Preparing Iraqi Kurdish Students for Postgraduate Study in the United States: Perceptions and Proposals

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Abstract: The present study addresses problems concerning the preparation of Iraqi Kurdish students for international study, with specific attention to the Kurdistan Regional Government's international study program (Human Capacity Development Program). The study reports the results of 25 qualitative interviews with Iraqi Kurdish students in the United States. Beginning with an assessment of the overall goals and problems acknowledged in the Kurdish Ministry of Higher Education's (MHE's) 2010-11 reports, the study proceeds to evaluate perceptions and recommendations for program improvements. The study found considerable agreement between problems identified in the MHE reports and those mentioned by students. Moreover, a review of literature on international study corroborates problems identified by both MHE reports and the students surveyed. Several recommendations emerge from the study, including a need for more ESL programs; more pre-departure orientations and arrival support; cultural training; and an increased emphasis on honing students' research methods and critical thinking.
Key Words: culture shock, language learning, pre-departure programs, memorization, critical thinking.

1. Introduction

This study explores the unique problems facing Iraqi Kurdish students when preparing to study at the postgraduate level in the United States of America. The rationale for the study is that institutions of higher learning and governmental entities that design and implement international study programs for such students have regrettably given little thought to their impact on the students actually enrolled and affected by them. Reflecting this, one online commentator recently lamented that those developing such programs need to

support our students. We talk a lot about policy and planning, we talk a lot about teachers and very often I don't think we talk enough about support for students. When we   talk about change in education, the bottom line of that educational change should be how   does it benefit our students, and yet, very often in a lot of educational contexts the   students don't even come near the top of the list. (Patel, 2009)

Such comments resonate with principles developed by Tyler (2013) in his seminal *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction*, in which he urges both schools and teachers to be informed about their students. A teacher, he argues, "must have some understanding of the kinds of interests and background the students have so that he can make some prediction as to the likelihood that a given

situation will bring about a reaction from the student; and, furthermore, will bring about the kind of reaction which is essential to the learning desired" (64).

Working from Tyler's premise, this study views the present Iraqi Kurdish educational system from the perspective of both students and administrators, with particular emphasis on the international study program. In-depth interviews of Iraqi Kurdish students enrolled at an American university offer grounds on which to address the following questions:

1.   What are students' perceptions and attitudes about the existing Kurdish educational system? What changes do they think need to be instituted to improve it?

2.   What are students' perceptions and attitudes about the existing international study program operated by the Iraqi Kurdish government? How can it be improved? What are its specific strengths and weaknesses?

Before proceeding to the survey findings, in the next section, we set forth the study's background, describing the Iraqi and Iraqi Kurdish educational system and its complex historical development.

2. Background and Context

Iraq's higher education sector dates back over a century. The first college of law was established in Baghdad in 1908. Building on this small foundation, "a number of other colleges and academies were established in the city between the 1920s and the 1950s" (Harb, 2008, p. 3). Harb describes a higher education system that flourished throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, until the emergence of the Baathist party and the ascendency of Saddam Hussein. During the pre-Saddam period the Iraqi Academy had considerable influence throughout the Arab world, especially for its work in the study of languages, history, and literature. Iraqi scholars regularly contributed to major academic journals and traveled widely to present their work in academic conferences. Moreover, Iraqi students pursued post-secondary education in countries such as Great Britain and the United States. With relevance to the present study, their academic destinations included Illinois University (Shepherd, 2012). During this period, other Arab nations viewed Iraq as a major intellectual and educational hub, and sent students by the thousands to Iraqi universities (Ranjan, 2009; Harb, 2008; Mazrzok, 2012).

Unfortunately, this golden age of educational dynamism ended with the political changes implemented by the Baathist party. Harb (2008) observes that when the Baathists "came to dominate public life after 1968, especially after Saddam Hussein became president in 1979, the higher education sector became a venue for political correctness, cronyism, corruption, and manipulation of resources to advance the regimes ideology and policies" (p. 3). For example, Saddam's textbooks were often full of historical revisionism, pro-regime propaganda and rhetoric, and even outright lies. This pedagogical indoctrination had profoundly negative effects on several generations of young Iraqis. Harb (ibid), Ranjan (2009), and Marzouk (2012) discuss the damaging ramifications of Baathist control, and claim it was largely responsible for countless thousands of intellectuals and university professors fleeing the country. The effects of this "brain drain" remain a tragic legacy of Saddam's impact on the Iraqi educational system. Ranjan and Jain (2009) portray a bleak aftermath for the educational system; despite "its glorious past in the field of education, the present education system of Iraq is almost on its deathbed" (Harb, 2008, p. 3).

