

The Internationalization of Higher Education in University of Raparin “Kurdistan Region-Iraq”

Name of Researcher: Paiman Ramazan Ahmad

Affiliation: University of Raparin

Kurdistan Region-Iraq

***Email: Paiman@raparinuni.org**

Abstract

The main aim of this study is to identify the important priorities of internationalizing higher education in Kurdistan region and specifically University of Raparin “UOR” and to determine the challenges of Internationalization process in the “UOR” as a public university in the region.

Descriptive study and quantitative design were carried out to identify the priorities of Internationalization, and challenges of Internationalization of Higher Education (HE). The data were collected through the use of a questionnaire distributed among the teaching staff and staff of office of relations at “UOR”. The questionnaire consisted of two parts; the first part in titled as “Main priorities for Internationalization process in Kurdistan Region-University of Raparin” has eight items. The second part consisted of seven items entitled as “the challenges of Internationalization of higher education” The data collected were analyzed and the results were shown diagrammatically.

The findings of the present study indicate that the main challenge of Internationalization of higher education is budget, curriculum of the study and language barriers, in “UOR” as sample of public universities. Moreover, the main priorities of participants were highly accepted and supported to develop and enhance Internationalization of “UOR” in the future. Here, the study concludes that the priorities of Internationalization are important for Internationalization of HE in University of Raparin, and the main challenges should be revised for better performance in Internationalization process.

Key Words: Internationalization, Higher Education, Challenges, Public Universities

Background of Internationalization of Higher Education in KRG Region

The emergence of Internationalization of higher education in Kurdistan Region of Iraq, paves the way of the present continuation of debate on developing academic relations with the industrial countries. Higher Education institutions especially, universities are working on Internationalization within the terms of overseas study programs for postgraduate studies, collaboration with international associations, exchange programs, student mobility, research capacity building, and staff trainings. This research deals with the concept of Internationalization of higher education in public universities in KRG Region, and analyses the outcomes of the Internationalization process in Kurdistan region besides the advantages and obstacles to meet the needs.

Internationalization process has started since the establishment of the ministry of Higher Education in 2006 in Kurdistan Region; modern universities in Kurdistan were established after the American invasion of Iraq. The war in a sense was a gate for paving the path for Internationalization and bringing new technology to the country. UNESCO (2004) acknowledged that there were 350,000 undergraduate students, 15000 postgraduate students, and nearly 30,000 teaching faculties from different majors, which were offered by the existing universities in Iraq” however there were a few students from Kurdistan, and few teaching staff due to the economic sanction and lack of access to education for Kurdish families. Thus, Internationalization process takes a rather long period and this would not be easy for an

emerging region like Kurdistan. Since, the economy of the region has emerged, and then it has a dramatic impact on the educational system. Althach, Reisberg & Rumbley (2009) defined "Internationalization as the variety of policies and programs that universities and governments implement to respond to globalization". Further, HE is affected by economic growth and national expenditure, since this would lead more people to study and to be engaged with education at all levels. Besides, that would give people credibility to study more after their graduation from universities or colleges. Therefore, for achieving sustainable development in Higher Education, the ingredients of higher education need to be reinforced, especially research capacity and staff development.

Moreover, the transition of power in Iraq after the second Gulf War changed the Kurdistan Region from a rather isolated region to an emerging region in the Middle East. This led to increasing demand on studying. That is to say, Kurdistan Regional Government, and ministry of Higher Education, had actively worked hard on updating educational system of the region. Accordingly, Internationalization of higher education would convey an important message to the public. Besides, revitalizing higher education in Kurdistan Region, would offer a significant transform that would help in knowledge production in the region. Importantly, KRG government and Ministry of Higher Education have to focus on one factor while thinking about Internationalization of Higher Education, which is a question that should be answered by action not words "can Internationalization help universities and academic institutions in Kurdistan region to prosper both financially and socially?"

The Process of Internationalization of Higher Education in Kurdistan Region

The continuous support of the regional government for investing in manpower and the investment in research infrastructure, innovation and creativity in curriculum are the main key factors of Internationalization process currently. However, still there is a strong agreement among local scientists and academicians from academic institutions and universities who have different point of views about internationalizing of HE in Kurdistan Region. To some extent, the key interests of Internationalization are not clear for the public, university staff. Since, engaging into a serious process like Internationalization of HE needs the investment of human resources and finance of the local government. Night's (1999) has focused almost exclusively on typology that gives clear illustration to the approaches of Internationalization including activity approach "focusing on bringing international student body join or exchange programs" also competency approach changing values, skills or generally institutional notion of the employees towards internationalization", besides, ethos approach "by promoting culture and preparing appropriate environment that facilitates Internationalization".

