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THE Quality of higher education in Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Current Landscape and Future Outlook

ABSTRACT

In the last twenty years, higher education in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) has changed a lot due to the establishment of many private and public universities. However, the focus is now shifting from quantity to quality. This article evaluated the current status of higher education in KRI by identifying challenges, such as the lack of research output, curricula modification, faculty development, and outcomes, and alignment of education with labor market needs. It also contains the recent initiatives by the Ministry of Education, such as the implementation of national quality assurance guidelines, Bologna process adoption, and more engagement with national and international accreditation bodies. This article also has a discussion on the role of private universities in promoting the innovation and academic excellence. This study also proposed a precise roadmap to enhance research capacity, governance, student employability, and international status based on various data, existing institutional case studies, and international benchmarks. The findings underscore the importance of sustained policy support, capacity building, and global partnerships in enhancing the quality and competitiveness of higher education in the Kurdistan Region.

KEY WORDS: Higher Education Quality, Kurdistan Region of Iraq, Academic Standards, Quality Assurance, Curriculum Reform

I. INTRODUCTION

The KRI has seen a huge change in higher education over 20 years. After KRI got some freedom and stability, the number and spread of higher education facilities increased faster than before. They only had a few public university in the early 2000s, and now, there are over 30, in all the governorates of Erbil, Duhok, and Sulaymaniyah and in new areas such as Halabja and Garmian [1,2].

Such growth helped much to open the way for those who wanted to learn after high school, as thousands could go every year to either under way or graduate work. Population growth, demand for trainers and policies by the KRG became the cause as there was more opportunity in education, and it went after young people without jobs [3]. But as there was more and more in higher education, real achievers started to see that more students sign up, and they also saw other parts of work and life [4].

Leaders, teachers, and academicians in KRI better suggested the need for well-done work, the impact of have done work, how they could go somewhere international, and they could get real for real around where they are. These completeness refs were slowly put in the hands of the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MoHESR-KRG), that plan about renewing may fold upgrades of classes, how(strengthening) faculty or be within ranking of one University [5]. Because of these plans, some companies met standards with international organizations and universities to meet it for the worlds.

Even with these efforts, the gap between the health of skills and the experiment of the labor market still as it does in the life of the gap. Multiple studies and anyone who uses work says that the bad is students about the discussion, the timeliness of the agreement, problem-solving, and working with the business. This way of dealing with skills put in attention KRI universities to promote Student-centered maximum education, then to come back to private company and industry.

Research and new ideas are still weak in most of the KRI schools of higher learning. Though more people now hold masters and doctorates, research productivity in pubs, patents, and grants has not increased. Digital funding, weak research base, lack of wanted skills, and a culture that puts teaching before research are key reasons [8]. Some speed has taken place through foundation of research centers, the money for doing masters, and going to meetings across the world; but these only work with more support for those places and better plans for the future.

Working with other parts of the world and being known worldwide can also become a big part of what KRI schools of higher learning now do. Several schools, like the University of Kurdistan Hewlêr (UKH), Salahaddin University, and Duhok Polytechnic University, started work with schools and groups from other parts of the world. They have traded people, worked together on the plan of what will be learned, and made research together; which has helped the global profile of KRI's higher learning [9].

In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic sparked the digital teaching practices in KRI's schools of higher learning. The sudden move to online learning forced institutions to use new formats, digital tools, and blended learning models. Regardless of the many problems, this also gave an opportunity to make teaching and evaluating better work [10].

The steps to reaching academic success are blocked by many glitches and systems. State-run university of higher learning sometime work under tight rules with little control over how they make money or how they run. Further, there is ongoing pull to political ground, which bars academic independence; there is not enough support for up-coming leaders, specially women and those in less learned areas.

The KRG then saw the need to do high-stakes changes in higher learning. Major plans for next ten years will be focused on more power being given to the university of higher learning, broadening time to learn, putting money on digital buildings, becoming quicker in research and advancing new ideas, and doing higher programs that meet the region's economic and social changes, [5]. These plans also show what the world is doing to change universities into sources of growth and endurance.

In the end, while the Kurdistan Region of Iraq has made good years in giving more people parts of higher learning, doing well in what you learn, and working with outside people has to be more in the years ahead. Fixing today's problems and being able to use what is strong in the area, universities of higher learning in KRI can be parts of the region that leads in making new ideas, new ways of doing things, and new beings in the people

II. LITERATUREREVIEW

2.1 Challenges in quality assurance

Despite progress, the higher education sector in KRI faces multiple challenges that affect the quality of instruction, research, and graduate outcomes:

1. **Lack of Unified Accreditation Standards:**

Many universities operate without full alignment with international or national accreditation benchmarks, leading to inconsistencies in academic rigor and degree recognition.

