



INSPIRE

Innovative Governance Practices in
the Higher Education Institutions in Iraq





Innovative Governance Practices in the Higher Education Institutions in Iraq

Virtual Focus Groups main outcomes

Decision-making process

Most of decisions are taken by Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research or in few cases by the University Council. Universities have only **partial autonomy** in deciding upon their mission and strategic goals, both short and long term. Even when a University defines its own strategic plan, this is supervised and needs approval by the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research.

University Leaders are not elected but appointed by the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, on the basis of qualification, previous experience, academic title, years of employment, published articles, attendance to international /national conferences, etc.

Universities indeed relate non only to the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research but also to the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Planning. Universities have the responsibility to implement the governmental program for HE, following the articles and points in the program relating to Higher Education. These guidelines from the government also rule the actions of the MHESR itself. **Decisions are in the hands of the central authority based on set laws and regulations.** According to what stated by the participants to the Focus Groups, some decisions must stay within the MHESR while others should be made by universities themselves, raising their level of autonomy and responsibility (accountability).

There is a new strategic plan for the next 5 years issued by the Ministry. It collects inputs from the strategic plans of each individual university and drafts a strategic plan for the Ministry for the whole HE sector. The plan includes indications for everything: adding colleges and departments, number of admitted students, expansion, materials, syllabus, physical locations, technology. Each university works on its own and then a strategic vision from the Ministry guides the whole HE sector in Iraq. The **main issue universities suffer from is the financial issue**, it is a unique regulation for all universities and no one can take its own decision about the amount of fees or the allocation of resources. There is a little space of decision for the University Council but it still needs to get approval from the MHESR that fully decides on financial allocation.

The **process of approval** by the MHESR may sometimes take hours or days, and require a simple notification by email on behalf of the HEIs. In other occasions, it may be very long and complex, taking weeks, months or even years to get to the final approval stage. This in turn affects not only the timing of change but also the will and attitude towards change on behalf of the university members.

If on the one side is essential to work on widening the level of autonomy granted to HEIs, on the other side it is also **important to work on the perceptions of the university staff** as well as on empowering universities. A step in this direction is to strengthen their role and concurrently defining the role of the central authority. The HE system is very static and is deeply affected by non-formal and not-written rules. Instead, Universities need to start carrying the responsibility for improvement. Decentralization must happen from the MHESR to the HEIs but also internally to each institution, towards the faculties, changing the direction of decisions (from top-down to bottom-up). There is the **need to encourage universities' leaders to take the responsibility of decisions**, being accountable for these decisions. To support that, more knowledge and understanding of the regulatory framework and on the role of the MHESR in relation to the university's functioning is crucial.



Autonomy, Strategic Planning and Accountability

Universities have partial autonomy (regulated autonomy) in deciding about the structure of curricula, the process of students' admission, the introduction of new programs, the areas of research, human resources policies and on the academic partnerships with other institutions. Universities may be willing to build their own strategies and the related action plans, and even if in some cases they could rely on a proper existing regulatory framework, they **do not feel to be in the conditions to act autonomously**. The first concern is a change in the regulatory framework, where the MHESR should be the key actor to support the process.

Participants in the Focus Groups seemed to have a cautious position towards full autonomy. Most stated that having more autonomy is fine and desirable, but that a condition of full autonomy might leave them in a condition of uncertainty. Partial autonomy is considered fine, the support from the Ministry essential. While we do not intend to state that the role of the Ministry is not essential, such a perception on behalf of the HEIs seems to be mostly the result of a limited knowledge of the concept and implications of autonomy in HE. **Autonomy should be further discussed with Iraqi universities**, to explain the full potential of an independent decision-making process complemented by a strong vision, support and regulation on behalf of the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research.

As the system functions today, universities are in a condition of decision-taking more than decision-making. **Even when universities define their own strategic plans, approval from the central authority is needed.** Universities define a plan, supervised and approved by the University Council; then submit the plan to the Ministry, which either approves it or begins a negotiation with the university and the Ministry of Finance. Main requirement on behalf of the Ministry is the compliance with the current regulations and laws. A big player in the process is the financial support, affecting everything, starting from the strategic plan and its implementation. Real autonomy starts on the financial capacity of implementing the strategic plan, therefore all universities agreed that higher financial autonomy is needed. Universities should have the right to diversify the sources of revenue, i.e consulting, services, etc. and allocate resources as they deem more appropriate.

According to the MHESR the probabilities that the plans are rejected are almost none, usually the Ministry says yes. However, changes may be asked to the university, and this may generate inconsistencies. For example, each university defines a number of students which is able to welcome, but often (due to the rising number of students in the Iraqi HE sector) the Ministry demands to admit an higher number of students, while resources (both human resources and funds) stay the same, or are even reduced over the course of the years due to the financial crisis in the country. Universities are often forced to do differently than what they have planned, with difficulties in keeping the overall quality of the service provided. Taking into consideration that **university staff members may benefit from training on strategic planning**, the current system still risks to generate difficulties for universities to fully implement what is in the plan, still being held accountable for that (for example by the auditing department of the Ministry of Finance). In some cases, 'departments plan less because they know they will get more'. Universities suffer from the **imbalance between the rising number of students and the limited resources available**. The sector of private tertiary education is still very young, private HEIs absorb students but they are still immature. The public universities hold most of the burden of offering to all Iraqi students education of good quality with the limited available resources. The whole sector is in need for investments to improve HE facilities, train staff and raise funds. Along with that, there is a need to redefine the national HE system and its outcomes.