The first phase of Internationalization can be via cooperation between Kurdish universities and International institutions of higher education. Interestingly, public universities in Kurdistan region had already started to work on partnerships, and some universities are leading in this process and some are working on, though, some universities are biased or passive in doing partnerships or are less likely in cooperation.

Accordingly, being involved in the process of Internationalization and working on partnerships is not an easy duty, since the university has to work on finding a suitable partner, which can feed the needs and demands of the second partner by taking into account their own interests at the same time. Cooperation, would lead to the sustainable developments in Higher Education, and it revolts the process of education according to the changes. Hence, each university or higher education institution in Kurdistan Region, has to decide on Internationalization according to the mission and the objectives of their institutions, as potentially Internationalization will have an impact on the curriculum and programs, besides human capacity building also the prestige and the rank of the university.

John K. Hudzik (2011) mentioned that people who are touched by Internationalization are new to the subject or are not familiar with its concepts, language, objectives and methods, or some had paid little attention to Internationalization and now are more connected to it, and those who have experience are not able to implement it for developing Internationalization". So, widening the awareness of the importance of the Internationalization of local higher education in the Kurdistan region is necessary at the moment. Therefore, drawing public attention to internationalizing of higher education has to be the issue for strategic planning of the public universities.

Demand on Education at all Levels is increasing in Kurdistan Region

The rapid demographic change in the number of students, for higher education, adult education and other professional related educational courses is dramatically increasing in the Kurdistan region. Very importantly, in education field numbers are dramatically changing Director of Sulaimaniya Statistics 2013 revealed that the number of students is increasing, including kindergarten 11189 females versus 9696 males, primary school, 162270 females and 161124 males, secondary school 3897females and 2736 males, high school 42537 females , 44622 male, technical education students 200females, 2918 males students. Besides, the other education like for those whom are late in getting to school with 750 females and 1298 males. Overall the statistical data covers 445286 females and 444788 males, based on this statistic is a dramatic change in the education system and women empowerment in the field. Furthermore, Alan Ruby (2009) acknowledged that it is fairly “accepted wisdom” that there will be an almost 150 percent increase in higher education seats globally to 250 million by 2025, and mostly the developing countries, besides of student mobility which will be duplicated by 2025.

Moreover, economic growth is interrelated with changes in community, and economic growth has a direct effect on education, since after the collapse of Baath Regime, Kurdish families started paying attention to social developments, and families are willing to afford their children to schools. This is the main reason why the number of secondary and primary students’ schools is highly increasing, and this creates load on the universities’ capacity of admitting new students to university. At the same time, the interest of learning is boosting among the young generation, and education is the main issue for the young generation. As a result, the number of Kurdish illiterate people is declining as family pre-capital is growing; the per-capita of families is based on governmental expenditure and salary scale of people. Also many people do work in private sectors, and this provides a further support which enables families to pay for education of their children.

However, rapid changes always bring drawbacks in a community and Kurdish community is not exceptional, as the demand for education is growing then the fundamental ability of the universities and institutions to satisfy their clients is questionable. Van. De Wende (2007) acknowledged the complexity and rapidly changing dynamics of Internationalization are even difficult for the developed regions to control, in a term, it can be said that Internationalization for the Kurdistan region is preparing students for their future career based on global trends in the market, as well in the political term, higher education can be a key for fostering peace and stability for the Kurdistan region, besides, it will help the Kurdistan region to develop its cultural interaction with the world based on the mutual understanding. Since, the student population is growing; thus expanding the capacity of universities to enroll more students is a need annually. Free access to education and the availability of education to the masses, is another important factor. Therefore, universities should work to diversify their pathways. The initiatives of getting interest from foreign universities are taken into account by universities.

