White European	PhD candidate	English Language and Literature	International	Teaching and Administration	N
Participant 7 (Somaliland)	Male	30–39	Black African	PhD	Political Science and IR	Domestic	Teaching, Research, and Administration	Y
Participant 8 (Somaliland)	Female	20–29	Black African	MA	Economics	Domestic	Teaching and Research	N
Participant 9 (Somaliland)	Male	40–49	Black African	PhD	Business Studies	Domestic	Teaching, Research, and Administration	N
Participant 10 (Somaliland)	Female	30–39	White North American	PhD	Anthropology	International	Teaching	Y
Participant 11 (Somaliland)	Male	20–29	Black African	PhD candidate	Education	Domestic	Teaching, Research, and Administration	N
Participant 12 (Somaliland)	Male	40–49	White European	PhD candidate	Political Science and IR	International	Teaching	Y

Source(s): Adapted from Kester (2021)

Table 1.
Research participants

Ashraf Ghani in August 2021 as US forces withdrew after two decades in Afghanistan. The Taliban then immediately re-established Islamic Sharia law with devastating consequences for those who previously supported the Western-backed government. The present situation is evolving and precarious as we write.

In the context of this shifting conflict, Case University A strives to offer higher education for peace and development. The institution was established in the mid-2000s to provide world-class higher education to Afghans to prepare future leaders to meet the needs of the country and region. At present, there are approximately 1,700 students at the university with nearly one-third being women. To be expected, Case University A has been significantly affected by the recent change of government, as the university was previously a site of several deadly terrorist attacks conducted by the Taliban. Yet, the university continues to offer its courses (primarily remotely or in exile); the future of the university remains uncertain. Understandably, the values and practices of the institution are contested – both internally among faculty and students and in Afghan society more broadly. This contested nature of the institution and its role in Afghanistan emerges also in the data.

Somaliland
The ongoing Somali Civil War has divided the territory between the internationally recognized government of Somalia in the South, the semi-autonomous district of Puntland to the Northeast, and the internationally unrecognized state of Somaliland in the Northwest. Somaliland is a clan-based society that has been proudly governed by democratically elected governments since the fall of Siad Barre in 1991 (Walls, 2017).

The de facto state has had a history of peaceful transitions of power, but it continues to contend with intrastate and interstate conflict as a result of the ongoing civil war (Pherali and Lewis, 2017). Similar to the "men of the sword" and "men of the pen" in Afghanistan, in the 1990s there was a demilitarization campaign in Somaliland with the slogan, "put down the gun and pick up a pen." From this point forward, education for peace and development was placed at the forefront of the national agenda.

Within this context, Case University B was founded in the late 1990s. There are nearly 7,000 students at the university. The first author interviewed several faculty who are also administrators of the university for this study. The administrators who participated indicated that the university today has a curriculum based on three pillars to support national peace and development: teaching and acquisition of appropriate peacebuilding knowledge, skills, and attitudes (P9 and P11). In this regard, the university has established a national institute for peace and conflict studies to train public officials in the theory and practice of peacebuilding and conflict resolution. To date, the institute counts among its graduates previous presidents of the country and various ministers and judges. Hence, both Case University A and Case University B are directly involved in intentional efforts toward peacebuilding and development through higher education. Having now outlined the contexts, we turn next to the findings.

Findings and analysis
In this section, we present the four salient themes that emerged from our data in response to the driving research questions. They include: (1) debates over strict or compromised pedagogical standards; (2) the notion of the university as a (value-free or value-laden) sanctuary; (3) contentions with "liberal White saviors" navigating tradition and modernity; and (4) challenges and opportunities with English medium instruction in conflict-affected contexts. We explore these themes by drawing upon the data from the 12 participants and reading these through the conceptual framework of the "three faces" of education. Quotes taken from interviews are italicized to foreground the voice of participants.

