



International Conference on Higher Education in Iraq

Erbil, 11 – 13 December 2007

Final Report

The International Conference on Higher Education in Iraq was held in the Shaheed Saad Conference Centre in Erbil, from the 11th to the 13th of December 2007, under the patronage of Mr. Massoud Barazani, President of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The Conference was organised by the Region's Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, in cooperation with the London-based Iraq Higher Education Organising Committee. This followed the Committee's organisation of two international symposia on Iraqi Higher Education, in 2004 and 2005, at the University of Westminster in London.

The Conference benefitted from the participation of many presidents and professors from various Iraqi universities, in addition to professors and senior faculty from the United States, the United Kingdom, Holland, Germany, Austria, Poland, Australia and Canada. These included a number of Iraqi academics from universities in those countries. The total number of participants exceeded 500.

PART A:

1) The Inauguration

The Conference was launched by the Regional President. His impressive speech emphasised the specific importance of Higher Education for the advancement of the Kurdistan Region and Iraq as a whole. The president stressed the particular role of university professors, with their distinctive expertise and commitment, in maintaining the position of Higher Education and in creating and developing a democratic, federal and united Iraq. After summarising a number of the most important and pressing issues, the President urged the professors to fulfil their responsibility to work together to overcome difficulties, and to reach agreement on all of the issues vital for the unity of the country.

Also speaking at the inauguration was Dr Idris Hadi Saleh, Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research for the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. In his address, the Minister discussed the indicators and trends in higher education and outlined his strategy. He said that he looked forward to the Conference achieving the goals for which it was set up, including: forming a close relationship with international scientific institutions; following current developments; allowing Iraqi universities and institutions to play their role in rebuilding Iraq; and the reform and development of Iraq's scientific and educational institutions drawing on current methods and modern technology. Finally, the Minister stressed the necessity of working to guarantee the independence of universities and to prevent inappropriate political involvement in their affairs.

This was followed by a brief address by Dr Salam Khoshnaw, Deputy Minister for Higher Education and Scientific Research in the National Government. He expressed the Ministry's support for the Conference, which he said demonstrated the commitment of universities and institutions of higher education all over Iraq to work towards setting up advanced educational institutions capable of assuming a leading role in building their society and responding to its developmental demands.

The participants from all the Iraqi universities and institutions, as well as those who had attended from other countries, were welcomed by Dr Abbas Al-Hussaini, Director General of the London-based Iraq Higher Education Organising Committee. In his address, Dr Al-Hussaini outlined the preparatory steps that the Committee had taken in order to hold the conference, with the support of the Regional Ministry and the participation of a number of Iraqi academics inside and outside the country.

At the start of the inauguration, Mr Nawzad Hadi, Governor of Erbil, welcomed the fact that the conference was being held in his city.

2) Proceedings of the Scientific Programme of the Conference

The Keynote Lectures

The Conference opened its scientific programme with two keynote lectures. The first of which, titled "The Role of the University in the 21st Century", was delivered by emeritus professor, Margaret Blunden, former Deputy Vice-Chancellor of the University of Westminster in London. The second, delivered by Professor Peter Paul from Holland, was on "Successful Accreditation of University Education Programmes" (the texts of the keynote lectures are published in the books of Conference Proceedings).

On the second day, Professor Carla Miller from the University of Twente in Holland gave a lecture on "Women in the University", followed by Dr Ismail al-Jalili from Britain,

whose talk was entitled “Specific Publications: A Barometer of PG Education”. The third lecture was from Graham Tipple from the University of Newcastle in Britain, on “The Need for New Directions in Higher Education Planning in Iraq – Insights from the Preparation of the State of Iraq Cities Report”.

On the third day of the Conference the President of the University of Buckingham in Britain, Professor Terence Kealey, gave a lecture entitled “Planning Higher Education: The Need for Independence”.

