

Iraqi Kurdistan Region & Educational Policy in the Age of Covid-19

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Abstract_ By the beginning of March 2020, the wave of the Covid-19 pandemic had reached the borders of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The earliest cases were recorded in the cities. The Sulaymaniah governorate took preliminary action. Later, the Council of Ministers led by the office of the Prime Minister formed a higher committee for counteracting the Coronavirus in order to instruct and update the public on the situation.

This paper closely examines the policies responding to the pandemic followed by the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research of Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq. For this purpose, considerations to the different mandates and decisions regarding the opinions of the universities and their level of compliance to the decisions of the ministry, as well as taking a different example from the state universities in order to clearly investigate the current educational policy of the ministry will be analyzed. Also, a survey is carried out and this is fragmented into three sections: the anxiety concerning the study, the method of online-teaching and final evaluations. This survey has inquired the opinion of 500 universities and institutions' students; the findings are analyzed, discussed, and finally suggestions for the education policy in the year 2020-2021 will be given.

Keywords; Educational Policy, Online teaching, Covid-19, KRG, Iraqi Kurdistan

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1. Introduction:

The Kurdish region of Iraq is situated at the northern part; it is located within the borders of the Iraqi government which was formed after the First World War. On the initial understanding, it is the motherland of the Kurds. However because of cultural and religious diversity it is different from the other regions of Iraq. The part which is known as Sothern Kurdistan in Kurdish literature, but constitutionally it is known as the Kurdistan Regional Government by Iraq. On the legal and administrative side the Kurdistan Parliament was established after the 1991 elections which include members of diverse nationalities, such as Kurd, Turkmen, Chaldean Assyrians, Yazidis, Kakai, Christians, and Muslims. Erbil is the capital. At the moment Kurdistan has three agencies which are regional presidency, Council of Ministers, and Parliament of Kurdistan. This government has 19 ministries and both the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research are responsible for education. There are directors of the policies and instructions that coordinate the education system of the region. (Amin, 2017)

The Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research is one of the service agencies of the ninth cabinet of the government. Aram M. Qadir is the minister of this cabinet and currently this ministry supervises 17 public universities and 15 private ones including various technical institutes which are spread all over the cities of Kurdistan region.

The ninth cabinet is led by Masrour Barzani and on his first day in office he presented the ninth cabinet program in the parliament. This program is based on the political agenda and there are some other programs made by other members of the cabinet which consist of all their views and plans. Hence, then, the implementation of the program becomes the mutual responsibility of the cabinet's members (Official website of KRG).

Within the regional government's plan and program (2019) on the level of providing service, in the third point it claims "we will work to improve and enhance the services of education and teaching in the public sector and also create ways to incentivize capitalists? both inside the region and outside to

participate in establishing new schools in areas where they are most needed. We will also work on the revision of the education curricula and adapting them according to the standards”.

Additionally in the thirteenth point of the program on the same level, it claims “we will work on valuing higher education and scientific research through elevating the potential of universities and institutes in their kinds along with providing appropriate opportunities for education and scientific research. We will work on reorganizing the works of private universities and institutes as well as revising their quality of science and tuition fees”.

2. Literature Review

In their study, Chick, Clifton, Peace, Propper, Hale, Alseidi, & Vreeland (2020) argue that during this rapidly evolving crisis, a great deal of flexibility will be required from both learners and teachers, and learning methods that are not well-studied may be necessary. They emphasize that the physical and mental wellbeing of learners should be a priority and that all programs should take appropriate measures to preserve it.