As, the new world of education is formulated with the changes of IT and technology. And, IT has a fundamental role in the progress of the educational system in the Kurdistan region. Easy access of Technology and the Internet helps Kurdish students to be linked with foreign students and universities at the international arena. Well-prepared laboratories and IT centers will help in enhancing the quality of education in universities, and KRG universities to be internationalized; they need to have equal facilities’ capability compare it to their counterparts. To be recognized globally, each university in KRG should work to prepare students to perform well both nationally and internationally. For better engagement in Internationalization, there is a need of focusing on Research capacity building, creating linkages and networks with foreign universities. Hence, universities have to carefully plan and implement it. Worth mentioning that public universities in the Kurdistan Region are rather free to sign bonds and cooperation with foreign universities, universities independently can work on partnerships according to their institutional interests.

**The Main Challenges to Internationalization of Higher Education in Kurdistan Region
Dependency on Government**

Weakness of universities in cooperation and sustainable development comes from the dependency of universities on governmental funding. And this makes universities to be dependent on government. That is why the implementation of Internationalization in universities is regulated by the policies, and lacks flexibility. The weakness of

Internationalization is rooted in the lack of resources, as a developing region the government spends far less on Internationalization approach.

In addition, public universities in the Kurdistan Region are highly affected by the traditional model of governance and universities are a victim of bureaucratic systems, in which the policies are centrally planned and regulated by the Ministry Of Higher Education-KRG. "Budget must typically be approved by government officials, who may have little understanding of higher education in general" (William G. Gale & Peter R. Orszag, 2004). In this regard, the central decision making process is controlled by top leaders of the institution, which probably brings disadvantage to the institution. Generally, the physical capital does regulate the knowledge capital in the Kurdistan region. According to the IAU, the main obstacle for Internationalization is lack of financial resources. Universities worldwide suffer from a lack of specific Internationalization budget and monitoring systems. Like the Latin American and Caribbean Universities, public universities in the Kurdistan region has no fund whatsoever for Internationalization.

Thus, regional government supposes to generate more revenues in internationalizing universities. Besides, universities need to be autonomous in regulating and generating their institutional budget. Globally, developing dependent regions like Kurdistan does not possess sufficient financial resources to compete with foreign partners. Although, being a small-developing region is a disadvantage due to lack of recourse and human capital, likewise, Kurdistan region is an oil rich region in which government can spend an enormous budget on higher education. Like, Mauritius, a small island state off the East African coast, which aims to become a knowledge hub (Gouges,2011) Kurdistan region can be the hub in the Middle East too, as this will not only attract foreign staff, but students too.

Lack of Sustainable Facilities

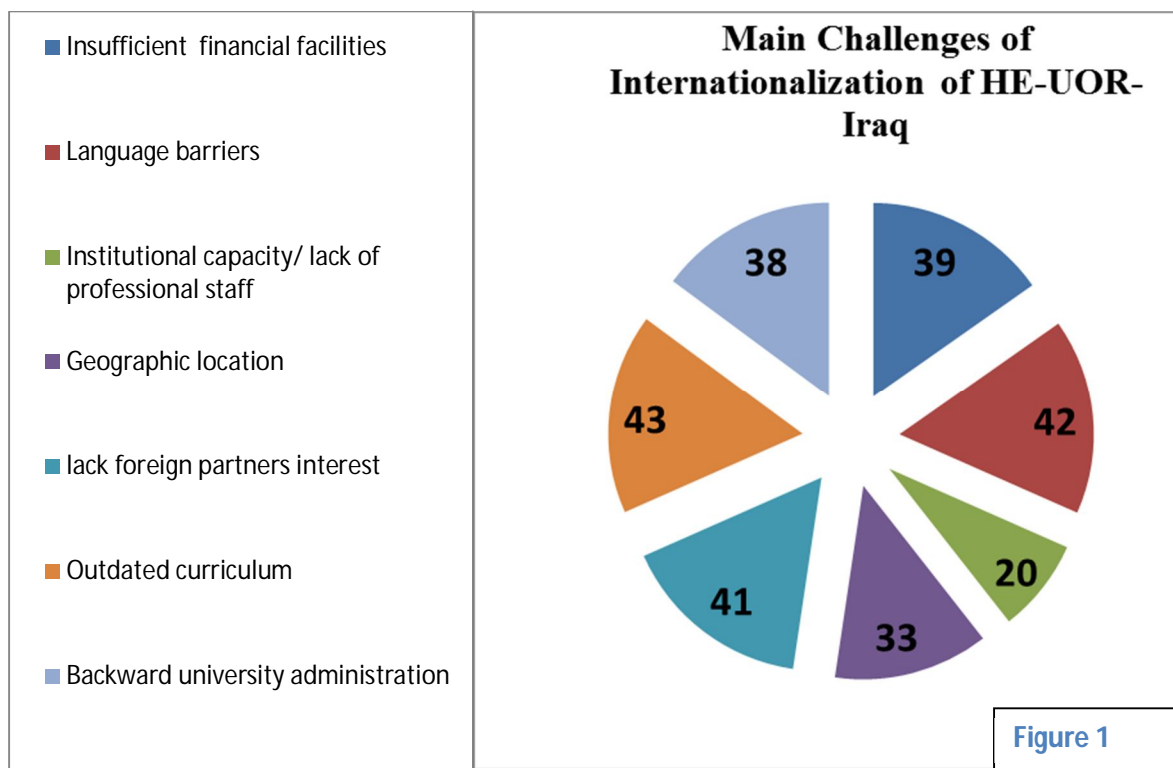
Since, Iraq passed through many wars and sanctions, and the national wealth and revenues had been spent on waging wars. Therefore, investment priority of development in higher education and research was rather neglected for many years. This affected the higher education system generally, and academic environment of universities as well. Though, recently the regional government has focused on developing policies and among them higher education is taken into consideration. Hence, working on the quality of learning in universities is extremely important, because quality is very crucial element for building a good reputation for the university.