2. **Overcrowded Curricula and Traditional Teaching Methods:**
- Outdated syllabi, heavy reliance on rote memorization, and limited use of student-centered teaching approaches hinder the development of critical thinking and innovation [11-12].
- Records move away from memory-based curricula to learner-centered learning structures based on what the student can do — mainly at the level of individual university still, even after Bologna reforms in KRI.
- Shows how hard it is to make learner-centered learning work in KRI because there is no enough training for being a teacher or designing curriculum that is based on the learner.
- Even though the study looks at first and second level school, it shows how teachers have depended on the lecture form of teaching, and rote learning, for a long time. This has led to the fact that higher education still has not changed the way it teaches.

3. **Faculty Development Needs:** Though many faculty members have higher education's there is continued need for training on the modern ways of teaching, doing

research, and digital tools for teaching.

4. **Limited Research Culture and Funding:** A local research culture that will compete for research fund, working with other international bodies, and to publish in indexes journals will help the advancement of science in the region [13-14]

2.2 Recent Improvements and Reforms Initiative

In the face of these challenges, some reforms are underway within both public and private bodies

- **National Quality Assurance Framework:** The Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MHESR) in KRI has established quality assurance units in all universities that concentrate mainly on three things: program review, curriculum review, and faculty performance.
- **International Collaboration:** International collaborations with European, American, and Asian universities are increasing. There are more opportunities now to give and take educational exchange programs, participate in joint research projects, and work toward international accreditation.
- **Digital transformation:** With the outbreak of COVID-19, universities of KRI are fast adopting digital learning tools, online assessments, and blended learning models [15-16].
- **Promoting Research and Innovation:** Now, institutions are rewarding research papers, patent applications, and participation in national and international conferences.

Table 1: Improvements and reforms Initiative

University Initiative	/ Innovation Focus	Research Incentives Highlighted
UKH &UoD ICRIE 2023	– Engineering innovation conference	Indexed publications, co-chair roles, and research dissemination
University of Sulaimani Innovation Exhibition 2025	Multi-disciplinary innovation exhibition	Awards, institutional recognition of research-based projects
University of Raparin – Erasmus+ Teacher MoD Project	International pedagogical innovation	Research exchange, networking, and academic publication exposure
Tishk Int'l Univ. & Salahaddin Univ. – DAAD Symposium	STEM collaboration with a German university	Joint projects with potential patent or industrial research outcomes

2.3 Why these matters

Conference-linked publishing: Hiring people to come to events like ICRIE and Sulaimani Innovation Exhibition for sell their work makes faculty want to publish in journals that are ranked and help students be known by their peers.

Working with other countries: There are working with Erasmus+ and DAAD that gives real money for research, working together on projects, and go to university.

Institutional rules and conference awards: there are events they put on and awards for going to a conference that help make them come up with new ideas.

2.4 Role of Private Universities

Private universities like Qaiwan International University, American University of Iraq, Sulaimani (AUIS), and University of Kurdistan Hewlêr (UKH) have come to be the top university to give a high quality of education. These universities often meet international requirements, have a wide variety of teachers, and put in systems to help research, and are setting a high bar for the area.

III. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This review paper is based on a close look at other research that can be used for learning. This research can be found in open access academic articles, reports from love institutions, on best websites, and in digital repositories.

1. University of Kurdistan Hewlêr (UKH) & University of Duhok (UoD) – ICRIE 2023

UKH and UoD held the 4th International Conference on Recent Innovations in Engineering (ICRIE) 2023. The event talked about getting the teachers to write in well known journals and tell about new research work. The conference is put in the waiting list of Clarivate Analytics, Web of Science, Scopus, and others.

2. University of Sulaimani – 9th International Exhibition for Innovation (2025):

Hosting creators from top and private universities across ten provinces, the event showed 79 innovative projects in many areas. We gave awards and credits to the best work, which helped find new work by teachers and students

### 3. University of Raparin – Erasmus+ Teacher MoD Project (2024):

Raparin University held an international meeting with many colleges in KRI and Europe in Erasmus+ programs. These works helped the send and share research across the world, find new ways to teach, and have higher quality work papers at colleges in the area.

4. Tishk International University & Salahaddin University – DAAD-Funded Collaboration:

Tishk and Salahaddin University worked together on the "Partnership in Progress" meeting with Technische Universität Bergakademie Freiberg (Germany). It had many research works with value everywhere, helping people work together and research that might get a patent.