Another legacy of Saddam's regime has roots in the deeper pedagogical subsoil of an Islamic education system: rote memorization and teacher-centeredness. This approach, dubbed the "banking system" of education by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (2000), is attributed by Marzouk (2012) for giving a generation of Iraqi students a "fatalist perception of their situation." Freire (2000) chronicles and critiques the Iraqi pedagogical "banking system" in several books, including

his influential *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000), and asserts that it remains a major part of how education is practiced in Iraq, and more importantly for this study, in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Writing about the negative effects of this type of system, Majeed (2012) observes that students "memorize what is in their books and the notes their teachers provide with very little regard to actually understanding the material. Their aim is to pass and get a diploma so that they will be employed in the future" (p. 1). Even the Kurdish Regional Government's Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MHE) recognizes that the system must be changed (MHE 2011; Ranjan & Jain, 2009; Harb 2008; Mazrzok, 2012). In its 2011 reform proposal, the MHE makes the case that the "education and training style in the region is very traditional and behind the times. It neither helps students to develop their skills, nor does it assist them in thinking creatively or independently. In Iraq, students from preparatory school right through university training are taught merely to memorize materials and feed it back" (MHE, 2011, p. 28).

In the wake of the First Gulf War (1991), sanctions imposed by the United Nations Security Council (Resolution 661), pushed Iraq's institutions of higher education into a state of near collapse. Along with this, universities and schools in the central and southern provinces experienced a decade of widespread repression of academic freedom, and a slow erosion of state support. Facilities and buildings became dilapidated and journals and books became outdated. The few remaining academics were denied international travel and faculty salaries fell significantly (UNESCO, 2003, p. 5). However, during this same decade, the three northern Kurdish provinces gained political autonomy, and as a result, academic and intellectual freedom flowered. The Kurdish region gained independence from the central Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research in Baghdad. Within less than a year of attaining this degree of autonomy, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) established the Universities of Dohuk in 1992, and Koya in 2004 (Harb, 2008, p. 8). Since then, expansion has been explosive, with the addition of nineteen public and private universities operating throughout the region with an estimated student population of over 100,000 undergraduate and postgraduate students (Ala'Aldeen, 2012).

According to Selar Othman Ali (2012), Kurdistan "had better development opportunities than the other parts of Iraq" (p. 670), even though it remained isolated from scientific developments and academic scholarship elsewhere in the world. Ali add that, during this time, Kurdistan saw "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" (p. 670). Corroborating this, a 2008 United States Institute of Peace report noted that "universities in the north have been able to capitalize on a host of assistance programs from American and European governments and universities" (Harb, 2008, p. 4). Furthermore, the report observes that universities in Kurdistan are enjoying a period of unprecedented academic freedom, highlighted by academic exchanges, the development of new and innovative curricula, novel approaches to teacher training, and, a rapid rise in enrollment.

Former KRG Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research, Dlawer Ala'Aldeen, one of the region's leading educational reformers (and one of the first to recognize the need for change), admits that it is "no secret that the Kurdistan Region has inherited an old-fashioned and outdated higher education system from the 'old-Iraq', a system that was developed for a closed, centralized, and isolated country" (MHE, 2011, p. 8). Ala'Aldeen also maintains that the present Kurdish system, regardless of its achievements, is not competitive and is unable to meet the demands of the region or that of a globalizing world. He goes on to acknowledge that both political and academic leaders in the region are fully aware that their institutions are due for a major overall. Furthermore, he warns that reforming the system will not be easy, but that nothing short of the future of the region depends on it, if the system is to be fit to compete in the twenty-first century (MHE, 2011).

One of the major reforms proposed in the 2011 report was the establishment of a teaching quality assurance system. In the past, teachers were neither evaluated nor held accountable for their teaching performance. Furthermore, the assessment of student performance was based on a combination of attendance and very low expectations for exams, for which 50% was recognized as a passing grade. The report cautions that raising quality in this context would require "a long and steadfast process in which, students, academics and the study experience as a whole can be assessed" (MHE, 2009, p. 24). To this end, the MHE considered a variety of options, including implementing the quality management system of the International Organization for Standardization (IOS) 9001 model. This IOS system uses an established methodology to evaluate all elements of an educational system, including teacher competence; existing curricula; qualifications of support staff; teaching methodologies and philosophies; and, perhaps most importantly, the competence and effectiveness of the administration (Dezaye & Kaghed, 2012, p. 72). Despite significant resistance to the implementation of these changes, the MHE reports that educational leaders across the country are slowly embracing them as they recognize the need for change.