Between strict and compromised pedagogical standards
Faculty indicated that in Case University A there is tension surrounding how participants approach their teaching in conflict zones. Should faculty hold high or compromised standards? Here, P1 explained that while she believes in adapting to the conflict situation, she also believes in maintaining high expectations for quality work (e.g. accepting no excuses) when it comes to university academic performance. She stated that, from her perspective, students often use the conflict context as an excuse for not completing assignments. For example, she stated (perhaps hyperbolically) that a student used his job as a soldier as a pretext for not finishing homework:

> Oh, I had a student who was like, "Oh sorry, I work in special forces and I had to go out and kill some Taliban this weekend". I had to tell him, "Look, you choose between taking our classes and killing Taliban, but you can't do both". (P1)

Though possibly exaggerating to make her point, P1 details that her hardline approach stems from past experiences with students using the existing conflict as an excuse for not completing work. She further justified her approach by referencing the university handbook: "*We've got a really strict faculty-student handbook that says, 'If your hand got blown off that doesn't mean that you can't finish your essay.*'" (Note: We checked the university's student handbook; this is a clear exaggeration of the policy. However, as P1 noted, students at the university are indeed – according to university policies – held to the highest standards of conduct concerning issues such as morality, honesty, respect, integrity, and plagiarism.)

Yet, other faculty approached their teaching in a conflict-affected society differently. P2 and P4 both explained that they use their discretion when engaging with students, often choosing to exercise empathy. These faculty explained that they approach standards in tandem with the challenges that students face. They said they attempt to take into consideration the broader context when choosing to exercise discipline or constraint. Hence, many of the faculty debate whether they should adapt their expectations to expect less (or more) of their students because they are situated in fragile and conflict-affected settings.

The university as a (value-free or value-laden) sanctuary
Nonetheless, despite the debate on strict standards above, several faculty indicated they believe the students perceive Case University A as a sanctuary. P4 described it as a safe space for the students, especially for women. She suggested that in contrast to the *"outside"* society in Afghanistan, in which women's opportunities may be restrained, *"inside"* the university female students are provided a *"free space"*. P2 called the university 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. They said the female students reported they feel *"free"* and *"comfortable"* and are *"never judged"* on campus by removing their veils. Moreover, they suggested that whereas it was *"frowned upon that a girl is being educated"* outside the university, inside the school the girls could *"study in peace"*. It is notable here that *"free"* and *"comfortable"* are framed together with *"Westernized"* and *"peace"* in contrast to life outside the university. For these educators these values are to be embraced and taught. Yet, such values are also not straightforward; they are contested amongst the faculty. For example, P6 cautioned that such liberal perspectives should be approached carefully. He argued:

> . . . 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)

He went on to describe his reserved approach to pedagogy in which he avoids discussion of the Taliban, Islam, or other potentially contentious topics. He stated, "*I mean, we do have some very, very conservative students . . . Maybe we could have very open and honest and calm debate, but I somehow don't think so.*" His approach to teaching in conflict zones, then, is to circumvent topics that could be perceived as political or controversial. In other words, there are several controversial issues that he would rather not address openly in order to maintain "negative peace". This approach contrasts with P2 and P4 who identify the institution as a liberal sanctuary for the students, and who raise discussion about values and differing perspectives in their classroom. This brings us next to the topic of "*liberal White saviors*" that emerged in the data.

"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, which includes values such as individual rights, liberal democracy, international law and global organizations. She explained this is grounded in a superiority complex related to unexamined colonial legacies that position the West as superior (cf. Alatas, 2003; Santos, 2014). P1 stated:

> 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)

Related to this liberal White savior notion, several participants discussed the dilemma of balancing between what they perceived to be global/modern spaces within the universities and local/traditional spaces outside. For instance, P4 and P5 highlighted the challenges of negotiating between the constructs of what they called "*local*"/"*traditional*" versus "*global*"/ "*modern*". P5, for example, expressed a desire to promote women's individual rights — which she associated with her home society — but felt this is hampered by local customs.

Yet, at the same time, P5 indicated that she did not want to reinforce the "*American culture of indoctrination*" by telling students to disregard their local cultures and customs. Rather, she highlighted the importance of engaging sensitively with the local context in which students are situated, carefully navigating between the tradition/modernity binary and between local and global norms. P7, too, spoke of the dilemma of navigating between the local and global in Somaliland when he stated:

> If we want to sustain this peace and stability, we have to at least incorporate the Somaliland indigenous knowledge with universal knowledge . . . if we combine those two very important components, I think that the country will survive. And also the citizens will survive, because they know their indigenous knowledge and . . . what is taking place in the world at a global level. (P7)

P8 also argued that "*Somaliland* [should] *have a curriculum for Somaliland,*" indicating the important role of ensuring a locally relevant and indigenous curriculum. One particular issue that P8 raised – like P1 above – concerns the use of English as the language of instruction in the universities. This brings us next to the challenges of teaching and learning through English in conflict-affected contexts.

