The Quality of Higher Education in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

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Abstract

The higher education sector in Kurdistan Region of Iraq has expanded rapidly in the last 14 years, but there has been only limited quality control of the higher education system. This exploratory study examines the perceptions of university representatives about the quality of higher education in the Region. It explores the higher education system from the perspective of the academic staff and university leaders, with a focus on evaluating the system's quality. The findings from the analysis of a quantitative online questionnaire survey carried out in four public universities in the region are presented and discussed, comparing the responses from different groups of respondents. The survey used closed questions, although respondents could add open-ended textual comments at the end of the questionnaire. The sample population compromised of 703 participants, but responses were received from only 123 participants (17%). The survey included the following dimensions of quality: teaching; leadership; facilities; funding and employability. The results demonstrate that the majority of respondents were critical of the higher education system in the region. Less than 15% of respondents had positive perception about the current higher education systems, and more than 60% were negative. Furthermore, the leadership of the universities were also dissatisfied with both higher education system and their own role. All respondents expressed a clear desire for more focus and more research on this important topic.

Keywords: Higher Education, quality factors, Iraq, Kurdistan Region, research study and methodology

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1. Introduction

For the last few years, we have been witnessing a state of political unrest, wars and significant social challenges in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region in general, and in Iraq in particular. These may have various reasons, but a low quality of higher education (HE) system in the region seems to be one of the main reasons. In spite of the fact that the region has witnessed a rapid expansion in the HE sector, including private and branch campuses of overseas institutions, for the last two decades, most of the governments have failed to offer a good quality education which can equip students with the knowledge and skills needed in the job market. In other words, the universities have not been able to play their role in the society successfully, neither in terms of providing skilled graduates nor in leading the changes in the region. Despite an increasing investment in this sector for the last two decades, the MENA region is still facing serious challenges which have negative impact on social and economic growth, such as high youth unemployment and a skills mismatch. According to Issa and Jamil[1], factors responsible for the decline in quality of HE in Iraq (of which KRI is part of) are evident in 'the low level of financing, lack of minimum standards in the form of teaching-learning materials (such as textbooks, libraries, laboratories), deteriorating infrastructure, out-dated curricula, and overcrowding'. Moreover, poorly trained, demoralised and unmotivated staff members are other factors influencing the low quality of HE. In addition, a lack of emphasis on analysis, synthesis or other forms of knowledge application in teaching is other important factors behind the decline in the quality.

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[1] Issa, J.H. and Jamil, H. (2010), 'Overview of the Education System in Contemporary Iraq', European Journal of Social Sciences – Volume 14, Number 3 (2010).

Issa and Jamil[2] concluded that 'innovation and initiatives to improve quality outside the rigid state-run education system were generally not encouraged'.

The situation of HE sector in Kurdistan Region of Iraq is not an exception from the other countries in the MENA region, and it faces almost the same educational challenges as in MENA countries most importantly; an increasing number of students seeking places in HE; a high rate of graduate unemployment; and low quality of HE[3]. Unfortunately, there is a very limited research on HE in Kurdistan, but due to similarities in both challenges, culture and history of HE in Iraq and KRI on one side and other countries in the MENA region on other side, most of the above mentioned facts can also be valid for KRI. Therefore, in this article we will refer to some studies on the HE situation in MENA region. In the research project described in this article, we investigate the quality of HE in Kurdistan Region, which has so far been an under-researched topic. In other words, there is a gap in this field of research related to Kurdistan, which this exploratory study seeks to address. The research presents the perspective of academic staff and university leaders on different aspects of the quality of HE system in the region based on the findings from a questionnaire survey. The focus of the research was the governance of HEIs in Kurdistan, and it is designed to gain the perspectives of institutional practitioners on system level governance issues, rather than their own institutional practice. Dimensions of quality related to the HE system in Kurdistan are many and varied, but in this study we focused only a few of these that are related the policy agenda described above, namely – teaching, graduates, facilities, funding and leadership – although

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[2] Ibid.
[3] Al Masah Capital (2014) 'MENA education sector'. http://www.alnajaheducation.com/resources/MENA_Education_Report_2014.pdf and Devarajan, S. (2016) 'The paradox of higher education in MENA'. https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2016/06/27/the-paradox-of- higher-education-in-mena/

we recognised that each of these issues could have been considered as a separate research area related to the quality of HE in the Region.

2. An Overview of Higher Education in Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)

Higher education in the Kurdistan region is highly valued and it plays an ever-important role in the region society although it is young. Until 1992, only one university existed in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), and therefore the higher education system is considered relatively new. Since then, the government's expansion policy has provided huge investment in the sector focused on opening new higher education institutions. Today, there are 15 publics and 14 private universities in the KRI. The government has also invested to improve the quality of HE and introduced a comprehensive system of quality assurance and accreditation in 2010. This includes performance assessment of all teaching staff and universities which later became the basis for the annual ranking of KRI universities (Ala-Aldeen, 2017)[4]. Despite this investment, largely due to persistent political and economic crises, the quality of HE in the region has been declining.