Another reform initiated by the MHE and Ala'Aldeen was to institute a program of international studies, the Human Capacity Development Program in Higher Education (HCDP). Through this program, several thousand Iraqi Kurdish students have traveled abroad to study in universities throughout the world in recent years. Beginning in 2010, the program also began sending students abroad for Master's-level and doctoral studies. Specifically, the government began funding the HCDP program with a $100 million annual budget. The program has thus far funded 4,000 students. Reflecting on these successes, Ala'Aldeen (2012) notes, "we made a thorough revision of the research system and doctoral education. We have now set up a new system for doctoral education in a way that the student carries out part of his or her research at advanced international institutions and brings back the current international standards and experience back to Kurdistan" (p. 2). Ala'Aldeen goes on to comment that the "roadmap [of the MHE report] is meant to increase the quality and value of our degrees and make them renowned in the Middle East or even globally so that people will come here in search of education" (p. 2). It is projected that within the next five to ten years this program will bring a return on investement, energizing and increasing the capabilities both of Kurdistan and its universities. Key components of the overall strategy include:

1. training the young generation to a high skill level in science and technology;
2. developing human resources capable of leading the restructuring of the Higher Education and Scientific Research system in order to meet the future needs of the Kurdistan Region;
3. meeting the needs of the Kurdistan Region's free market economy by training specialized and qualified leaders and modernizers in all sectors of the economy;
4. facilitating knowledge transfer into the region from abroad;
5. promoting excellence in scholarship and research in Kurdish institutions of higher learning by establishing links with leading international universities identified by the MHE.

In this context, the remainder of this paper explores actual experiences and perceptions of success and failure among Iraqi Kurdish students involved in the international study program. The study assumes the students themselves to be the authentic eyes and ears of the program and of this movement for educational change; it is crucial to explore what actual students have to say about how the MHE protocols are working. Ideally, through this research, we should be in a better position to evaluate the program, and to offer thoughtful recommendations for how the MHE can improve this international component of the Kurdish higher educational system. Moreover, this research should also be useful for Western universities wishing to assess their own programs from

the perspective of their Kurdish guest students who have been sent under the auspices of the MHE's system. This in turn should prove helpful as Western universities develop strategies and curricula to engage more effectively with the aims of their counterparts in the MHE.

3. Research Design and Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach. Specifically, in-depth, open–ended interviews explored the challenges faced by Iraqi Kurdish students in the United States. Interviews were conducted in the spring semester of 2013, using twenty-five Iraqi Kurdish graduate students enrolled in U.S. universities. This study focused on the participants' concerns and allowed them to express their views and experiences openly and fully (Patton, 1990, pp. 98-107). In spite of the relatively small sample size, as Patton notes, "In-depth information from a small number of people can be very valuable" (1990, p. 184). The depth of the inquiry is what assures the value of this qualitative study for program administrators, as well as for students.

The researcher used two different kinds of interviews: face-to-face interviews with seven Iraqi Kurdish graduate students on the campus of Southern Illinois Universiry in Carbondale, and online email interviews with eighteen subjects not residing in Carbondale (but still residing in the United States). Three additional interviews with program administrators were conducted on the campus of a large mid-western university in the United States. As Mann and Stewart (2000) maintain, internet technology can be used to adopt qualitative methods to gather rich, descriptive data and understand human experience. Other researcher observes several advantages associated with using email interviews, such as accessing hard to reach groups due to practical constraints (Meho, 2006).