Innovative Governance Practices in the Higher Education Institutions in Iraq

Another element has been pointed out during the Focus Group is the issue of accountability. According to the Ministry, the central authority stays as the only authority which controls that HEIs work in compliance with the regulations. **Accountability is the other element which must be taken into account when re-defining the relation HEIs-MHESR.** Approval from the Ministry is a way to control and monitor compliance, make universities accountable in respect to the law and instructions from the government. However, approval is different than notification, as it happens in more decentralized systems. Accountability relates to transparency, to the freedom of action within a set regulatory framework.

Quality Assurance

Most of Universities have a Quality Assurance system and practice monitoring activities. The results of periodical evaluations are sent to the University Council and the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research. There is no national agency for QA which is independent by the Ministry, but a Quality Department in the Ministry itself. Quality departments at each university receive indications and evaluation forms directly from the MHESR.

Quality Assurance applies on Institutional licensing, accreditation of institutions and programs, assessing learning outcomes, on teaching methodologies, on the research activities and on the facilities. Even students periodically evaluate their learning experience, their courses, their lecturers. Corrective actions are undertaken after each evaluation if needed, eventually defining an action plan. The main rising issue is that **QA offices are today dealing mostly with the results of the evaluation of performance, while they should also work to provide universities with guidance on ensuring quality standards.** They should intervene before and after the evaluation, to guarantee compliance with standards and preventing unnecessary mistakes. The work of the QA offices should change direction, not only working on results but providing guidance to universities to comply with international quality standards.

As mentioned before, since universities are working often with unexpected changes, training is also needed to empower staff to deal with these changes, without affecting the quality of the service. There is a general lack of knowledge in management techniques and skills which should be further developed. For example, recently a round of evaluation has been performed by the Ministry to assess programs. Many universities had a low score because they were not well prepared to provide information to the accreditation team. Participants explained it was not a matter of quality of the programs, but a matter of difficulties and lack of knowledge on reporting to the accreditation team. Advice and directions should be given to departments. **Raising awareness on procedures** can result in well representing the quality of HE programs. Indicators for accreditation are shared between the Ministry and the HEIs through the QA departments, but the sharing process and the awareness around these indicators must be improved.

Students' involvement in the University

In some Universities students are grouped into Students Union but they do not take part in the decision process. Students, alumni and students' organizations are not among the stakeholders involved in the university governance. The process towards decentralization must also include students' involvement at different levels. Engaging students in the governance of the university, in the decision-making process,



Innovative Governance Practices in the Higher Education Institutions in Iraq

welcoming students' representatives in the University Council is something new for HEIs in Iraq, it is a new culture which needs to be acknowledged and promoted. When the recent evaluation on behalf of the central authority took place, in the rare occasions that representatives of the students were actually invited to take part in some Council meetings (such was the case in Wasit University) an higher score was granted.

International Cooperation

International cooperation agreements of the Iraqi universities include many activities, such as training, scientific cooperation and research projects, faculty exchange, scholarships, lectures exchanges, mobility, etc. All Universities have an International Relation Office coordinating and guiding international activities, which is called Department of Scholarships and Cultural Relations. At the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research there is a unit for international relation. It emerged the need to reduce bureaucracy of permissions on behalf of the Ministry which is needed also when universities want to engage in international cooperation. If on the one side new universities rely on the guidance of the Ministry because they are less experienced (for example relying on advices about agreements with international universities), on the other side there is need to ease the procedures of approval which may take very long (up to 1 or 2 years).

Universities in the Focus Groups agreed that **universities need more space of autonomy in managing international relations** and international opportunities (despite the perception of autonomy is higher in respect to other dimensions), **along with training** on how to handle these international opportunities, agreements, cooperation projects, how to manage mobilities, and on the transfer of credits and recognition procedures. This will also support the drive towards being listed in international rankings. According to some respondents, it would be helpful to have more knowledge about the criteria or requirements to fulfill in order to achieve a position in the ranking and raise the level of Iraqi HEIs.

Despite the willingness in engage in international cooperation, joint transnational activities also beyond European funded projects, concerns arise in respect to the resistance HEIs have displayed towards changes (necessary to advance in international collaboration and to raise the quality of HEIs to international standards) and regarding different understandings of what internationalization means. In addition, the **centralized relation with the MHESR may reduce the potential of international cooperation**, for example universities need to take permission every time they want to be involved in new collaborations. The funds available are also a limit: if the budget for international cooperation is low, then also its impact will be low. Most of activities are performed online with the current resources, even before the pandemic, which (as we have fully experienced) may reduce the benefits and impact of transnational cooperation.

Iraqi HEIs should also dialogue between themselves. Cooperation is not only international but also at national level, where **dialogue between universities should become an asset** for advancement.