Challenges and opportunities with English medium instruction

Provocatively, P1 critically exclaimed that English medium instruction is connected with imperialism. She stated, "*English* [is] *the language of hegemony and imperialism*"; and P12 also

expressed skepticism toward the widespread use of English in Somaliland suggesting that it is linked to colonialism:

> If it wasn't for the ability of English and how English has spread throughout the world through colonialism, it wouldn't exist. [. . .] There's a lot that I reflect on about the neo-colonial idea of these kind of things, whether we want to call it neo-colonial, or whether we want to call it about North, or whether we want to call it Western or Cartesian based alignment, whatever . . . all of those things we know and we talk about . . . generally come from . . . the North, the modernist traditions, Western traditions. (P12)

He continued:

> . . . I feel like there's a lot of issues with the fact that we do a lot of these classes in English. Who gets to be in those classes because we do select in English? Who gets to teach these classes because it's in English? What kind of theories and terms get propagated and reproduced because it is through English? All of those things, I struggle with . . .. (P12)

Elsewhere in the literature, Phillipson (2012) too argues that the dominance of English in L2 contexts reproduces global inequities, what he calls "linguistic imperialism"; and Mignolo and Tlostanova (2006) explain that this tension creates a situation in which particular ideologies and worldviews are reproduced through English while others are disregarded (see also Nelson and Appleby, 2015). To be sure, all faculty suggested to some degree that their students desired to study in English; and several participants offered a positive perspective on English medium instruction in conflict zones. They suggested that English is a key component for student success and a "*gateway*" to other opportunities. For example, according to P2, students are eager to polish their English abilities due to its "*prestigious elements*"; and P6 explained that English is "*the gateway to educational opportunities and jobs*".

P6 further reflected on the role of English in terms of academic research and publication requirements for faculty in conflict-affected settings. He explained that academic papers published in English are associated with faculty promotion, while those published in other languages (such as local languages) are devalued. For him, this illustrates yet another example of how English has come to dominate the academy in conflict zones reproducing inequalities of opportunity amongst the faculty. To be sure, this is not limited to conflict zones but is a global phenomenon that is further exacerbated in fragile and conflict-affected contexts due to limited resources in such regions (Anderson-Levitt, 2014; Curry and Lillis, 2022). This concern was also raised in Case University B's strategic planning documents for 2021–2025 (reviewed for this study).

These challenges indicate, then, the complicated role of English language instruction (and scholarly production) in conflict zones. All in all, the findings point to the complexities and opportunities for higher education peacebuilding in conflict-affected societies. We will now turn to discuss some implications drawing on the "three faces" of education.

Discussion

As the data indicate, tensions with pedagogical standards, liberal White saviorism, navigating tradition and modernity, and the hurdles of English medium instruction complicate efforts toward peacebuilding through higher education in conflict settings. Faculty responded to these uncertainties and challenges in diverse ways: some implemented and advocated for strict policies on learning while others promoted more empathy for students studying under difficult circumstances. This tension was especially raised in relation to the English medium instruction in both universities. It was argued, for example, that English medium instruction may reproduce socio-economic divides. Yet, it was also suggested in Afghanistan that the university offered a "*sanctuary*" where female students could escape, "*speak like native English speakers*" (a contested notion in the literature), and

"*study in peace*". Hence, we find that the education is as Metro (2020) described: "neither the bad sort that perpetuates war nor the good sort that delivers social transformation" but "well-intentioned if theoretically muddled; passably executed; somewhat problematic; and having mixed effects on society" (p. 294). These findings, then, hold implications for curriculum, teaching, and research.

With regard to curriculum, curricular implications include the need to incorporate local indigenous knowledge into the learning. As indicated above, participants from Somaliland argued for greater indigeneity in the content. P7 called for more indigenous knowledge in the curriculum, and P12 warned that the dominant use of the English language might perpetuate Western hegemony by failing to integrate local knowledges. Here, Zembylas (2018) suggests that curricula can be localized and "decolonized" by including "the histories and experiences of colonized people" into the learning (p. 16), and Metro (2020) calls for ensuring the inclusion of diverse teacher (and student) voices in the classroom. To be clear, however, a focus on indigeneity and decolonial thinking does not advocate for a total rejection of other global knowledges; rather, this position argues for multi-directional knowledge production that seeks to decenter the dominance of Western knowledges (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018).