The procedures for the interviews were approved by the Human Subjects Committee at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. The data for interviews consisted of direct quotations from subjects' opinions, thoughts, experiences, and recommendations. The participants were volunteers and had the right not to respond to the emails or participate in this research. The researcher developed an email Solicitation Request, which was attached with a questionnaire and an Informed Consent and Consent Form for Taping. A non-random purposive sampling was used because study candidates had to be pre-screened for the special qualifications that they be Iraqi Kurdish students involved in the international study program. It also screened out subjects who had not finished their ESL program. The researcher obtained students' email addresses through the Kurdish MHE, and questions took around 30 to 40 minutes to answer. Face-to-face interviews were recorded and transcribed so as to preserve an accurate record and facilitate analysis. Validity for this study depends on the "Methodological skill, sensitivity, and integrity of the researcher" because the researcher is the instrument for the interview (Patton, 1990, p. 11). All of the participants received the questionnaire two or three days before the interviews so they could think about the questions and consider their answers in greater detail. Participants who received the questionnaire by email had one week to return their answers.

A qualitative descriptive method of analysis was applied to the interview responses. The emails, recordings, and notes were transcribed, numbered, labeled, and categorized. This careful examination enabled the researcher to identify and categorize patterns in the data, such as the problems that respondents most frequently identified—and to consider different solutions from the interviewees' points of view. Patton (1990) maintains that researchers should consider their data from varying perspectives and analyze the different sources individually as well as contextually within the framework of the entire data set. This process adds additional credibility to the findings.

4. Findings and Discussion

Congruent with the recent history and characterization of the Iraqi Kurdish educational system cited earlier in this paper, all respondents mentioned that the higher education system in Iraqi Kurdistan is based on memorization and that classrooms are teacher-centered. For example, and typically, one respondent indicated that "students sit in the class as passive learners. Teachers pour information into the students' brain" (Student-3). Another described this "banking" style of teaching in some detail:

> the education system in Kurdistan-Iraq both at higher education level was slightly more developed than primary and secondary school levels. However, it was still teacher centric rather than student centric. By teacher centric I mean that the system hardy counted for the students that they were doing better. It did not help discover the potentials of the high achievers. We had only one textbook that we hardly looked at as we used the notes that we were taking from the class as our main source of information and knowledge including to pass exams. Assignments, presentations and debates are things hardly heard of. We had only one assignments (group one) and one presentation which was part of the year four project. All of the above limited reflection and encouraged memorization. (Student-1)

What Freire calls the "banking" concept of education was also commented on by other respondents: "I experienced an educational system which was teacher-centered and specific curriculum resource-centered system." This respondent went on to say that their teachers "were doing almost everything in terms of class presentations" (Student-5).

The perception of little direct student interaction between teacher or student lead one respondent offer the following testimony:

> Traditional teaching style was used at every stage at the University. To be more precise, the teachers were talking for the most of class and we did not have an opportunity to discuss the subjects with the professors. Thinking critically is not common in the Kurdistan education system. They behave you like soldier and they are commanders in the class. Memorizing in much important. (Student-6)

Most interviewees noted this general difference between Eastern and Western pedagogical methods. For example, one respondent observed that the Iraqi Kurdish "system is based on memorization; the smartest student is someone who memorizes a lot." Moreover, this respondent continued, the emphasis at home institutions was on "memoriz[ing] the information that is in the textbooks. Sadly, we always had to solely depend of the textbooks to answer exam questions" (Student-2). Regarding these contrasting pedagogies, one student reflected at some length:

> There is big difference between Kurdish educational system and American educational system; Kurdish educational system largely focuses on memorization information and American educational system focuses on critical thinking. Kurdish educational system relies on two basics (a) educational pol
> icy makers in Kurdistan thought that memory is just like muscles and it gets stronger if it is used on regular basis, and (b) there was a lack of technology devices that provides students with basic information, so memory was a good tool which everyone poses and able to use it (Student-25).

All respondents believed they were inadequately prepared to come to study in the United States. Not only did they acknowledge their academic unpreparedness for the challenges of Western universities, but they also felt their linguistic skills were not adequately developed for the task. In a forceful indictment of the system, many respondents claimed they were "not prepared at all." One recurring theme was that students felt their pre-departure preparation and orientation briefing concerning their host country was highly inadequate. One student reflected, "I did not prepare

because I did not have enough information about the US educational system" (Student-6). Another stated, "No, I was not prepared, when I came here, I was totally lost and I was going to give up" (Student-19).

