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SOCIAL AND POLITICAL INSTABILITY AND THE RELATIONSHIP TO EDUCATIONAL REFORM IN KURDISTAN

ABSTRACT

Formal education can be a mechanism for increasing social tolerance, political transparency and cultural integration; thus, a discussion of the relationship between political and social instability and resultant struggle with comprehensive educational reform in Kurdistan is timely. This chapter, written by the two university presidents of the only American-style not-for-profit institutions in Kurdistan/Iraq, narrates the challenges the authors face in bringing high-quality education to a region of the world confronting civil unrest, continual violence and economic turmoil.

Key words

Kurdistan, Iraq, formal education, cultural integration, political transparency

1. The Past: The Halcyon Days Are Gone

Since the violent overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003, the Kurdistan region of northern Iraq has actively sought independence; however, corruption, mismanagement of natural resources and sectarianism have led to internal feuds between political parties and talk of a sovereign nation of Kurdistan remains, for the most part, just that: Talk. Furthermore, conversations between leaders

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of political parties remain difficult, at best, given the lack of economic/political transparency, corruption, and resultant distrust. “We need to force all companies that belong to KRG (Kurdistan Regional Government) politicians that have embezzled Kurdistan’s wealth brought back to its rightful owners: the Kurds” (Salih, 2016).

Although recent extreme violence in Baghdad is further igniting Kurdish separatism, it remains a question to many whether or not the main political parties in Kurdistan can find common ground and the will to share power and therefore effectively, and peacefully, govern the nation. And although Kurdistan is currently the least violent area in all of Iraq, the so-called Islamic State remains ensconced on the border of the country and is no less than a 30-minute drive from the regional capital city of Erbil. Since 2014, the war with ISIS has caused the region to suffer economically and socially. This ongoing instability has had a tremendous negative impact on the ability of the Kurdish people to gain a foothold in global markets and thereby garner the necessary resources needed to successfully push for independence.

Masrouf Barzani, chancellor of the Kurdistan Region Security Council and also Chairman of the Board of Trustees at the newly-established American University of Kurdistan (AUK) in Duhok, recently wrote:

(...) Iraq is a conceptual failure, compelling peoples with little in common to share an uncertain future. It is time to acknowledge that the experiment has not worked. Iraq is a failed state, and our (Kurdish) continued presence within it condemns us all to unending conflict and enmity. Turmoil surrounds us. In the summer of 2014, the face of the nation was exposed when the Islamic State terrorist group seized a third of the country and a significant part of the border with Syria because the most credible institution in the land, the Iraqi army, failed to defend it. Eleven years after the tyranny of Saddam Hussein ended, Iraq was exposed for what it is: a country that cannot protect its people and can barely define its interests (Barzani, 2016).

Clearly, as Barzani pointed out, forced coexistence between the Iraqis and Kurds has not worked. It is believed that a separate and sovereign Kurdistan is the only answer to bringing stability to the region. Barzani continued:

We have all done enough pretending – to our peril. An Iraq free from the shackles of what Baghdad describes as the “Kurdish issue” would be liberating for both sides, disentangling interdependencies that each of us resent and allowing us to secure our economic footing (...) To remain invested in a state that has clearly and repeatedly failed is folly. It is past time to recognize that. With little else but the dedication of its people, the Kurdistan region has already built the foundations

of a successful, prosperous state. We have earned the right to self-determination and have shown that, even without statehood, we are a valued component of the international community, the steadfast of allies in a region short on certainty. We stand ready to join the community of nations (Barzani, 2016).

This entire region of the Middle East has been in turmoil since Saddam Hussein assumed the presidency of Iraq in 1979 although he was, in fact, the *de facto* president for several years prior to that. He was directly responsible for two bloody wars – the Iran-Iraq War that raged from 1980–1988 and the Gulf War from 1990–1991. In various purges and genocides, the low estimate of the number of Iraqis (including Kurds) killed during the Saddam era is 250,000. What this means is that for the past 40 or more years, Kurdistan/Iraq has been bathed in conflict and any real attempt to build a modern and efficient government infrastructure has been constantly thwarted. Without question, this continuous instability has dramatically impacted the educational system in the country, both K-12 and higher education. Indeed, the entire higher education sector was all but destroyed in 2003. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) figures (2016) a total of 61 universities and college buildings in both Kurdistan and Iraq were severely war damaged and over 100 college buildings were looted. Most seriously harmed were scientific laboratories and libraries.