By HE system we mean everything that combines to educate university students, such as; policies, regulations, laws, resource allocations, human resources, physical facilities and learning materials. Our definition of 'quality' related to a HE system is where it equips students with the knowledge, skills and transformable competences they need to succeed after graduation within a high-quality learning environment which recognises and supports good teaching (European commission website). Anecdotally, the quality of HE in Kurdistan Region is perceived to be low for a range of reasons, and most of academic staff and

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[4] Ala'Aldeen, D., (2017) 'Universities are rising from ruins of war', MERI, Policy Brief, vol. 4, no. 08.

university leaders are critical to the HE system. This view comes partially because the region's HE lacks appropriate strategies to serve both academia and community, and because it doesn't fulfil the needs of Region's current or future labour market. As in many MENA countries, budget shortfalls and ineffective budget allocation combine to create a significant problem within the HE system in KRI.

The policy agenda related to HE in Kurdistan focuses on improving the standard of universities overall through an emphasis on quality improvement in curriculum design and in approaches to teaching and learning. This is highlighted in a report on HE called 'The Roadmap to Quality: Reforming the System of HE and Scientific Research in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq' in which 'reforming teaching to endure quality' is the main component (Ala'Aldeen, 2009)[5]. The mechanisms to ensure this comprise teaching quality assurance (TQA), curriculum development, continuous academic development (CAD), assessment of teachers' portfolio and licensing and accreditation (Palander, 2013)[6]. The axis of the reform which started in 2009 can be summarised into; education (quality assurance), research (linking universities with international research centres), diversifying investment (private universities), organisation (autonomous universities), administration (bureaucracy) and human rights (health and social justice).

2.1. Challenges to higher education quality

With the region's steadily growing of its youth population, the demand for educational services has put immense pressure on existing HEIs. Therefore, improving the quality of HE which is a huge challenge and pressing issue for the current and future KRI, must be top

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[5]Ala'Aldeen, D., (2009) 'A Vision to the Future of Higher Education and Scientific Research in Kurdistan Region of Iraq - Quality is our Top Priority'. http://www.mhe-krg.org/node/3325

[6] Palander, N (2013), 'Higher Education policy-building in Kurdistan region of Iraq: perceptions of university representatives', (MA thesis, University of Toronto), 2013.

priority of the region although the region is struggling to find balance between access, quality and costs. Furthermore, the dual challenge of quality and relevance must be considered in any reform to be conducted in HE (Hoel, 2014)[7]. These and other challenges facing HEIs in the region are discussed further in the following.

2.1.1 Political instability

Among the many challenges facing HEIs in the Kurdistan region is the political instability, as the result of central governments' budget cut of the region since 2014, ISIS war and the referendum which is the most recent one. It has created new challenges for HEI's budget, research as well as development of HE facilities. The political unrest has also impacted negatively on private investment in HE sector. The private investment helps the sector to accommodate the increasing number of students, and it can also offer a better quality of HE.

Political instability and lack of jobs have also resulted in brain drain which in turn has affected the development in the region for a long time. This was emphasised by an Algerian HE expert when he said "the best lecturers leave for more lucrative activities locally or are attracted by international careers abroad [USA, UK, Canada and other Western countries]"[8].

2.1.2. Growing student enrolment

The region experiences an education transition where the number of potential students is increasing substantially, especially due to having huge number of IDPs in KRI lately. This is leading to growing demand for HE which in turn is leading to political challenges in the

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[7] Hoel, A. (2014) 'Education in the Middle East and North Africa'. The World Bank. http://www.worldbank.org/en/region/mena/brief/education-in-menaJanuary.

[8] Sawahel, W. (2014a) 'Advancing Research in Higher Education in the Arab World – Time for Action'.http://www.cli-cks.com/wp- content/uploads/2015/08/CLICKS_Insider_Mar.pdf(Assessed: 4 March 2014)

region. Statistics from Bank Group Region[9] indicate a rapid increase in the gross enrolment rate in HE in the MENA region for the last two decades; e.g. 15.7% (1995), 20.0% (2000), 23.3% (2005) and 31% (2010). By a higher proportion of students transitioning from secondary to HE, the pressure on HE system to ensure quality and equitable access has increased. Furthermore, the forecast for this enrolment rates seems to continue at about the same rate over the next ten years, but in contrast, public expenditure on HE has not been increasing at the same rate as enrolment[10]. Moreover, the Bank Group Region Report states that "the rapid growth of demand for HE presents challenges for delivering quality in teaching and learning". This is partly due to increasing size of classes and teaching loads which pushes the institutions to hire staff with lower academic qualifications. Expansion of private universities, have helped to meet some of the increased demand, but they often pose quality concerns.[11] Looking at HE from gender point of view, literature shows that access for women has expanded rapidly across the region. In some regions women are overrepresented in HE[12]. One can conclude that the challenge goes beyond the expansion of enrolment opportunities in order to keep pace with growing social demand in the region. According to the Arab Knowledge Index report "the real challenge is higher education's inability to provide relevant and quality services [student and faculty support] that keep pace with the

