



## **About**

Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies is an independent, nonprofit think tank based in Baghdad, Iraq. Its primary mission is to offer an authentic perspective on public and foreign policy issues related to Iraq and the region.

Al-Bayan Center pursues its vision by conducting independent analysis, as well as proposing workable solutions for complex issues that concern policymakers and academics.

**Copyright © 2018**

---

**[www.bayancenter.org](http://www.bayancenter.org)**

# Strategies toward a world-class higher education system: What can Iraq learn from other systems?

Ali Mohammed Baqer Al-Behadili \*

## Abstract:

Iraq's higher education system can play an important role in fostering long-term economic development, peace and stability if efficient reform and funding policy are implemented for the university system. However, the quality of the university education in Iraq is still below the accepted benchmark following the 1990 Gulf War. The article develops the strategies that can assist Iraq's university system to improve their standard of education. The article recommends that the government should offer autonomy for the universities and free them from government interventions. The government should increase the R&D funding and allocate the funds based on performance. The government should also boost security systems for the university staff and allow private universities to flourish. These strategies will enhance healthy competitions in Iraq's university system, thereby improving the country's quality of education.

---

\* PhD student - The Sahlgrenska Academy- Sweden

## **Introduction**

Iraq's higher education system can play an important role in fostering long-term economic development, peace and stability if efficient reform and funding policy are implemented for the university system. An effective university education could resolve Iraq's economic, social, and political problems, thereby promoting the country democratic principles and human rights. Despite the benefits associated with Iraq's university system, the UN sanctions on Iraq after the invasion of Kuwait impoverished and isolated the country's university system. The invasion of Iraq in 2003 also left the universities in a poor physical state, revealing that hundreds of millions of dollars were needed for the rehabilitation<sup>1</sup>.

Iraq's university system is underfunded as the textbooks are outdated, curriculum materials are in short supply in all fields, and administrative authorities are over-centralized. The teaching staff is also ill-trained, and students are poorly prepared. While the international community has initiated different efforts to rejuvenate Iraq's higher education through fund donations, launching cooperative initiatives, and provision of expertise; nevertheless, Iraq's universities still require a comprehensive reform program to reclaim their earlier dynamism and assisting them to play a leading role in the economic and national reconstruction.

---

1. Jawad, Saad N., and Sawsan I. Al-Assaf. "The Higher Education System in Iraq and Its Future." *International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies* 8, no. 1 (// 2014): 55-72.

## **Current Problems Facing Iraq's University Administration**

A decade after the United States invasion of Iraq, the universities in Iraq are still struggling to recover because of the devastating aftermath of the war, sanctions, and effects of years of dictatorships. During the brink of sectarian war between 2006 and 2007, hundreds of the university professors in Iraq were assassinated and thousands fled the country. Considering these problems, the Iraqi universities are seeking for the help of international partners to reform the university curricula, retain the staff and improve the educational systems. Although, the government is investing a large amount of money through public scholarship programs to improve the standard of education by sending thousands of students, especially graduate students, to study overseas to boost the country new teaching cadre; however, Iraq's universities remain highly politicized and centralized, which in need of systematic reforms. During the rule of Saddam Hussein, the Shiite majority was discriminated by Saddam Hussein. This discrimination and political ideology were transferred into the university system protocols where the staff appointments were based on the political connections and religious affiliation, rather than academic qualifications. For example, when the Baath Party was in power, a person had to belong to the ruling party to be appointed a president or dean of a university. After the Baath Party was disbanded, each political party exerted different political threats to exert control. For many years, fears persisted in the university communities. Many professionals were threatened by extremists

during the sectarian violence wave between 2005-2007. Many female lecturers received anonymous threats as well for not wearing the headscarf<sup>2</sup>. As a result, brain drain and emigration of professionals was significant during the last few years. Unfortunately, many of these professionals were difficult to replace, or were replaced by less qualified people, thereby preventing the universities to carry out their mission<sup>3</sup>. Ursula (2012) argues that the Iraqi university system is getting worse daily. Although successive Iraqi governments after 2003 have increased the salary of university lecturers by 200%, reaching approximately \$3000 per month; nevertheless, the university systems are still underfunded as the funding is not enough to carry out research and to teach through seminar and workshops. In addition, there is no clear research funding policy, resources are badly allocated. The Iraqi employment system at universities is still old and centralized, and as a result large portions of higher education budget are spent on salaries of unproductive staff of researchers.