Universities in the region need an appropriate environment for implementation of Internationalization, lacking adequate facilities is a serious barrier for Internationalization. To get internationalized universities need to have full technological devices, because technology is very important and especially for the developing regions. It is the job of regional government to provide universities with suitable facilities, which helps in enhancing learning environment for students.

Lack of Professional Staff

Working on Internationalization of higher education and universities brings in an important realm of education, lacking competency in teaching staff at universities has an impact on Internationalization process, Public universities in Kurdistan region seek to become more global than before, and this requires the universities teaching staff to be engaged in the global orientation of the educational system. Similarly, the role of teaching staff is dramatically essential in universities Internationalization, although "many teachers are not developing this competence themselves. Schneider (2003) Countless reason might be involved in the weakness of teaching staff performance in Kurdistan region, first and for most is the local system, which is outdated, and the region is developing rapidly, and teaching staff who had studied during the wars and time of Bath regime were unable to get globalized and engaged with outside world. And, that left no room for training of teaching staff that are the core for teaching in universities in the Kurdistan region and in all universities around the world. According to Reigeluth, 1994& Duffy (2009) internationalizing teacher preparation calls for a model of systemic change, in the Kurdistan region the curriculum reform took place very rapidly, and there had been less focus of teachers and yet not enough preparation programs for familiarizing teachers with the new curriculum. Since the changes require teaching staff engagement as an important part of the curriculum which is the major key for Internationalization of local education. Teaching staff is the most important ingredients to the Internationalization process; hence the specific focus should be on teaching staff capacity building and trainings especially on pedagogy and curriculum which will be the key engagement with Kurdistan higher education in the global community.

Besides, lack of teaching staff involved in commitments and discussions about Internationalization is another point, mostly in public universities teaching staff is deprived from Internationalization process, their chance to get involved is weakened by institutional barriers and focus on teaching rather than management is the process.



The results in the above pie chart show that 43% of the respondents reveal that the main challenges for Internationalization of higher education in University of Raparin-KRG is the educational curriculum which is outdated. Whereas, the rest of respondents did not show the same trend for this dimension. The 42% shows that the second main challenge is Language barrier which makes the Internationalization of higher education in University of Raparin to be challenging currents. Besides, 41% of the respondents suggested that the lack of foreign partners' interest is another challenge which makes Internationalization process rather difficult.

Even though, financial resources has always been taken into account as the main concern for Internationalization only 39% out of 60 participants stated that the budget is a problem. Whereas, 38% of respondents posit that university administration is another challenge of Internationalization of higher education. The 33% participants consider the geographic location of university of repairing as a public university in Kurdistan region of Iraq as a challenge for internationalizing of university of Raparin. 20% of participants stated that Institutional capacity/ lack of professional staff are challenged for Internationalization of HR in university of Raparin.