Table:2: Graduate Skill Gap vs Employer Expectations

Category	% of Employers Dissatisfied	% of Graduates Confident	Gap (%)
Communication Skills	68%	45%	23%
Critical Thinking & Problem Solving	62%	40%	22%
Industry/Practical Exposure	75%	35%	40%
Teamwork & Collaboration	50%	60%	-10%
Digital & Technical Skills	45%	50%	-5%
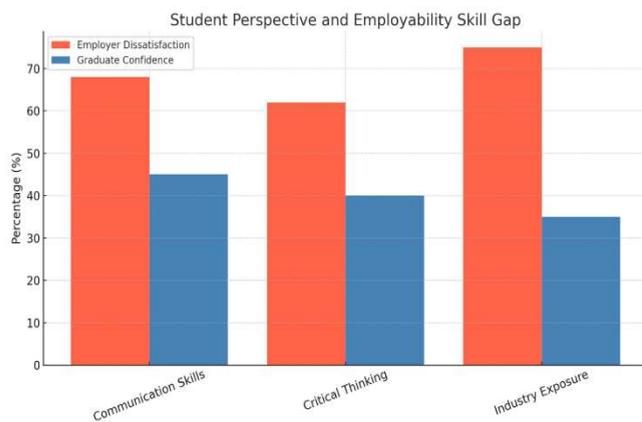
Statistics Graph: Graduate Skill Gap vs Employer Expectations

Student Perspective and Employability
While there were more students, graduate skills do not meet needs of the labour market. Employers cite poor communication skills, lack of understanding of the industry, and lack of learning [17-18].

Looking Ahead: A Roadmap for Excellence
To make higher education in Kurdistan Region grow and compete within the region, the following are require

- Better quality assurance through global partnerships
- Faculty training and development
- Funding and Collaboration for research
- Matching labour market needs
- Promoting innovation, entrepreneurship, and like fields of study
- Stick to joint working arrangements between University, Industry and the Government

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Since the early 2000s, there has been rapid expansion of higher educational institutions (HEIs) in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). As of 2025, over 30 public and private HEIs exist in four of the region's five governorates -

Erbil, Duhok, Sulaymaniyah, Halabja and Garmian. This expansion allowed growing numbers of students to gain access to higher learning in the region, especially at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. With this paper we find, however, that quality is inconsistent and generally prone to improvement if systematic enhancement is to be gained. In terms of graduate skill gap and labour market alignment then as we see, with access and institutions reaching a certain size, there is still a gap between graduate outputs and the needs of employers. (Table 2) demonstrates this mismatch when it comes to key skills including communication, critical thinking and industry exchange. On the one hand, 68 percent of employers complain about lack of communication skills whereas only 45 percent of students are confident in this area with a mismatch of 23 percent. Also, the gap concerning industrial and practical exposure amounts to 40 percent and is the highest need. Findings of UnEsCO, ILO, and WTO prove this mismatch. Universities have started creating spaces for internships and entrepreneurial activities to close this gap, but to this day work is sporadic and uncoordinated. QS Employer Survey 2023, the employer survey, confirms that it is soft skills and real-world readiness where priority is given and not academic performance only.

Multiple issues remain a hurdle in delivering Quality Assurance and Institutional Effectiveness. Several structure issues are still hampering quality step up in the higher education institutions of KRI. Several institutions are not fully complying with international or even national accreditation systems. Without a common framework, there are still issues of inconsistency of academic rigor. Out of date curricula rest on rote memorization powers dominating, hampering innovation and critical thinking. Though some faculty hold postgraduate degrees, many of them have never undergone training in contemporary pedagogical approaches and digital literacy and publication of academic materials. As had been highlighted by, research output in KRI tends to be behind the regional standards owing to weak funding mechanisms, absence of publication incentives, and weak collaborative networks. Recent Reforms and Innovations in the area of quality assurance units since these units had been established in universities to supervise evaluation of curricula and faculty performance have been summarized in, whereas it is time the units must be involved with international collaborations to expand and undertake joint degrees, faculty exchange and international accreditation. Partnerships through Erasmus+ and DAAD have demonstrated potential in enhancing academic capacity. Institutions like Qaiwan International University, AUIS as well as UKH are raising the level by following the Standards prescribed by international, attracting international faculty and investing in infrastructure for R&D. Their role is important in driving competition and innovation in the reemployment of higher education participating bodies in the regional higher education system. Recent academic society needs to look into long term perspectives on this subject to retain academic excellence share backward out of the following strategies.

- Institutionalize global quality assurance structures
- Strengthen faculty development by means of formalized training schemes
- Offer continuous research funding and create

international partnerships
- Realign curricula to match the needs of the labour market and the skills of tomorrow
- Promote the development of ecosystems of innovation and entrepreneurship within campuses
- Create hubs of the university-industry-government collaboration (UIG).

V. CONCLUSION

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq faces a crucial point in its time to get higher level degrees. If the area discards weak leadership, frills on money and other stuff and keeps working on good things it can change worn out universitie into places of thought, change, and traveling around the world. If places do the work they need to work well with each other in the future, the leaders of places and the world can change how we learn in the time to come.

APPENDIX

Appendixes, there are no appendix.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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