Some respondents believed that because they had passed the required language test (e.g. IELTS or TOEFL), they would be ready to enter graduate-level, English-speaking classrooms upon arrival. Thus, one respondent expressed his or her disappointment with the level of pre-departure preparation: "I did only the ILETS [*sic*] test just to receive the conditional offer of master program. Meanwhile, nobody told me how I could prepare essentially before coming to the US about improving the English or doing research about the education system and culture in this country" (Student-4). Another student recalled being shocked at not having been more prepared: "Of course, we tried to be prepared, but how? I thought I was ready. I do not know, In Kurdistan, there are not enough opportunities to stand out and improve your skills before commencing to study abroad" (Student-11). Nevertheless, a few students claimed to have gained sufficient confidence to excel at their studies in a single semester. One respondent writes, "When I finish my English course and finish one semester in an academic course and started my second semester in academic field I found out I am ready for this system" (Student-14).

Most students reported that they experienced difficulties with the new system. Yet, over half of the respondents credited their will and determination to succeed as playing a major role in overcoming their difficulties. The following remarks represent a typical response in this vein: "my personality and open conversation with other people and professors, the professors here are too good with us, they do not treat us like a strangers" (Student-12); "my personal desire to study in the USA" (Student-11), and "my style of thinking, prospective and my ideas about the life, the universe, the society, and the role of science have shaped me" (Student-2).

Almost all respondents acknowledged the importance of learning as much English as possible before traveling abroad to study. For example, one wrote that "having experience of studying English language as the major degree for four years helped me as the most to adapt western education system" (Student-8). Again, another noted that "after taking language course for one year I was kind of familiar with the system" (Student-9). Several students credited such things such as Western films for helping them adapt to the educational system: "watching and seeing some of Hollywood movies and films which made me to know more about American culture and society and mostly liberal education system" (Student-7). Another identified the importance of learning from other students: "sharing experiences with other international students was a great factor" (Student- 3). Only two respondents identified teachers or support staff in the host countries as having any major role in helping them adapt to the new culture. However, one did acknowledge "the readiness of academic stuff and admin staff to help and support whenever I need assistance" (Student-1), as a factor in his or her adjustment.

It is a well-established phenomenon that most people who travel abroad and subsequently spend long periods of time in another country (e.g. students, business people, missionaries, etc.), experience some form of "culture shock" (MHE, 2011; Ala'Aldeen, 2012; Winkelman, 1994; Oberg, 1954; Ryan & Twibell, 2000). In the present research, all respondents noted that they had experienced some type of culture shock or cultural-related problems. A variety of sources of culture shock became apparent in the interviews. One respondent discussed such experiences in considerable detail, and his or her remarks are illustrative:

> I did experience culture shock but not to extent not to be able to continue or to restrict my learning but rather it limited my learning. The major culture shock for me was what is called learn to learn concept. In the West most teachers and lectures teach you how you teach yourself rather than just teach you what he has to or need to. To be more specific when you

> study at a Western education institution the teacher mostly guides your learning process; however, in Kurdistan the teacher teaches you what he/she believes needs to be taught. The means used to do this in Kurdistan could be described [as] spoon feeding. In the spoon feeding method of learning students learn only what the teacher teaches them; however, in the West as the teacher guides your learning the students is able to explore other sources of information and knowledge. In a spoon feeding system, the student cannot improve his/her research skill. In contrast in the West, as students are given guidelines to teach themselves, they can improve and enhance their research skills (Student-1).

Evidently, some of the culture shock relates directly to differences in educational systems and pedagogies. This is evident in several other responses, such as, "when my teachers ask me to think about some question to think about and after that say my reflection. I do not used to think and reflect. I just memorized and write down what I memorized. This is a major shock for me" (Student 12). A few students were aware of structural or systemic differences between the Iraqi Kurdish and American systems. One reported being "shocked will all the business which mixed with the university and education process. For every paper and thing we have to pay! In my country these things are free" (Student-14). For some students these differences caused severe stress: "having no idea about using visa card and getting cash form ATM machine. These leaded to me to think about going back home" (Student-4).

Other examples of cultural differences leading to initial problems for respondents included being on time for meetings and dealing with a larger international student community. For example, one student said, "yes, we saw different values and assumptions like individualism, assertiveness, punctuality" (Student-11). Another indicated that "I have no idea about some detailed points were kind of strange sometimes such as paying tips, being direct as Western culture" (Student-5). Yet another observed, "yes, not just shocked with American also with other international students like Indian, Chinese, and European. Also, different kind of body language shocked me. Our body language for thinking means crazy in the USA" (Student-22). Moreover, one student acknowledged that the image of the West portrayed in contemporary films and media does not correspond to reality: "I have culture shock because I was kind of aware about this culture thru media and movie, but since I am here everything is different, opposite media" (Student-12).

