

Quality Assurance and Effectiveness in Kurdistan Higher Education: The Reform Process

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Abstract—Implementing quality assurance in higher education establishments is the main focus of the reform process currently undertaken by the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The reform agenda has involved attempts to improve academic quality and management processes in universities, technical institutions and colleges. The central challenge for the reform process is to produce change in higher education in a region where administration is described as centralized and bureaucratic. To make these changes, there should be a well-designed plans and follow up processes in order to monitor progress and develop responses to obstacles. Lack of skills, resources, political dilemmas, poor motivation, and readiness to face the consequences of change are factors which will determine the success of the reform process.

Keywords—Higher Education, Kurdistan-Iraq, Quality Assurance

I. INTRODUCTION

THE higher education sector in Iraq flourished between the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s and was one of the best higher education sectors in the Middle East [6], [7], [16]. With the arrival of the Baath political party in 1967, the higher education sector began losing its prestige and mostly stopped flourishing after 1988. The Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MHESR) in Iraq was established in 1970 and the sector became more centralized and controlled by ministerial authority. In 1979 when Saddam Hussein became the president of Iraq, the higher education sector became a spot for “political correctness, cronyism, corruption, and manipulation of resources to advance the regime’s ideology and policies” [6, p. 3]. Additionally, the sector became more centralized to serve Baath ideology and the party had the authority to appoint its loyal members to fill high-level vacancies without taking into consideration academic skills and values. The latter action forced intellectuals and professors to leave Iraq while those remaining had to cope with the situation. Iraq was isolated from the world for about thirteen years after its invasion of Kuwait in August 1990. This isolation, which was imposed under the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) No. 661 in 1990, had great impact on destroying the infrastructure of Iraq including higher education sector. It was a time of corruption in the higher education sector as academic capacity, administration policy, and research quality moved backwards gradually. Due to the significant safety and stability in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq since 1990 when the United Nations announced it as a non-fly zone, the region had better opportunities to progress with support of international organizations which could invest and resume their projects [16].

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The Kurdistan Region had better development opportunities than the other parts of Iraq but, it remained isolated from scientific development and prosperity that was going on in the wider world. The region was able to develop more after the liberation of Iraq in 2003. The Kurdistan Region witnessed progress and changes in terms of democracy, media and press, tourism, women's rights, arts, business, architecture, power and oil resources, education, and higher education [10], [17], [18]. The sixth cabinet of the Kurdistan Region Government which was in place from late 2009 to the end of 2011, the (MHESR) adopted a reform process to ensure international standards and quality assurance in higher education. The process set out to shape reform and change to cover all the sections and entities of higher education sector in the region. The reform process generally focused on three main areas: first, developing academic, research, and training capacities; second, administrative restructuring, seeking decentralization, and expanding the use of information technology; third, highlighting issues of social justice and safety. In order to meet the reform objectives and bring updated knowledge and research experiences into higher education, the KRG allocated 100 million dollars per year for scholarships program. In addition, many scientific and academic projects have been organized with British Council, and universities in the United Kingdom, United States of America, Europe, and some eastern countries [10]. The MHESR further had some contacts with Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) and Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET), which are international accreditation organizations in the USA, in order to review and give accreditation to some of the state universities in the region [10].

Higher education sector in the Kurdistan Region-Iraq is free and consists of Foundation of Technical Education and University (private and public). There are also morning and evening classes in both divisions. Due to the stability condition in the region and free higher education, there are many students from outside the region and neighboring countries applying to Kurdistan universities which impact the capacity of higher education sector. Therefore, the MHESR-KRG in the sixth cabinet took the challenge to plan the reform strategy in a centralized hierarchical government. This paper is providing the structure for future analysis of the reform process in a centralized bureaucratic context and how quality assurance strategy fits into such a context. It also focuses on the value of the reform process to establish an international quality assurance strategy in Kurdistan higher education.

II. ROLE OF CENTRALIZATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

It is important to know the role of government in a centralized administration system to find out how this would affect the reform and change processes. The government creates the policy and enacts the legislations for higher education sector but leave the implementation process for

higher education academics. Thus, the process can be very poor, unsuccessful, and even non implementation because the reform process and policies will go through many layers of bureaucracy as a pyramidal order, and as Porter has pointed out, "the events and their consequences occur in different organizations. Thus the basic framework for either political or bureaucratic learning is not present." [15, p. 11]. In addition, the role of centralization will affect the clarity of objectives, leveling priorities, service quality, and the whole value of the sector nationally and internationally. The higher education sector should be decentralized in the first instance and has its own financial resources for more investment and development which consequently lead to better quality.