According to the UNESCO Office for Iraq:

The rehabilitation of the Iraqi higher education system, already damaged by almost two decades of under-investment and isolation, is hampered by insufficient infrastructure and limited capacity in terms of planning, policy and management of higher education programs. The gap between the educational opportunities offered by universities in Iraq and the requirements for sustainable economic development is widening. Instability and lack of security have undermined the normal academic activity in Iraqi universities and triggered an unexpected brain drain that has further undermined the educational opportunities of Iraqi students. At the institutional level, the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MoHESR) needs technical support and capacity building to effectively ensure access to a quality higher education system (UNESCO, 2016).

This decades-old conflict has caused a significant brain-drain in the region. Thousands of academicians have fled the country. Although a number of teachers and professors from Baghdad relocated to the relatively safe region of Kurdistan, a crippled economy has prevented the purchase of modern equipment and hampered the development of a progressive curriculum. Due to war and

resultant economic instability, higher education in the country is a relatively new phenomenon. Prior to 1991 there was only one public university in the entire region – the University of Salahaddin – located in Sulaimani, which later opened a branch in Erbil that became the main campus. After 2003, the Kurdistan region of Iraq experienced fairly rapid growth in its number of universities (Vernez, Rand Education, 2014). In short order, four public universities were opened, two in Erbil and one each in Koya and Soran. As of 2009 about 12,000 students were enrolled in public universities (Kurdistan Region Statistics Office, Ministry of Planning, 2011). There was also significant growth in private universities with six institutions opening in Erbil alone, and AUIS opening in Sulaimani in 2007. AUIS opened its doors to a cohort of 10 students and currently it has 2,000 students.

Over the past several decades, three types of colleges and universities have evolved in Kurdistan including public, private for-profit, and private not-for-profit. Public higher education is 100 percent supported by the government and is free of charge to students who are admitted. However, the number of seats available in the public system does not satisfy the demand and many thousands of students are denied the opportunity to enroll. In addition, there is tremendous pressure on the higher education community to provide education assistance to the 2.2 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and to refugees who make up fully 30 percent of the Kurdish population.

Lacking space in the public institutions of higher learning, many students enroll in private colleges and universities, paying for their education in hopes it will bring increased opportunities. With the exception of only two not-for-profit universities in Kurdistan/Iraq – including the American University of Iraq, Sulaimani (AUIS) and the American University of Kurdistan (AUK) in Duhok – all private institutions are for-profit. These “business centers” are often equated to degree mills as the quality of education can be poor, at best. As a result, the Kurdistan Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MoHESR) has attempted to regulate these colleges and universities to oversee their academic quality. Regrettably, however, the result has been a plethora of highly bureaucratic “decrees” or “Ministry Orders” that demand often unrealistic actions be taken in a specific timeframe. For example, one of the latest decrees imposed a variety of fines of up to 2 million Iraqi dinars (about \$1,700 USD) for any of a series of 25 violations including “Not responding to the Ministry’s mail within the period of time specified in the mail” and “Holding events or celebrating events such as University Day and so on without getting the prior Ministry’s approval” (Ministry Mail No. 7973, May 24, 2016).

Although some attempts by the Ministry to regulate higher education seem misguided, the attempt to reform higher education is necessary. There is, without question, a desire to upgrade the quality of education in the region in a direct attempt to stabilize the economy, increase opportunity, and thereby mitigate violence. Indeed, it has been demonstrated time and again that formal education can help prevent violence. According to Wright (2011) “Formal education provides an opportunity for [young people] to learn important social skills, critical thinking skills, problem-solving strategies, and communication skills.” On the other hand, in a country where violence is dominant, the educational system, and in particular American-style education, is often considered a soft target for terrorist groups. Security on AUIS and AUK campuses is very tight. Armed guards check all cars and pedestrians at the entrance gates, do not allow visitors without an invitation, and often walk the campus internal roads. Do to the fear factor, some students are reticent to enroll in classes. As a result of this and other factors (i.e. economic hardship), opportunities for young people to expand their knowledge of different cultures, religions, and ethnicities are scarce. Young individuals without jobs, and those lacking higher education opportunities, can become increasingly desperate and membership in extremist groups becomes the choice.