Although, most students acknowledged that their host universities had performed adequately in helping in their transition and studies, over half claimed they should have done more. A few respondents were very critical about how they were treated by their host institution. For example, one harsh critic complained that the "schools do not have a good program or orientation for international students. They have one week orientation which is too general and we did not get any information about what the university expects us to do" (Student-9). Similar criticism included that the university "has not done everything to help me to succeed in my study [and] I think they have to think more universally [globally] as we live in a globalized world, and there are international students in their universities" (Student-2).

However, the severest criticisms focused on the English as a Second Language (ESL) programs offered by host universities. For example, several respondents concurred with Student-2's statement that the

> University did not helped me to improve my language as its required for studying my major (political Sciences), I had studied 8 months at CESL English for academic purposes in general with other students from different countries and different academic majors from Engendering departments, Science, biology, and music to some majors in Humanities. I think, it was better if I studied English Language for my academic major, with connections with the political sciences department.

Another added that "they help us a lot but the ESL program is not good and they do not care about individual interests. The teachers in ESL program are not that good and they want us to pass TOEFL and they do not teach us how to pass TOEFL test" (Student-13). Similarly, Student-25 indicated that his "University or academic school is great, but the ESL program is not quite good to prepare us to study in the graduate level." Many students were more guarded in their criticisms, writing things like, "I am satisfied with the support that I received from my universities. However, I believe there is always room for improvement. I believe they could help be improve my academic writing skills, I mean advance level" (Student-1), and "Yes, I understand a freedom of study. I can say that teachers are 'down to the earth' they make everything easy in order to help us. But, the university should provide some program for international students in order to communicate with American students" (Student-12).

It is clear from this research that many of the issues, observations, and recommendations identified by these interviews support the observations recorded in the MHE's 2009 and 2011 reports. Most importantly, many of the recommendations are almost identical to issues raised by the MHE and the former minister who oversaw the program. Taken together, these observations and corresponding recommendations offer the MHE and the Kurdish government a general framework for reconsidering the study abroad program in detail. These recommendations offer students, universities and the MHE a clear checklist of issues that the program must address and work towards improving.

Although several of the problems experienced by the interviewees would require major structural changes to move the pedagogical system of Iraqi Kurdistan toward a more student-centered curriculum that cultivates critical thinking, other recommendations can be implemented without great cost or bureaucratic reorganization. For instance, implementing more pre-departure orientation and cultural education can be accomplished at the university level. Utilizing returning graduates of the program in these efforts can also provide future students with firsthand information and advice. Moreover, disseminating the type of information researched in this study throughout the broader Iraqi Kurdish student population through various social media is another way to facilitate dialogues about reforming the existing educational system. Therefore, it is important for all parties involved in the international study program to consider in detail the types of problems and their possible solutions outlined in this study.

5. Recommendations

This research set out to explore and evaluate the experiences of Iraqi Kurds studying in the United States under Iraqi Kurdistan's international study program (MHE-HCDP). This relatively new program is promising, but still in its early stages. Doubtless there is room for improvement. In this context, the present research specifically set out to explore the experiences and perceptions of Iraqi Kurdish students currently enrolled in US universities under the auspices of the program. To this end, 25 Iraqi Kurdish students enrolled at US universities were interviewed. Drawing from the results of these interviews, this section outlines a number of specific recommendations.

Bearing in mind that research of this type captures a snapshot of educational changes in flux, the focus of these recommendations is on specific programmatic initiatives that could be implemented at the most basic level at individual institutions. A preliminary version of these recommendations has already been vetted and acknowledged by the former minister of the Ministry of Higher Education in KRG, as well as by seasoned program administrators. Moreover, it is important to note that most of these recommendations are supported in essence by a considerable amount of research. In other words, while these recommendations are based on this original research, they are corroborated by similar existing strategies and programs.

First, the KRG and MHE should direct universities to provide more thorough pre-departure orientation for students planning to travel abroad. If universities fail to do this, the government should take the initiative. Whichever entity ultimately provides such preparation, the pre-departure programs could, no doubt, take many possible forms. Many students presently enrolled in the MHE program act as *de facto* advisers and ambassadors for the program. These informal efforts could easily be captured formally, prior to departure, by having returning students share their experiences through workshops, blogs, or forums, virtual or otherwise. Such efforts could provide essential information, advice, and perspectives concerning various academic destinations for future students.