Change and reform in higher education sector could be the outcomes of the global changes in marketing and expansion of stakeholders' demands as can be seen in Taiwan and the Dutch examples [5], [9]. Moreover, the global changes imply further development and progress which affect social, political, cultural, and economical aspects in every country rather than another. But, it is so crucial to understand how governments receive the idea of change and to what extent they adapt it to their systems. In bureaucratic countries, government system and administration is categorized as hierarchical process merely based on law and complex order while the government run by a group of individuals who resemble power and authority [9], [13]. It is significant to note that progress processes in centralized governments move very slow because it is difficult for the government to adopt the idea of change and, though the global socio-political development is progressing and changing according to the markets' needs to produce better outcomes that suits the needs, find it difficult to meet the global market's needs. Therefore, the change process should begin within the government structure and administration to decrease bureaucracy and hierarchy then other sectors in the government would be decentralized and have better opportunities towards progress and investment.

III. WHY REFORM PROCESS IS NEEDED?

The reform process carried out by the MHESR-KRG plans to cope with the progress and development in the Kurdistan Region market especially after 2003. Additionally, the reform process faced political and administrative restraints and oppositions by students, university academics, and politicians which led to slow down the achievement and progress of the reform process. However, quality assurance strategy and accreditation process should be adjustable with the nature of the centralized and hierarchical system of the government to best describe the needs and objectives of the reform process.

The MHESR-KRG tries to follow the American accreditation system considering that American universities have their autonomy and independence and accreditation mission is carried by nongovernmental organizations [14]. Thus the American accreditation system might not be successful to use in the Kurdistan higher education where universities have neither autonomy nor independency. There is a big gap between American higher education and Kurdish higher education. Generally, Porter [15] and Kirst [11] present general options for American and Australian governments to support reform in education and as following:

- 1- Allocating financial budget for expanding, developing, and continuity of higher education sector.
- 2- Providing specific amount of budget for specific projects and activities.
- 3- Enacting regulations to systematize and regulate the infrastructure of higher education sector.
- 4- Establishing a research centre to be as a source for data and knowledge.
- 5- Providing administrative and technical assistance besides of various experts and professionals whenever needed.
- 6- Evaluating and examining the educational methods.

The above options could be supportive for administrative and structural development of higher education but these will not improve the core of higher education. The Taiwan experience, on the one hand, in reforming higher education [see: 9] through privatization might be closer to Kurdistan higher education. In Taiwan, the reform began mostly as a need to develop the country after crisis that the country witnessed. Therefore, the reform process transformed the sector from centralized hierarchical poor condition to decentralized and deregulated developed status. A reform process when made in a country should be made for its citizens and suits its culture, resources, and needs. The Taiwan reform was based on the assumption of expanding and developing the sector to produce valuable quality of education to Taiwan people. However, the Taiwan reform focused on the following:

1. Expanding higher education and junior stages in high schools.
2. Updating curricula and teaching methods.
3. Ensuring educational resources are available as much as possible and enhancing private education as well.
4. Making education adaptable according to the needs and further development.
5. Lifelong education
6. Different training programs.
7. Developing a system of employment after graduation.
8. Establishing community culture.

The Taiwan reform experience started after terminating the martial law in 1987 to continue until 1995. The higher education sector expanded widely in the 1990s besides was decentralized, denationalized, and got autonomy. The most important and effective factor in Taiwan experiences was allowing business and industrial agencies to invest and support the sector. Such a relationship between the sector and investment agencies enforced seeking higher quality, updating curricula, and higher research capacity in order to provide what the market needs. However, the Taiwan experiences on the one hand could be considered as a model for Kurdistan higher education reform in terms of having the desire to reconstruct and develop the country after crisis and terminating martial law. On the other hand, it would be a failed model in terms of having centralized and hierarchical Kurdish government and higher education governance.

On the other hand, the Dutch reform process in higher education [see: 5] was relatively similar to Taiwan experience in terms of privatizing public universities, decentralization, further expansion in the higher education sector, and autonomy. But, it became more hierarchical in term of management structure and centralized in term of decision making. However, the state has some control upon Dutch universities and mostly has the role of indirect leader orientation to instruct and support universities. The main changes in the Dutch universities concerned constructing their identity and autonomy; hierarchical management; and administrative, teaching, and research rationality. These changes, thus, gave more strength and quality to universities which are regarded as integrated entities of professional academics and marketing companies. In comparison, the Dutch reform experience in higher education seems to be more adaptable to Kurdistan higher education than the Taiwan one because simply there is still some kind of hierarchy and centralization. At the same time, though the Kurdish reform process highlights the significance of university autonomy, the sector lacks leaders and experts to build the fundamental for investment opportunities and establish a centre to follow up the reform process and measure outcomes. Such a centre should be isolated from the MHESR-KRG and combines members from the private sector, academic professionals, and government in order to work together and identify the market's needs then shape the needs academically to finally be approved and funded by the government. The reform strategy could be a successful attempt to raise the value of Kurdish higher education sector if seriously supported by the government and regularly followed up by professionals.