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[9] Arab Knowledge Index (2015). Dubai, UAE in
http://www.knowledge4all.com/uploads/files/AKI2015/PDFEn/AKI2015_Full_En.pdf

[10] ICEF Monitor (2016b) 'A regional perspective on student recruitment in MENA'. http://monitor.icef.com/2016/07/regional-perspective-student-recruitment-mena/

[11] Economist Intelligence Unit (2014) 'Creative Productivity Index: Analysing Creativity and Innovation in Asia'. The Economist Intelligence Unit for the Asian Development Bank cited in www.adb.org/sites/default/les/publication/59586/creative-productivity-index_0.pdf (November 15, 2015)

[12] Robert J.Barro and Jong WhaLee in "A new data set of educational attainment in the world, 1950–2010", *Journal of Development Economics*, Volume 104, September 2013, Pages 184-198.

actual human capital requirements of economic development"[13]. Further, the report indicates that HEIs produce many graduates who have no access to real work opportunities, while labour market is in need for graduates in many disciplines such as engineering and management.

2.1.3. Infrastructure

Lack of infrastructure (physical, virtual and social learning environment) to provide quality learning environment for accommodation of increasing enrolment is another challenge which many HEIs face in the region. Therefore, there is a need to invest in educating future generations to ensure growth and maintain social stability. KRI needs to follow Gulf States in committing large funds toward the development of educational infrastructure in the coming years. It is worth mentioning that, the quality of education in the MENA region has remained below global standards despite high spending on education by respective MENA governments except in the UAE and Saudi Arabia[14]. The reason behind this can be many; traditional teaching methods, lack of research and absence of cooperation between HEIs and industry or job market[15].

2.1.4. Skills mismatch

Increasing employability of graduates is another challenge for KRI, simply because unemployment is high among graduates of HEIs. The Economist Intelligence Unit (2014) explains the reason partly to be discrepancy between the kind of skills needed in the labour

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[13] Arab Knowledge Index (2015). Dubai, UAE in
http://www.knowledge4all.com/uploads/files/AKI2015/PDFEn/AKI2015_Full_En.pdf, p.59.

[14] Al Masah Capital (2016) 'MENA education report'.
http://almasahcapital.com/uploads/report/pdf/report_89.pdf

[15] Diab, N.M.(2015) 'Teaching the skills for a global future'. University World News Global Edition Issue 377 in http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20150726091208685

market and the graduates with no adequate skills such as soft skills or technical skills in different disciplines. It is further argued that this gap results from the low quality of HE and the mismatch between skilled labour supply and demand, with some working fields facing shortages while others have too many graduates. The latter can be due the limited student numbers in some disciplines such as engineering, administration and medicine in some cases, but it can also be that the employers can't find qualified graduates to the available jobs.

According to several HE experts interviewed by Sawahel (2014a)[16], this problem is partly due to the out-dated or totally irrelevant curricula in terms of the job market. The outcome of this trend of education is masses of graduates being unemployed or employed in jobs unrelated to their University studies. According to a report in (www.Informchat.com), 71% of employers in the region are concerned that the HE system in their country has failed to graduate students with the right skills required for the job market. It reported further that 32% and near 50% of students from UAE and Saudi Arabia respectively shared the same concern and believed that they were not equipped with the right training and skills required to operate within their chosen career. Furthermore, in a keynote speech given in a conference in Algiers in 2016, it was said that "employers in the region complain that university graduates lack the skills needed to work in the global marketplace"[17]. This mismatch has led to a high unemployment rate among the graduates in the KRI, and even when there are jobs available they remain unfilled for the same reasons mentioned above.

Other problems facing HE in the region include accessibility, quality, lack of research and publications, and low level of faculty and student mobility and innovation. Due to the high

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[16] Sawahel, W. (2014a) 'Advancing Research in Higher Education in the Arab World – Time for Action'. http://www.cli-cks.com/wp- content/uploads/2015/08/CLICKS_Insider_Mar.pdf (Assessed: 4 March 2014)

[17] Devarajan, S. (2016) 'The paradox of higher education in MENA'. https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2016/06/27/the-paradox-of- higher-education-in-mena/

number of registered students, the problem of accessibility is increasing in spite of the efforts made by the KRG to keep up in term of funding and infrastructure. Poor quality programmes offered by the universities and weak assessment are other concerns in HE. Usually these are measured by the QA body in the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Affairs in KRI.