Higher Education Reforms as the Key Drivers in Promoting Internationalization

The ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research in Kurdistan Region initiated a systematic reform of higher education. The main approaches to the educational reforms are pointed out by the former minister professor. Dlawar Aladdin, as the following:-

- Reforming teaching and establishing a modern Teaching Quality Assurance (TQA) system.
- Reforming the research training of students and the research funding system to revitalize the scientific research, promote innovation, and link our scientists with their counterparts in international research centers of excellence.
- Building capacity by investing in people and infrastructure.

- Establishing an institutional licensing and accreditation system.
- Reforming the management structure of the universities and the technical institutes to minimize waste and promote university independence.
- Reforming the administrative system to minimize bureaucracy and put students and staff first.
- Protecting human rights, achieving social justice, and improving the learning and working environment.

Exclusively, the main aim is to boost the quality of teaching and learning in the universities in Kurdistan Region. Furthermore, quality assurance is an academic contribution for developing universities academic excellence and promoting teaching quality. The issue of quality assurance is related to quality of performance in the institution, “Quality Assurance is a significant driver for improving higher education, which services students, institutions and governments” (MENA, 2011).

While Internationalization is new to the Kurdistan region, quality assurance is relatively the same. Chiefly, public universities in Kurdistan Region need to work on self-evaluation and benchmarking the current evaluation system against the internationally accredited standards. As, accreditation internationally will enhance the reputation of public universities in the KRG. Developing stronger accreditation and quality assurance mechanism will link “UOR” more closely with international standard quality assurance agencies. The process of quality assurance will help Kurdish students get accredited degrees nationally and internationally, if their knowledge and skills breed the international standards of quality assurance. In this respect activating quality assurance is based on international programs of study is necessary. **OCED (2004, 2005)** articulated that most national systems of quality assurance and accreditation focus on the quality of domestic programs that delivered by local institutions. “the current system of higher education, which Kurdistan has inherited from Iraq, is dated and largely dysfunctional” **stated by Former KRG Higher Education Minister Prof. Dlawar Aladdin (2009) in his article “quality is our priority”** in his ministerial term Professor Aladin worked hard on improving the quality of teaching and learning. As it is clear from this analysis that public universities in KRG need to learn about various institutional models and systems of quality assurance.

Thus, the reform in curriculum and standardizing higher education accommodates Internationalization. In other words, it will be a chance for both teachers and students to be familiarized with the higher education system based on international experience of quality assurance and accreditation. In this respect, many universities are engaged with international cooperation in curriculum development. Increasingly, the importance of both Internationalization at home and Internationalization abroad is being recognized as complementary (**Knight, 2005**).

University Partnerships in Kurdistan Region are the key for Internationalization, as traditionally cooperation was mostly active within the European institutions and the reason might be the migration move to Europe and Kurdish students mainly are interested to study at higher education institutions in Europe. Therefore, focusing on the networking in order to develop stronger academic linkages is a fundamental factor for reinforcing the relations. As, having authority in signing memorandum of understanding and flexibility of universities in choosing appropriate partners has been significant initiative in Internationalization of higher education in the Kurdistan Region.