Education International (EI) recently published an article stating that:

Education is the key to uniting nations, bringing human beings closely together. In many parts of the world, civil society suffers because of situations of violent conflicts and war. It is important to recognize the crucial role of education in contributing to building a culture of peace and condemning instances in which education is undermined in order to attack democracy and tolerance.

A culture of peace and non-violence goes to the substance of fundamental human rights: social justice, democracy, literacy, respect and dignity for all, international solidarity, respect for workers’ rights and core labor standards, children rights, equality between men and women, cultural identity and diversity, Indigenous peoples and minorities rights, and the preservation of the natural environment (...) (EI, 2016).

Quality education is one of the best antidotes to extremist, violent behavior (EI, 2011). When education is poor or lacking altogether due to war or other violent activity, the culture of violence continues unabated.

According to EI:

Education is a key tool in combating poverty, in promoting peace, social justice, human rights, democracy, cultural diversity and environmental awareness. Edu-

cation for peace implies an active concept of peace through values, life skills and knowledge in a spirit of equality, respect, empathy, understanding and mutual appreciation among individuals, groups and nations.

The educational action for promoting the concept of peace concerns the content of education and training, educational resources and material, school and university life, initial and ongoing training for teachers, research, and ongoing training for young people and adults. A culture of peace must take root in the classroom from an early age. It must continue to be reflected in the curricula at secondary and tertiary levels. However, the skills for peace and non-violence can only be learned and perfected through practice. Active listening, dialogue, mediation, and cooperative learning are delicate skills to develop. This is education in the widest sense. It is a dynamic, long term process: a life-time experience. It means providing both children and adults with an understanding of and respect for universal values and rights. It requires participation at all levels – family, school, places of work, news rooms, play grounds, and the community as well as the nation (EI, 2016).

2. A Strong Educational Legacy

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Iraqi colleges and universities were known for their progressive curriculum and scientific/technical expertise. The streets of Baghdad were lined with book shops. The city was a thriving, cultural center in the Middle East. Thousands of foreign students enrolled in the universities.

According to Svensson:

Books are written in Egypt, printed in Lebanon and read in Iraq according to an old Middle Eastern proverb. In the region, Iraqis have long been considered well-educated and interested in learning. Baghdad's Mutanabbi Street was once known throughout the entire Arabic world. Eyes would light up in Cairo or Beirut when someone mentioned the avenue known for its booksellers and as hub of the country's intellectual life. Baghdad was long seen not just as a center of trade and entertainment but also of art and education. Those in the know would head to Mutanabbi Street on Fridays and come back home with a small mountain of used or new books. In the Schabander coffee houses, artists, writers, filmmakers and intellectuals met for discussions with one another. The country's elite surrounded by books – that was the image that the Iraq of the 1970s and 80s offered (Svensson, 2012).

However, this was all lost in the 1980s when Saddam Hussein gained control and began his systematic persecution of various ethnicities and political parties. A number of university professors, among other intellectuals, were imprisoned. Higher education went into a steep decline that has been difficult to turn around.

Svensson continued:

Iraq had never experienced such a brain drain as in the post-Saddam era. The academic elite were hunted. Professors, teachers, doctors, lawyers and politicians were shot, kidnapped or threatened. When lecturers gave out bad grades on account of poor performance, they had to consider the possibility of being murdered by students. One professor at Mustansiriya University never left home without a weapon. On March 5, 2007, two car bombs went off in front of the university's buildings, destroying the entire street and killing nearly 100 people. For many, that signaled the end of the country's long dedication to education. Nearly a million people have left Baghdad in the last 10 years, including many educated people (Svensson, 2012).

Since 2014, the arrival of ISIS in Iraq has caused matters to grow even worse. In the first few months of 2016, there have been almost weekly suicide bombings in Baghdad. The educational sector has continued to struggle. There seems almost no hope to restore the halcyon days of educational excellence.