Mohamed, (2012) notes that Iraq's higher education rarely participates in international scholarship exchange programs, collaborative graduate program, and joint conferences and workshops<sup>4</sup>. Regarding the problems facing Iraq's universities, this article explores the reforms for research system and funding policy

---

2. Lindsey, Ursula. "Iraqi Universities Reach a Crossroads." The chronicle of higher education 2012.

3. Harb, Imad. «Higher Education and the Future of Iraq.» United States Institute of Peace: United States Institute of Peace 2008.

4. Mohamed, Basil K. «Internationalization Modules of the Higher Education System in Iraq.» Journal of International Education Research 8, no. 3 (2012).

for the universities across the globe to provide the effective recommendations for reform and funding policy for Iraq's university.

### **Reforming research system and guiding policy globally**

Several countries have formulated policies and implemented reforms to improve the standard of tertiary education in their respective countries to enhance the economic growths. Mahoney (2003) reveals that New Zealand has implemented reforms to improve the country's tertiary education<sup>5</sup>. The reform included an overhaul funding system; for example, the 2002/2003 government budget, voted for the tertiary education, was \$3.3 billion, which was 5% of government spending and 1% of GDP. The New Zealand government expenditures on tertiary education increased to \$4.18 billion in the 2015 fiscal year. These expenditures are for student support, student loans, and student allowances<sup>6</sup>. Comparatively, the biggest challenges facing Iraq's universities is the government limited budget for research and development and building the research capacity of the country's institutes. A report by UNESCO on 2014 reveals that the government expenditures for the university education in Iraq have been reduced, which have jeopardized the standard of education<sup>7</sup>. However, New Zealand is at the forefront of improving their standard of education; this is done by following international

---

5. New Zealand Parliament. «Tertiary Education Funding – Overview of Recent Reform.» Parliamentary Library (2003).

6. Ministry of Education. «Government Funding of Tertiary Education.» In 2016-2017. Education Counts: Education Counts, 2017.

7. UNICEF. «The Cost and Benefits of Education in Iraq: An Analysis of the Education Sector and Strategies to Maximize the Benefits of Education.» 2014.

education benchmarks to measure the success of the university system. To achieve this objective, the New Zealand government introduced the Performance-Based Research Fund (PBRF) in 2004 to fund research and development in the universities and other tertiary institutions. The goal of PBRF is to improve the quality of university education in New Zealand.

Hearn et al. (2016) note that the university education systems are in the period of transition globally. Many emerging economies, such as Brazil, China, India, and Mexico have started to develop world-class universities. They aim to achieve this objective by increasing funding for publications in the top-tier journals, scientific research, and hiring of PhD holders graduated from the top-tier universities. Many universities in the emerging economies are encouraged to offer openness-to-sharing programs by implementing student loan programs<sup>8</sup>.

At the same time, the Japanese government has increased the funding for higher education institutions to encourage research activities in the universities to improve the quality of education. Hearn et al. (2016) believe that the major global strategy employed in enhancing the quality of education is accountability and privatization with equal accessibility of education for students through scholarships and student loans. The concept of accountability involves using the regulated autonomy to monitor the day-to-day administration of the university

---

8 Hearn, James C.; Warshaw, Jarrett B.; Ciarimboli, Erin B. «Privatization and Accountability Trends and Policies in U.S. Public Higher Education.» *Education & Science / Egitim ve Bilim* 41, no. 184 (2016): 1-26.



systems. This accountability includes monitoring of the university revenues, enrollments, costs, and annual or monthly reporting requirements. The overall objective of this policy is to improve the performances of the university education. However, many countries are moving toward market dynamics for the university by encouraging private organizations to establish private universities. This strategy will enhance healthy competition among private and public universities, thereby improving the quality of education.

The United States is a good example of a country that adopts the accountability and privatizations policies for the university system. Although, the federal government influences the university system through laws, regulations, and funding mechanisms. The different states use different governance structures for public tertiary institutions. The government also grants the market-based autonomy for the public universities. Thus, the U.S relies on the effective market-based system and government funding to steer the university education. Since the 1970s, the US governments have offered financial aids to students to assist universities to compete for students; the federal and state governments have formulated policies to favor private and nongovernmental sources of funding.