Workshops on the Key Issues of the Conference

Throughout the three days of the Conference, workshops were held for the presentation and discussion of research papers (abstracts and texts of the research papers are published in the books of Conference Proceedings). These papers dealt with the eight key issues of the Conference, which were the following (along with the number of studies on each):

- 1) Models for Interactive Higher Education (13 research papers).
- 2) Capacity Building (14 research papers).
- 3) Developing Curricula (42 research papers).
- 4) Guaranteeing Quality (31 research papers).
- 5) Higher Studies and Scientific Research (14 research papers).
- 6) Universities in Society (21 research papers).
- 7) Different Types of Higher Education (16 research papers).
- 8) Decentralisation of Higher Education (8 research papers).

PART B:

Conclusions and Recommendations

The work of the Conference, in the form of lectures, research papers and the discussions in the workshops and in meetings of the drafting committee, resulted in a comprehensive set of conclusions and recommendations. These were enriched by the discussion that took place in the final session of the Conference, whose work was concluded by endorsing the final set of conclusions and recommendations, summarised as follows:

- 1) Universities are a leading part of society. They are central to its needs and aspirations, both monitoring and influencing its trends. Not only must universities respond to social and economic developmental needs, but must also understand their progression and their limits. They should help to develop effective human skills and abilities, strengthened by up to date knowledge, advanced science and technology and pioneering research. In order for this to be implemented, the Conference suggests that an “Academic Advisory Board” should be formed in every institution of higher education, whether university or other foundation. These should be composed of senior academics and from experts with a high level of experience and knowledge, and should advise on the formation of the institution’s strategy as well as the requirements for its development and its role as an active, responsive and leading part of society.
- 2) University teaching faculties are the core of universities. They fulfil vital teaching and research functions and should help the university to achieve its societal role. As such, it is incumbent upon institutions of higher education, **as** a priority, to take the necessary steps to ensure their regular updating in knowledge, science and technology, educational systems, curricula and modern teaching methods. This task is of particular importance at the present time, as a result of what Iraqi institutions, teaching faculties and scientific cadres have suffered. For more than two decades, they were denied access to international knowledge and developments in science and technology, educational curricula, sources and methods. Addressing this problem demands the following:
 - a) Preparing plans for capacity building, and executing them in a defined timeframe. Plans should aim at raising the level of knowledge and skills to that required at advanced universities and foundations.
 - b) Establishing centres for the development of human potential and continuing education, and activating existing ones, as well as equipping them with what they require in order to ensure that they efficiently execute their plans for capacity building.
 - c) Allowing holders of higher degrees to follow a career in teaching, after taking and passing teacher-training courses lasting six months for holders of bachelors and masters degrees and 3 months for holders of doctorates.
 - d) Meeting the requirements of university faculties for access to sources of knowledge and up-to-date information by way of advanced internet services and communication technologies with databases, information banks, libraries and electronic journals. The equipment necessary for this should be made available to

every member of the teaching faculty and all students pursuing higher studies. It should be provided in university libraries and in specialised locations in various departments so as to give general access to the student body. To this end, the libraries should be extended as centres of information and learning.

- e) Organising scientific seminars and conferences within universities and institutes as well as between them. Participants should be invited from the foremost universities worldwide, so as to expose university staff and students to the most recent advances in knowledge, science and technology, curricula and teaching methods.
 - f) Organising visiting fellowships in advanced universities and research centres for teaching staff who received their higher degrees during the sanctions period. This will enhance their ability to conduct research and give them access to new advances in their areas of specialisation as well as knowledge in general. The programmes should be designed for this purpose according to what is to be agreed on in discussion with partner international institutions.
- 3) Iraqi universities and institutes have suffered, to differing degrees, from being cut off for two decades from progress in educational curricula, resources, teaching methods, modern technology and research. This situation requires a comprehensive review in order to develop curricula, scientific specialisations and degree programmes. These should be brought in line with the practice of the leading institutions of higher education in the world, as well as corresponding to Iraq's developmental requirements. In order to do this the following is required:
- a) Developing a mechanism to update curricula in which members of the teaching staff participate alongside representatives of society and the economy in order to ensure advanced curricula that meet society's needs.
 - b) Being open to variety and inter-disciplinarity in the curricula of scientific degrees and specialisations. Collaboration between academic disciplines, rather than a narrow and exclusive focus on individual disciplines, will help to meet the country's social and economic requirements.
 - c) Creating specialised committees within departments, colleges, institutes and universities in order to review programmes and curricula and create the necessary plans for their development.
 - d) The wars and crises from which Iraq has suffered over the last two and a half decades have led to a large number of people with disabilities or special needs and others whose education was discontinued. Universities and institutes should provide