As well as, Kogan, Hannon & Nolte, (2020) conducted a study on the challenge for orthopedic education in the age of Covid-19, they conclude that those departments must develop a list of priorities based on their institutional needs to guide decision-making during these times of uncertainty. They maintain that "Potential tools include the use of virtual meeting platforms, independent home study, surgical simulation, and fostering leadership opportunities. It is of the utmost importance that in order for these plans to work, the residents must feel safe, protected, and heard" (Kogan, Hannon and Nolte, 2020—p.51-63)

Additionally Bao (2020) states that, There are five high-impact principles for online education in the age of Covid-19 at Chinese universities: (a) high relevance between online instructional design and student learning, (b) effective delivery on online instructional information, (c) adequate support provided by faculty and teaching assistants to students; (d) high-quality participation to improve the breadth and depth of student's learning, and (e) contingency plan to deal with unexpected incidents of online education platforms.

Furthermore, Sintema (2020) in his study collected data from public sectors in the Republic of Zambia. Semi-structured interviews via mobile phone were used to collect views of what these specialists thought would be the COVID-19 effects on the general performance of students in their subject areas. Accordingly, results of his study revealed that there is likely to be a drop in the pass percentage of secondary school students in this year’s national examinations if the COVID-19 epidemic is not contained in the shortest possible time considering that the school academic calendar was abruptly disrupted by the early untimely closure of all schools in the country.

Kurdistan Regional Government’s ministry of health announced the first case of the coronavirus in Sulaymaniah in March, 1. 2020 on their webpage DMI-Kurdistan Covid-19 on Viber, the government also shares information about the number of examinations and quarantined individuals, the number of cases which is (54.387), recovery which is (34.128) and deaths (1949). (DMI-Kurdistan Covid-19, October 9. 2020)

With the spread of the coronavirus in the Middle East before reaching Kurdistan region and at the same time the spring vacation of universities and institutes, the Ministry of Higher Education arranged several meetings. One of which was on February 26. 2020 that attempted to organize the necessary mechanisms for facing the virus and the manner in which the scientific institutions of the Ministry of Higher Education can support the Ministry of Health in the process.

3. Methodology

As already mentioned, the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research of KRG provided the universities and institutions with the opportunity of electronic-dependent teaching, although a very few number of them received the benefits of that. After that in a message the Minister of Higher Education presented the ending of this year’s education to the people and revealed that they will count the grades of the first term for groups who apply the annual system and the transfer of credits and writing reports for those that apply the Bologna system.

Generally the education system in Kurdistan universities and institutes functions on the basis of two common processes, the annual system and the Bologna system. The annual system by definition divides a single year of education into two courses. The students receive a different curriculum and their grades will be accounted for. But the Bologna process which is a series of agreements signed between 29 European countries in 1999 to standardize the higher education system qualification for the purpose of building a European area for higher education. It is the consequence of a series of annual ministerial agreements of 29 countries in the continent of Europe which was signed in the city of Lisbon. Before the agreement was signed, the great document of Magna Charta Universitatum of universities was established by administrators of the Bologna University in the 900th anniversary ceremony of the said university which is the reason why it is called the Bologna process and relies on the credit system (ECTS) (Juszczyk, 2013).

The main research questions that this paper is seeking to answer are;

Q1. What is the current educational policy of the ministry of higher education in KRG? Is it answerable to the issue of Covid-19 and education?

Q2. What are the perceptions of university students toward the educational policy of KRG in terms of dealing with anxieties concerning the loss of education?

Q3. What are the perceptions of university students toward the educational policy of KRG in terms of online-learning?

Q4. What are the perceptions of university students toward the educational policy of KRG in terms of examinations and evaluation processes?

In order to examine the viewpoints of the university and institution students, in this research we will analyze a survey which is made up of these topics; (the anxiety concerning the loss of education, the method of online teaching, and final examination). This survey conducted an interview about the prospect of many students; the results of which were analyzed and discussed. The suggestions regarding the planning of education in the years 2020-2021 in case the problem persists were provided.

The first topic, the anxiety concerning the loss of education in the year 2019-2020, for the survey which contains three questions of which their answers are elaborated, the opinions of 500 male and female students of the universities and institutions were randomly picked.