Moreover, the federal government in the U.S encourages the research and development (R&D) through government funding by allocating \$29 billion yearly to colleges and universities. The bulk of these funds goes to National Science Foundation to finance the R&D for graduate students across the U.S

universities. This funding constitutes the critical resources for scientists across the country to come out with new ideas for economic growth and development, thereby improving the university's quality. However, selected elite universities to have more access to federal government funding sources than other universities (Hearn et al., 2016). Since the last few decades, increasing number of universities are emulating the elite universities to secure more funding from the federal and state governments.

On the other hand, Tierney, (2014) believes that integrating the technological systems is a way forward for the advancement of the universities globally<sup>9</sup>. The technological advancement has assisted the top universities globally to offer high-quality educational resources, such as peer-reviewed journals, books, big data, academic videos, and presentations, accessible to students. For example, an increasing number of universities in the United States, Canada, and Europe are using the technologies to revolutionize the educational systems. Faculties now use big data, accessible through an online database, to analyze and solve problems, which was hitherto impossible some decades ago.

As noted by Tierney, (2014), the university educational systems are constantly changing. Today, it is possible to access books online, teach online and perform research online. Countries that are aspiring to improve their quality of education must integrate the modern technologies in the educational system and adopt a

---

9. Tierney, W. G. «Higher Education Research, Policy, and the Challenges of Reform.» *Studies in Higher Education* 39, no. 8 (2014).

blended teaching program, where some lectures can be given by world class lecturers through video conferencing. Hanushek, & Woessmann (2010) use the cost-benefit analysis to support that investment in higher education is the major strategy for the economic growth of the OECD countries. Increase in educational funding improves the cognitive skills of students<sup>10</sup>. As noted by Hanushek, & Woessmann (2010), there is a statistically significant positive correlation between an increase in investment in tertiary education, cognitive skills and economic growth. For example, 10% increase in the top skills shares leads to 1.3% points higher in annual growth in the OECD countries. As investment in university education can only increase the top skills shares, a country aiming for economic growth should focus on skill acquisition.

Hanushek, & Woessmann (2010) believe that OECD countries implement the following policy reforms to improve the standard of their university educations: First, the accountability is one of the major policy decisions for the university reforms as these countries extrinsically or intrinsically reward the actors in education for producing better student achievements or penalize them for inability to produce high-quality students. These countries also use tools, such as rules and regulations, penalties, implicitly or explicitly set rewards for the people involved to improve the quality of education.

---

10. Hanushek, E., & Woessmann, L. «How Much Do Educational Outcomes Matter in Oecd Countries? .» *Economic Policy* 26, no. 67 (2010).

Autonomy and decentralization are also other strategies for reforming the university system in the OECD countries. Autonomy is the school management system, in which the universities administrations can make critical decisions about themselves. Unlike Iraq where the government makes the key decisions for the universities, however, the universities in advanced countries form the boards that comprise think-tanks who have the power to appoint the deans or presidents of universities for the decision-making process. “Across countries, students tend to perform better in schools that have autonomy in personnel and day-to-day decisions, when there is accountability” (Hanushek, & Woessmann, 2010 p 475). The curriculum-based external exams are also used to evaluate the performances of the universities. It has been revealed that students of the countries who practice accountability outperform students in the countries without proper accountability. In Germany and Canada, students studying in the regions that embrace the accountability policy outperform in the regions without a policy of accountability.

Karolak, (2012) cites an example of Bahrain that experienced a boom in the private tertiary education, following the formulation of a reform policy in 1999. After 1999, the number of tertiary educational institutions has risen to 32.8% and expected to reach 57.6% by 2020. The reforms introduced in 1999 allowed the private universities to flourish and helped the country to increase the total

number of the universities<sup>11</sup>. The Bahraini government formulates policy to boost the establishment of private American and British universities by allowing foreign investors to form a partnership with local sponsors. For example, the New York Institute of Technology was established in 2003 with a partnership with a local sponsor. AMA International University was also established in 2002 with a participation of a local sponsor. Moreover, RCSI Medical University of Bahrain, established in 2004, was a Single Person Company (SPC) owned by the Royal College of Surgeons operating in Dublin, Ireland. These partnerships pay off because the foreign universities, based in Bahrain, award the certificates of the universities located outside Bahrain. For example, the New York Institute of Technology in Bahrain offers certificates that come directly from the New York Institute of Technology.