- appropriate opportunities for those that want them, by designing special programmes of study that aim, amongst other things, to make possible their reinstatement as effective members of society.
- e) Working towards forging reciprocal relationships with advanced universities and institutes in order to organise new programmes of study and specialised degrees, design new curricula and obtain additional teaching resources.
 - f) Extending invitations to the Iraqi scientific community in the diasporas and encouraging cooperation with the universities and scientific institutions worldwide in which they work. The Iraqi scientific community worldwide should help their colleagues in Iraq by providing opportunities for internships, study fellowships, scholarships, sabbaticals and other cooperative programmes.
 - g) Studying the current teaching and admission systems and comparing them with those practised in universities worldwide, and design the systems that correspond to the developmental needs of higher education in the country. This should be done by the creation and subsequent oversight of a consultative body of experienced specialists.
- 4) The suffering endured by Iraqi academics and others with higher qualifications, by way of assassinations and harassment of themselves and their families, represents a massive human tragedy. It has had, in addition, a destructive effect on the work of educational institutions and the state in general. Tackling this problem requires urgent action. The conference registers its gratitude and appreciation to the universities and institutions in the Kurdistan Region and the other secure parts of Iraq which have hosted professors and researchers and provided them and their families with opportunities to live and work. The conference also
- a) Asks the Iraqi government to take all necessary steps to ensure the safety of the scientific community working in Iraq and to protect them from assassination, kidnap and the dangers to which they and their families are exposed.
 - b) Asks the international organisations and responsible bodies to take on their responsibilities, in line with the Geneva convention, to provide secure living and working conditions, as well as looking after Iraqi refugees and other homeless Iraqis. Highly qualified people should be seen as the guarantors of the future of the country and secure conditions should be created for the return of those who emigrated.

- c) Urges the humanitarian organisations to provide aid in order to protect the scientific community and help their families. They should start providing the necessary support to those who have left Iraq in search of professional and personal security.
- 5) The organisation of quality assurance is among the most pressing needs of universities and institutes, in order to guarantee the soundness of their programmes, degrees and teaching curricula, the efficiency of their teaching process and the credentials of their staff. Achieving this requires setting up a “Quality Control Board”. The work of this body should include laying foundations and building a base in accordance with international standards, devising action plans to guarantee quality, preparing qualified staff to lead the process of guaranteeing quality within universities, institutes, colleges and departments, as well as carrying out these activities, as circumstances dictate.
- 6) Postgraduate studies and scientific research represent the most vibrant and effective channels for connecting universities and institutes with society and for meeting the demands of the market and the requirements of social and economic development. In this respect, and given the need for variety in higher education, it is essential that each university and institution should strive for excellence in the fields in which their strength lies. This applies to specialisations in higher studies and the quality and level of research, which should be developed according to the requirements of the job market and the ability to obtain results. Universities and institutes should familiarise themselves with organisations of higher education in leading universities worldwide. They should learn as appropriate from these universities, particularly those which are most effective in meeting the needs of their local societies. Accordingly, the deans of postgraduate studies and scientific research should work with the scientific departments to devise a strategy for postgraduate studies and scientific research, as well as mechanisms to execute it. This should be in accordance with the specific, defined goals of the university, its specialties, departments and faculties.
- 7) Connecting universities and institutes with society is achieved through channels of communication which they establish with the organisations of civil society, the economy, business and other sectors of the market. This requires:
 - a) Appointing representatives of these bodies who possess experience and qualifications to committees or governing bodies of the universities, colleges and other institutions of higher education.
 - b) Encouraging the private sector to enter into contracts with scientific departments and researchers to undertake the research projects and other services that they require.