IV. QUALITY ASSURANCE STRATEGY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

If a government is seeking globalization and marketization, then it is important to follow the wheels towards more effectiveness and development to achieve the needs of such globalization and marketization to ensure effective outcomes and modify or change the weak ones. The liberation of Iraq in 2003 besides providing the safety and stability conditions in the Kurdistan Region urged the need for reconstructing the infrastructure of all major sectors. Therefore, the MHESR-KRG started the reform process and established a quality assurance program in 2009.

For accreditation process, the MHESR-KRG has links with the American WASC and ABET. Despite the fact that American universities are autonomous, independent, and decentralized; accreditation mission is carried out by nongovernmental organizations [12] but this would mislead the accreditation process in Kurdistan Region if the aim is to ensure quality assurance in higher education sector because the sector is centralized and bureaucratic [6]. Prior to seeking accreditation models, it is significant to highlight the effective factors which impact decision making authority and financial resources in higher education sector and then create or find investment opportunities to raise the sector's income which can be used in further investment and development projects. Besides, ensuring quality assurance in the higher education sector needs a well designed plan to follow up the process and find alternatives when the targeted objectives are not achieved.

Quality assurance cannot be complete via an absolute reform strategy without a follow up process and continuous improvement [8]. A group of Iraqi and Kurdish universities are members in the Association of Arab Universities (AAU), and the Kurdistan higher education sector has great opportunities for better quality assurance strategy via cooperation with the Council of Quality Assurance and Accreditation in the AAU. Moreover, this kind of cooperation will ensure trust and international standards of quality assurance in Kurdish higher education as the AAU adopts international standards of quality assurance [4]. However, these are only four private and state Kurdish universities among the total of twenty one universities and twenty seven technical institutes and colleges are registered as members in the AAU.

One of the most important areas which might need urgent review and change in Kurdish higher education is the academic programs which are mostly over outdated and belong to the 1960s and the 1970s. Moreover, the poor quality of academic programs leads to the poor academic level of graduates and underperformance besides inactive interaction between the higher education and the society. Al-Haj et al [3] set up several steps to assess quality assurance in academic programs as follow:

- 1- Identifying the mission, vision, and objectives of the program.
- 2- Didactic programs and training to enlighten administrators and academics of the significance of academic programs.
- 3- Universities should set up standards of self assessment for the academic programs then test the programs according to these standards.
- 4- Organizing profiles for designed curricula and academic programs
- 5- The quality assurance team should report an assessment focusing on goals and outcomes of learning, program curricula, teaching and learning, teaching staff members, library, student issue, services, academic management of the program, research and collaboration, quality control and enhancement.
- 6- Documents and references to depend on for review process.
- 7- Data entry and writing up final annual report of the academic program.
- 8- Identifying standard records for the program components to find out the final level of performance which should be a minimum of %70 to be eligible to obtain quality certificate

It is worth mentioning that the AAU identified levels of quality for academic programs as from (+%90) very good to (-%60) very poor. However, the success and accuracy of this process might depend further on the quality of the available information technology, quality team's skills and experiences, accuracy and loyalty in providing the data, fund, and most importantly having the will to progress and change. Moreover, Al-Haj et al [4] introduce six methods for institutional quality assurance: self-assessment, external-assessment,

benchmarking, peer-evaluation, total quality, and accreditation. Each of these methods has its skills, requirements, goals, and outcomes which all depend on the institution's, societies, and market's needs. Undoubtedly, it is so effective to keep a cycle of the quality assurance program after drafting the plan and check out the progress and movement of this cycle regularly to identify areas of strength and weakness. Kettunen [8] keeps on the role of having the quality cycle and divide it to four main stages which are "plan, do, check, act" [8, p. 151]. Though the process is applied in higher education institutions, yet neither is comprehended nor applied on a promising level in all institutions and universities. Moreover, many academics are against carrying out further duties and responsibilities besides giving students the right to give feedback in order to participate in teachers' evaluation and curricula. Teachers believe that students are not in such a level to evaluate teachers and curricula and as if the MHESR-KRG gave more power and authority to students. Prior to the reform process, students did not have the right to give feedback or participate in the evaluation process.

According to Kettunen's cycle [8], more areas of researching would arise out of the reform process done by the MHESR-KRG to investigate if the process keeps a well designed cycle of quality assurance and to what extent the objectives are achieved and evaluated. Other areas which need further research in the Kurdish reform process is identifying whether the process was planned extensively to cover all areas in higher education at one time or it focused on prioritized areas rather than others depending on necessity and needs of the university or the institution, and assessing the level of success/failure of change in higher education sector in relationship with a centralized and hierarchical government. However, there are many other obstacles to continue this process like politics, changing the government cabinet, lack of experiences, lack of international cooperation, none or poor follow up, and poor management of the process. The reform process could be the beginning to build national quality assurance if the platform was built successfully. Moreover, establishing a national quality assurance could be the point to open towards international quality assurance and seek investment and trade opportunities in higher education. This model of international quality assurance exploding from national quality assurance is the most desirable model for quality assurance because it provides many opportunities for development and progress to cope with globalization tendencies [2].

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