Chies, et al. (2013) also argue that “Italy experienced an expansion of enrollment in higher education benefiting from the Bologna Process over the period 2001/2005”<sup>12</sup>. The authors compare the academic performances before and after reform. As pointed out by Bratti, et al. (2006), university student dropouts in Italy were the highest as compared with other OECD countries before the reform. Moreover, “OECD student survival rates in 2000 was the lowest for Italy (42%) as compared with an OECD average of 70% (70% for Germany, 59%

---

11. Karolak, M. «Bahrain’s Tertiary Education Reform : A Step Towards Sustainable Economic Development.» *Revue Des Mondes Musulmans Et De La Méditerranée*, no. 131 (2012).

12. Chies, L. Graziosi, G. & Pauli, F. «Italian University Reforms Have Changed Students Performance? A Case Study.», 2015.

for France, 83% for the UK)”<sup>13</sup>. Moreover, the percentage of graduates in Italy aged 25-34 was below 10% between 1999 and 2001 as compared with an OECD average of 26% (22% for Germany, 28% for the UK, and 32% for France). In 1999 only 6.5% of Italian graduates were able to graduate and 7.3% in 2000. In 2001, Italy introduced a two-tier university structure where students enrolled in a first three-year cycle for the undergraduate degree, followed by the two-year degree master level program, and at least a three-year PhD program. After the reform, the university systems in Italy have improved. For example, the number of dropouts reduced across the universities as it was 939 in 2001, which reduced to 200 in 2012.

Finland also formulates a policy in 2008 to reform the university systems following the Lisbon Treaty for modernization of the European higher education (University of Finland, 2010). The goal of the reform is to improve the quality and competitiveness of the university education in Finland. The reform is also formulated to strengthen the top-level research activities among the universities. The internationalization and innovativeness of the university systems are also the major goals of the reform. In the reform, the government set universities as a new legal entity, in which the universities are separated from the states and are operating under the private law. The universities are also allowed to form the boards that appoint the university’s rectors (deans or presidents). The board

---

13. Bratti, M., Broccolini, C., & Staffolani, S. . «Is ‘3+2’ Equal to 4? University Reform and Student Academic Performance in Italy,» (2006).

consists of the university professors; however, 40% of the board members are professors, students, and other personnel outside the university. The reform also allows the universities “to pursue their own human resources policies, geared to their specific features, independently of government human resources policy”<sup>14</sup>. Following the reforms, Finland has become one of the leaders in the global innovative performances. Moreover, the Finnish Universities contributed an estimated €14.2 billion Gross Value Added (GVA) and 136,000 jobs in Finland. “This implies that for every €1 Finnish Universities generated through their direct operations in GVA terms, they created almost €8 in total benefits for the Finnish economy; and each person directly employed the Universities supported more than four jobs elsewhere in Finland”<sup>15</sup>.

### **Recommendations for reform for Iraq’s universities**

The findings of the article reveal that R&D funding and autonomy are the major strategies that the universities across the world employ to improve the quality of university education. As R&D is difficult to implement without qualified university professionals, Iraq’s government should formulate a policy to make universities be autonomy, to free them from government interventions. If the university systems are free from the government’s interventions, such universities will attract qualified lecturers. This article recommends that Iraq’s government should emulate the university administrative systems of other countries by giving

---

14. University of Finland. «University Reform in Finland.» 2010.

15. BiGGAR Economics. «Economic Contribution of the Finnish Universities.» 2017.

autonomy to universities, allowing them to make important decisions regarding the university administration. For example, each university should be allowed to form a board that will oversee the appointing the university deans or presidents and to makes other important decisions without the government interventions. This strategy will attract qualified university professionals in the university systems, thereby increasing the quality of Iraq's university education.