- c) Universities and institutes should make full use of their Consultancy Bureaus, and where these do not exist they should be established.
 - d) Creating specialised joint committees drawn from companies in the industrial and services sectors and civil society groups, alongside members of the teaching faculty, according to their specialisations. These should monitor the requirements, output and research activities of the university, design projects and create plans for their execution, in the form of contracts between the university or institute and relevant outside bodies.
 - e) Universities and institutes should concern themselves with investments in the intellectual property rights that result from their researches and other scientific/educational activities. The subsequent income from such investments should be channelled for the maximum benefit of the university. This requires setting up specialised offices in universities and institutes in order to undertake the management of such activities.
- 8) In Iraq's current situation, steady population growth and the desire of Iraqi families to send their sons and daughters to universities, puts the latter under enormous pressure due to the imbalance between their ability to take new students and the increasing number of entrants. This situation demands a number of undertakings:
- a) Reviewing policies of admissions and **guiding** students towards different academic and professional studies according to the demands of society and the job market.
 - b) Evaluating different types of higher education, including those that have developed a great deal through the use of computerised systems of communication, the internet and other advanced technologies. Universities should make maximum use of those technologies that benefit the teaching process.
 - c) Encouraging different sectors of the economy and civil society to invest in the higher education sectors within the framework of the rules and principles that safeguards the high standing of this sector. In order to guarantee this, a "Board for Private Higher Education" should be formed from representatives of the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, universities, the Foundation of Technical Education, industrial and service sectors (Chambers of Industry, Commerce and Agriculture) and from a number of experienced independent persons who are known for their academic participation. The board's tasks should include agreeing on the rules for licensing private higher education institutions and their regulations and programmes as well as mechanisms for supervision and evaluation.

- d) Putting in place effective controls for the recognition of universities and the degrees that they award. Those that do not meet the threshold of standards, good teaching and evaluation of their graduates and degrees, such as the institution known as “Saint Clements University” and others, should not be recognised. The degrees evaluation and equivalence committees should fully investigate the worthiness of the degree awarding institutes.
- 9) The current situation in Iraq requires the utmost caution in establishing a critical balance between the independence of the university in the management of its own affairs and the role of the government, as represented by the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research. The current law makes the Ministry the highest authority for the affairs of the universities in all of their academic, bureaucratic and financial details. In order to move forward and prepare the right ground to produce, through a well-managed and timely plan, Decentralisation in the Higher Education Sector, the following is required:
- a) Creating a new law governing the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, affirming the decentralisation of the higher education sector and organising the relationship between the Ministry and the universities on this basis. The law should make the Ministry a planning and general policy making body for higher education and scientific research. It should develop the strategy and developmental plans for the sector and establish oversight and quality control bodies, within boundaries that do not infringe upon the independence of universities in managing their affairs, devising and executing their plans, locating their own private funds and allocating their money, subject to the established budgetary rules and to financial oversight.
 - b) Universities should be financed by grants accorded to each of them on the basis of their yearly budgets, to be decided by university councils. The grant should be set according to the evaluation of the university. The grant should be placed in a special university account, which the university has full authority to spend, according to the state rules for financial oversight and auditing.
- 10) The Federal Government and the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government are asked to support and facilitate the execution of the conclusions and recommendations of the Conference. They should work to pass the legislations needed to implement them as necessary.