Next, with regard to teaching in conflict-affected contexts, we suggest that practitioner reflexivity can help academics to engage sensitively with students' diverse backgrounds and practice a conflict-sensitive education that is grounded in the students' life experiences (Inter-Agency Network on Education in Emergencies, 2013; Kester, 2021). Here, it is crucial for educators to critically reflect on the often taken-for-granted assumptions that prevail across contexts. As Kester and Cremin (2017) indicate, challenging widespread assumptions in peacebuilding and higher education in different settings requires unveiling how "actors in the field find themselves complicit in furthering the very violence[s] that they seek to mitigate" (p. 1418). For example, several international faculty in Afghanistan critiqued the liberalism of the institution (and its faculty) as being out-of-place in its context. Specifically, they critiqued the "*liberal White saviorism*" in the university. Thus, as the participants show themselves, reflexivity can support faculty in potentially disrupting unjust practices. Yet, in practicing reflexivity scholars must be cautious not to overgeneralize from their own experience. Instead, educators should practice critical reflexivity as an inter-relational praxis drawing on critical thinking, affect/emotions, and their reflexive interactions with others (Zembylas, 2022).

Finally, as argued throughout the paper, a critical implication for research is the need to move theory and practice in conflict-affected contexts beyond the good/bad binary to engage with the "under theorized middle ground" (Metro, 2020, p. 294). This argument calls for examining what is going on between and beyond the "two faces" of education. Here, employing Metro's (2020) "third face" of education might help better capture the complexity of higher education in conflict-affected contexts. As Metro explains, the "third face" is the "sort that may be more common in conflict and post-conflict situations" (p. 294). In the end, the findings demonstrate that higher education for peace is often more muddled and complex than "a simple manifestation of positive and/or negative faces" allows (Paulson, 2008, p. 4).

Conclusion
In summary, this paper has examined diverse approaches to higher education and peacebuilding in two conflict-affected and post-conflict settings. Through interviews and document analysis with 12 faculty, the study has highlighted specific policies, philosophies and pedagogical practices that institutions and instructors employ when working in and around conflict. The empirical findings offer implications for educators working in other similar contexts, particularly around the importance of transcending the good/bad binary of higher education and peacebuilding. Drawing on the "third face" of education, we conclude, then, that university educators working for peace and development in conflict-affected

contexts should aim to further engage the in-between: maximize the positive of higher education peacebuilding, minimize the negative, and embrace the more common middle ground. It is here that higher education peacebuilding is perhaps most promising.

Notes

1. The boundaries between conflict-affected and post-conflict contexts are not straightforward and this messiness creates blurred boundaries that complicate peacebuilding efforts (Chopra and Dryden-Peterson, 2020). For the purposes of this paper, we choose to alternate between conflict-affected and post-conflict to signify the uncertain and unsettled nature of these contexts, particularly in the immediate aftermath of armed conflict.

2. All interviews in this study were conducted before the Taliban's usurping of state power in August 2021.

3. In line with these guidelines, we have published the findings open access to provide accessibility to the research results for all participants and relevant stakeholder communities in Afghanistan, Somaliland, and beyond. We additionally made provisions prior to publication for participants to validate or challenge the findings. Finally, we sought to ensure diverse perspectives from women and men in each context.

4. The study received ethical approval from Seoul National University IRB No. 2101/001-004.

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Appendix
Interview protocol
Interview conducted by the first author.

During this interview, you will be asked about your experiences teaching in universities within emergency and conflict-affected contexts. I am interested in knowing what curricular, pedagogic and institutional policy strategies have been adapted within these contexts to work with diverse student populations, and to promote a fair and equitable education for all. Please remember that the information you share during this interview will only be used for the purposes of this research. You may choose to not answer any questions you wish, or to withdraw at any time without consequence. Thank you again for agreeing to participate in this study.

Interview questions:

(1) How does conflict in [Afghanistan or Somaliland] impact upon the teaching and learning at the institution?

(2) How might the teaching in universities in conflict-affected contexts exacerbate or mitigate the conflict?

(3) How does the local context affect the choice of pedagogy?

(4) What pedagogic strategies (or good practices) from conflict-affected contexts might educators elsewhere borrow (e.g. such as in Korea) who work with students from conflict-affected areas?

(5) Under what conditions is such borrowing appropriate?

(6) Is there anything else you would like to share that has not already been addressed?

Once again, thank you for your participation and the insights shared today. I will share with you soon the transcript of this interview for your review. Additionally, prior to the completion of the study I will share the findings for any final comments you may wish to add. It is my hope that this collective process will help generate better awareness of the challenges educators face and new practical strategies for conflict-sensitive teaching for university educators working with students in and from conflict-affected contexts.

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