

A Vision to the Future of Higher Education and Scientific Research in Kurdistan Region of Iraq

Quality is our top priority

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The role of higher education institutions (HEI) in the process of nation-building is indispensable. Raising standards in these institutions has long been a top priority for the people and Government of Kurdistan Region.

It is not a secret that the current system of higher education, which Kurdistan has inherited from Iraq, is dated and largely dysfunctional. Its pyramid-style management structure concentrates decision-making authority at its summit. There is little transparency, democracy and accountability in the system, and the role of staff and students in management is negligible. Internal audit, performance monitoring and quality assurance are virtually non-existing. In short, the existing system is a major barrier for progress, incapable of healthy evolution or modernization.

Whereas student numbers are increasing exponentially, standards within HEIs remain below those of the rest of Iraq or neighbouring countries. The key question is whether this stagnant system can be reformed, and the future of generations of students rescued. The answer is yes. Can this be easily achieved? Certainly not, for the challenges are enormous. However, where there is a will, there is a way.

Fortunately, there is now a unique and historic opportunity to bring this vision closer to reality. The process of reform begins with a vision, followed by a well-designed strategy and a clear road-map. With the right level of dedication, determination and concerted efforts, the dream is achievable. It will require close collaboration of all parties involved, including the Cabinet, Parliament, political leaders, professional organizations, media, universities, students and the people of the Region.

Priorities

The Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MoHESR) will embark on reviewing the entire system of HE, in a way that no legal or administrative barrier would be considered too sacred to change. On the contrary, they will all have to be removed to accommodate reform and serve the ultimate purpose, namely, improving quality and raising standards. Even the role of the Ministry and the Government in HE would have to be re-defined.

First: A new HE strategy

A key priority for the MoHESR would be to harmonize the Region's demand-and-supply of University graduates. Currently, there is a major gap between the two, in terms of quantity and quality. For example, the Region's economy is booming and demand for professionals in the tourism, oil and other industrial sectors are increasing exponentially, whereas our Universities are busy teaching conventional topics without keeping pace with the reality.

We shall study these issues in close collaboration with the Ministry of Planning and other ministries, and assess the Region's need of professionals in various disciplines. New colleges, training courses and institutions may need to open, while others reduced in size or even closed.

Second: the role of the Ministry

Prior to inauguration of the fifth cabinet, the Region's higher education institutions were managed via the Higher Education Council, chaired by the Prime Minister. Key members were the presidents of the state-funded HEIs. There was no central administrative body to support this structure.

Following Iraq's liberation, the fifth Cabinet (formed in 2006) established MoHESR to mirror that of the Federal Government in Baghdad. The Ministry was created in a record time, for which we congratulate the fifth Cabinet, its members and the Ministry staff. Today the Ministry has a vital role in running the Region's HE system. However, past experience has demonstrated that the Iraqi model of HE is bureaucratic and its ability to improve quality is inherently limited. Therefore, we shall review the Ministry's roles, structure and interaction with HEIs. In this regard, the Ministry's priorities will include:

- 1- Reforming the management structure of Universities, and introduce a modern democratic system where the staff's ownership of their institution and students rights of quality education are protected.
- 2- Reviewing the financial system of universities and institutes, based on formulas as per student numbers, subject areas, quality teaching and research output.
- 3- Introducing teaching and research quality assessment systems to monitor performance and link key performance indicators to promotion and pay.
- 4- Implementing audit mechanisms to ensure the rule of law, control of corruption, safe environment, gender equality and protecting the rights of minorities such as non-Kurds, disabled individuals etc.
- 5- Reforming the funding schemes for student scholarship and research grants, to ensure compatibility with the Region's future plans and aspirations.

Third: Independence of Universities

It is the ambition of the people, government and academic institutions of Kurdistan to improve standards in the HEIs, to have them counted among the best in Iraq, Middle East and the World, in the near, intermediate and long term future, respectively. However, the main barrier for realizing this dream is the fact that the Region's HEIs are not sufficiently independent.

Independence of HEIs is the main reason behind the success of Universities in the United States, United Kingdom and Australia, in stark contrast to their counterparts in other industrialized countries such as Italy and France.

To insure independence of HEIs, the Ministry must shed power and hand academic, administrative and financial control over to these institutions. Its own role should become largely restricted to strategic planning, funding, auditing and ensuring quality and equality. Mutual interactions between the Ministry and the HEIs should be regulated via a dynamic, modern and transparent mechanism.

Transfer of power, on the other hand, requires the Universities to become more democratic, transparent and accountable. They are not at the moment, therefore, are not in a position to accommodate self-governing powers. Transferring power from the Minister to Presidents of Universities at this moment is more like replacing a micro-managing dictator with several junior ones.

Therefore, one of the priorities is to radically reform the management structure of Universities, to render them answerable to staff and students, and help them gain independence. Power will then be transferred from the Ministry to the institutions in a programmed fashion.

The road map to independence will begin with the establishment of an elected body (senate) which will become central to all University functions. Via the senate, university owners (academic staff) and customers (students) will take part in decision-making process, auditing and monitoring quality.

Fourth: Redrafting the HE Law

The higher education law in Kurdistan Region was based on the old fashion law of Iraq's HE. No doubt, there are certain components that are amenable to modernization, but on the whole it is a barrier for progress. In collaboration with Parliamentary colleagues (Higher Education Committee), we intend to review the law to bring it in line with the new vision. A direct communication channel between the Ministry, the Parliament and the Cabinet will be created for this purpose and to remove legal barriers.

In conclusion

Reform of Higher Education and Scientific Research in Kurdistan is a big challenge that requires a clear vision and a well thought out road map. Here, the top level strategies mentioned are to provide a frame work for the Ministry's future activities, and to generate lively debates in the academic community. The issues are complex and the challenge is enormous, however, these are not overwhelmingly so. We shall brain-storm every milestone, and with the determination and hard work of the academic leaders, we shall move from a milestone to another.