KRG's population is very young, with about 50% of residents aged 20 years old or younger (KRG, 2014). According to Save the Children (2015), as this young population reaches working age, "it is estimated that over the next 20 years between 850,000 and 1.1 million new workers will enter the labour market; in other terms, an average of 43,000 to 54,000 jobs per year will be needed to keep pace with changing demographics". According to the statistics from the Ministry of Planning in Kurdistan Region, the unemployment rate before 2013 was only 6.5%, which is not low but compares favourably with most countries of the Middle East region, but it increased to 14% in 2014 (RUND, 2014). This rate further increased, especially among youth and women; to 29.4% among women and 9.7% among men in 2016. Furthermore, youth unemployment (15-24) for female youth was very high in 2014, at 48.9 percent, compared to 12.8 percent for young men. This increased further to 69% for female and 24% for female in 2016. The reasons behind high unemployment rate among university graduates can be manifold such as lack of growth of the private sector, and therefore majority of the graduates are employed at the public sector. This feature can have had an impact on the quality of HE simply because the public sector doesn't require the same graduate skills as in the private sector. Another controversial reason behind this problem was the pricing of university education "because free education gives weak incentives to improve the quality of University Education".[18]

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[18] Devarajan, S. (2016) 'The paradox of higher education in MENA'. https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2016/06/27/the-paradox-of- higher-education-in-mena/

2.1.5. Research in Higher Education

Research has not become the priority of HEIs in Kurdistan region, and overall there is a weak institutional engagement and investment in research, and funding is extremely low on research. According to Sawahel (2014b)[19], one of the main reasons behind poor performance of HEIs in terms of knowledge and technology is the lack of research in HE as well as knowledge dissemination tools in the region. This was also reflected very well in the search for literature on the topic of this research work. Therefore, the KRI needs to focus on advancing research studies in HE, including a research focus on quality and entrepreneurship education. The way forward is to establish a network of researchers and scholars in the field of HE studies.

2.1.6. Governance and accountability

Good governance is a major element in improving the quality of HE (Zaman, 2015)[20]. Furthermore, to bring about a balance between autonomy and accountability, the role of quality in education should be brought to the foreground. Institutional governance seems to gaining importance in KRI, but increasing enrolment and thereby expansion of the HE sector is putting extra pressure on the governance systems for HE in the region. Depending on the type of institutions (public, private), the HEIs have a certain degree of autonomy, but the institutions face challenges of leadership, financial management and strategic direction. There is need for stronger measures to improve governance and thereby to improve the quality of HE, and to increase competitiveness and employability of graduates.

Political interference in university affairs is a serious problem facing the governance of HE

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[19] Sawahel, W. (2014a) 'Advancing Research in Higher Education in the Arab World – Time for Action'. http://www.cli-cks.com/wp- content/uploads/2015/08/CLICKS_Insider_Mar.pdf (Assessed: 4 March 2014)

[20] Zaman, K. (2015) 'Quality guidelines for good governance in higher education across the globe', Volume 1, Issue 1, January 2015, http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.psrb.2016.01.001

institutions in the region. Any political interference will have a negative impact on quality of HE, simply because the decisions have to serve the politicians before it serves HEIs. According to Sawahel (2014b); "there is a need to take politics out of universities, which should remain sanctuaries of knowledge diffusion and research only. Total academic freedom should be given to universities to be innovative and to respond adequately to the economic and social needs of their countries and their populations".[21] Finally, it is essential that universities are enabled to operate more soundly and effectively. The HE system faces serious challenges with internal efficiency such as student retention, student support, and time to degree completion. Moreover, many institutions lack the capacity to address many of these critical variables which affecting internal efficiency. As an illustration, the rapidly increasing enrolments have had negative impact on student progress toward successful degree completion.

2.1.7. Educational quality

Improving the quality of HE is a necessary element for the foundation of a successful society, and it can play a major role in solving many problems that KRI is now facing. According to the MENA Education Report (2016), most governments in the MENA region, realizing their education system was faulty and not giving the desired results, have taken serious steps and announced large spends on education infrastructure to improve quality. However, the low quality of HE has not been improved, resulting in relatively high unemployment rates across the region, because low quality in HE has a direct impact on the employability of graduates.[22] The report suggests high level of public-private participation, and access to high-quality

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[21] Sawahel, W. (2014b) 'HE challenges in the Middle East and North Africa'. Issue No:302. http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20140109111922940

[22] Kjerfve, B. (2014) 'Op-ed: The State of Higher Education in the Middle East, Documenting change, challenges and an undeniable opportunity'' in http://www.usnews.com/news/college-of-tomorrow/articles/2014/12/17/op-ed-the-state-of-higher-education-in-the-middle-east

educationists to be given top priority in the coming years. Devarajan suggested that the "universities should be given incentives to invest in higher quality education, and students should have an incentive to demand higher quality instruction".[23] As HE systems expand worldwide, they face increased challenges to sustain the quality of teaching and academic research. A report compiled by the World Bank Group and the Independent Evaluation Group (2015) revealed that the World Bank and the International Finance Corporation (IFC) have invested heavily in promoting quality of HE in the region. However, it is still not clear what approaches and interventions have been effective and how their support for HE might better contribute to its development objectives. This can be due to what have been mentioned earlier, namely the lack of data on HEIs in the region.