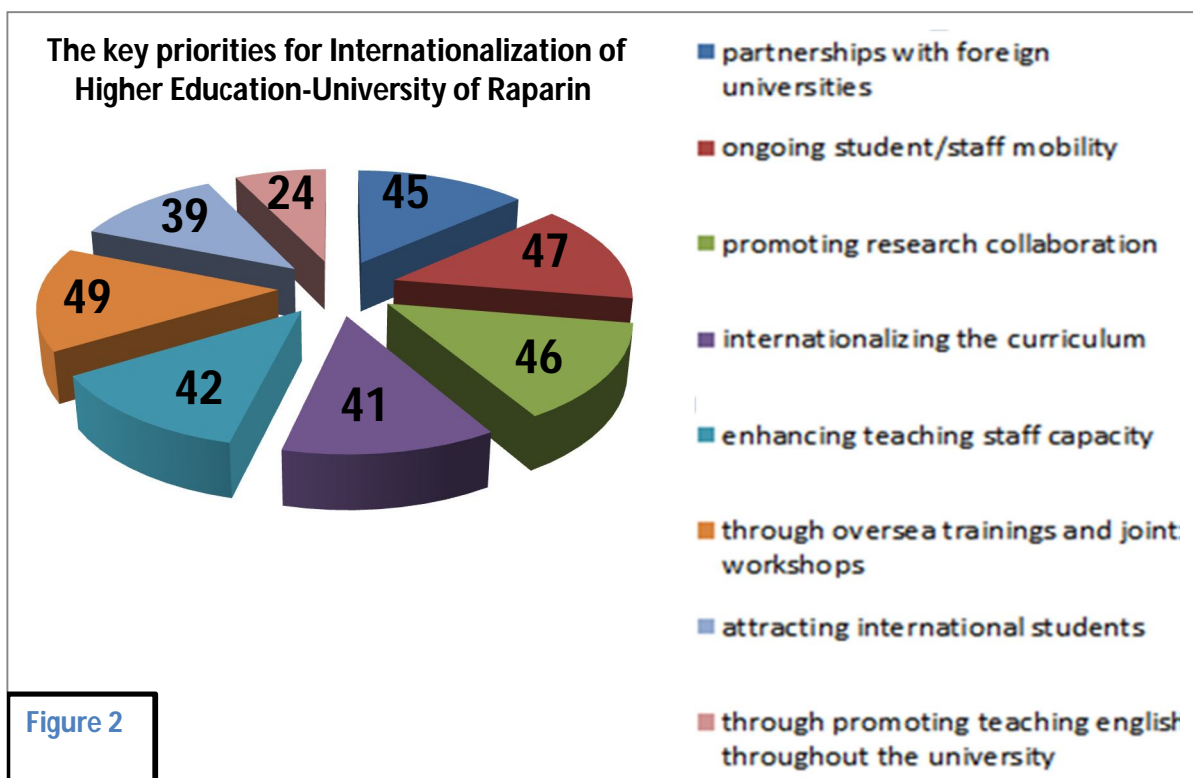
Additionally, successful partnerships can bring significant contributions to Internationalization of HE, and particularly long-term partners, being wise in partnerships will help with the sustainability of the relation between the institutions, for Kurdish universities most partnerships are with the European countries and American universities as well few from the Middle East. Importantly, sustainability of the partnerships leads to pave the way for internationalizing of higher education, besides it is not just about what our university would gain but it is about what both partners get from this partnership, the sustainability of the partnership comes from the intention and willingness on both sides to cooperate on certain disciplines of higher education.

Research Competition in Kurdistan region: - public universities need more investment for upgrading research infrastructure from the scratch. Currently, universities plan to have partnerships and memorandum of understandings with foreign partners for research collaboration. The governmental strategy might help out if the fund for research to rise and there should be special budget and funding for research field, because budget is the key to strengthening Internationalization of research. Moreover, promoting funding between the public and private sectors will feed the research development. That is why emphasizing on networking between international and national institutions is crucial for attracting international market attention to the Kurdistan Region.

It is to be highlighted that research is rather weak, and this is due to many factors: first is governmental policies which made research to be isolated or deprived from study, and that made almost all public universities to be teaching centers rather than research seeking institutions. And, lack of funding and facilities, both human resources and infrastructure is not what is needed for a good research with high quality. The faculty members pay less attention to research due to financial concerns and individual interests “Any faculty works part time at several institutions, devote little attention to research or to improving their teaching, and play little or no role in the life of the institutions employing them” (Richard Florida, 2004). Overall, public universities need to work on re-activating and establishing research entities in their universities, but based on the quality of international research centers.

Significantly, public universities in Kurdistan are seeking to diversify their research fields, or building a shared center with foreign universities, which would be very fruitful for young researchers to be involved actively. Siaya & Hayward (2003) stated that the US research universities had mentioned Internationalization in their mission statements; also about half of the universities included it in the strategic plans. Emerging research in Kurdistan region would be a great contribution to Internationalization of the regional higher education, hence having research in the vision and road map of universities is essential step.

