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## Policy Brief

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### Universities are rising from ruins of war

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*The Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), an emerging nation in the heart of the Middle East, has survived many conflicts, existential threats and crises over the past few decades. Its institutes of higher education have grown in quantity and quality. How can international universities help?*

Since the 1960s, successive governments in Baghdad considered the Kurdish-majority areas of Iraq a war zone, and deprived them of investment. So when, in 1992, Kurds elected their first parliament and government, the politicians inherited a half-ruined country, with more than 4,000 destroyed villages and just one small university to serve a traumatised population of more than 4 million. Educationally, the biggest priority for the Kurdistan regional government (KRG) was to rapidly expand school capacity. New universities and technical institutes with diverse programmes were also established de novo. Currently, 14 public and 15 private universities are fully operational, accommodating 165,414 students in 2016, compared with 10,166 in 1992.

Investing in quality was the next big challenge. In 2010, the Kurdish government that I was part of introduced a comprehensive system of quality assurance and accreditation, including a performance assessment of all staff and institutions that later became the basis for the annual ranking of KRI universities. Previously, no such system had existed in Iraq, and standards were on the decline – especially after the Iraqi regime change in 2003. Continuing political, security and economic crises, as well as poorly designed policies, corruption and over-politicised administrations were partly to blame.

As in other Middle Eastern countries, the Iraqi and KRI governments make all senior university appointments and manage university budgets. This inevitably permits external interference in academic affairs, at the expense of quality and efficiency. There have been serious attempts to move towards making universities totally independent from government, but it has not been easy to accomplish.

However, we have succeeded in making the KRI university admissions system electronic and transparent, to ensure equal opportunity. Curricula and teaching methods have been modernised, with greater emphasis on critical thinking, scientific debate, mastering information technology and learning other languages, particularly English and Arabic.

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The rapid proliferation of educational institutions and the subsequent increase in student populations threatened to outpace the system's ability to prepare an adequate number of teaching staff. This is where research-intensive universities and other centres of excellence in Europe and America helped.

In 2010, it was mandated that all PhD candidates should spend up to 18 months in international centres abroad. And the KRG launched a \$400 million programme to send more than 4,500 talented graduates to study for higher degrees at prestigious universities abroad.

Meanwhile, existing faculty were given incentives to take sabbatical leave, spend time in prestigious universities abroad and to co-publish with colleagues there. Such arrangements can be mutually beneficial. While the local academics and institutions have great needs in terms of connectivity, sense of direction and research leadership, they can offer scientific material, data and unique insight into their local issues.

Academic leaders of post-conflict countries need first-hand exposure to best practice in higher education and research. They need to understand how independent universities work in a democracy. They need help to become research-active and to produce high-impact publications. They need to think globally and act locally, solving their countries' problems through collaborative research.

Countries such as KRI are resource-rich and can sustain the funding of their side of collaborations. In addition to its full-fee paying scholarship and sabbatical programmes, the KRG also pledged in 2010 to match-fund external grants for research projects in the KRI. These have led to numerous joint projects, publications and supervision of research students. Many of the external supervisors have become external examiners and assessors of university performance in the KRI.

The current security and economic crises have slowed progress, but this is a transient phase. These investments must be maintained as the situation eases. Without strong higher education, Kurdistan will never stand tall even as it moves towards full nationhood.

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