According to Mamouri:

(...) there is nothing on the horizon suggesting a qualitative development to restore the scholarly status of Iraqi universities. The reasons for this are the crises that have plagued Iraq in the post-2003 period, in addition to the unsuccessful policies of the Ministry of Higher Education and other governmental institutions involved.

The ratings of global institutions specialized in evaluating the performance of universities, such as the Spanish National Research Council (CSIC), place Iraqi universities at very low rankings compared to their counterparts throughout the world. In addition, Iraqi universities are not effectively involved in global research projects, and none are mentioned in scholarly reports in the various fields of science and education (Mamouri, 2014).

And in a recent article by Razak, president of the International Association of Universities:

[Kurdish] universities, like in many areas destabilized by wars and calamities, are confronted by unique challenges arising from 'unfair' global public perception. Consequently, they remain relatively isolated from the vibrant academic changes that are taking place. This hampers the country's ability to cope, drawing it away from the set national trajectory. In reality, the aspirations of education as the

leveler of society, and the global tide that carries all boats, failed to be actualized (Razak, 2016).

Although Kurdistan is considered an autonomous region of Iraq, the structure of the educational system has been influenced by Iraq for decades. What this means is that Kurdistan inherited an incredibly outdated system of higher education that continues in large part to this day. For decades, the only tangible mission of any college or university was to monitor the attendance of the students and conduct final examinations. Rote memorization was the standard pedagogy.

According to Hamarash:

(...) time has proved that Kurdistan's universities and institutions have not been able to reach the required standard of excellence in education and training or even maintain a steady level in their respective fields. As a consequence of this, education standards have continuously fluctuated according to political circumstances, financial constraints of the country, and the will of the teaching and administrative staff (Hamarash, 2012, p. 8, 10).

And in a 2012 article published in DW, Svensson wrote:

The destruction wrought by three wars affected lives well beyond the country's rulers and military. The embargo following the Kuwait War in the 1990s divided Iraq. The Kurdish provinces in the North developed differently than the rest of the country. A no-fly zone enforced by the UN offered the Kurds protection from further prosecution by Saddam Hussein, but is also blocked progress. Academic exchange was practically impossible, and archaic familial structures quickly penetrated academic life (...) the country became visibly poorer. Academic buildings decayed and new technologies were not installed either because the embargo made them unavailable or because they were simply too expensive. When Saddam Hussein was overthrown in April 2003, the university equipment dated back to the end of the 1970s or beginning of the 1980s" (Svensson, 2012).

Serious talk of educational reform in Iraq/Kurdistan began shortly after the turn of the century. For example, in February of 2005 UNESCO organized a conference, held in Paris, on the revitalization of higher education in Iraq. These round-table discussions were designed to assess educational needs and priorities. By the end of the conference, the participants – including representatives of the higher education community in Iraq/Kurdistan, the international academic community, and various NGOs agreed on eight main actions:

- Improve governance and management of colleges and universities;
- Improve the development of the curricula, focusing on quality and accreditation;

- Teacher training;
- Engineering (training, professional and leadership development, meeting manpower and infrastructural needs);
- Medicine (training, professional and leadership development, meeting manpower and health infrastructure);
- Research knowledge and society (natural, human and social science);
- Women: leadership and employment;
- Distance learning and new technologies.

Another significant development occurred in 2007 when UNESCO opened an office in Erbil. This was motivated in large part by the need to update a decades-old curriculum, modernize teaching methodologies, and replace a seriously outdated infrastructure. In December of 2009, the Kurdistan MoHESR published a so-called “strategic roadmap” with the stated purpose of reforming teaching and establishing a modern Teaching Quality Assurance (TQA) system; reforming the research training of students and the research funding system to revitalize scientific research; building capacity by investing in people and infrastructure; establishing an institutional licensing and accreditation system; reforming the management structure of the universities to minimize waste and promote university independence; reforming the administrative system to minimize bureaucracy; and protecting human rights, achieving social justice, and improving the learning and working environment.

According to the report:

The Kurdistan Region will need to develop and achieve higher standards in the fields of science, technology and management. Investing in people and raising the human capacities of professional cadres is one of the top priorities of the successive governments of Kurdistan. There is no doubt that our universities and institutes of higher education and scientific research will play a major role in this task.