On the second topic, the electronic-dependent online teaching of Soran University in the International Relations department is taken as an example. They have implemented this for five weeks using the LMS application. To analyze this topic the opinion and experience of those five weeks of the teacher of Academic English class has also been picked and some questions have been answered.

On the third topic, as previously stated, in the annual system the results of the first term were counted for the second term as well. However, in the Bologna system, examination was based on writing documents and reports. For this reason, the methods of assessment and contribution of grades are explained.

The number of participants in the survey of this research count towards 500 university and institution students all of which have been selected from different stages, different departments and different genders among Iraqi Kurdistan universities and institutions.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Analysis of current educational policy of KRG

As the problem aggravated the concerns of university and institute students and their families intensified. Many questions were evolving such as; what would become of this year's education? Will students be able to round off their academic year? Will all challenges the students have faced and overcome be in vain? A program named "With Ranj" was presented on Rudaw news agency on April 3, 2020 and many university presidents and representatives took part in the discussion. The minister of Higher Education also engaged in the conversation and declared that they await the consultation of the universities. In the program all the other universities were concerned? about resorting to online-learning in case of the virus infections pervading everywhere except the University of Soran, Despite this the head of the faculty of Law, Hemn Mirany as the vice president of the University, declared that the university is ready for online learning with the application of LMS and that they are waiting for the decision of the ministry to commence. (Rudaw News Agency, 2020)

After a series of discussions and consultations the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research arranged a meeting and in a press conference announced their support of online learning. In the announcement of the meeting it reads "the Council of Ministry reassured all students of Kurdistan and their families that the education of 2019-2020 will not be wasted and the circumstances of scientific measures will be taken in order to protect the process of education (Official website of MOHESR KRG). The universities will also continue their preparations so that in case the traditional process of education hasn't resumed until May 2, 2020, electronic teaching, depending on technology, will commence in order to finish the portions of the curricula that weren't studied this year. Moreover if such processes were to be initiated then the universities will be granted academic and scientific independence in utilizing various platforms and applications suitable for the characteristics of their universities and those of the said system.

This decision of the Ministry of Higher Education which produced for universities and institutes was only applied in an extremely small number of them in virtue of justifications such that students cannot afford or do not have computers, students do not have the internet connection, teachers are not trained in the method of online teaching, online learning is not viable everywhere in the world...etc. (Kurdish Media Agencies). Again on May 18, 2020 the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research organized an online meeting in which they reiterated the contents of the previous meeting and announced "the main topic of the meeting which was specialized for scaling the options laid before the Kurdistan universities to defend the process of education in the year 2019-2020 in addition to know the difference in economic and

humanitarian capability between the universities and the number of students and the training the teachers undergo. Because of the difference of educational capability regarding the programs and systems of education between universities, particularly between the annual system, course by course system, and Bologna system, the ministry therefore emphasizes on the decisions of the previous meeting (Official website of MHE.KRG). Endeavoring to support the institutes and universities of Kurdistan region, the Ministry of Higher Education commenced the course of electronic-dependent learning through the IREX organization in order to make adequate preparations for online learning.

The coronavirus infections and the incidence of new cases abated greatly in the Kurdistan region. Victory over the virus was declared in the Sulaymaniah governorate and the last infected person recovered. Because of this, the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research also announced in an exchange “noting the improvement of health in Kurdistan and according to the report of the Ministry of Health which is directed at our ministry, it is in our plans to resume standard education in universities on May 16, 2020. If, God forbid, health problems and other cases do not emerge we shall, step by step, make the life of the universities normal again. For this purpose the Ministry of Higher Education will meet again to eventually finalize the solution to the problem (Official website of MHE.KRG). Furthermore, the minister of Higher Education made a statement in a video in May 26, 2020 regarding the direction of academic education in the year 2019-2020 and said “we had previously made the decision in the Council of Ministry that if the condition of health improves and is flexible in the region we will open the campus gates of the universities and allow the continuation of education in May 2020. But unfortunately after the deterioration in health conditions the Ministry of Health reported and gave instructions that we cannot do so at the moment (Press conference of the Minister of MHE.KRG).

