

Improving Academic Programs through Assessment and Accreditation

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The higher education institutions in Iraq have been facing weaknesses and deficiencies according to the World Bank and different United Nations agencies. Iraq is not unique in this situation. However, many developing countries have taken steps to improve their higher education institutions since 2000. Iraq falls behind other nations because of the lack of political and security stability in the last two decades. Nevertheless, Iraq has the potential to improve and prepare its higher education systems to meet present and future social and economic challenges. Iraq can depend on its golden past, human and financial resources, and external “know-how” to improve the higher education system.

Helping the Iraqi higher education system and institutions begins with improving the quality of performance and adapting standards which are close to those of advanced developing countries. To achieve that, I propose two mechanisms: (a) applying internal assessment and (b) conducting external accreditation on the academic programs. Some Middle East countries have developed their own national quality system, like Egypt, while others depend on International systems, like the Gulf States and Jordan. Iraq may choose either way to improve the performance of the higher education institutions. In both cases, Iraqis and professional organizations in the U.S. can help in achieving that goal.

Accreditation and Assessment have been part of the higher education culture in the United States for more than 80 years. Therefore, the U.S. is a leading nation in the World in these topics. The European Union adapted the Bologna Declaration in 1999 to develop a European vision for a “good” higher education system and practices. Europe is benefiting from American experiences in developing their own system. Iraq can benefit from American professional organizations such as CHEA (www.chea.org), SACS (www.sacs.org) and ABET (www.abet.org) for technical help. Qualified Iraqi-born academics and administrators who took leading roles in their American affiliated institutions and academic programs can be engaged in assessment and accreditation activities. They can help the Ministry of Higher Education to develop needed policies, as well as the higher education institutions to implement the policies. The Iraqi Embassy should provide leadership in coordinating and facilitating Iraqi needs and American-based assistance. As a proto-type, Iraq may start with four academic disciplines: Applied Sciences, Computer Science, Engineering and Technology. These disciplines are linked strongly to building a knowledge-based society and improving economy at the global level.

Improving the higher education system in any country is financially costly and a political challenge. Nevertheless, no country can meet their social and economic challenges without enabling and counting on its citizens’ talents. Only quality-driven higher education institutions can produce these talents.

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