It is no secret that the Kurdistan Region has inherited a complicated and outdated higher educational system from the ‘old Iraq.’ The higher education institutes were originally developed to suit a country with a closed market and a people with little hope of a high standard of living or rapid educational advancement. In the new Iraq, reformation of higher education is now urgently required in order to harmonize the heretofore antiquated system to the needs of the Region for highly skilled professionals (A Roadmap to Quality, 2010).

A key element of The Roadmap to Quality was effective implementation of the Teaching Quality Assurance (TQA) program. The primary objective of the

TQA plan was to ensure educational accountability by assigning responsibility to a course coordinator responsible for preparing and distribution a course book containing a detailed syllabus, timetables, curricular details and more. The course book would contain a curriculum plan, learning topics, summary of lectures, and the method of conducting examinations. At the end of teach course, a feedback process would be conducted to collect and analyze student evaluations. An external assessor was assigned to each course and he/she would give an opinion regarding the outcomes of the course. A new directorate in the Kurdistan MoHESR was created to monitor and evaluate the TQA process. However, progress in reforming education is slow due to lack of funding and an unwieldy bureaucracy.

According to the UNESCO report:

Despite international endeavors in the reconstruction of Iraqi education system, the rehabilitation of the institutional and human capacity of Iraqi universities continues to be dramatically under-financed. Urgent needs include the enhancement of the capacity of the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research in policy, planning and management of the higher education system and the necessary support to Iraqi teachers and researchers to re-establish contact with the academic world community (UNESCO, 2016).

3. The Future: Reforms Made Real

Throughout these difficult years, the only glimmer of hope in the educational sector lay in northern Iraq, specifically in Kurdistan. Hundreds of K-12 teachers and university professors from Iraq and Syria have sought refuge here and thousands of Kurds began returning from abroad to help a nation in need. Educational reforms continue to be introduced. The MoHESR in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has been significantly more progressive than their counterpart in Baghdad. It has licensed American-style universities: AUIS, founded in 2007 in Sulaimani and AUK founded in 2014 in Duhok. The MoHESR in Iraq has been slower to recognize these institutions. Currently (nine years after its foundation) the Iraqi MoHESR formally accepted the license process of AUIS. This is a significant step forward because AUIS is seen by many in the education sector to be revolutionizing higher education in the region by introducing such concepts as academic freedom, development of critical thinking skills, education of the student as a whole person, individuality, internationalization of the curriculum, and life-long learning. Accreditation by the Ministry in Baghdad is quite important in the international realm of education, allowing faculty and

students to apply for Fulbright and Erasmus Mundus scholarships; exchange of students with transfer of credits; alignment with international accreditation standards, and more. AUK will soon begin similar steps to gain formal accreditation from Baghdad.

As university presidents in Kurdistan (and also husband and wife) the authors began early during their Kurdistan tenure to believe that full access of young people to the opportunities presented by higher education could go a long way in addressing the differences between the political parties in the region and paving the way toward a long-desired peace. In their discussions with politicians, educators, government officials, business men and women and many others they have affirmed their conviction that access to higher education is a key element in ending the violence in the region and helping to solve the political and social instability in Kurdistan/Iraq. However, decades of violence seem to have severely harmed the ability of educational institutions to offer high quality programs. The curriculum in virtually all institutions of higher learning is outdated. Laboratory equipment is often antiquated. During the last few years, professors in the public universities often have not been paid for months at a time. Classes are often cancelled. Further, at private for-profit institutions, class sizes are generally very large, instructors have large workloads and the pay is quite low.

However, education is improving and has begun to deliver results. A major step forward in the establishment of a new, comprehensive, American-style type of higher education was taken in 2007 when the AUIS was founded. This was the first-ever not-for-profit institution of higher learning in all of Iraq and Kurdistan. AUIS was founded with the commitment to offer a liberal arts education to students of all economic, political, cultural and religious backgrounds. The language of instruction is English and only those students who demonstrate English proficiency are allowed to begin their studies at the university. AUIS founding Trustee and Chairman of the Board Barham Salih wanted to provide an American education for Iraqi students. He brought a new concept of private education for the public benefit. It was specifically designed by a forward-thinking Board of Trustees to reform higher education in Iraq/Kurdistan by offering challenging courses in English, encouraging independent thought and critical thinking, and by following regional accreditation standards in the US.