They also added that “for the universities that apply the Bologna process they decided to count all the credits that were studied in which examinations took place in the year 2019-2020. And all the credits that were not studied will be distributed over the future semesters in the education year of 2020-2021 and they will be studied then. The reason is that according to the Bologna system these kinds of changes are permissible based on the ECTS criteria. As for the annual system and course by course system, all the scientific and humanities faculties will tally the results of the first term to account for their success or failure in the education year of 2019-2020 (Press conference of the Minister of MHE.KRG). This way the Ministry of Higher Education gave a series of instructions, which comprises six pages, to universities and institutions. This manual of instruction disclosed the details of examination and the ending of education of the academic year 2019-2020 over all of the Kurdistan Region’s universities and institutes. It also mentioned that by the end of July 14, 2020 all the results of the first course of this year’s education must be finished (Official website of MHE.KRG).

4.2 Analysis of perceptions toward the anxieties of students:

On this topic, the opinions of 500 female and male students from the universities and institutions have been picked randomly which all answer only three questions and each answer is elaborated. The questions are as follow:

1. *Do you fear missing out on education this year?*
2. *Do you believe the Ministry of Higher Education will solve the problem of education this year?*
3. *If you missed out on education this year, would you be willing to continue your education the following year?*

In answering the first question and in total of 325 male students and 175 female students, 53% of them have had extreme fear that they will lose their education this year. 31% had had less fear concerning the matter. 12% had little to fear, and 4% didn’t answer the question.

In answering the second question of whether they trust the Higher Education to treat the issue of education this year, 73% of the participants were optimistic about the capability of the ministry to work out the problem of education. 21% had very little trust and 6% had no trust in the ministry.

Moving forward to the third question, 82% answered that they would be willing to continue with their education in case they missed out this year. Only 5% showcased their intention to drop out. But 13% of the participants didn’t answer the question.

4.3 Analysis of perceptions toward electronic-dependent online learning

For this topic, we used the example of the University of Soran who, depending on the LMS application of their university, applied online teaching for five weeks. To further explain this topic the experience and the viewpoint of those five weeks by the teacher of Academic English has been collected and some questions have been answered.

In both May and April of 2020, for five weeks, each week, 8 hours of the morning and evening classes of Academic English have been taught to the 2nd and 6th semester students of the IR department. This means that they managed to teach 40 hours of online classes.

The teacher of the course recounts his experiences: *"In the beginning instructional videos about using ZOOM MEETING and Google Meet were emailed to the students. Next on Soran University's LMS application; each student and teacher had personal accounts made for them. Models specific to the classes and stages were activated as well."*

"The rate of subscriptions was scant in the beginning of the week due to limited knowledge and the potential lack of internet access. However the rates increased dramatically after technical and service teams provided the students with more assistance in a way that in total of 37 students in the 2nd semester, 28-33 of them consistently partook in the online classes. In the same way, within the morning students of the 6th semester, in total of 45 of them, 36-39 participated. And in the same evening semester, out of 20 students 17-19 of them participated."

"To assure the true participation of the students, 5 minutes at the start of the classes and at the end were assigned to registering the absentees and all the students were requested to answer by voice. Additionally, throughout the classes the students were actively engaged while also questions and discussions were raised."

"The classes were shared with the students using PowerPoint slides. And the classes were recorded as well as the documents on LMS in form of audio and paper for the students' use. Student activities such as presentations, quizzes and interviews were also consistent throughout the classes. At the end of the course, the necessary grades like annual grades were entrusted to the presidency of the IR department"

4.4 Analysis of perceptions toward evaluations and examinations:

As previously stated, the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research clearly discussed the process of examination in their announcement about the end of the academic year. After that they handed over the universities and institutions a 5 page- instruction manual appointing them to apply the process of examination. The majority of universities and institutions of the Kurdistan region on the ministry's order implemented the process of examination in the manner below:

First; all the universities and institutions that applied the annual system had their first term grades counted for their second term grades and the students received their results. However those that failed or were applicable to the cross-passing rule of receiving ten grades were asked to write an academic report for their teachers to be examined.