2.2 The need for reform in higher education

The HE has the potential to create new and better quality employment as well as to contribute to economic transformation. In addition, the development of a country's HE system can have a positive impact on social equity, political stability, and regional development.[24] As it was indicated earlier, like many other regions in the world such as Latin America, South and Southeast Asia and Tropical Africa, the KRI suffers from mismatch between HE systems and the skills and qualification needed for the job market. This is not new information, but it is rather an indication to a continuously growing problem which needs to be dealt with more seriously. Acknowledging all the previous mentioned challenges facing HEIs in the region, extensive efforts are needed to improve this sector. In an interview with University World News, Manar Sabry, an Egyptian HE expert at the State University of New York in the

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[23] Devarajan, S. (2016) 'The paradox of higher education in MENA'. https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2016/06/27/the-paradox-of- higher-education-in-mena/

[24] Word Bank Group and Independent Evaluation Group (2015) 'Accelerating Growth through Skills and Knowledge: An Evaluation of the World Bank Group's Support for Higher Education'. Approach Paper, World Bank, IFC and MIGA. https://ieg.worldbankgroup.org/Data/reports/approach_paper_higher_education.pdf

United States (Sawahel, 2014a), stated that "the MENA region must move to an aggressive agenda of reform more like a real revolution in the [higher] education system in order to accumulate serious improvements and to guarantee high quality education in order for graduates to compete in the job market".[25] A reform must include, among others, a higher level of autonomy, and less political involvement in their work. Furthermore, ICT should be utilized at all levels in administration, teaching and research work. In addition, internship and cooperation with industry are needed. Universities need to be enabled to operate more effectively. To sum up, the key to long-term regional stability is providing the youth with an education that gives them an opportunity for decent jobs and secure futures.[26] Moreover, the consequences of delaying HE reform in KRI are alarming, the best and brightest students, academics and professionals will continue to migrate. In the following the research on quality of higher education in KRI, as it is a part of Iraq and MENA region, will be presented.

3. Research questions

The research study was guided by the main research question: '*What is the perspective of university leaders and academic staff of universities on quality of HE in the Kurdistan Region?*' and three sub-questions:

- Is Kurdistan Region's HE system suffering from a weak or insufficient competence?
- Is the Region's HE equipped with necessary physical infrastructure and tools to serve the learning environment?
- What are the main issues or challenges currently confronting the Kurdistan Region's HE system?

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[25] Sawahel, W. (2014a) 'Advancing Research in Higher Education in the Arab World – Time for Action'. http://www.cli-cks.com/wp- content/uploads/2015/08/CLICKS_Insider_Mar.pdf (Assessed: 4 March 2014)
[26] Rubin, A. (2012) 'Higher Education Reform in the Arab World: The Model of Qatar'. Middle East Institute in http://www.mei.edu/content/higher-education-reform-arab-world-model-qatar (Assessed: 32 July 2012).

To investigate these questions, empirical research was conducted amongst the academic staff including the leadership of higher education institutions (HEIs) in the region. The perspective of the academic staff might be different than the university leaders, as most leaders of HEIs in Kurdistan are appointed by politicians to their positions rather than elected. Therefore, these groups were considered both together and separately in the research. A questionnaire survey was distributed in four public universities across Kurdistan Region; the University of Duhok, the University of Zakho, the University of Salahaddin and Koya University. The questionnaire was sent via email, and the participants received both a letter (as an attachment) and a link to the questionnaire (which was hosted online since), which was more economical in term of time and money. The letter explained the purpose of the questionnaire, and ethical issues related to anonymity and confidentiality.

4. Research methodology

There are many different ways in which the quality of HE system in the KRI could be evaluated, but a key consideration was how to ensure valid and truthful answers to politically-sensitive questions. For this research project, a quantitative research approach was chosen using a closed-ended self-administered online questionnaire. The findings were more likely to be reliable than for a qualitative approach because it could be conducted anonymously, encouraging greater honesty. A survey is a useful method for gathering factual information and opinion. A structured questionnaire was also used in which participants are asked to give their perceptions based on their knowledge of the KRI HE sector. The questionnaire was structured into three sections. Firstly there were four demographic questions, focused on the respondent's role, gender, age, and their education level. The second part of the questionnaire focused on the different elements of the KRI HE system. Some issues were asked about in different ways, to test the consistency of responses. For example, interviewees were asked "how prepared are the teaching staff in terms of scientific

knowledge and ability to get students engaged and involved in a constructive learning?" and in another question they were asked" how well equipped is the teaching environment in Kurdistan Region in terms of modern technologies (internet, library, electronic education, etc.)?". Such comparison helped to test whether the interviewees provided reliable answers. This is called triangulation of questions which, nowadays are used in many academic research projects and help in preventing the provision of random answers at no significant cost to the project.[27]

The research questionnaire contained twenty-two different closed-ended questions in which the participants were asked to indicate their best answer within 5 different options using a five item Likert-type scale. The items were scored equally, were designed to be simple to understand, and used a scale with a low or negative position at the bottom and a higher or more positive position at the top.[28] For example, in one of questions related to the "HE level of fulfilment of the market needs" the answers ranged from A (not fulfilling at all - lowest score) to E (fulfilling very well - highest score).