Both AUK and AUIS were established by influential Kurdish patriots who believed in the power of education to transform individuals and their countries. The style of education these institutions provide is quite unique to Kurdistan. The goal is to develop English proficiency, critical thinking skills, love for lifelong learning, good citizenship, and personal ethics and integrity. Education at both

institutions is values-based. In stump speeches the authors give at various events they indicate that students are being educated to become global citizens with respect for different races, creeds, political persuasions, and more. Excellence at these two institutions is being demonstrated with a robust, challenging curriculum featuring innovative academic programs with performance indicators and student assessment outcomes clearly articulated, assessed and evidenced. Graduates enter a global society and to facilitate their success both AUIS and AUK bring the world to the student body. For example, all faculty in the academic preparatory program at AUIS are native English speakers. The AUIS English Program is accredited by the Commission on English Language Accreditation (CEA) in the US. Thus, AUIS and AUK students are internationalized by receiving “the world” in their campus through their faculty, researchers in residence, student and faculty exchange programs, and world class curriculum. The AUIS faculty working in the Center of Excellence for Teaching and Learning virtually discuss how to model classroom behaviors that lead to active listening and awareness of different races, creeds and political affiliations. The AUK Center for Peace and Human Security examines sources of worldwide conflict and violence and discussions center around key mechanisms for conflict transformation and prevention. This type of inclusive education is the best and enduring way to combat extremist groups such as the so-called Islamic State (...) the most meaningful way to bring peace to our world.

When the authors are asked what they consider the most pressing issues for higher education in Kurdistan today, the following comes to the fore: Access along with curricular reform. Regarding access, it is not surprising that in Kurdistan, as in most developing regions, a high number of students are not able to gain admission to institutions of higher education. Entry into programs is based entirely on pre-baccalaureate test scores. Although in the US test scores are important, they are only part of the admissions process. Personal interviews, public service, work experience and volunteerism are all considered. Diversification of the kinds of educational institutions can also increase access. In the US there are community colleges, vocational/trade schools, professional schools, proprietary institutions and more. Graduating from these institutions allows students to be prepared for the work force and to become productive, tax-paying citizens.

The second pressing issue for higher education in Kurdistan is reforming the curriculum based on a liberal arts model. In our global age it becomes increasingly important to “educate the student as a whole person.” In other words, students need to graduate with employable work skills, for sure, but they also need to be holistically educated with skills in the humanities, sciences, mathematics,

world history and more. They need knowledge of different cultures, religions, political systems, as well as a deep understanding of current events. They need to think critically, creatively and independently. They need to be challenged to examine relevant information as they think globally, as citizens of the world. Students must be empowered to think critically. Their spirit of inquiry is fostered by multicultural, intergenerational, and highly accessible institutions that value and nurture an innovative, reflective and experiential approach to educational excellence. Excellence in both teaching and research can be achieved by building lasting partnerships with business and industry as well as with other educational institutions on a local, regional, national and international basis. Both AUIS and AUK are developing a strong international presence by building relationships with a wide range of colleges and universities. This allows both universities to strengthen their research-based curriculum and, as a direct result, the critical-thinking skills of their students.

However, no matter how innovative AUIS and AUK become they are relatively small institutions. Some of the larger universities in Kurdistan house upwards of 20,000 students. Thus, continued educational reform is critical if access is to be broadened and the curriculum is to be modernized. Unemployment remains one of Kurdistan's most important – and difficult – challenges to solve. According to figures supplied by the Ministry of Planning (2015) there were 280,000 unemployed permanent residents in Kurdistan. Added to this is the burden of 350,000 unemployed refugees and internally displaced persons. The annual growth in unemployment (predominantly young people) is 70,000. The only real answer to this complex social problem is high-quality, entrepreneurial education that allows graduating seniors to successfully enter the private work force. The educational sector in Kurdistan/Iraq must continue to build and re-build. Active partnerships with regional and international universities must be established. Curricula needs to be continually upgraded and revised so that graduates to have the necessary skills to compete in a global work environment. Applied academic research must be modernized. These educational reforms need to be fully implemented in the shortest possible time frame and both human and capital resources need to be invested in the infrastructure of a fully modernized system of higher education.

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