Second: for those universities that applied the Bologna process, it was decided to count all the credits that were studied and had examinations in the years 2019-2020. But all the credits that were not studied will be distributed over the subsequent semesters in the 2020-2021 academic years, because according to the Bologna system these kinds of changes are permitted based on the rules of collecting credits (ECTS) annually.

Regarding the process of examination, certain examples of methods were applied in the universities and institutes. These are:

- Writing academic reports
- Writing scientific research papers
- Online presentations
- Essay question exams
- Writing on the students' experience of learning
- Writing reaction papers
- Writing critique papers
- Writing review papers
- Writing book reviews

After finishing their papers the students would email them based on their university model to their teachers. Then headship of the departments together with the teams of the teachers would examine the reports and papers. Some examination committees of universities would remove the name of the students on their papers and the teachers were verified with respective codes to assess the papers. Other universities and institutes were open but their examination committee would perform the duty. Concerning the grading system, some universities and institutes would mark the papers out of 100 and others that studied during the 2nd semester on campus or applied online teaching would distribute the grades separately as 40-60 or 25-75.

5. Limitations and recommendations:

In this section we will first present a few points as the limitations on the application of education policy of the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research of KRG. Subsequently we will present the necessary recommendations for planning education for the years 2020-2021.

- The financial crisis became a nightmare to the education sector. The salaries of teachers and university employees weren't paid and this has caused regression in education.

- The lack of appropriate internet connection and the deficiency of computers and tablets for university and institution students deprived them from the positive benefits of electronic-based -online learning.

- the majority of universities and institutions in the region still apply traditional teaching and learning methods so they couldn't also receive the benefits of electronic-based online education.

- The lack of examination opportunities and the rushing of the universities caused degradation in the quality of preparing reports and papers. And in some places writing reports and papers became a business interest which motivated students to take advantage of them.

Considering the condition of the Higher Education in Kurdistan and the continuity of Covid-19 also in order to discuss the planning of education in the year 2020-2021 in detail, the Ministry of Higher Education of the Kurdistan government on the 15th day of June 2020 by the resolution of 389 formed a committee of planning the new year education led by the vice president and membership of 16 officials from the ministry and universities as soon as possible.

After the readings and analyses centered on the three topics, the anxiety of the students concerning the loss of education, online teaching/learning and examination a few suggestions will be offered here:

- It is imperative that the ministry makes the decision that all universities and institutions of Kurdistan region make complete preliminary arrangements to manage the system of online education for the next year.

- The ministry should make every effort to provide universities with cheap internet access, tablets and necessary computers through transportation and delivery companies as well as the economics ministry.

- Training courses on online teaching should open for university teachers and employees.

- A series of symposia and an online conference regarding details of the Higher Education's policies in the period of Covid-19 should be conducted so that it becomes a stimulus for more preparation.

- The Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research of Kurdistan government should work on creating a centralized program, classes and methods of examination and assessment. This should be properly supervised.

6. Conclusion:

This paper has discussed the education policy of the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research of Iraqi Kurdistan Region at the time of the coronavirus outbreak. In addition the results of the survey that aimed to cover the anxiety concerning the loss of education this year has been clarified as fortunately the Ministry of Higher Education could alleviate such anxieties. After that the experience of online teaching/learning has been introduced and explained. The methods of examination in universities and institutions in which various paths were taken to perform them were clarified as well. Furthermore, the level of difference in examination and distribution of grades was noted. Ultimately the limitations of the KRG Higher Education's policy during the times of Covid-19 were presented. Next to this, a group of suggestions for planning 2020-2021 academic sessions that were propounded in case the spread of coronavirus continues.

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