In relation to our recommendation, some pre-departure orientations already use a pre-departure "checklist." Such checklists encourage students to do a self-evaluation to rate how prepared they are for foreign study. The checklist might include questions such as:

- What do you know about the culture in the host country?

- What do you know about the requirements for graduation in the host country? Where can one find such information?

- How would you evaluate your reading and writing skills?

- Do you know that you will have to read and write much more in American universities?

- How do you rate your English language skills?

Similarly, Iraqi Kurdish students might be required to participate in programs involving temporary study or travel abroad prior to their longer stay with their foreign host university. The literature is quite clear on the advantages of even a brief, temporary study abroad programs. Thus, we also recommend that the Iraqi government, in collaboration with foreign host universities, develop and implement such programs.

Second, the findings of this study reveal that host universities are lacking in several areas. This perception of deficiencies leads us to several related recommendations for host universities to consider in their efforts to improve the experiences of international students:

1. Hold mandatory orientations for all students upon arrival. These orientations should not be restricted to ESL personnel, but should also include representatives from the graduate school and from the colleges the students plan to attend. If possible, peers from the student's home country, who have already completed a year or two of study, should be encouraged to attend and assist at these orientations.

2. Arriving international students should be assigned a mentor, at least for their first few months in their host country.

3. Students should be carefully briefed regarding their rights and duties within the first weeks of their arrival. They should also be informed about local laws, customs, and rules and regulations unique to their host country.

4. Upon arrival, students should be met at the airport by a representative of their host university. If this is not possible, the university should meet and assist the student upon arrival in the host community. Moreover, initial accommodation should be arranged by the host institution in conjunction with the student and home country institutions.

5. The host university could offer web-based resources, in the native language of the student groups they are hosting, with accompanying videos explaining such things as housing, insurance, driving laws, and other pertinent information.

6. Host university counselors should institute a "checklist" type of interview with all incoming international students. Many students indicate that they do not know what questions they should be asking. Host university counselors, who generally know what these questions are, should help students ask them.

7. Students with spouses, and especially students with children, should have a pre-departure, informational interview with representatives of the host university. The host university should be sensitive to the additional challenges faced by graduate students with families.

8. This research revealed that most Iraqi Kurdish students with families found host university programs for students with families seriously deficient. It would be beneficial for all if universities would post on their web-sites accessible information concerning the services they provide for families, beyond the obvious study-related issues.

Third, this study revealed that because the MHE's international study program is relatively new, it naturally has areas in need of improvement. One purpose of this study was to explore actual student experiences, with a view to suggesting possible solutions to perceived problems. In the spirit of constructive counsel, two recommendations should be of particular interest to MHE administrators as they move forward with improvements to the program:

1. The MHE should do everything in its power to assure that students' monthly payments arrive in a timely manner. Many students reported having problems in this area. Indeed, all interviewees reported that their major "stress" factor was concern about whether their money or scholarship would arrive on time. Naturally, all students recommended an increase in their monthly stipend because living expenses in the United States are substantially higher than in Iraq. Indeed, most students did not know they had to pay for things such as health insurance, hospital and doctor visits, parking, notebooks, textbooks, library fees, paper for class tests/booklets, graduation, cap and gown, activity and recreation fees, student attorneys, revenue bond, athletic fee, information technology, student services building, diploma, and a host of other fees.

2. The KRG and MHE should more thoroughly investigate particular universities abroad before sending students to them to study. Important questions to investigate include the following: Are the university's mission statements and curricula compatible with the KRG

and MHE? What services does the university provide? What is the cost of living, from the perspective of Iraqi Kurdish students? As the program matures and develops, it will be important to keep a record of host university performance in meeting the particular needs of Iraqi students.

Finally, individual universities in Iraqi Kurdistan should establish their own long-term programs for students who plan to pursue post-graduate study in the West. Such programs should begin during students' undergraduate years, and focus on developing a plan of study that will help them succeed in their international studies. These programs should be combined with intensive ESL classes and should emphasize reading, writing, critical thinking, and research skills. Such endeavors could also leverage the experiences of returning students to strengthen preparatory materials, with particular regard for cultural differences to prepare students for academic life in the West. Any preparatory programs should guide students toward more self-directed investigation of the universities they plan to attend.

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