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Iraq campuses rebuild in hope

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THE higher education and research infrastructure of Iraq not only suffered substantially after the collapse of the former regime but continues to face the cumulative effects of three decades of mismanagement, Baathist cultural indoctrination, and regime corruption of academic ethics.

As a consequence, many Iraqi universities regressed or are frozen in terms of development. The last humiliating act in the long process of erosion was the looting and destruction.

The sequence of devastations inflicted on Iraqi universities transformed what was perhaps the most respected and well-developed higher educational and research system in the Middle East to a miniature shadow of its former self. The University of Baghdad, as an example, was known as the Harvard of the Middle East.

For most of the past two decades, Iraqi higher education institutions faced fundamental problems in being cut off from any significant international contact. What this meant practically was the suspension of library subscriptions to academic journals and the acquisition of new books and having to train students and conduct research using outdated laboratory and computing equipment.

Travel abroad for faculty members and students was extremely restricted. Throughout the last 3 1/2 decades of Baath Party rule, academic independence and freedom of thought and expression were severely constrained.

Under the former regime, the well-established universities in Baghdad and provincial centres were neglected to the benefit of ad hoc elite institutions such as Saddam University - which was lavished with resources and staffed with the best academics in Iraq. The intent was to supply the state a loyal class of highly educated and competent technocrats.

Over the past two weeks, a high-level delegation from the University of Baghdad and the Iraqi National Academy of Sciences visited Australia at the invitation of the Australian Iraqi Forum. The delegation was headed by dissident scientist Hussain Al-Shahristani, who spent 11 years in solitary confinement for refusing to join Saddam Hussein's nuclear weapons program. He is now president of the Iraqi National Academy of Sciences. The delegation also included University of Baghdad president Mosa Al-Mosawe and its engineering faculty dean Ali Al-Kiliddar.

The story they conveyed to us, and to the senior university managements and government officials they visited, carried signs of hope and optimism in the new Iraq. Iraqi universities are functioning regularly despite of all the difficulties they face. The delegation demonstrated how determined they are to revive higher education and to elevate research standards at their institutions. Their commitment was remarkable.

The group visited seven universities and signed two memoranda of understanding with Monash University and another with the University of Technology, Sydney. A draft MOU with the Australian National University is under review.

In meetings with senior management of the universities visited, the delegation discussed areas of possible co-operation including exchange of faculty members and students, joint research projects, joint conferences, joint cultural programs, assistance in curriculum development and short courses for professional development.

In meetings in Canberra with the Department of Education, Science and Training, AusAid and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the delegation put forward a compelling case for the need for Australia's assistance to revive Iraq's higher education system.

In two visits to Iraq over the past 18 months and in discussions with the higher education delegation last week, I found that in spite of all the adversities and instead of despairing, staff and students remain remarkably upbeat and optimistic. Universities recessed for the duration of the war and continued their classes and scheduled exams from mid-May to mid-July 2003. Students in their final year have already graduated. The new academic year has already commenced as of the start of October 2004.

The higher education system in Iraq comprises 22 major public universities and 43 technical institutes and colleges. At the start of the 2002-2003 academic year, these institutions had more than 240,000 students with nearly 14,700 full-time academic staff.

Australian universities, with their global focus and their internationally recognised role in advancing research in various fields, are ideally suited to help revive Iraq's university system and rebuild its skills base by training students and staff who now represent the future of their country. This could best be achieved by building a national consortium of university programs in collaboration with Iraq's Ministry of Higher Education, with financial and in-kind support to be provided by the Iraqi government, AusAid, the World Bank and the universities forming the consortium.

Advancing academic programs with the new Iraq would be an investment in future collaboration between Iraqi and Australian universities, with the potential for fee-paying students and academic staff trainees coming to Australia in the years to come.

Through such programs, Australian universities have a unique opportunity to stand at the centre of world events and expand their global vision - an opportunity that should be embraced.

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