

THE CURRENT STATUS AND FUTURE PROSPECTS FOR THE TRANSFORMATION AND RECONSTRUCTION OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM IN IRAQ

While Iraq enjoyed a long and proud tradition of distinguished universities, a sequence of wars and sanctions in recent years have severely damaged the system. After the recent invasion of Iraq by the coalition forces, 84% of the infrastructure in Iraqi higher education institutions has been either burnt, looted or severely destroyed in some form; 48 academics have been assassinated and many are under daily threat.

Modern universities in Iraq were established in the second half of the last century, beginning with the University of Baghdad in 1957 uniting several constituent colleges in the process. During the 1960s five more universities were established – the University of Technology and the Al-Mustansirya University in Baghdad as well as universities in Basra, Mosul and Sulaymaniah. The further development of higher education in Iraq was characterized by establishment of technical institutes reflecting the considerable demand for qualified technicians created by the flourishing oil industry. During the last 20 years the policy of establishing a university in each governorate responded to both the demands of equity and the growing demand for higher education. Thus 14 new universities were founded.

CURRENT STATUS

Iraq's current higher education system comprises 20 universities and 47 technical institutes under the management of the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MHESR). This includes 200 colleges, 800 departments, 28 research centres. The Commission for Computers and Informatics offers specialized course for postgraduates. There are in addition 10 private colleges offering programmes in computer sciences, business administration, economics and management. The UNESCO survey, 2004 found a total student enrollment of 251175, 42% of whom are women. Almost 50% of the students are enrolled at the 5 universities in Baghdad. Two universities have less than 2000 students while Baghdad University enrolls two thirds of all students. Thus there is wide range in the size of universities as well as a lack of geographic equity in their distribution across the country.

The major fields of study offered by the universities are: education, arts, law, social sciences, administration, economics, natural sciences, engineering and technology, medical sciences, veterinary medicine and agriculture. In the area of education there 24 colleges preparing teachers for secondary schools, 7 colleges for primary and kindergarten school teachers and 7 for physical education. The University of Technology has a specialized college for technical education, training teachers for vocational schools and technical institutes. During the period of economic sanctions, the importation of computers was restricted and therefore computer related disciplines were offered in a limited number of institutions.

Technical Education in Iraq comprises 37 Technical Institutes (58540) and 9 Technical Colleges (7368) with 66 000 students, 22% of whom are female with 2837 teaching staff.

There is at least one Institute in each of the 18 governorates. Iraqi higher education has a strong orientation towards technical education through the technical institutes which had significant growth after their inception in 1969. This expansion was triggered by the oil boom, which created the need for large numbers of technical workers. Technical Institutes award a Degree while Technical Colleges award a Diploma. These qualifications cover over 60 fields of specialization in engineering, administration, medical subjects, agriculture and applied arts. The Technical Institutes resort with the Commission for Technical Education under the direction of the MHESR.

Of the 19112 academic university teaching staff, 56% are male and 44% female; 43% of the teaching force is concentrated in Baghdad. The average staff student teaching ratio is 1: 13 being much more favourable than neighbouring countries such as Jordan (1:30) and Saudi Arabia (1:20). There are however extreme variations among Iraqi universities from 1:43 to 1:4. In Iraq the minimum educational qualification for a teaching post in higher education is a master's degree. However one third of the teaching staff lack a masters degree; 28% of the staff has doctorates, 39% masters and 33% bachelors degrees.

While in pre-war days, Iraqi scientists were publishing widely in international and regional journals, very few articles were published in the last decade. The larger universities like Basra, Baghdad and Mosul have between 5 & 8 specialised research centres. In addition there are other specialized research centres - the Polymer Research Centre, Date Palm Research and the Marine Research Centre. The Commission for Computers and Informatics (CCI) and the Commission for Medical Specialization played an important role in training of research staff and promoting research activities. Socio-political research was conducted at the Gulf Study Centre at Basra University, International Study Centre at Mustansiriya University, Iranian Studies Centre in Basrah and Turkish Studies Centre in Mosul. Archeological research was undertaken in the Iraqi National Museum in Baghdad. The House of Wisdom – Beit Al-Hikma and the Iraqi Academy of Sciences – Majma'Al-'Ilmi al Iraqi, two famous institutions focus on the history and academic tradition of the country and region. The teaching overload of academic staff was a serious obstacle to the development of high quality research. There was also limited international cooperation in research.