The third section of the questionnaire contained an open question requesting "further comments". Adding such section to our questionnaire was designed to gain a deeper insight into - and more detailed information on - the region's HE from the respondents. Also, it will give the participants a chance to provide their input on the subject matter, which in identified some other important elements not covered by the other questions.

4.1. Sample population and sampling approach

[27] Yeasmin, S., Rahman, K. F. (2012) 'Triangulation' Research Method as the Tool of Social Science Research', Bup Journal, Volume 1, Issue 1, September 2012, ISSN: 2219-4851.

[28] Bertram, D. (2003) 'Likert Scales', CPSC 681 – Topic Report in http://poincare.matf.bg.ac.rs/~kristina/topic-dane-likert.pdf

Since objective of the research project was to evaluate the quality of HE and determine the shortcoming or problems within the system we considered it important to seek the expert perspectives of the people who are, or were, most directly involved in the HE system of the Kurdistan Region. These we people who have been working at a range of academic institutions, HE experts, and high-ranking employees at the universities and in the Ministry of HE and Scientific Research in the Region. To limit the present research project, the latter group was not included. We followed a purposive and non-probabilistic sampling approach and the sample population comprised four universities in Kurdistan Region, to whom the researchers had easy access. Access was gained through researcher's personal contacts with "gatekeepers" in four targeted universities: Duhok, Salahaddin, Zakho and Koya. The chosen universities which are located in two of the total three governorates of the Kurdistan region, enrol 55-60% of total number of students (and of academic staff) and represented different types of university in terms of focus and student population.

The survey invitation was sent to 703 academic staff and university leaders with academic degrees; MSc/MA, PhD and MBD (assistant lecturer, lecturers, assistant professors and professors). The sample frame included the majority of university leaders in each institution compromising of all heads of departments, deans, vice deans, vice rectors and rectors. These groups were considered to be the well experienced and familiar with the HE system. The target sample 511 academic staff and 192 university leaders who were contacted via email and directed to the questionnaire which was in English and located on an online portal (Google Forms). There are only around 200 university departments the KIR in total, so almost all the academic leaders and head of departments were included in the sample population.

A brief covering letter explained the research and its purpose clearly and introduced the researchers Duhok, Salahaddin, Zakho and Koya. The participants self-administrated the survey and entered their own data. The research was also anonymous, meaning that that the researcher received data with no trace of the respondent. The data gathered were analysed using the Google Forms platform to identify patterns in the data and to compare the perspective of different subgroups of respondents. In parallel to the empirical research, we also undertook some desk research using academic reports and other literature on the KRI HE system. Although this was not a comprehensive analysis of the status of the HE system in Kurdistan Region, it helped to contextualise the survey's findings.

4.2. Ethical considerations

The online questionnaire was distributed to respondents' Ethical approval for the study was providing Kingston University's Centre for Higher Education Research and Practice Research Ethics Committee (CREC). Educational research is often sensitive, and this requires behaving ethically, especially when it comes to sampling and access.[29] The research project was not a particularly sensitive politically or ideologically, but was instead a professional and academic topic of interest mainly to academia, but also government and young students.

The project was unlikely to have caused any harm or negative effect on the participants, and in fact they could benefit from the findings of the research since they are also part of the HE system. Publication of the findings will help the government, academia and public to make better planning and decision making.

Furthermore, it was expected that the participants would be more thoughtful about dealing with the research in general and answering the research questions, especially because they are

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[29] Cohen, L., Manion, L., Morrison, K. (2013), 'Research Methods in Education', Book, Routledge, 2013, p.165.

academics themselves, and the subject is of fundamental interest for them. Nevertheless, there were some political sensitivity and some respondents might have been more cautious in their responses. Unless this the focus of the research considered as a political issue by the governing political party in HE, appearance of the name of the university was not considered to be a problem in this context of this research.

An online anonymous questionnaire poses a minimal risk to participants, and all respondents could provide their informed consent by reviewing the participant information and then submitting the survey.

The study was not completely anonymous since the lead researcher was able identify the university a respondent belongs to, and for some roles there is only one person in each University. However, all data was treated confidentially, and the lead researcher was the only person who had access to the information received, which was stored securely on a computer with and encrypted password. The research did not seek private information about the participants such as their name, address. Respondents were also assured that the data was aggregated and would not be analyses at the level of an individual case. Although the lead researcher is a lecturer and a member of the Kurdistan Region's HE system, this was not used to influence the research, and neither the researcher nor his affiliated organizations had any direct or indirect financial interests in this project. The project also did not involve any payments or rewards to participants.

5. Research findings

Out of 703 people who were invited to complete the survey, the total number of responses was only 123, which is 17.5% of participants. A demographic analysis shows that 74.8% of respondents were male, 23.6% were female and 1.6% preferred to not mention their sex. The female participation matches very well with the current number of academic female staff

currently working in HEIs in Kurdistan, which is about 28%. Almost a third (32.5%) of sample population were university leaders (president, vice-president, dean or head of department), and the rest were academic staff (lecturer or/and researchers) working in the four universities. Furthermore, two thirds of respondents had more than ten years of experience in HE, and 59.3% had a PhD. This profile analysis provides an indication that, in terms of their demographic profile, survey participants were broadly representative of HE in Kurdistan, and thus able to provide reliable insights into quality of higher education in the region.