Iraq's government should emulate the government policies of the OECD countries by allocating R&D funding for the universities. The quality of universities depend on the new ideas that they can develop yearly. However, R&D is the only strategy that can allow universities to come with new ideas, attract high-quality lecturers and be competitive across the globe, and solve problems locally. Iraq's government should use the "performance-based university research funding systems (PRFSs)"<sup>16</sup> to allocate R&D funding to the universities. This strategy will allow each university to tailor the funding to effective R&D and produce high -quality research. Hicks, (2012) reveals that PRFS is the funding model where the universities with the best indicators receive more funding resources than the universities with lower indicators, resulting in a vertical differentiation between Iraq's universities. Buckle, & Creedy, (2018) affirm that New Zealand is a good example that accelerates the quality of R&D among the universities

---

16. D Hicks, «Performance-Based University Research Funding System,» Research Policy 4, no. 2 (2012).



through PRFSs<sup>17</sup>. Apart from increasing the quality of the results of R&D, the PRFSs will enhance healthy competitions among the universities, thereby improving the country economic development. Iraq's government should allow the establishment of private universities across the country to enhance healthy competitions. The government should introduce tax-holiday incentives to attract foreign private universities in the countries. Finally, the government should boost the security of university staff and increase the salary of the university lecturers to attract foreign university professionals into Iraq's university system.

---

17. Buckle, R. A., & Creedy, J. «The Impact on Research Quality of Performance-Based Funding: The Case of New Zealand's Pbrf Scheme.» *Agenda - A Journal of Policy Analysis and Reform* 25, no. 1 (2018): 23.

## References

1. Bratti, M., Broccolini, C., & Staffolani, S. (2006). Is '3+2' Equal to 4? University Reform and Student Academic Performance in Italy. UNIVERSITÀ POLITECNICA DELLE MARCHE.
2. Biggar Economics (2017). Economic Contribution of the Finnish Universities. A Report to Finland University.
3. Buckle, R. A., & Creedy, J. (2018). The Impact on Research Quality of Performance-Based Funding: The Case of New Zealand's PBRF Scheme. *Agenda - A Journal of Policy Analysis and Reform*, 25(1), 25-48. doi:10.22459/ag.25.01.2018.02
4. Chies, L. Graziosi, G. & Pauli, F. (2013). Italian University Reforms have changed students performance? A case study.
5. Education Counts (2017) Government funding of tertiary education. Retrieved October 10, 2018 from [https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/statistics/indicators/main/resource/government\\_funding\\_of\\_tertiary\\_education](https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/statistics/indicators/main/resource/government_funding_of_tertiary_education)
6. Hanushek, E., & Woessmann, L. (2010). How Much Do Educational Outcomes Matter in OECD Countries? *Economic Policy*, 26 ( 67): pp 427, 429-491 doi:10.3386/w16515
7. Harb, I. (2008). Higher Education and the Future of Iraq. *Special Report 195*.
8. Hearn, J. C., Warshaw, J. B., & Ciarimboli, E. B. (2016). Privatization and Accountability Trends and Policies in U.S. *Public Higher Education*. *Ted Eđitim Ve Bilim*, 41(184). doi:10.15390/eb.2016.6270
9. Hicks, D. (2012). Performance-based university research funding system. *Research Policy*, 4(2): 251-261.
10. Jawad, N.S., & Al-Assaf (2014). The higher education system in Iraq and its future. *International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies*, 8(1): 55-72.

11. Karolak, M. (2012). Bahrain's tertiary education reform : A step towards sustainable economic development. *Revue Des Mondes Musulmans Et De La Méditerranée*, (131), 163-181. doi:10.4000/remmm.7665
12. Lindsey, U. (2012). Iraqi Universities Reach a Crossroads Ambitious plans for reform could be thwarted by sectarian politics, Retrieved October, 2018 from <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Iraqi-Universities-Reach-a/131293>
13. Mahoney, P. (2003). Tertiary Education Funding – Overview of Recent Reform. Parliamentary Library.
14. Mohamed, B. K. (2012). Internationalization modules of the higher education system in Iraq. *Journal of International Education Research*, 8(3), 245.
15. University of Finland (2010). University reform in Finland. UNIFI.
16. UNICEF (2014) The Cost and Benefits of Education in Iraq: An Analysis of the Education Sector and Strategies to Maximize the Benefits of Education. United Nations Children's Fund.
17. Tierney, W. G. (2014). Higher education research, policy, and the challenges of reform. *Studies in Higher Education*, 39(8), 1417-1427. doi:10.1080/03075079.2014.949534
18. Ursula, L. (2012). Iraqi Universities Reach a Crossroads: Ambitious plans for reform could be thwarted by sectarian politics. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.
19. Warshaw, J. B. (2015, November). STEM-centered organizational innovations in the research university: Structure, science, and money. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education, Denver, CO.