

Afghan woman amongst first to be awarded new Weidenfeld-Hoffmann Scholarship at Oxford University

Twenty-one year old Shaharзад Akbar is an extraordinary woman. Having grown up during a tumultuous period of Afghanistan's recent history, she has already achieved more than most. She reported for the BBC Dari service, worked on projects with the Afghan-Pak Joint Peace Jirga, Human Rights Watch and UNIFEM. Now as the first Afghan woman to be offered the prestigious Weidenfeld-Hoffmann scholarship at Oxford University, she is pursuing a Master's degree in Development Studies. 'Nine years ago, it was unimaginable for an Afghan, especially an Afghan woman of my economic background, to think about studying in an institution such as Oxford University' she reflects, 'I hope my education in Oxford and being part of this prestigious scheme will enable me to sustain and expand that hope and belief in a better future for more young Afghan women and men. It is that belief accompanied with realization of education and a better life that can ultimately put an end to war and destruction'.

The Weidenfeld Scholarships and Leadership Programme began in 2007 with 17 scholars and has rapidly expanded to the current cohort of 29. The Programme, led by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, provides outstanding young people from transition and emerging economies with the opportunity to pursue graduate studies at the University of Oxford combined with a comprehensive programme of leadership development. Through this, Scholars deepen their knowledge, skills and networks to contribute to public life in their countries of origin. They also build lasting professional linkages across cultures and continents.

The Weidenfeld Scholarships' unique feature is a Leadership Programme through which the Scholars, drawn from across disciplines, discuss, debate and enhance their leadership skills. Through the Leadership and Public Policy Seminar, the annual Study Tour and other extra-curricular courses, events and excursions, the Scholars are encouraged to reflect on the nature of a 'good society' and explore ways of building towards this goal within their own fields and contexts.

This year sees the launch of a new sub-scheme which has generously been funded by Swiss philanthropist, André Hoffmann through his grant-giving institution 'Fondation Hoffmann'. His motivation for supporting the Programme comes from a strong belief that 'it is through the education of our future decision makers as well as through the expansion of their international networks that we can contribute to the improvement of tomorrow's world'. Each year five Weidenfeld-Hoffmann scholars will be sponsored to pursue studies connected with Environmental and Sustainable Management and International Development. These particular areas of study were chosen by Hoffmann due to his increasing concern about the risk of conflict arising from competition for depleting natural resources.

The international and intellectually stimulating environment of Oxford is an ideal setting for this diverse group of exceptional young scholars. Roger Goodman, Head of Social Sciences at Oxford University, is a firm supporter of the Programme; ‘The challenges of the 21st century are going to require excellent Social Scientists who are willing and able to lead on tackling the critical issues of the day. The Weidenfeld Scholarships are addressing this very need and it is no surprise that they are already highly sought after for those who wish to study here at Oxford.’

A Press launch will be held at the Garrick Club on Monday 26th October at 12.30. André Hoffmann and several scholars, including Shaharзад Akbar, will be available for comment and photographs during and immediately following the event. To register your interest in attending or for general press enquiries, please contact Victoria Fraser on 0207 493 9333 or vfraser@strategicdialogue.org

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Notes for Editors:

The ‘Fondation Hoffmann’ is a Swiss grant-making institution created in 2000. Its mission is to support the emergence and expansion of concrete projects which address global problems in today’s societies. The Foundation’s main objectives are to foster sustainable development, to enhance international governance, and to advance knowledge and culture. The best way for the Foundation to meet these challenges is through education and by the empowerment of women’s roles in society.

The Institute for Strategic Dialogue is an independent think-tank working through policy, educational and cultural programmes to challenge long-range threats to international and communal peace and to enhance Europe’s capacity to act strategically in the global arena. Headquartered in London, ISD works with leaders in government, media, academia, and the private sector to achieve its goals. www.strategicdialogue.org

To date, Afghan students at postgraduate level have been underrepresented at Oxford University. In 2008-2009, Oxford University had just one Afghan Student enrolled. The Weidenfeld-Hoffmann Scheme is proud to be able to support in its first year two Afghan students, one of whom has deferred the start of his postgraduate course until October 2010 for family reasons.