The breakdown of survey participants across the four universities was; Duhok University 40.6%, Salahaddin University 30.1%, Koya University 24.4% and Zakho University 4.9%. Unfortunately, this does not match with their relative size, and the implications for this imbalance for the findings are that comparison between the perceptions of different universities will be difficult. The highest level of participation was from Duhok University. This might be because the researcher has worked in the administration of this institution for many years, and he is a well-known member of staff at the university. An interesting observation from the respondent profile is the relatively high participation of the leadership of the four universities.

The questionnaire contained 22 questions categorised into six main dimensions of quality; HE system, teaching, graduates, facilities, leadership and funding. We will try to analyse the collected data within these categorise. The results showed that only 13.8% of total respondents were satisfied with the quality of the HE system in the region, and 62.6% were definitely not satisfied. The rest (23.6%) answered "maybe" to the question. Table 1 shows the comparison between the perspectives of the two groups, and demonstrate that 12.5% (5) university leaders were satisfied, but that 14.5% of academic staff was satisfied. For an

education system which has such a high level of discontent or dissatisfaction among its own leaders and academic staff, this must send a signal for the top-level policy makers that change is needed at the system level.

	Respondents	Satisfied	Maybe	Unsatisfied
Academic staff	83	14.5%	22.9%	62.6%
University leaders	40	12.5%	25.0%	62.5%
Sample population	123	13.2%	24.3%	62.5%

Table 1 Comparison between perspectives of academic staff and university leadership on the quality of HE system in Kurdistan Region

Furthermore, the results show that respondents perceive the system to very fixed, as 86.2% of respondents expressed that there is not much freedom to make necessary changes for improving the quality of graduates. Student engagement in active learning has been a subject of interest for the HE authorities in Kurdistan for the last 8 years, and it has been emphasised as a part of the reform process in student centred learning. When answering the question about how students are engaged in an active and participative learning program, 52% of respondents thought that the students were "little engaged", and only 6.5% thought that the students were "engaged enough" compared with 13.8% who thought that students were not engaged at all. Moreover, 31.7% of respondents blamed the teaching staff for not being prepared in terms of their scientific knowledge and their ability to get students engaged and involved in a constructive learning. Only 17.8% of respondents thought the opposite, and 50.4% of the respondents considered the level of knowledge of teaching staff on these issues to be "average". Furthermore, only 11.2% of respondents thought that the academic staff in Kurdistan Region were well connected to academic research and its practical application, whilst 43.1% didn't think that this was the case, whilst 43.9% of considered their level of engagement to be "average". Respondents were divided on the accuracy of course books or [relevance of] teaching materials prepared by the teaching staff and 38.2% of respondents

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replied "average" on this question. Another important aspect of HE examined in this study was whether the academic disciplines are fulfilling employers' current skill needs in Kurdistan. Only 15.4% thought that they were fulfilling these 'very well'/'bit' and 53.9% reported that they did not fulfilling the skills needs enough/at all. This is similar to the general trend in MENA region, and it poses as one of the main problems in the whole region. This feedback is also supported by the responses to another question on how optimistic the students are in finding their preferred employment/career after graduation. The majority (80.5%) of respondents' answers confirmed that students were unoptimistic about finding preferred career, and only 4.9% thought that the students were optimistic about their future career. Here it is worth mentioning that, as this question is asking the academics to understand what students are thinking, it may not be as reliable as the answers to the other questions.

The current learning *environment* in terms of physical and structural facilities (such as classroom, teaching environment, library or leisure structures), the *teaching environment* in term of modern learning technologies and the *comfort* in terms of density and facility accessibilities in HEIs were other questions that were double checked. The responses to these questions showed the same trend in all these issues and there was a clear consistency in the answers. The ratio varies between 50.4% and 63.4% of respondents in terms of how uncomfortable the latter were with the facilities and equipment in the HE institution in the KRI. Only 21% of the participants were happy with the existing physical infrastructure, which plays an important role in creating learning environment in any educational institution, and less than 15% were comfortable with the quality and amount of the equipment that is available in HEIs. This situation is likely to have a negative impact on the quality of education delivered in these four HEIs.

In a question about the role of HE leadership, more than 50% of respondents expressed that HE leaders in Kurdistan were not well connected to what is happening in the departments and classrooms, and only 8.6% of them thought that the leadership was well connected and 7.5% thought that they were very well-connected (see Table 2). Furthermore, only 15.7% of respondents assess the *quality of HE leadership and administration* as appropriate, even though 32.5% of the total respondents were university leaders. Of this group, 65% of leaders thought that the HE leadership and administration was poor or very poor. This reveals the fact that even the leaders consider their own institutions to be badly led.