The Iraqi Academy of Sciences, founded in 1948 was a center for fellows from various disciplines including modern and ancient Middle Eastern languages, history, social and physical sciences. Its main goal was to promote the Arabic language and heritage. Its digital and traditional library was partially looted during the war. Iraqi academics are of the view that the Academy can reestablish itself as one of the leading research centres of the country but urgent interventions are required to rebuild its infrastructure for which a modest \$825 000 is estimated.

UNESCO ROUNDTABLE

A recent Roundtable was convened by UNESCO (22/23 February 2005, Paris) to enable Iraqi academics and representatives from the MHESR to discuss with representatives of the international community the current status of the higher education system in Iraq and

to explore ways of both its immediate and long term reconstruction and transformation. In all 120 delegates participated in the discussions over a two day period.

The main issues, needs and priorities that emerged from the Roundtable were the following:

- The widespread destruction of the infrastructure of the higher education system and now lacking a reliable source of electricity and potable water
- The unstable and dangerous environment for normal academic activity – 48 academics have been assassinated since 2003 and many are under daily threat. This has served to demotivate academics and many have left the country
- The quality of higher education has been steadily deteriorating since the imposition of authoritarian rule in Iraq. This has been exacerbated by a sequence of wars first with Iran, the Gulf war and now the invasion of 2003 with sanctions compounding the problems; it is estimated that 30-40% of the best trained professors have emigrated since 1990; its research centres have suffered from isolation by the international academic community
- Only about a third of the academic staff hold doctoral degrees; this together with long periods of isolation make the retraining of staff to international standards an urgent priority
- There is a need to equip more than 2000 scientific laboratories and for 30 000 computers; libraries are in a poor condition and are in urgent need of restocking with new books and journals in both Arabic and English; journals in electronic format are required
- The student population has been rapidly increasing due both to a high birthrate and an admissions policy that allows all students who have completed secondary school to enter higher education

At the conclusion of the conference, The Director General of UNESCO, Matsura stated: “The meeting provided us with valuable information and gave us an opportunity to appreciate the determination of Iraq’s academics and Ministry of Education to bring higher education back to its former level of excellence”.

INTERIM PROGRESS

Despite the formidable problems encountered by the Iraqi higher education system, progress and improvements have been made. The subjects of democracy, human rights and antiterrorism have been included in the curricula. There is no dedicated budget for higher education but an ad hoc amount has been allocated. This has increased from \$40 million in 2003 to nearly \$70 million in 2005 This has enabled salaries for teachers to be increased from \$1000 a month to \$1500 a month. Teacher upgrading has been supported by UNESCO and the World Bank; 4300 new jobs have been created in the universities; 40% of the reconstruction of destroyed buildings have been achieved through the existing budget. A student’s union has been formed in each college and a new law governs student election based on freedom and democratic principles.

CONTINGENCY MEASURES

In his concluding remarks at the Roundtable, the director of Higher Education, Georges Haddad, UNESCO outlined the following measures in support of the Iraqi Higher Education System:

- Establish a database of the Iraqi academic diaspora
- Connect the Iraqi higher education system to international networks
- Iraqi academics to participate in the next international quality assurance network (INQAHA) to be held in Wellington, New Zealand from 29 March to 2nd of April
- Iraqi academics to attend the next meeting of the International Association of University Presidents to be held in Bangkok from July 11-15
- A workshop to be held in Amman to discuss student life in Iraqi universities
- There should be capacity building for university governance and management of Iraqi universities
- UNESCO/UNITWIN Chairs should be established for Iraqi universities in a number of disciplines – engineering, medicine, teacher training, distance education
- Establish a Conference of Rectors /University Presidents

SYSTEM TRANSFORMATION OF THE IRAQI HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

As necessary as they are, the above contingency measures to assist the Iraqi Higher Education Sector must be complemented by systemic transformation of the higher education system that has been severely damaged and is out of step with international norms and standards. In order to achieve this it may be wise to appoint an overarching Commission along the lines of the South African National Commission on Higher Education (1996) following the demise of the Apartheid. And there are other such Commissions which have undertaken systemic transformatory imperatives in Chile, Australia and the United Kingdom. Such a Commission should clearly comprise the important stakeholders of the Iraqi Higher Education System - the MHESR, the Universities including the academic staff, the students and other relevant stakeholders. Given the country's isolation during the last few decades, the inclusion of carefully selected international academics should be a necessary addition to the Commission. Among others, the remit of the Commission should include:

- The value system that should underpin a new and reinvigorated higher education system such as equity, democracy, human rights, autonomy and academic freedom
- How should the State – University relations be mediated and regulated
- The participation rate for the HES; in developed countries it is reaching 50% for the age cohort 18-21 years; what should be the affordable and realistic target for Iraq say in the next ten years; in how many universities should these students be accommodated in order to ensure quality, efficiency and effectiveness
- How should the universities be funded – e.g. through formula based block grants or other systems; what % of the GNP would be devoted to higher education; should students pay fees and if so what proportion of the total expenditure; will there be support for students unable to pay

- How is quality of universities to be enhanced within the context of ongoing strategies to improve the system; will a national Quality Assurance body be established; there are a number of models addressing the critical areas of institutional audit, programme accreditation and quality improvement
- How is private higher education which is still in its infancy in Iraq to be regulated; the challenge in recognizing that it will play its part in the provision of higher education is to create a regulatory but enabling environment and subject it to the same quality assurance mechanisms as public higher education
- What will be the role of open and distance education together with e-learning in a transformed Iraqi higher education system
- How is research to be rejuvenated and funded in order to contribute to the pressing challenges of post- conflict reconstruction of the country

Hopefully such an exercise can be conducted in an open transparent manner with the full support of all stakeholders resulting eventually in a framework or blueprint that is owned by the government, institutions and other stakeholders and within which the systematic, incremental and progressive reconstruction of the higher education system can unfold.

ROLE FOR THE UNITED NATIONS UNIVERSITY INTERNATIONAL LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE

With its strategic location in Amman, Jordan, a country at peace with itself and its neighbours, UNU-ILI is well positioned to make a contribution to the reconstruction of the Iraqi higher education system. The new building and conference center will be an ideal venue for the hosting of conferences, workshops and seminars. Two courses are planned for 2005. The first in partnership with UNESCO will be on quality assurance and will include Iraqis as well as delegates from the wider Middle East and beyond. In November a course on leadership and management of higher education will be held. A sequence of courses on higher education is being planned for 2006 – strategic planning, teacher education, open & distance learning, ICT in higher education, research, private higher education and regulation of higher education, the role of technical & vocational education, internationalization and student life. All of these courses will be open to international participants but it is intended to have a strong Iraqi presence.

FUNDING FOR THE TRANSFORMATION OF IRAQI HIGHER EDUCATION

The International Fund for Higher Education in Iraq was initiated by the First Lady of Qatar through a donation of \$15 million in 2003 and has enabled UNESCO to address the most urgent needs of higher education in Iraq. To this has been added smaller donations from the Qatar National Bank, South Korea and Doha National Bank. It is vital that these funds are augmented substantially by the international community in order for the reconstruction and rejuvenation of the Iraqi higher education system to proceed unimpeded.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Compelling international evidence indicates that countries cannot generate sustainable socio-economic development without investment in human development. At the heart of such development is the production of critical intellectual capabilities and well trained graduates with a range of competencies and skills. Douglas (2000) captures this necessity

succinctly and aptly: “As the global economy becomes more competitive, those states and nations that invest the most time and energy in expanding and nurturing their higher education systems, will likely be the big winners of tomorrow”

Without adequate higher education and research institutions providing a critical mass of skilled and educated people, no country can ensure endogenous and sustainable development and in particular, developing countries and least developed countries cannot reduce the gap separating them from the industrially developed ones, Sharing knowledge, international cooperation and new technologies can offer new opportunities to reduce this gap (World Declaration of Higher Education for the 21st Century, 1998). This is the vision that should be the driving force of the MHESR in constructing a modern higher education system for Iraq. The view on the reconstruction of higher education expressed by the Deputy Minister of Higher Education of Iraq at the Paris Roundtable is indeed encouraging: “to ensure quality higher education marked by gender parity, the separation of state and religion, mindful of the values of democracy and human rights”. It is clear from the recent UNESCO Roundtable, the International Community stands ready to assist in whatever way required by the Iraqi people.

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