Internationalization of Higher Education in Kurdistan Region as a Purpose of Internationalism:- for many regions and countries Internationalization is not new, but that might be new to Kurdistan and Iraq. Nonetheless, initiatives had been taken into account, and worked well; a clear example of the date is Human Capacity Development Program (HCDP) funded by the Ministry of Higher Education, Kurdistan Regional Government. Worth mentioning, that HCDP was an attractive facilitator which brought many foreign education bodies and stakeholders to the region. The first national scholarship program that is sponsored by KRG as cross-border education that had sponsored around 4000 thousand students in three rounds from different ministries and institutions in Kurdistan Region. Throughout this program, a large number of MA/MSc and PhD students have been sent abroad to get their degrees in the internationally recognized universities especially European universities. Toffler (1990) discussed a significant key development of the current century which is the power of mind as the most important



economic development of our lifetime, which is considered as a novel system for creating wealth, depending on the mind rather than muscles". Flourishing the move of student flow from Kurdistan to the West and other countries was in a sense to let more people to be aware of our nationality. Thus, continual support of the Government is urgent for continuity of HCDP, and for the process of nationalism. On the other hand, it is not just sustainable developments of knowledge, but further it is bringing diversity to the higher education system of Kurdistan.

The pie charts 2 shows that **49%** of participants indicated the importance of oversea Trainings as a priority for Internationalization, and Joint workshops between University of Raparin and foreign universities. Meanwhile, **47%** of participants in the figure illustrated that the ongoing student/staff mobility is the second most significant variable among the priorities. Thus, there should be focus on exchange programs which require a continuous plan to be adopted by university of Raparin and Ministry of Higher Education. The **46%** participants' results showed that Internationalization of research collaboration is important.

The results of the Pie Chart 2 show that **45%** of participants answered positively for having Partnerships with foreign universities for better Internationalization implication. This is a positive step towards suitable and long term partnerships for university of Raparin. The Pie indicates that **42%** of participants recorded that Enhancing Teaching Staff Capacity is a key element in improving internationalization of HE in University of Raparin. Overall, impression of participants is adequate for enhancing quality and human recourse of the university. Besides, **41%** present of the respondents agreed that internationalizing the curriculum of study in university of Raparin is a need for Internationalization of higher education. 39% of the results pointed that attracting international students to Kurdistan region and specifically to university of Raparin will affect internationalization of HE in the region. Since, having international students in higher education circle has a strong effect on how respondents felt about Internationalization process. 24% of participants saw promoting teaching English throughout the university as being highly important. The ability of speaking English other than the local languages in university of Raparin will possibly reinforce Internationalization of HE.

Conclusion

It seems that universities in the Kurdistan Region are attempting for the first time to identify themselves within the global context, and are trying to create much tighter relationships with reputed universities and institutions. Hence, public universities do pay attention to their global rankings and also to the brand of their education. Additionally, practical attention to Internationalization of higher education in Kurdistan Region is necessary. As, the linkages core purpose is to constitute a linkage of scholars, educators and researchers in the region. Indeed, two concluding insights from this research can be offered. The first relates to the top priorities of Internationalization and, the second insight is to meet these challenges for branding Internationalization of higher education in University of Raparin as sample of young public university in the region.

Recommendations

- Mentioned during this research that a serious barrier for Internationalization is financial resources, hence increasing and diversifying the funding for universities, will help universities to be engaged in exchange programs for staff and students. The policy makers, key personnel in universities and the Ministry of Higher Education, have to think of increasing the financial support for universities Internationalization.
- **Student mobility programs towards the region:-** the Ministry and universities have to think of balancing the strong imbalance of exchange programs where lots of Kurdish students are going abroad, but Kurdish universities do not attract foreign students regionally and internationally. Promoting the increasing of the number of international students and scholars on campus will integrate regional universities to the global village and different cultures.
- **Raising the institutional and public awareness** is significant to raise awareness of the university's staff about the importance of the Internationalization of the institution they work in. Besides, public awareness of local community in which universities exist in is also very important.

- **Focusing on staff development:** is significant for successful Internationalization of university relations, especially staff training to be integrated into a global agenda of the university.
- **Foreign Language skills** need to be developed as it is poorer among international staff, besides having international experience would be better for being active in Internationalization of the university. Foreign language training for staff of international relations office and faculty members is crucial.
- **Working on home Internationalization without leaving the region,** the stream of internationalizing the local system of higher education is one dimension of Internationalization, by having distance-learning course or research degree studies, and joint degrees too.
- **Short term course:** Ministry of Higher Education and public universities in Kurdistan region ought to develop short-term programs for international and regional academics and students from European, Asian, Eurasian and Middle Eastern countries that would like to pay a scientific visit to Kurdistan to learn about Kurdistan culture, heritage, language, religion and education at the top. This would bring advantages for continuing the Internationalization of higher education

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