	Respondents	**Good/very good**	**Average**	**Bad/very bad**
Academic staff	83	10.9%	30.1%	59.0%
University leaders	40	7.5%	45.0%	47.5%
Sample population	123	8.6%	40.2%	51.2%

Table 2 Comparison between perspectives of academic staff and university leadership on how well the HE leadership in Kurdistan is connected to what is happening in the departments and in the classrooms

	Respondents	**Poor/very poor**	**Average**	**Appropriate**
Academic staff	83	62.7%	9.6%	27.7%
University leaders	40	65.0%	25.0%	10.0%
Sample population	123	64.3%	20.0%	15.7%

Table 3 Comparison between perspectives of academic staff and university leadership on the quality of HE leadership and administration in Kurdistan Region

Public HEIs in Kurdistan are directly funded by the government, and public funding is almost the only income source for universities. The appropriateness of the government's budget allocation for HE, especially for future academic improvements scored very low; 75.6% of respondents answered that the budget was not appropriate, and only 6.5% thought that it was appropriate. A similar picture emerged on the question about 'how good the funds are to

promote motivational teaching in Kurdistan'; about 60% of respondents thought that the funding was inappropriate and only 8.9% thought the opposite. These answers were confirmed when respondents provided their perceptions about 'how prepared the HE system was for the future of economic need'; over 75% of respondents scored this question as very low. How thoughtful and well the programmes and academic disciplines were designed in Kurdistan Region was another question which divided the respondents almost equally between 'bad' and 'average', and only 17.1% thought it was good. The quality of continuous academic education in HEIs, was another issue which again scored low; only 21.2% were happy with it, and 46.3% thought it was 'bad/very bad'. The recruitment process for teaching staff in HEIs was scored as following; 13.0% 'very bad', 26.8% 'bad', 52.0% 'average', 7.3% 'well' and 0.8% 'very good. In the last question on how appropriate and strong the international relationships are within the HEIs in Kurdistan Region is, most of the respondents were not happy; over 50% thought it was 'weak/very weak' and only 12.2% thought that there were good relationships. The final open-question allowed the respondents to express or add any extra comments. There were 21 comments, and many of them expressed the need for more research in this field.

6. Conclusion

As mentioned in the introduction, anecdotally the quality of HE in Kurdistan Region is perceived to be low, and most academic staff - and other university staff - are critical to the HE system. The general perception of the academic staff and university leaders who participated in this survey confirm this perception based on empirical data. The five items in Likert-type questions in this research were scaled from negative stand to positive stance, and the analysis of the survey results shows that all the questions, with no exceptions, were scored low or very low by respondents. This provides a strong message from the academic

staff and university leaders which are the most experienced staff of HE in Kurdistan to sector leaders, which needs to be taken seriously, although there is a need for more research on this issue before it can be generalised across the region's HE sector .

The comparison between the perception of the two groups, the academic staff and the university leaders, demonstrated that the university leaders were more critical of the role of the leadership of HEIs than the academic staff. The same is true about their perspective on the quality of HE system in Kurdistan. Such feedback signalises the fact that both groups agree on the current problems facing HE in the region. This perception might partially be influenced from the lack of appropriate strategies in HE to serve academia and community, and that it does not really fulfil the needs of the today and future market in the Region.

The questionnaire considered different relevant issues related to the quality of HE in the region, however these were too general and any of these aspects could form the basis of a separate research topic in the future. Unfortunately, due to the lack of research in these areas in Kurdistan, it is not possible to make any comparison with the results of this study. There is a huge gap in research on leadership, funding, teaching and learning, graduate skills, physical facilities of the universities, etc. These are all relevant research areas, but the most relevant research topic for the researcher is physical infrastructure of universities campuses in Kurdistan region. This issue is important as it influences the learning environment and thus the quality of teaching, learning and research in addition to engagement in the surrounded community.

Since the number of respondents form different universities does not match with their relative size, the universities cannot be compared for their responses. This is unfortunate for the generalisability of the findings from this research, but perhaps could be remedied for any

future surveys by using a more stratified sampling approach, or by seeking to elicit an equal level response from all sample institutions.

At the end of the questionnaire, more than 20 respondents commented on the current situation of HE in Kurdistan, in which they mainly elaborated on the reasons behind such a low scoring in the questionnaire. In these comments, the respondents confirmed the low quality of HE in Kurdistan, and argued that there were several issues which underpin this perception. These focused on the lack of government funding, and the poor quality of practical education, staff development programs, the learning and research environment, and laboratory equipment and research. Furthermore, corruption, political interference and heavy bureaucracy in the system were mentioned as other obstacles to improving the HE sector. These comments confirm the consistency and the results of the closed ended questions.

In an attempt to remedy the pressing issue of low quality in higher education, the policy makers in KRG have to recognize the immediacy of addressing the problem by introducing radical reforms and initiatives. This includes improving the quality of education, promoting entrepreneurship, innovation and problem- solving skills in addition to allowing the faculty and students to explore new ideas.

Finally, it would be helpful if further qualitative research (e.g. in-depth interviews) could be undertaken to better understand the perspectives and thoughts of the leadership of the HEIs, and university staff, about the different aspects of quality of HE in Kurdistan.

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